

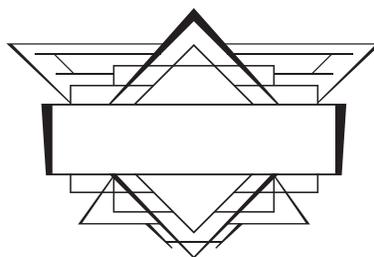


The Cities

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Alden

The City of Alden is a gothic metropolis sprawling beneath a perpetually leaden sky, heavy with the smoke and smog of industry. Black rains stain concrete and ancient brickwork alike, and to live in Alden is, on some level, to Endure. Huge and bustling, the City houses gargantuan factories, illustrious universities, and many, many people. The wrought iron filigree adorning ancestral manses flourishes alongside the most modern of architecture, and there is an air of tense antiquity that is difficult to escape. Closed circuit television cameras mounted in the mouths of gargoyles supplement the patrols of the constabulary, and it is a rare night that passes without an anarchist's bomb going off or a subversive group being raided by government forces.

Society: The people of Alden are widely considered to be civil, reserved, and sometimes overly polite or bound by tradition. Modern culture is a direct outgrowth of the semi-formal caste system of yesteryear, with norms and traditions forged in the crucible of the Dark Times. While the quiet and retiring personas of many in Alden can make them seem somewhat unassuming, such an assessment would neglect to take into account a stoicism and ingrained perseverance rarely found elsewhere. A deeply seated sense of nationalistic pride and, to some extent, superiority led to Alden's use of gunboat diplomacy in many instances over the last century, including the ninety-nine year "lease" of the Phong Tai colony of Xian Dao. Special note should be taken of the Blooded presence in Alden—and by extension, the existence of the Gore Tax. Human citizens of Alden are entered into a system by which, periodically, they may be called upon to visit one of the City Phlebotomists. There, they donate blood (a generally painless and innocuous procedure, but one with religious implications to some and considered invasive by others). The blood is then given over for distribution to the Blooded of Alden. In turn, Blooded are expected to enroll in the civil service in some capacity—most become soldiers, constables, or kingsmen, though some become doctors or scientists at the City's Universities. While the Blooded tend to excel at whatever profession in which they serve Alden, there is nonetheless a sense of resentment brewing in some quarters at the nature of the Tax—and the rare instance when a Blooded goes rogue doesn't help matters any.

Populace: Home to almost 3 million sentient beings, the vast majority of the population of Alden is human. There are a considerable number of individuated automata in Alden, chiefly working in factories, mines, and other dangerous industries (some do find their ways in the world as servants and bodyguards). Per capita, there are more Blooded than anywhere else in the world, though even in Alden they are rare—fewer than one in every one hundred and fifty people. Nonetheless, the presence of the Blooded has mitigated the need for certain technologies and developments, and there are vanishingly few H.A.V.O.C.s in the City. Similarly, Slabs are very few in number, mostly a handful of unfortunates who were caught in the tragedy in Thorncrag and made their way home, but others traveled to the City in search of a new beginning. A fair number of Homunculi skirt the edges of society in Alden, and opinions on them vary wildly from vitriolic disgust all the way to pity or curiosity.

Government: A constitutional monarchy, Alden is ruled by King James MacDevitt. Alden's government is made up of two branches: the Legislature and the Monarchy.

The Legislature: The Legislature of Alden is comprised of three separate, but nominally equivalent, houses. The Gold House, in which all nobles of sufficient rank have a seat, chiefly concerns itself with matters of national security and international policy. Meanwhile, the Silver House is home to Guild and Union leaders, captains of industry, and the nouveau riche with political acumen enough to secure a place for themselves in the halls of power. The Silver House has significant economic authority, though its actions are sometimes curtailed by the "ancestral rights" of the members of the Gold House. Lastly, there is the Copper House, whose members are elected by popular vote. Ostensibly the Copper House oversees a variety of domestic purviews, but with the military and economic powers of the land held tightly by the other Houses, some question whether the Copper House has the ability to enforce any of its many referendums and statements of censure.

The Monarchy: Alden's royal family has but a single member: King James MacDevitt. Among all the rumors surrounding the man, perhaps the most striking states that King James is one of the last extant vampires on all of Ayos, a claim supported by his apparent lack of aging during the course of his one hundred and fourteen year reign. While long, James's time as king has certainly not been easy, seeing tragedies both personal and public. Some thirty-seven years ago, his wife died under mysterious circumstances. Not long after, on the day James was to abdicate and crown his son Sebastian as his successor, Sebastian was slain in a terrorist action. These events drove James into seclusion from the public eye, and while the rulings and edicts that have been carried out in his name have been widely regarded as fair and just, his removal from the populace has proven an easy target for his critics, and his purported undeath is an undeniable point of societal contention and division.

The Present Day: Alden stands a City divided. "The Disagreement," as the schism is generally known, has arisen for a number of reasons, and while there are a great many groups involved, most can broadly be described as belonging to one of two Camps: the Shepherds (who believe that a strong central government is required to maintain stability and security in the face of enemies both foreign and domestic, even at the cost of personal liberty), and the Lamplighters (those that find the various impositions of the government to be abhorrent and seek to overthrow the present leadership of the City and restore the Church of Phenex as the state religion).

The Shepherds draw their ranks primarily from the nobility, the wealthy and the middle class. Conservative academics, followers of the Chayodyne Order, and others who seek to maintain both peace and the status quo are quick to support the Shepherds. Almost all of the Blooded in Alden are sympathetic to the Shepherd cause.

Conversely, the disenfranchised, the poor, and devout Phenexians flock to the banner of the Lamplighters, the clarion call of revolution urging them onwards. The disparities between rich and poor are as stark as they have ever been. The Gore Tax, and the Blooded who make it necessary, are constant sources of ire and religious outrage to many.

Gangs and paramilitary groups supporting each side of the Disagreement are lamentably common. Street violence, vandalism, and outright terrorism are facts of everyday life in modern Alden—the tighter the grip of the government becomes, the more resentment builds up in certain quarters. The more the Lamplighters rebel, the harsher the government actions become. It's as vicious a cycle as one might imagine.

While each Camp has a set of people drawn to it, the issues in play are more complex than one may think, and there are countless instances of individuals bucking the trends of their peers for one reason or another. Though most nobles side with the Shepherds to safeguard their stations, there are some who are devoutly Phenexian and find themselves siding with Lamplighter sentiments. Likewise, there are poor who live in districts where the only safety or justice is that brought by the black-clad Blooded, and they bring the Shepherds what news and information they can.

Locations of Note

Barrowmoor: At one edge of the expanded City of Alden stands a vast, fetid swamp. As technology improved and the Dark Times came to a close, Alden undertook the previously impossible task of draining and working in parts of the swamp. Almost 40 years ago, agents of the Royal Academy of Science were able to detect and isolate traces of tanzolium, and, in short order, residential buildings sprang up surrounded by fields of derricks, the occasional mine, and blocks of refineries operating round the clock in the awful conditions. As the water levels sank and the drills delved deeper, geologists and work crews found colossal bones preserved in the acidic soil—bones the size of skyscrapers. A member of the press dubbed the entire place “Barrowmoor,” and the sobriquet, like the bones below, has stood the test of time. Whole generations have lived and died in the tanzo fields, their wages paid out by the A.M.C. and swallowed up again as rent on the company-owned apartments, or as the cost of company-owned food.

Coreditch: A series of great shafts sunk miles deep into the ground, Coreditch has supplied the bulk of Alden's mineral and metallic wealth for more than a century. The tunnels are anything but safe, being prone to cave-ins, colonization by horrid creatures, and generally hazardous conditions. In years past miners were mostly the starving poor or criminals pressed into service under threat of execution. The rise of drones and automata, though, has displaced humans from many of the most dangerous jobs—and those displaced by such machines are often quite bitter. All in all, it is an ugly, dangerous place, and not often the subject of polite conversation. If the rumors are to be believed, however, there is a good deal more to Coreditch than meets the untrained eye. Persistent, if sporadic, reports from Lamplighter agents state that certain mine shafts, long since played out and abandoned, have been host to parties of Kingsmen and other government and military forces. Some units are seen to arrive and never seen to leave. Whether this indicates the presence of some underground complex, a terrible subterranean threat, or something else entirely is a matter of hushed conjecture in certain quarters.

Hammersea: Once one of Alden's most impoverished districts, Hammersea has undergone a truly remarkable transformation in the past few decades. As Alden ruthlessly and relentlessly clawed its way out of the Dark Times under the strong vision of King James, power shifted significantly from the nobility to the merchants, businessmen, and innovators. While originally something of a slum, the people of Hammersea

were poor due to circumstance—not for want of work ethic. With the government’s judicious investment of time, labor, and capital, Hammersea grew by leaps and bounds. Businesses opened and flourished almost overnight. Entrepreneurs, inventors, and investors quickly caught wind of the change, and in a remarkably short time Hammersea was well and truly gentrified by the presence of younger and somewhat rebellious nobles. The population soon outgrew the confines of the original district, and the City created a secondary section of the district jutting out from the Curtain Wall, over the sea. Today, the palatial estates with views of the ocean are home to the rich, the famous, and the servants who dote on them hand and foot. With commercial streets of both legitimate and less than legal goods open day and night, and manses capable of giving rise to any number of scandals in secret, it is hardly a wonder that Hammersea and its citizens are often the subject of newspapers and tabloids throughout the City—and beyond.

The Western Marches: Whenever Alden has faced direct attack, the Western Marches have always stood as the first bulwark against the advance of the invader. One of the most heavily fortified districts in all of Alden, the Western Marches boast massive walls, monstrous guns, and dedicated regiments of stalwart defenders, Human, Blooded, and Automatic alike. Despite, or perhaps because of, the imposing military presence, the Western Marches are widely regarded as a fairly safe place to raise a family. Similarly, while the district is the first line of defense in times of war, it is also one of the gateways of trade with the outside world. Riverships and quad-track trains are common sights in the dockyards, and the commerce conducted in the district accounts for nearly twenty percent of all commercial business carried out in Alden. The post of Marcher Lord comes with both great esteem and great responsibility, and only those in close confidence to the King are entrusted with the now non-hereditary position.

Groups and Institutions of Interest

The Amalgamated Mineral Consortium: A mining concern with a long and somewhat troubled history, the Amalgamated Mineral Consortium (or the “A.M.C.” as it is widely known) is one of, if not the, most powerful companies in Alden. Its shares closely held by nobles and venerable banking houses, the A.M.C. has used both official and private military forces to make its will manifest. With holdings stretching from Coreditch to as far afield as Xian Dao, woe betide those workers or activists who attempt to unionize or thwart the inevitable march of progress.

The Bloody Rooks: One of the most storied units in the entire military of Alden, the Bloody Rooks are an elite company of Blooded individuals. Over decades of service they have become famous (or infamous, depending on one’s political views) for carrying out missions most would consider impossible. From daring rescues and brazen commando raids to subtle acts of sabotage and assassination, the Bloody Rooks have consistently acted with terrifying effectiveness and bravery. The full extent and nature of their operations is, of course, unknown, what with so much of their activity being classified as Most Secret by His Majesty’s forces.

Caulderwood University: The premiere private institute of higher learning in Alden, Caulderwood University has seen countless nobles and giants of industry study in its halls. Caulderwood’s programs in archaeology, literature, and psychology are particularly well known in academic circles, and anyone who is anyone of standing is likely to have a “degree in the classics” from the very prestigious school. Caulderwood is also

responsible for funding a great deal of archaeological, historical, and anthropological research—academics with grants from Caulderwood travel all across the world in search of artifacts and lore from ancient times.

The Kingsmen: A secretive and clandestine organization, the Kingsmen report directly to King James—and only to King James. While the bulk of Kingsmen are reported to be Blooded, there are certainly “normal” humans, individuated automata, and other such people counted among their ranks. Originally tasked solely with protecting the members of the royal family, it is rumored that King James has asked the Kingsmen to perform an ever-expanding array of missions. On the rare occasions when Kingsmen are seen in public, foreigners are often somewhat confused about how to act in their presence. “With care,” local folk reply quietly.

The Kirkwold Irregulars: Perhaps the most sizeable park and game preserve in Alden, the Kirkwold is made up of square miles of dark and foreboding forest. There are whispers that rogue Blooded stalk the woods for victims, and that fell beasts make their home amidst the towering, twisting trees. What is certainly true, though, is that a group of vigilantes uses the place for meetings and training operations. Calling themselves the Kirkwold Irregulars, these paramilitants have taken it upon themselves to support the actions of government forces through actions of dubious legality. The Kirkwold Irregulars are one of the leading members of the Shepherds’ side of the Disagreement.

Mayweather Industries: With over a century of continuous operation under its belt, Mayweather Industries is one of Alden’s leading manufacturers of both automata and medical technologies. Presently owned and controlled by Molly Mayweather III, the Mayweather Industries mark is considered to be a sign of great craftsmanship and quality. One of the most popular automatic servant and bodyguard designs on the market, the Mayweather Model 424 can be found in the households of many of the elite households in Alden. Curiously, there is an unusually high rate of individuation among such automata, including the series’s prototype unit, the S.A.R.A.H.-2.

The Scythe: The vast majority of Blooded are conscientious, law abiding citizens—just like “normal” humans. And just like “normal” humans, there are some few that give in to their baser instincts. When the Blooded go rogue, they become consummate urban predators. Stronger, faster, and more deadly than any “normal” human criminal, such monsters go on terrifying rampages, tearing bloody swathes through busy streets. Worse still are the stories of such villains who have learned to curb their outbursts and work together. If the rumors are to be believed, the Scythe, as this “society” is called, engage in human trafficking, wanton violence, and depraved predation, all behind the closed doors of their elusive, exclusive, and eminently fashionable, hellfire clubs.

The University of Alden: One of the largest and most prestigious public universities on all of Ayos, the University of Alden offers significant merit-based scholarships to applicants regardless of race, background, or creed. This co-mingling of viewpoints has led to a fairly liberal outlook among the student body. Specializing in medicine, engineering, and other hard sciences, a great many innovations and inventions have come out of the laboratories and lecture halls of the school. The University of Alden has something of a reputation for acting in concert with other parts of the City Government.

The Vigil of Solomon: While the congregations of Phenexian churches have never reached the numbers they had before the brief reign of King Maximilian, many are quite sizable. From these churches, some of the most devout, the most downtrodden, and the most vengeful have sworn to eradicate the Blooded from the face of Ayos. Citing scripture, and naming their cells after a controversial martyr from before the Dark Times, the Vigil of Solomon have claimed credit for countless acts of violent and subversive rebellion. Founders and staunch supporters of the Lamplighter movement as a whole, the Vigil themselves specialize in the murder of Blooded, and are labeled terrorists for their actions.

National Dress

Civilian: Suits tend to be conservative in color and tailored in cut, both to show off the wearer's physique and to be economical with cloth. Hats, especially the fedora, homburg, bowler, and paperboy, are ubiquitous. Vests are quite common. Trousers tend to have high waists, as do skirts (which are often of the pencil variety, and rarely worn when mobility is key). Dresses tend to be fitted at the waist, with high collars and knee-length hems. Professionals and members of the upper classes wear ties and, on rare occasions, veils, and jewelry tends towards the simplistic. Many people wear suspenders, with gloves and spats also serving as everyday accessories. Cropped, short jackets and boleros are quite popular—long coats are uncommon.

Military: The military of Alden has two primary demarcations: general issue (olive drab and khaki, sported by normal military units) and special issue (black with red highlights, worn by elite, secretive, or specialist units). General issue tends to be made of durable, pragmatic cloth such as wool or cotton, while special issue is often crafted from materials less likely to stain.

Iconography: Alden counts two animals as its national symbols: the lion and the griffin, shown in either white or red. The military roundel for Alden is a red circle, surrounded by a black circle, surrounded by a red circle. The flag of Alden features a red field bordered top and bottom with black bars, and a horizontal trio of angled heater shields, the center shield larger than its neighbors.

Common First Names: Albert, Alice, Annie, Arthur, Charles, Doris, Dorothy, Edith, Elizabeth, Elsie, Ethel, Florence, Frederick, George, James, John, Mary, Robert, Thomas, William

Common Surnames: Barnett, Cole, Cooper, Hobbs, Holloway, Mason, Rampton, Tanner, Webb, White

International Relations

Elenzio:

We have lost our path. We have turned our eyes from the light, and willingly walk in shadow. I pray nightly for deliverance, and for the guidance of the Pontiff to reach our troubled City.

—Father Benjamin Carmichael, Phenexian Priest

Once staunch allies, Alden and Elenzio have drifted apart, both politically and culturally. King Maximilian's Declaration of Religious Freedom, and later the flourishing of the Chayodyne Order under King James, have contributed significantly to the rift with the devoutly Phenexian state. The Lamplighters of Alden are, of course, pressing for closer ties with Elenzio, spurred on by edicts from the White Throne condemning the Blooded as abominations. Even amidst such turmoil, though, Elenzio and Alden conduct trade in good course and have fairly normal national exchanges.

The Federated Cities:

They may be lacking in culture, manners, and enunciation, but the infectious spirit and vitality with which they pursue their ends is downright confounding at times. Where we stoically endure, our cousins whistle.

—Sir William Gantry

The Great War had a devastating effect on all nations, but it was particularly hard on the Confederated Territories. Alden rendered aid in the initial defense, in the reconstruction afterwards, and again after the advent of the Thorncrag Rising. This aid helped wash away the resentment that had spurred the Confederated Territories to break from Alden to begin with. When Falls, Thorncrag, and Waypoint rose from the ashes of the Confederated Territories as the Federated Cities, they counted Alden as one of their greatest supporters. To this day the two nations enjoy a special relationship of both military and cultural alliance.

Loreard:

Bloody fascists. Oh, aye, the trains might run on time—but I prefer having more than one candidate in the running when I vote for District Mayor, if you know what I mean.

—Jack Doyle, Tavern Keeper, to various patrons

Since the Messernacht and the ensuing rise of Walther von Altreich's Eienstadt Party, Loreard and Alden have found themselves in an increasingly antagonistic situation. While the two nations still engage in significant commerce, their respective governments have entered into something of a trade war. Tariffs and quarantines, embargoes and fines—the Cities are doing whatever they can to undercut one another. Further, caustic propaganda flows freely from all quarters, with blatant accusations of various atrocities and acts of moral degradation. Many simply wait for some inevitable spark to light the conflagration of war.

Phong Tai:

You can't seriously expect me to believe that their tin soldiers are a match for Agents of the Crown. Of course I won't sponsor an additional appropriations bill!

—Lord Fairfax Brennan IV, during a legislative session of the Gold House

Relations between Alden and Phong Tai are, understandably, rather cool. After the “leasing” of Xian Dao by Alden, Phong Tai entered a period of strict isolationism. Foreigners are restricted to specific quarters and districts within the City, and individuals from Alden are given treatment just shy of insulting. For their part, Alden considers Phong Tai the backwards-thinking, reclusive pauper of the international community, to be exploited as a matter of convenience. More enlightened (and better informed) elements within Alden realize the danger of holding such an attitude towards the City with perhaps the most sophisticated drones on all of Ayos.

Skvalgaard:

There is an eerie stillness to the place. A quiet that has settled into the bones of the people. Some of the most profound statements I have ever heard have come from the mouths of Skvaldic common folk after I'd started to wonder if they'd frozen to death.

—Professor Lillian Crenshaw, Caulderwood University

Skvalgaard and Alden get along well enough. There is ongoing debate as to whether Alden or Volskagrad founded Skvalgaard (or, as some fringe academics theorize, Skvalgaard founded one or both of the larger Cities). Skvalgaard's fiercely democratic system of government is somewhat at odds with the republican government of Alden, but trade and academic interests keep all parties friendly enough. Caulderwood University maintains a significant presence in Skvalgaard, working closely with the University of Sovik to explore and research both the remnants of the Temple at Salappsa and the ancient, cyclopean ruins frozen into Hjemsoktis.

Volskagrad:

An example of how much a people can lose, how far they can fall, in the process of claiming “equality” and “self-determination.” Collectivists do not offer self-determination—they offer only the slavish drudgery of a hive.

—Amelia Randolph, Political Analyst

The history of Alden and Volskagrad is a long and contentious one. The two Cities have come to blows numerous times over issues ranging from spheres of influence to religion, from ideology to fishing rights. After the Great War there was a brief period of peace. A few generations on, though, when the Dark Times were at their worst, the Collectivist Revolution swept the then-moderate duChenko dynasty from the pages of history. The relatively young populist Volskagradian government is thoroughly critical of the autocratic

methods of Alden, and in turn Alden condemns the various purges conducted under the banner of the Lords of Winter.

Xian Dao:

Right or wrong, our control of Xian Dao has brought tremendous wealth to the City. Today it smells like no other place on Ayos—today, Xian Dao smells like money.

—Charlotte Kilbannon, Captain of the Steel Osprey, a mercantile aeroplane

While technically under lease from Phong Tai, Alden generally treats Xian Dao as a protectorate or colony (depending on whether or not one believes the claims of autonomy touted by the local government and the Aldish ambassador alike). With virtually no tariffs, taxes, or duties, trade booms in Xian Dao. Moreover, the customs officials are notorious for corruption and graft—the Aldish military presence in the area is concerned with strategic military matters, not smuggling. When taken altogether, there is almost nothing that can't be bought, sold, or rented somewhere in Xian Dao. While some in Alden question the morality of the arrangement, none dispute its profitability.

Il Zindan:

A land of adventure, lost knowledge, and amazing archaeological discoveries. A pity it's ruled by barbaric, superstitious raiders and heathens. Pass the brandy, won't you?

—Sir Reginald Dashwood III at a meeting of the National Explorers Society

As Il Zindan lacks for any sort of formal central government, it is difficult to state with certainty any kind of formal relationship between the two Cities. What is true, though, is that Alden is one of a number of powers that have taken an interest in the Thek ruins and artifacts that practically litter the area. Indeed, Il Zindan stands as something of a proxy battlefield between Alden and Loreard, with other Cities invested to lesser extents. Hiring local militias and tribes as soldiers and guides, Alden seeks to explore (and some would say plunder) the forgotten secrets of the Dwelling in Darkness while preventing all others from doing the same.

Zyebrinsk:

I'd say 'At least it's not Volskagrad,' but Volskagrad has the ballet.

—Lady Jane Shadburton

A satellite City of Volskagrad, Zyebrinsk is often regarded as either a glorified garrison or an oppressed slave state. While the City shares a great deal with Volskagrad (including weather, political systems, and what both Cities assure the rest of the world is “humor,”), it is given noticeably short shrift by its parent state, receiving little in exchange for steep tithes. Some elements in Zyebrinsk have begun a tentative “turn towards the West,” trading with foreign merchants to alleviate widespread shortages of food, technology, and materiel. Such activities have brought the calamitous specter of Volskagradian wrath down on the City—but also promises of further support and aid from the West.

To walk the streets of Elenzio is to feel the past and present collide. Masterwork automata race along beside canals, darting between elegant statues and vaulting fountains that are centuries old. Limestone townhouses and marble-columned villas share the skyline with stuccoed tenements and concrete factories. Impressive as some of the modern buildings are, though, nothing in the City stands taller than the Great Spire of the Cathedral of Phenex. Despite the grandeur and beauty apparent to even the most casual of observers, times are hard in Elenzio. For every breathtaking walled estate there are ten blocks of crumbling slums, and poverty and privation are widespread—particularly in the ghettos set aside for occupancy by undesirables and non-believers.

Society: Famed for their passion and their devotion to Family, it is said that none love so hotly, nor hate so deeply, as Elenzians. This intensity has lent itself to some of the finest works of art in all of Ayos. It has also manifested itself in crusades and holy wars. In much of the world, the Phenexian Church has lost most of the influence it once held. In Elenzio, however, the Church is very much alive and well. During the Great War, the majority of Elenzio was leveled by a Thek invasion. Little more than the Church's most heavily defended bastions and a handful of fortified compounds belonging to merchant princes withstood the onslaught. Afterwards, a vampire made pacts with some of the princes and took control of the City. Only once the vampire was slain did any kind of normalcy return to Elenzio. The merchant princes quickly rebuilt and solidified their own positions, both physical and political. It was left to the Church, then, to see to the needs of the general populace. It was the Church that paid for the public works projects which rebuilt the City's infrastructure, and it was the Church that ensured that the devotion and faith of the impoverished were answered with bread and succor. During the Dark Times, the famed waterways of Elenzio were choked by bodies and debris. In answer, the City sprawled landward. When times began to improve, the proud merchant houses dredged clear the canals and harbors of the City, and once more Elenzio opened itself to trade—and emigration. Nonetheless, the character of the place did not change. To this day, faith in the Church and in Phenex remains both strong and ubiquitous, and to this day, non-humans and non-believers are quite literally second-class citizens.

Populace: More than two million people reside in Elenzio. Far and away, most of them are human—and for very good reason. Blooded without diplomatic immunity or the protection of a powerful patron are hunted down and killed (or at least they were, when there were any such Blooded in the City). Slabs receive similar treatment—much like the Blooded, the “Undead” are regularly decried by the Church as signs of Divine displeasure. Homunculi are likewise abhorred, though some manage to eke out an existence in secret. Automata are uncommon in Elenzio—rather than being mass produced, master craftspeople spend months or years creating drones both beautiful and useful, from fleet-footed messengers to the marble-faced guardians of the Pontiff. Individuated automata, however, are destroyed on the assumption that some malign entity has caused the artificial sentience to manifest. While the Elenzian government has not officially announced the creation of H.A.V.O.C.s, there are rumors that the Church is looking into “the identification of Saints” on an unprecedented scale.

Government: A theocratic plutocracy, Elenzio's official ruling body is the Patricians' Council. That said, the Church of Phenex plays a very important role in City government.

The Patricians' Council: Made up of "princes," the gender neutral term for the scions of the most powerful Elenzian families, the Patrician's Council enacts legislation and appoints magistrates to enforce secular law in the City. Both the military and the constabulary are accountable to the Patricians' Council, though it is the magistrates who oversee the day-to-day operations of both organizations. Admittance to the Council is no mean feat. While some seats are essentially hereditary, individuals and Families seeking to join the rarefied ranks of the Council from more plebeian backgrounds can find the way difficult—and treacherous. Politics in the City is an ever-shifting labyrinth of quicksilver alliances, secret patronage, and centuries old Familial feuds. While knives in the dark and poisoned cups of wine have mostly (though not entirely) been retired from the political arena, hostile takeovers, incited workers' strikes, and riots can do tremendous damage. Taken together with the complexities and requirements of dealing with the Church, it is easy to see why politics in Elenzio has been called "the sport of kings and vipers."

The Church of Phenex: The Pontiff is the head of the Church of Phenex, and leads the Church from his seat upon the White Throne. The Pontiff is served by four groups in this holy endeavor, each serving a different and specific purpose:

- a) *The Photolatry.* Home to monks, nuns, missionaries, and others who seek to spread word of the Divine Light of Phenex, the Photolatry runs churches, shelters, orphanages, and other such humanitarian programs to support the needs of congregants.
- b) *The Xenomachy.* The martial arm of the Church, the Xenomachy was devastated during the Great War. Its numbers replenished from the ranks of the poor and disillusioned from across Ayos, the Xenomachy helps keep the peace in Elenzio.
- c) *The Etymarchy.* The Lords of Truth, also called the Inquisition, are charged with facing supernatural threats to the faithful. It is the Etymarchy that hunted the Blooded in Elenzio to extinction, and rumors persist that they did so with the help of living Saints.
- d) *The Skvaldic Corps.* In addition to his marble-faced automatic guardians, the Pontiff counts the Skvaldic Corps as bodyguards. Made up of devout Phenexians from Skvalgaard with no stake in Elenzian politics, their loyalty is unquestionable.

The Present Day: Times are hard in Elenzio. Very, very hard. While the wealthy continue to throw profligate balls and masquerades, the impoverished masses face desperate privation on a daily basis. Life is difficult under the dual rule of the Patricians' Council and the Church. The Paladins of the Xenomachy make regular rounds through the streets alongside the secular constabulary, but just as often as the two organizations work together they can be seen working at apparent cross purposes. As an example:

Etymarchs find themselves searching for a Prince's youngest son on charges of blasphemy. Alas the young man was arrested by the police just last night on charges of public drunkenness—and the paperwork on the case has been lost. Coincidentally, the Prince receives a Transferable Indulgence for her generous

contributions towards the construction of a charitable hospital. By the time the civil authorities are able to determine which guard house her son is in, the young man miraculously has the Indulgence in hand. The Etymarchs find themselves being informed of sightings of one of the Undead by the Laraccino Airdocks, and off they go in pursuit of new quarry.

It is important to note that while the corruption and political machinations inherent to circumstances such as those described above are quite common, they are by no means universal. The majority of self-identified “devout Phenexians” are just that—earnestly religious people. Nonetheless, the intertwining of Church and City has created a plethora of bureaucratic issues, especially for individuals on the outside of one or both systems.

While alternative religions are not specifically outlawed in the City, their practice is subject to taxes or fines. Similarly, land ownership by non-Phenexians can be a matter of dubious legality. Almost all individuals of alternative faith or race spend most of their lives in the Quarters, a series of walled ghettos scattered across Elenzio. Subject to the scorn and suspicion of both the Church and the City, the unfortunates that live in the Quarters are particularly vulnerable to the depredations of organized crime. With ties to the Patrician Families and their business interests, organized crime, or “i Omada” as it is sometimes called, runs rampant in Elenzio. The modern culture of patronage, graft, and mass marginalization has allowed i Omada to flourish to an unprecedented degree.

Locations of Note

The Fidiman District: Looming elegant and hawkish from its perch on the highest hill in Elenzio stands the Cathedral of Phenex. It marks the center of the Fidiman District, and, in many ways, the Phenexian faith. The Fidiman is a City within a City, a fortress of faith in a sea of secular corruption. The massive walls of the Fidiman surround many of the most famous landmarks in Elenzio—the Cathedral of Phenex itself, the Holy Manse, the Pontiff’s Gardens, the Paladins’ Barracks, and the Tower of Questions, to name a few. Legally a separate nation from the rest of Elenzio, the Fidiman is the smallest sovereign state recognized by the League of Cities. Its population consists of approximately fifty thousand individuals, mostly members of the Photolatry, with a significant presence of both lay personnel and the Xenomachy. The Skvaldic Corps and the Etymarchy are quartered there, as well, though both groups are smaller than is generally supposed. The population of the Fidiman quintuples during high services.

Il Mercato dei Fantasmi: Just a few districts from the Fidiman, located quite literally in the shadow of the Cathedral of Phenex, sprawls Elenzio’s infamous “Market of Ghosts.” Owned and operated by various Families in i Omada, the Market of Ghosts serves as Elenzio’s hub of illicit trade. Part pleasure district, part black market, part artists’ enclave, il Mercato dei Fantasmi is a veritable warren of malls, arcades, and terraces converted into bazaars, galleries, and brothels. Most of the trade in the Market is in proscribed substances, pleasures of the flesh, and scandalous works of art, but arms dealers do see considerable traffic as well. Of particular note is the utter lack of a slave trade—due to some of the core tenets of Phenexianism, actual slavery is deeply taboo. On top of this social moor, slavery is one of the few things which will attract the active ire of the Church—generally the interests of i Omada and the less scrupulous members of the

Patricians' Council keep the agents of the Church in check, but any news of human trafficking causes the Pontiff's forces to descend on the Market of Ghosts in a tide of righteous fury.

San Marsus: Few other areas are so emblematic of Elenzio as San Marsus. One of the oldest and most prestigious sections of Elenzio, San Marsus is a chain of tiny islands connected to one another by canals, bridges, and tunnels. The district survived the Great War and the Dark Times not because of divine favor, but rather because of the private armies and brutally effective methods of the Princes that reside there (as well as a healthy dose of blind luck). Enforcers of i Omada serve alongside automatic soldiers and foreign mercenaries, all in furtherance of the ancient Merchant Houses of Elenzio. Palatial villas of marble and limestone line the multi-tiered, sparkling canals. Gondolas ferry the elite of the city from one estate to another, from masquerade to masquerade (some such gatherings can last for weeks at a time). The banks and factor houses of San Marsus are better appointed than the royal courts of some other Cities, and the backroom dealings of Princes there can move merchant fleets and mercenary armies alike.

The Shield Quarter: Insofar as non-humans find homes in Elenzio, they are in ghettos such as the Shield Quarter. Peeling stucco and cracked red tile rooves are the mainstays of the district. Washing lines hang haphazardly between tenement towers like the webs of monstrous, drunken spiders, and clean drinking water is something of a luxury commodity. Despite the obvious poverty, though, the Shield Quarter has the air of a true community. Walled off from other, more acceptable parts of the City, the Shield Quarter is home to a variety of quiet apostates, mild-mannered heretics, and other such undesirable populations. A Purge has not been declared in decades. Instead, the Patricians' Council and Church levy heavy fines and taxes on the ghettos, which the semi-autonomous ostracized communities are generally able to pay due to their capacity to engage in work in times or places considered improper for Phenexians. Named for the Chayodyne population in the area, the Shield Quarter has a population of more than one hundred thousand souls.

Groups and Institutions of Interest

The Cavallaro Family: One of the youngest of the Families, the Cavallaros have only taken a seat at the Patricians' Council within the last few decades. Don Cavallaro is getting on in years, and while his is still a strong hand on the tiller of the Family's ship, it is clear to anyone paying attention that he will soon have to relinquish control to one of his children. While the ties that bind Families together are as strong in the Cavallaros as in any Elenzian family, the significant mercantile and other interests in play (rumored to include some less than savory dealings overseas) are sizable enough to make the question of succession both lucrative and dangerous.

The Falcone Family: The Falcones are an old and well respected Family. They have had a seat at the Patricians' Council for generations, and it is an open secret that they are one of the largest driving concerns within i Omada. Their enforcers regularly patrol districts under the Family's control, and while this Protection is expensive, the Falcone's are ruthless in the defense of their territory—both against the depredations of other Families and from external threats such as street crime. For all that the Falcones are feared, though, Don Falcone is widely considered to be quite honorable. Children and "civilians" who are not party to a given

bit of “business” are respected as non-combatants in the case of Familial disputes—more than one torpedo has been severely, if briefly, surprised by the Don’s displeasure when they were overzealous in their duties.

I Gondolieri: The Ferrymen of Elenzio are iconic, their shallow boats a common sight on the multi-level canals that form the transit systems of the the oldest sections of the City. Transporting incognito Patricians and common folk alike, gondolas are ubiquitous. There are rumors among Elenzians, though, that some of i Gondolieri have a sinister side rarely seen by common folk. If one believes the tales from the Market of Ghosts, and if one is searching for a spy or assassin with a professional reputation beyond reproach—one may need look no further than the nearest Ferryman. Most Gondolieri are honest, upstanding citizens, of course, but the rumors remain persistent on the subject.

The Numinal Audience: There are some few curious souls in Elenzio who seek to better understand the mysteries of the unseen world. By necessity, such people must remain unnoticed by the Etymarchy lest they be fined, jailed, or worse. Despite the dangers, such seekers after knowledge can sometimes congregate into cults, clubs, or lodges. One such group, the Numinal Audience, is said to be a circle of initiates concerning itself with ancient powers and strange entities from beyond the mortal realm. By all accounts, their most recent forays into the unknown include research on various artifacts recovered from archaeological digs.

Il Partito Sovrano Citta: The Sovereign City Party is new to the Elenzian political scene. Led by Alonzo Rossi, a former soldier in the Patricians’ Army, the S.C.P. is a group founded on dissatisfaction and resentment. Elenzian power is divided between two distinct factions—the Phenexian Church and the Patricians’ Council. The S.C.P., however, posits that such a division is unwarranted. Rossi makes frequent arguments (by radio, before live audiences, and via newspaper) that Elenzian power should be viewed as just that—the power of Elenzio as a whole, undivided City, and that any upstanding Elenzian may lay claim to that common heritage regardless of patronage or religious creed. This holistic, nationalistic stance appeals to a great many people—especially the vast population of Elenzians living in poverty.

The Sepharitic Order: The Etymarchy is both the least known and the most feared branch of the Church of Phenex. Within their ranks are a number of Orders created to serve specialized roles, and the Sepharites are one such group. Founded more than a century ago to carry on the personal work of High Inquisitor Sepharian, the members of the Sepharitic Order may well be the most accomplished vampire slayers in the world. During the Dark Times the Sepharites led the inquisition that wiped out the vampires and blooded of Elenzio. One should, however, make special note of the character of the members of the Sepharitic Order—rather than the frothing zealots some critics make them out to be, initiates are sought out for their piousness, their poise—and above all else, their ruthless pragmatism in the face of terrible choices.

Il Sindacato Arlecchino: There are reports that in the seclusion of their private estates some members of the upper class hold blasphemous revels and hedonistic debauches unparalleled on the face of Ayos. Il Sindacato Arlecchino, “The Harlequin Syndicate,” as they call themselves, are given to darker pleasures and wild excesses. More dire yet, they purportedly harbor a deep resentment for the strictures placed on their lives by the Church—and if one believes the most sensational tales, there may in fact be a revolutionary

streak to some of the more active members. Whether such individuals are merely playing at anarchy as a dangerous hobby, or whether they are legitimately working towards political change, is anyone's guess.

Viparri Clockworks: Emblematic of Elenzian passion and drive, Viparri Clockworks is one of the premiere luxury automata manufacturers in the world. Founded almost sixty years ago by Giuseppe Viparri, the company started as a powered loader manufactory. A series of innovative design features led to an influx of capital from investors, and within a decade of inception, Viparri Clockworks shifted gears from utility armatures to cutting edge automata. World renowned for their sleek lines, quiet operation, and excellent performance, Viparri automata have become a universal symbol of wealth and success. The Viparri 166 is thought to be the most popular model among the movie stars and glitterati of the Federated Cities.

La Zipporah: Not everyone in Elenzio quietly follows the doctrines of the Church, the edicts of the Patricians' Council, or the sinister orders of the Omada. A number of revolutionary and subversive elements exist within the City, and many of them find their voice in La Zipporah. Unquestionably the most popular underground newspaper in Elenzio, La Zipporah—literally “The Little Bird”—uses a variety of hidden presses and proxy distributors to spread controversial ideologies, encoded messages, and pieces of investigative journalism on behalf of any number of groups frowned upon by the powers that be. More than once an authority figure has asked a prisoner “How did you know?” and gotten the answer “A Little Bird told me.”

National Dress

Civilian: Elenzian suits tend to be conservative in color, often black, grey, or pinstripe, with padding in the shoulders and a very tailored cut. Dresses and skirts with hemlines at the calf are the style of the day among the upper classes (trousers being prevalent among the lower classes for ease of movement), skirts being generally black and blouses and shirts being predominantly white. Colorful clothing still tends towards the conservative among the lower classes, though the extravagant fashion of the Elenzian elite is well known. Hats, like gloves, are quite common, with fedoras, derbys, pillboxes, and floral fascinators in the upper class and simple caps among the poor. Upper class individuals sometimes wear jewelry—cufflinks, rings, and tie-clips being the most prominent examples. Many people wear suspenders. Long coats and scarves or cravats are common on those occasions when the balmy Elenzian climate warrants extra layering.

Military: The Elenzian military favors light grey uniforms, most frequently made of wool or drill, alongside brown leather accouterments. Jodhpurs are generally worn by officers, with a similar effect created for the rank and file through the judicious use of baggy trousers and leg-wraps or gaiters. Paladins are a separate force and frequently wear archaic armor including steel or reinforced leather plating on their limbs (though rarely on their torsos).

Iconography: As the home of the Church, Elenzian iconography is replete with Phenexian imagery. The falchi is the most common form of official Church insignia, though a phoenix is sometimes used decoratively. The military roundel for Elenzio is a golden starburst on a white circle, while the Church uses a black falchi on a maroon circle. The Elenzian flag is comprised of a white field with a golden starburst, center, supported by two Phenexian falchi.

Common First Names: Alvaro, Anna, Carmen, Dimitrios, Eleni, Giulia, Irene, Ioanna, Konstantinos, Magdalenea, Maria, Mario, Martina, Michail, Pietro, Riccardo, Sophia, Stefanos, Tommaso, Ugo

Common Surnames: Angelo, Bianchi, Costa, Giordano, Guzman, Kriezis, Moreno, Petridis, Stavros, Triana

International Relations

Alden:

Our brothers and sisters in that benighted City toil under the lash of the Unclean. Join me, one and all, in beseeching the Almighty to allow Phenex reign here, that the light and fire of Phenex may flow through us, and through us cleanse the world of the Abomination of the Vampire King.

—Father Alejandro Mussoli, Phenexian Priest

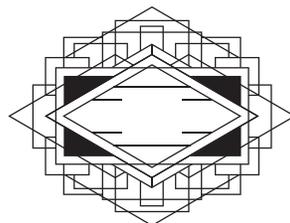
Once staunch allies, Alden and Elenzio have drifted apart, both politically and culturally. King Maximilian's Declaration of Religious Freedom, and later the flourishing of the Chayodyne Order under King James, have contributed significantly to the rift with the devoutly Phenexian state. The Lamplighters of Alden are, of course, pressing for closer ties with Elenzio, spurred on by edicts from the White Throne condemning the Blooded as abominations. Even amidst such turmoil, though, Elenzio and Alden conduct trade in good course and have fairly normal national exchanges.

The Federated Cities:

Though they be far away, our cousins are still Family. It was a terrible thing, the Rising, and we will do everything in our power to help our Family in their time of need. We shall extend to them the hand of compassion.

—Don Bartolo Ammanci

After Elenzio was devastated by the Great War, waves of emigrants searched for new homes. A great many of the displaced made their way to the Federated Cities. With the emigrants came culture, cuisine, reinvigorated faith—and i Omada. Gemeinschaft communities arose in both Waypoint and Falls, but it was Thorncrag that saw the greatest influx of Elenzians. Unfortunately, Little Elenzio was one of the districts hardest hit by the Thorncrag Rising, an event labeled "Divine Condemnation" by the Church. Today, the Merchant Princes of Elenzio have significant dealings with the Federated Cities. I Omada money and influence are powerful forces in Thorncrag and Waypoint, particularly in the burgeoning film industry.



Loreard:

It is rare to find so kindred a people in another City. They are making great strides despite von Altreich's sentimentality. We should think of them as brothers-in-arms against the tyrants of the world.

—Alonzo Rossi, former Captain in the Elenzian Army, in a private conversation

Historically enemies, Loreard and Elenzio are quickly becoming allies. Though the Church rails against the atheism espoused by the Eienstadt Party and the Patricians balk at the party's autocratic leadership, the Elenzian proletariat find much common ground with modern Loreardans. There are significant similarities between classical Elenzian societal divisions and the segregationist policies created by the Eienstadts. Further, the Cities have parallel histories of vampiric oppression alleviated only by hard fought rebellion—it is easy to see why the disenfranchised of Elenzio identify with popular sentiment in Loreard, and why the two nations have developed close political and economic ties.

Phong Tai:

A strange people from a strange City. I cannot claim to understand their culture, their religion, or their fashion, but I respect their engineering. Not so good as ours, perhaps, but still—very impressive.

—Lorenzo Viparri, after an automated pugilism exhibition bout

Elenzio and Phong Tai have a stable, if somewhat detached, relationship. Following the Great War and the Dark Times, the leadership of Phong Tai was a shambles. Contemporary Elenzio, for its part, had almost been destroyed. As the two Cities rebuilt, neither was in any position to make aggressive moves against the other. While one would think the activities of Elenzian merchants would be curtailed by Phong Tai's retreat into isolationism, "commerce finds a way," as the saying goes, and Elenzian cargo vessels have continued to carry Phong Tai goods across the face of Aynos almost without interruption for the past century.

Skvalgaard:

There is cold, there is blasphemy, and there is death. We should lance that City like a physician lances a boil.

—Sister Andreana, Etymarch of the Order of Saint Adephon

Skvalgaard has little in the way of a military, and has not acted violently against other Cities since the times when their raiders carried axes and plied the waves in dragon-headed sailing ships. Nonetheless, Elenzians harbor a distaste for Skvalgaard. No doubt this is due to the pre-human ruins extant in the glaciers north of the City, as well as the emphasis Skvalgaard places on secular education. Some few Skvals seem immune to Elenzian contempt—the truly devout, who volunteer for service in the Skvaldic Corps. There are fewer and fewer such volunteers, however, due to the rise of Tyhjalintu, a strange, syncretic branch of Phenexianism which has taken root in the northernmost City—and which is quickly drawing the ire of the Etymarchy.

Volskograd:

Whether the Church or the Council, someone must be in charge. Can you imagine the rule of the anarchists? I do not need to. I have seen it. In the Dark Times. Trust me, little fish, our way is the better way. Come, who is for sweets?

—Don Matias Cavallaro, to his granddaughter Sophia

The cultural divisions between Elenzio and Volskograd are old and deep. Emotions run hot with Elenzians, while few peoples are so stoic and somber as the Volskagradians. Elenzian tastes run towards ornamentation and complexity, while Volskagradian aesthetics are drastically pragmatic out of necessity. One of the few points of agreement the two Cities ever had was religion, and that ended long ago with the advent of the Eastern Orthodox Phenexian Church in Volskograd. Many in Elenzio see the Collectivist Revolution in Volskograd as nothing more than a seizure of power by anarchists, pointing to the various political purges as evidence of the bloody folly of such movements. Such commentators are generally members of the upper class.

Xian Dao:

A conquest of the vampires, perhaps—but the food is good, the nights are warm, and the taxes are just about exactly the price of a new dress for the customs agent's mistress.

—Maria Vendretti, Captain of the Carlotta's Smile, a cargo hydrofoil

Alden and Elenzio see eye to eye less and less as time marches on. Happily for the economies of each, however, Xian Dao serves as a port of convenient origination. Goods which might otherwise be subject to heavy duties are shifted from one Xian Dao pier to another, the labels on their crates are changed, and what once was an import from Elenzio is suddenly a repatriation of goods from an Aldish territorial possession. The Merchant Princes of Elenzio are both familiar and adept with such dealings, and with the added benefit of acting as a conduit into the sequestered markets of Phong Tai, Xian Dao is a frequent and favored port of call for Elenzian vessels.

Il Zindan:

In ages past we would have called for a crusade. Today, we know better. Let them kill each other to the last, and when the unslaked dunes have quaffed their blood, and their damned souls are as quiet as the crumbling hive-tombs they worshipped, then shall the Chosen People—our people!—tear down the last of their time-wracked ruins and build not a Dwelling in Darkness, but a City of Fire and Light.

—Paladin Loreo, of the Order of the Whispering Flame

When the Thek went mad during the Great War, their armies devastated both Il Zindan and Elenzio. After Elenzio shook off the control of a vampire, the rebuilding began—and so did the blame for the insectile invasion. A Thek Queen had ruled Il Zindan, one that the Church had launched more than one crusade

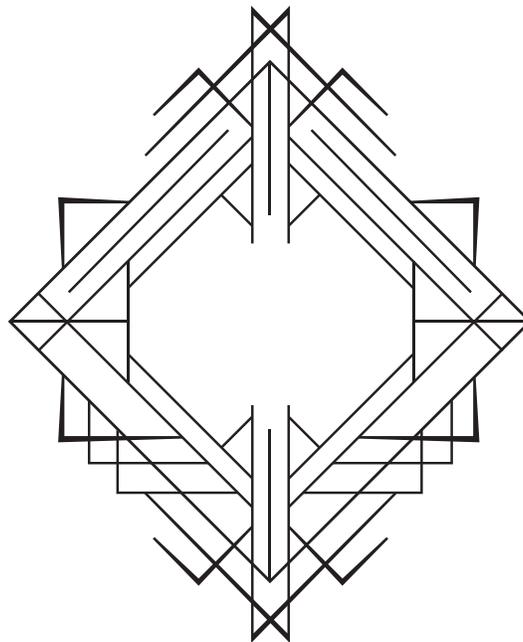
against over the centuries. Elenzio and the Church have consistently, volubly laid the blame for the Thek invasion at the feet of the Zindani people. Unlike many other Cities, Elenzio has neither the resources nor the desire to hire Zindani mercenaries to scavenge 'blasphemous' relics and artifacts from the Thek ruins. While Zindani petroleum and tanzolium sell as well in Elenzio as anywhere else—that is the extent of the 'polite' relations between the two Cities.

Zyebrinsk:

A poor people from a poor City—they I understand. A little bird tells me that they seek to get out from under the shadow of the bear. I wish them luck in this—we all have our own shadows to escape.

—Lucia Corteza, Gondolier

While Zyebrinsk and Elenzio have a great many differences, they have this much in common: both have vast populations of indigent, desperate people. While the poor of Elenzio can see the ostentatious consumption of the Patricians and the ceremonial grandeur of the Church of Phenex, the poor of Zyebrinsk are much more removed from the political elite in Volskagrad who dictate so much of their lives. Nonetheless, there is in each population a subtle but strong and brewing sense of resentment. Some political factions in both Cities, including Elenzio's S.C.P. and the Zyebrinski Mason's Cooperative, regularly exchange tracts and advice and, on somewhat rare occasions, agents and materiel.



The Federated Cities

Unique among the City-states of humanity, the Federated Cities is comprised of three separate metropolitan areas linked physically by rail, road, and river, and historically by common culture and heritage. While the geographies and topographies of Falls, Thorncrag, and Waypoint are wildly disparate, there is a single, universal spirit shared by the people of each. From the gleaming academic towers of Falls, to the hardened streets of Thorncrag, to the neon-lit night clubs of Waypoint, the people of the Federated Cities tout personal freedom and individual potential as fundamental rights. The oft-times cutthroat political and economic conditions, however, have created a severely stratified society despite the egalitarian ideals at the core of the Federated Cities, and it can be difficult for moguls in the booming entertainment and industrial sectors to imagine the lives of the denizens of the shanty towns and slums.

Society: Relatively young among City-Nations, the Federated Cities gives rise to citizens widely considered optimistic, enthusiastic, outgoing, and brash. Such stereotypes are hardly universally accurate, of course—the Great War took a staggering toll on the populace, and the ensuing Dark Times hit the Federated Cities particularly hard. Ravaged by war, famine, and disease, the F.C. might have collapsed entirely were it not for the consistent aid received from Alden. As a result of the aforementioned trials and tribulations, a citizen of the F.C. is as likely to be a bleak, bitter soul as they are to be full of an irrepressible Can Do attitude. Despite the gross disparity between the Haves and the Have Nots, citizens of the Federated Cities are fiercely patriotic, especially when their Cities are threatened by an outside force. Originally colonies of Alden, Falls, Thorncrag, and Waypoint declared their independence by way of a revolution under arms. The unstoppable need for self-determination is one of the most dearly-held beliefs of the population of the Federated Cities. Moreover, stories of the Great War—of their forebears' unceasing, unflinching resistance to the invasion of horrors from beyond the wastes—have taken deep, deep root in the narrative history of the City-Nation. It is also worth noting that Thorncrag (more specifically the event known as the Thorncrag Rising) is the point of origin of all Slabs. Given that fact, and the number of Slabs still residing in Thorncrag, it is little wonder that almost the entirety of the world's supply of Aeonium-117 is created in Thorncrag (which has inevitably given birth to a thriving black market in the substance).

Populace: Each of the Federated Cities is home to approximately 1 million sentient beings (though Thorncrag had a population almost double that until the Rising). While the majority of these beings are human, the F.C. is the most racially diverse of all City-Nations. Individuated Automata occupy a strange societal niche, simultaneously regarded as "objects" or "just more regular folks" depending on the speaker. While very rare, the Blooded can be found living unmolested if one looks in the right places, especially in the entertainment industry. Similarly, H.A.V.O.C.s are quite unusual, though a regular enough sight in the F.C. armed forces. Slabs account for almost one in twenty individuals residing in Thorncrag. Homunculi are generally considered disconcerting and unpleasant, though they can be found integrated into society to some degree in various boroughs and neighborhoods. While the Federated Cities once housed a considerable number of Dorr, the local populations have long since disappeared for one reason or another (including plagues and societal actions ranging from ostracization to forced exodus).

Government: The Federated Cities are a representative democracy, though the separation of the various Cities has necessitated the creation of a form of government unique to the F.C.—a Federal Authority which works in conjunction with the various City governments.

The Federal Authority: Incorporating both the Elected Council and the Office of the President, the Federal Authority is the overarching, coordinating governmental body of the Federated Cities. The Elected Council is made up of a varying number of members voted in during a popular election held every three years, while the Office of the President is filled by way of a closed election every four years (only members of the Elected Council vote on who is to fill the Office of the President). The Federal Authority handles matters of national security, issues which arise between member Cities, and matters of international policy and operations. While there are Federal Magistrates who serve to arbitrate legal disputes among and between Cities both foreign and domestic under the auspices of the Articles of Confederation and various treaties, there is no actual judicial branch of the Federal Authority. Currently, President Helen Claybourne (Progressive) leads the Federal Authority, with Majority Leader John Corduroy (Traditionalist) and Minority Party Leader Suzanne McTire (Progressive) and their respective whips heading up the Elected Council.

The Municipal Governments: Each member City within the Federated Cities has its own form of local government. It is broadly accurate to say, however, that the Cities are divided into distinct Districts, Boroughs, or Wards, each of which holds regular general elections to select one or more individuals to serve on some form of legislative body (generally the City Council). General elections are also held to choose the Mayor of each City—Mr. Charles O’Dwyer remains the Mayor of Thorncrag after four consecutive terms. Ms. Dorothy Calhoun was recently elected Mayor of Falls on a platform of labor reform, while Mr. Fletcher C. Porter is the Mayor of Waypoint (amidst murmurs of ties to both the studio executives and organized crime). The Judiciary branches of the Cities are most often filled by Mayorial Appointment, rather than by election.

The Present Day: The resurgence of the Federated Cities after the Great War was a long, bloody, torrid affair. No other nation on Ayos showcases such wild extremes of wealth and poverty. Business tycoons, crime bosses, and captains of industry wield truly immense power, while “average” citizens struggle to make ends meet. The ranks of the destitute grow more vast and desperate by the day.

Business owners and politicians argue that the centralization of capital and the means of production allowed a Few to drag the Many out of the muck and mire of the Dark Times. Union representatives and academics, though, cite the aggregation of wealth as a contributing factor to the extensive duration of the Dark Times, convinced that the F.C.’s economy would have righted itself sooner with direct oversight and intervention by the Federal Authority. Regardless, other socioeconomic systems such as collectivism and anarchism are widely rejected, if not outright derided or feared. One may say this for commercialism in the Federated Cities: it has created a boom in industry the likes of which has never been seen anywhere else on Ayos. High technology, heavy industry, radio programs, moving pictures—the F.C. leads the world in all these and more.

There has never been an official class system in the F.C., and anyone with enough talent, determination, and grit can claw their way to the top. “The Dream,” citizens call it, and they can see it reinforced every day on the silver screen, or hear its siren song through their wireless sets. The Dream is flawed, though, and it is far more elusive than most are willing to admit to themselves.

A special note should be made of the strange relationship between the Federated Cities and the notion of vice. Part of the Dream is based on a special sort of wholesomeness and integrity. Indeed, it was in the spirit of the Dream that the Federated Cities passed Article 27 and embraced Proscription—a ban on alcohol. Despite the apparent support for the measure, the demand for liquor has remained as high as ever (if not higher), and organized crime is making money hand over fist through bootlegging operations. This is emblematic of a wider spread phenomenon in the F.C.—a pursuit of public decency and private indulgence.

Locations of Note

Falls: Arguably the most technologically advanced City in the world, Falls is a testament to ingenuity and perseverance. Originally a boomtown centered on a hydroelectric plant (and the first publicly accessible electrical grid on Ayos), Falls has become a renowned center of learning and industry, a City of universities and factories perched along a titanic waterfall. Elevated railways run throughout the City and beyond, their sleek steel behemoths carrying passengers and freight alike. The hangars of Falls house vast airships and flying wings, the docking towers and landing fields busy day and night. Laboratories both private and governmental invent chemical, biological, and mechanical marvels at a prodigious rate, and there are more schools per capita than anywhere else on the planet. It should come as no surprise that Falls contains the highest concentration of automata in the Federated Cities, enough so that politicians have begun to seriously question how to approach the subject of automatic citizenship. Similarly, Falls was the cradle of the H.A.V.O.C. program, with commensurate numbers of the resulting individuals residing there to this day. While crime is a problem, as it is in every megatropolis, Falls may represent the epitome of the ideals upon which the Federated Cities were built. Generally speaking, the citizens of Falls are tolerant, patriotic, and idealistic. They see first hand what wonders modern science can create—new medicines, new tools, new ideas—and this sense of Progress fosters a deep seated optimism. Indeed, following that streak, Falls was the City which first fostered the Article for Proscription.

Thorncrag: Thorncrag is a City of survivors. Ten years ago the events known as the Thorncrag Rising nearly destroyed the entire metropolitan area, and to this day, a great many mysteries surround the Rising. The 42nd Street Wall remains one of the most iconic features of the City alongside the Lady of Exiles and the Sovereign State Building. Architectural marvels and the undead are only parts of life on the mountain, though—as both the largest and the most densely populated of the Federated Cities, Thorncrag hosts a staggering depth and breadth of cultures. From the screamdust dens of Quayside to the charnel houses of the Butcher Blocks, from the factory districts of the North End to the gemeinschaft communities of Twelve Points, if one looks hard enough, one can find representatives of every human culture on Ayos in Thorncrag. The arts are prominent as well, and while Waypoint has become the center of life in moving pictures and radio, the stars of more traditional forms of entertainment (the theater, live musical performances, etc.) all regard headlining one of the marquees on Mainway as the pinnacle of personal achievement. The glitz and glamour of the upper

classes is regularly documented in newspapers and social columns. Despite all that, Thorncrag is an industrial powerhouse at heart. Its factories are some of the largest in the world, and when Slabs aren't frequenting clubs on Tomb Street, they make money as untiring, unsleeping workers. This has caused considerable grief to the unions in the City—and their rumored underworld connections.

Waypoint: Called "The City of Dreams", Waypoint is quickly emerging as the indisputable world leader in entertainment. Little more than a century ago, Waypoint was stoically dying, shriveling in the harsh desert sun. Then came the Great War, and the Dark Times close behind. Just as the City seemed to be tottering on the brink of extinction, moving pictures started picking up steam in earnest. A handful of entrepreneurs realized the incredible potential held by the abandoned buildings of Waypoint as sets and studio lots, and within a few short years the outskirts of Waypoint had been transformed into state of the art film and radio program production facilities. Capitalizing on the influx of money and people, many of the central boulevards and thoroughfares of the City sprouted bars, casinos, and houses of ill repute at an alarming rate, and with the dens of vice and iniquity came career criminals. The advent of Proscription barely put a dent in liquor related businesses and activities—speakeasies have become as ubiquitous as neon and aerials in Waypoint. Outsiders sometimes wonder at how such illicit business can operate so openly, but the answer is as simple as it is deplorable: corruption. Organized crime runs rampant in the City, almost entirely unfettered by law enforcement. Police, judges, and prisons exist, of course, but the various gangs and mobs use a cocktail of graft, blackmail, and intimidation to dictate the course of justice. It has been said that only the poor and the friendless go to prison in the City of Dreams.

Groups and Institutions of Interest

Falls:

The First Enhanced Division: Created from the first successful generation of the H.A.V.O.C. program, the First Enhanced Division is the pride of both the Federated Cities' armed services and their home City of Falls in particular. A combined arms division, the super soldiers of the F.E.D. are as skilled in armored warfare and aerial combat as they are at paratrooping and amphibious operations. Under the command of General Brenda "Boom Boom" Bradshaw, the First Enhanced Division has seen more action and garnered more victories in its short history than some units of Rangers which have been on active duty since the revolution against Alden.

The Sentinel Times-Star: Boasting one of the largest readerships of any newspaper west of the Separic Ocean, the Sentinel Times-Star is the premier outlet for news ranging from political happenings and economic trends to fashion and celebrity interviews. Newshawks go to extraordinary lengths to gain or maintain prestigious postings at the paper (with some of their feuds reaching the proportions of urban legends, as when Florence Tyson scooped Carl McGarrety by way of a singing telegram). The clout of the Sentinel Times-Star is such that entire political and criminal dynasties have been made or broken with just a few lines above the fold.

The University of Falls-North: One of the leading academic institutions in Falls (and, by extension, the world), the University of Falls-North is a haven for free thinkers and the truly gifted. With its main campus built directly into the hydroelectric plant that powers the City, the university can and does draw on massive amounts of power for use in experiments and small scale prototype production alike. In fact, the Federated Cities' H.A.V.O.C. program was created and run at this very site. In addition to biohelical experimentation, the University of Falls-North is well known for its aeronautical engineering and chemistry departments.

Thorncrag:

The Donnelly Family: The most notorious crime family in Thorncrag, the Donnellys are known to have connections to operations across the City—and beyond. While their bootlegging activities alone are legendary, the Donnellys control the ebb and flow of drugs, prostitution, gambling, black market goods, and loan sharking across entire boroughs of Thorncrag. Counting a surprising number of Slabs among their goons, the Donnellys have thus far shown no compunction about throwing down in open warfare with competing families and gangs. Nonetheless, it is their work with and for various political and industrial families that is perhaps most impressive, and their ties to the underworld of Alden should not be overlooked.

Foster Heavy Industries: The Foster family adopted the philosophy of vertical monopoly early. For better than fifty years, Foster Heavy Industries has owned mines, ore refineries, steel mills, railroads, ships, factories—anything that might be involved anywhere along the line of inventing and manufacturing tools and equipment. From pickaxes to industrial drones, from firearms to fire extinguishers, Foster Heavy Industries is a major part of the market. Such power does not come to the faint of heart, though—James “Big Jim” Foster is the unquestioned patriarch of the family, and it is widely known that his perceived enemies have a remarkable tendency to suffer “accidents.”

Industrial Workers' Association: Touting the slogan “Bread and Lilacs,” the Industrial Workers' Association, or “I.W.A.,” is the most prominent union in Thorncrag. Though liberal newspapers and radio shows portray the I.W.A. in a sympathetic light, it is a tough organization run by tough people. With connections to organized crime, it would be overly simplistic to say that the members of the I.W.A. are “the good guys” in the struggle against the companies of Thorncrag. While the I.W.A. has made strides in forcing companies to improve wages and working conditions, strikes are often broken by scabs or the authorities, and the I.W.A.'s public image is hampered by their attempts at compulsory membership in certain industries.

Waypoint:

Ascendant Pictures: Of all the movie production companies in the world, only a few are powerful and well-known enough to be known as, collectively, “the Studios.” Ascendant Pictures is one of those few. Routinely releasing blockbusters, some of the biggest stars in the business headline their releases—Diaphina Jones, Lawrence Montgomery, and Isabella Cranston are all under contract with Ascendant. The movies are a cutthroat business, though. Sometimes literally. It's something of an open secret that Ascendant has ties to organized crime. Between labor dispute resolution and scandal cover ups, Ascendant has a remarkable number of large, intimidating people on their payroll as “production assistants.”

The Gondorf Detective Agency: The gold standard in the private investigation business, the agents of the Gondorf Detective Agency have a well-deserved and much envied reputation. Calling someone “a real Gondorf” implies discretion, tenacity, and impeccable manners. Waypoint is rife with sin, debauchery, and vice—little wonder, then, that there are countless people looking for help with all sorts of sordid problems. Those with money, taste, and a lot to lose are the most likely to retain the Gondorf Detective Agency. That’s not to say that the agency turns a blind eye to the moral merits of a situation, and occasionally a charity case does slip in. Charity doesn’t keep the bill collectors at bay, though, and the doors of the agency have been open for a very long time.

Garner Sisters Productions: Another of “the Studios,” Garner Sisters is known for producing musicals, period pieces, and other spectacles. Like most other major players in the Waypoint scene, Garner Sisters is generally understood to have dealings with less-than-reputable individuals. Indeed, it is possible that Warren DeLaney, one of their most prominent actors, was born Trevor Donnelly, and people in the know claim that Mr. DeLaney’s “family ties” have made sure of more than one movie house deal. In a similarly dark vein, the ingenue Esme Stevens was rumored to have been considering breaking contract and going to work for Ascendant Pictures shortly before her tragic accident with the jar of acid.

National Dress

Civilian: Like a great many things in the Federated Cities, fashion is dependent on socio-economic class. Upstanding individuals tend to wear suits or dresses of conservative color and cut—cloth is expensive after all. For just that reason, of course, those who wish to profligately display their wealth (e.g., gangsters and the like) favor “zoot suits,” which are very baggy, with flared lines, and come in colors ranging from black and pinstripe all the way to canary yellow. Formal and evening gowns tends to be fitted, with those in high society seeing a rise in backless gowns and hemlines almost to the floor. Day dresses are a common form of apparel, with modest knee-length hemlines, ruffled or padded shoulders, puffed sleeves, and large yokes or collars all being prominent features. Coats and jackets follow suit, and sometimes include capelets. Hats, especially cloches, fedoras and homburgs, are very common.

Military: Federated Cities military personnel are issued simple, durable uniforms in olive drab (or, rarely, khaki). Some form of harness is a common, though not universal, feature, as are gaiters, and such accoutrements are mostly made from canvas or leather. While F.C. dress uniforms are as formal and crisp as those from any other military, combat uniforms often seem a bit more casual than their counterparts due to a design mindset that puts function over form.

Iconography: The Federated Cities are a younger political entity than most other Cities, but their heritage is no less proud for that. The Ranger’s flag boasts a brown hawk on a red field, while their roundel is a blue circle containing a white half field (lower), on which stands a dark blue monolith buttressed by a pair of red, angled towers. The federal flag is a series of three equal vertical bars in blue, red, and white (from left to right).

Common First Names: Albert, Ann, Barbara, Betty, Carol, Edward, Frank, Geraldine, Jack, Joe, Kenneth, Mary, Nancy, Patricia, Raymond, Robert, Shirley, Thomas, Virginia, Walter

Common Surnames: Avery, Bernard, Davis, Gager, Kennigan, MacLeod, Olmstead, Ripley, Smith, Winters

International Relations

Alden:

Too much starch in their shirts, you ask me, but all told? They're alright. I mean, the royals is snobs, but our bosses is pretty much the same, and Tom from down the factory's a nice guy.

—Bob Thornton, Welder

The Great War had a devastating effect on all nations, but it was particularly hard on the Confederated Territories. Alden rendered aid in the initial defense, in the reconstruction afterwards, and again after the advent of the Thorncrag Rising. This aid helped wash away the resentment that had spurred the Confederated Territories to break from Alden to begin with. When Falls, Thorncrag, and Waypoint rose from the ashes of the Confederated Territories as the Federated Cities, they counted Alden as one of their greatest supporters. To this day the two nations enjoy a special relationship of both military and cultural alliance.

Elenzio:

Family is family, and business is business. And when it comes to the Family Business—well. I don't care what City you're from, your cousin's your cousin, even if he owes you two large.

—Alphonse “the Author” Lupelli

After Elenzio was devastated by the Great War, waves of emigrants searched for new homes. A great many of the displaced made their way to the Federated Cities. With the emigrants came culture, cuisine, reinvigorated faith—and i Omada. Gemeinschaft communities arose in both Waypoint and Falls, but it was Thorncrag that saw the greatest influx of Elenzians. Unfortunately, Little Elenzio was one of the districts hardest hit by the Thorncrag Rising, an event labeled “Divine Condemnation” by the Church. Today, the Merchant Princes of Elenzio have significant dealings with the Federated Cities. I Omada money and influence are powerful forces in Thorncrag and Waypoint, particularly in the burgeoning film industry.

Loreard:

One of our largest foreign markets. I'll admit that I find some of their policies in poor taste, but I'm sure they feel the same way about some of my wardrobe from last year. Best to just let each enjoy their own. As long as their own includes my movies.

—Evelyn Karn, Director, Ascendant Pictures

At core, the authoritarian underpinnings of the Einstadt Party fly in the face of the liberal, democratic heritage of the Federated Cities. That said, Loreard and the F.C. have been trade partners in a very lucrative manner for quite some time, and a great many Loreardans have emigrated to the Federated Cities over the years in search of the Dream. With the tycoons and industry barons heavily invested in Loreard, a considerable amount of shared culture, and the scars of the Dark Times still fresh in everyone's minds, it is little wonder that politicians in the F.C. tend to adopt an isolationist stance rather than taking open issue with Einstadt policies and actions. For their part, Einstadts tend to view the F.C. as a decadent, fallen place—but one that holds the potential to be redeemed.

Phong Tai:

They're strange. They keep to themselves, mostly, and I guess that's alright, but it'll be a generation or more until the Unions forgive'em for that mess with the railroad.

—James Berkley, Freelance Reporter

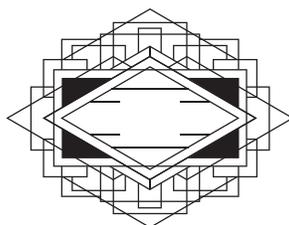
The Federated Cities have casual, commercially based associations with Phong Tai. In no position to project influence during the Dark Times, the F.C. had little or nothing to do with Alden's pseudo-annexation of Xian Dao. Then again, during the Dark Times Phong Tai was one of the greatest sources of immigrant laborers for the reconstruction efforts of the Federated Cities. During that period, a number of labor unions arose in the construction industry. One (in)famous incident involved a rail company in the F.C. working with an element of the Phong Tai underworld to break a strike using crews of immigrants.

Skvalgaard:

I knew a Skval, once. Not one of the massive, muscled giants. One of the other kind. Small guy, real quiet. A grocer. A mobster took a... shine... to a kid in the Skval's neighborhood. The Skval took a hunting knife, a mallet, and a chisel—pulled the mobster's lungs out through his back.

—James Cannon, Private Detective

Skvalgaard and the Federated Cities have a cordial, if not especially close, relationship. Both societies believe strongly in personal freedoms, and enshrine such values in their methods of government. As likely to search for the Dream as anyone else, a number of Skvals have resettled in the Federated Cities, especially in Thorncrag. Conversely, very few people from the F.C. move to Skvalgaard, with the noted exception of a thriving academic exchange program—a number of professors and scientists from Arkhatonic University spend considerable time and funding on research expeditions to the icy north.



Volskagrad:

Collectivism is a hateful thing, and a menace to peace and organized government.

—Adephon Williams-Hearst, Steel Baron and City Councilman, Thorncrag

Given the close ties between the Federated Cities and Alden, as well as the vast sociological differences between collectivism and commercialism, it is little wonder that the relationship between Volskagrad and the F.C. is an acrimonious and contentious one. Historically, the Federated Cities have not held enough power to threaten the V.P.C.P., but with recent innovations and expansions in the west, the Lords of Winter are taking more and more notice of the upstarts across the ocean. For their part, the barons of industry in the F.C. justifiably see collectivism as a threat, and they ruthlessly quash any outspoken Collectivist advocates.

Xian Dao:

They talk different, they dress different, they cook different—but from a certain angle, right, the people of Xian Dao are the closest to siblings we've got in the world. They're treated badly by pretty much everybody, governed within an inch of their life by Alden, and they know money doesn't have loyalties, see?

—Tahlia "Dizzy" Freeborn, Bootlegger

Officially, Xian Dao and the Federated Cities do not have much of any sort of diplomatic interactions—such business is conducted with Alden. Unofficially, of course, Xian Dao and the Federated Cities are close partners in trade. As the "Gateway to Phong Tai," Xian Dao offers the F.C. access to one of the largest and busiest markets of the world, to say nothing of its own voracious appetites. For every airship that carries films, gadgets, and tourists from the F.C. to Xian Dao, another carries silk, ore, and spices from Xian Dao to the F.C.

Il Zindan:

If they ever get those drilling platforms up to spec, we're going to have a real problem on our hands. Do we have anyone out there we can trust to... keep our interests in mind?

—Ida Fitzpatrick, President of Tri-City Drilling, at a board meeting

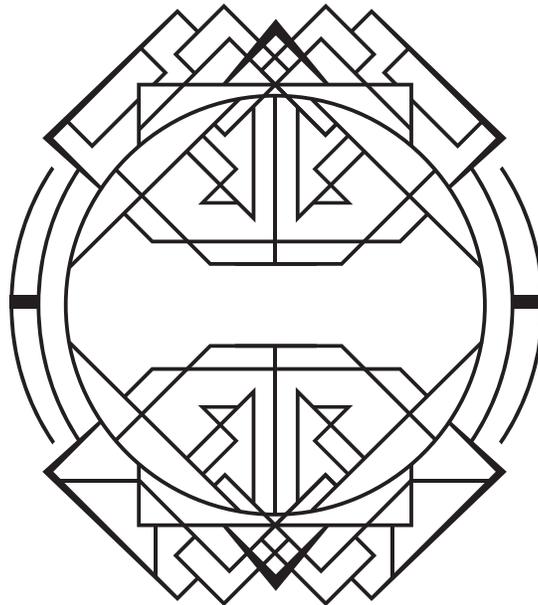
Somewhat surprisingly, the Federated Cities are much less concerned with Zindani Thek artifacts and lost knowledge and much more concerned with the potential threat of Zindani tanzo. Thus far, the tanzolium fields and refineries of Waypoint have maintained a comfortable technological edge over their Zindani counterparts. With the advent of Hallack Red Diesel's most recent set of derricks, however, that edge is rapidly dwindling, and tanzo markets the world over are paying keen interest to the situation. Waypoint's tanzo sector is understandably worried about their newly invigorated competitor.

Zyebrinsk:

There's a war on, over there, just some people don't know it yet.

—Robert Cranston, Student

The vast majority of anti-Collectivist posters and news articles focus not on Volskograd itself, but rather on Zyebrinsk. While it is true that a number of Union members in the F.C. are Collectivists, it is also true that many more are Commercialists who simply want a “fair shake.” That latter group sympathizes with the plight of the people of Zyebrinsk—the political impotence, the deplorable working conditions—but they tend to view the whole situation as the inevitable conclusion to collectivism. The people of Zyebrinsk, meanwhile, are starkly divided. Many view the F.C. as a decadent dystopia, while others hold it up as a land of infinite opportunity.



A Note Regarding Creating a Character From Loreard

Please remember that Players cannot play members of the Eienstadt Party at Hellcat Jive. Such individuals are, unequivocally, the villains of the piece. While Hellcat Jive strives to portray an ethically complex world, supporters of the Eienstadt regime have passed the moral event horizon of playability. They are the bad guys, and we will not condone Eienstadt player characters.

Towering behemoths of concrete and steel, the skyscrapers of Loreard stand as brutalist testaments to the power of the Eienstadt political machine. Draped in enormous party flags, the buildings are designed to impress upon residents a sense of monolithic loyalty and purpose—and impose upon outsiders the true might of Loreard. By channeling sunlight and shadow, wind and weather, the City itself serves in many ways to control and inspire those that live within its cyclopean walls. Flights of aeroplanes and airships circle relentlessly in the skies above, ever vigilant for signs of unrest from without or within. While the sprawling, vermiculated alleys and tenements of the Old City cling to existence on the periphery, the unforgiving, calculated recent construction is the unmistakable new shape of Loreard.

Society: Across Ayos, the people of Loreard are believed to fall into one of two archetypes—one, a decadent hedonist, unparalleled in artistic endeavor, debauchery, and cuisine. The other, a fierce advocate for Order above all, industrious, methodical, and exacting. After the Great War, it was the former who flourished under the rule of the vampires. It was the latter that led the Messernacht, the Night of Knives, when the humans of Loreard rebelled against the vampire nobles and their spawn, hunting them to extinction within the City. That same revolution saw the meteoric rise of one Walther von Altreich. A contract laborer by trade, von Altreich proved to be an orator of the highest caliber. His message—a galvanizing, caustic slurry of patriotism, human supremacism, and demagoguery—was instrumental in the creation of the Eienstadt Party. Within a decade of its inception, the party's constituents (known as Eienstadts) won key governmental positions and quickly transformed all of Loreardan society. Elements of infrastructure ranging from the educational system to the military reinforce the doctrine that individuals exist to serve the state, and in so doing, serve their own interests. Tremendous emphasis is placed on the importance of the City, and, by extension, the sole remaining political party. While there are some people who refuse to endorse the current culture, such individuals are a rare and dying breed, relegated to a handful of slums and ghettos. The vast majority of Loreardans are avid supporters of the Eienstadt regime, finding the rewards of centralized authority—food, employment, and housing all guaranteed by the City—to far outstrip the 'freedoms' they 'enjoyed' during the Dark Times.

Populace: The most recent census from Loreard enumerated 1.8 million citizens. However, it is important to note that only humans may achieve the designation of "citizen" within Loreard, and more specifically, only humans who have completed their duty to the City (usually by way of military service). Official publications indicate that there are few, if any, non-humans residing in Loreard. Unofficial estimates and observations

offer a rather different narrative. It is true that there are no Blooded local to Loreard, and that Blooded from other Cities seem to suffer “accidents” and ailments at a truly catastrophic rate. Slabs are almost unheard of, though the scientific community has retained a few for study. Drones are plentiful in Loreard, even if Individuated Automata are rare enough to qualify as either “wonders of modern science” or defective units to be decommissioned depending on their political leanings. The H.A.V.O.C. program in Loreard is exceptionally well funded and seamlessly integrated into military infrastructure. Rumors persist of pockets of homunculi eeking out their lives in Spitespit and other slums.

Government: The Eienstadt Party has subsumed the institutions of the previous forms of Loreardan government. Today, the country is controlled by a series of City Divisions, the heads of which directly report to the Office of the Leader—Walther von Altreich.

The City Divisions: Each of Loreard’s City Divisions is a semi-autonomous unit within its stated purview. As the head of each Division is hand-selected by von Altreich, there is considerable personal loyalty and politics involved in such appointments. Divisions such as Foreign Affairs, Civil Planning, and Public Enlightenment all work towards their own agendas while vying with one another for both resources and the Leader’s favor. Presently, the Division of Air Power, the Division of Military Endeavors, and the Division of Science and Inquiry seem to be attracting the greatest shares of backing and esteem. The head of the Division of the Navy has also been receiving more time with the Leader in recent months, at the apparent expense of the Division of Justice, the Division of Labor, and the Division of Nutrition and Agriculture. It is unclear why this might be—while Loreard possesses navigable waterways leading to the ocean, the City has never been a major naval power.

The Leader’s Chancellery: Overseeing the City Divisions, the Party Courts, and the Leader’s personal affairs, the Leader’s Chancellery is an office that sprawls, both physically and politically. Von Altreich himself maintains a series of desks inside the office, and due to security concerns, very few individuals are privy to his exact location or itinerary at any given time. This blend of potentially omnipresent scrutiny and lack of clear direction is emblematic of the Leader’s approach to governance—those reporting to von Altreich are expected to carry out their duties to further the goals of the Eienstadt Party, and are accorded personal accolades (and punishments) in accordance with their success (and failures), all without the Leader himself providing explicit direction or accepting responsibility for any specific task. The Leader and his Chancellery encourage and manipulate competition among their subordinates to simultaneously enforce individual performance and ensure a toolset to undercut any who may overreach their station.

The Present Day: The social order of Loreard is monolithic, violently maintained, and not quite so complete as the Einstadts would have people believe. When von Altreich took power, he did so by harnessing a rising wave of fear, resentment, and desperation engendered by the depredations and casual brutality of the vampiric nobility. Seizing upon the fear and resentment of the underclasses, von Altreich was able to stoke and direct the simmering fervor of the masses into a push for control of society, culture, and government alike. While the Leader was shockingly effective in his coup, there are still remnants of the Loreard-that-was lurking in the fringes of the old City.

Society in “proper” Loreard is centered on the needs of the City and the needs of the Party (which are essentially synonymous under the Einstadt regime). Party membership is not strictly mandatory, though it is glaringly obvious that everything from education and employment to healthcare and travel papers are tied to a person’s station in the Einstadt. Young people attend schools provided by the City, with the children of prominent Party members attending boarding schools centered around specific career paths—military, political, and science officers are created young, as it were. In a “happy coincidence” for the City, such children double as hostages in the event that their parents decide to act in any way unbecoming of a “loyal Citizen of Loreard.” Moreover, there is a substantial likelihood that children of such parents will turn them in to the authorities, as doing so is one of the few ways to diminish the traitorous stain upon their own careers caused by “questionable familial affiliations.”

While hardly so organized as some might like (and as the Einstadts might fear), certain elements in Loreard can broadly be categorized as “the Defiance.” For the Einstadts, the Defiance presents both an embarrassment to be hidden and a scapegoat to be blamed. On those rare occasions when the Defiance successfully disrupts an Einstadt undertaking of any sort, the Party is quick to either bury the entire incident or rebrand it as the way things were meant to go all along. Conversely, when the Einstadts carry out any action which might be met with public objection (the demolition of an orphanage, for example), the blame for the activity is placed squarely on the shoulders of the Defiance.

Locations of Note

Das Herzenstahl: At the center of Loreard looms das Herzenstahl, “The Heart of Steel.” A truly gargantuan structure, the Herzenstahl is practically a City within a City. Encompassing the labyrinthine structure of the Leader’s Chancellery, housing an entire division of elite troops, and containing multiple airdocks and airstrips, the Herzenstahl can theoretically operate for years or decades unimpeded by any conditions outside its curtain walls, up to and including the wholesale occupation of the rest of Loreard. Bunkers, subterranean hydroponic gardens, power plants, medical facilities, manufactories—redundancies and failsafes have been layered and overlapped to ensure security and survivability to a degree unimagined anywhere else on the planet. No one but the Leader is entirely certain how deep the sub-basements go, or what the true potential of the various parts of the complex might be. One thing is certain, though: between the intelligence flowing in from countless agents and spies, the presence of the High Command of the Gendarmerie, and the reports and meetings of the various Division heads, the Herzenstahl really is the beating heart of Einstadt Loreard.

The Wyssenschaft Exclusion Zone: Various rumors have it that the Wyssenschaft Exclusion Zone was the original site of the headquarters for the City Division of Science and Inquiry. Others state that the Zone was merely a very important subdivision or project base. Regardless, some years ago there was a catastrophic incident involving a Division of Science and Inquiry installation. It is certain that there were a great many casualties. The specific nature of those deaths, though, is one of the many mysteries surrounding the incident, and each supposed explanation is more far fetched and horrifying than the last. What is true is that today an entire district of Loreard is locked down as tight as any prison. There are rings of reinforced walls topped with barbed wire and guard towers. Anti-aircraft guns maintain the integrity of the Zone against aeroplanes and zeppelins. The perimeter of the area is constantly patrolled by soldiers, dogs, jaegerpanzers, and

drones—though none of the guard forces ever actually venture into the Zone proper. Anyone who can find one of the rare vantage points that offer a view into the Zone will notice that all vegetation within is dead and withered. Perhaps the greatest of the Zone’s mysteries, though, is the placement of certain key fortifications. It is impossible to tell whether they are constructed to keep people out—or to keep something else in.

Spitespit: Of all the districts of Loreard, Spitespit is the one that has changed the least over the past few decades. For more than three hundred years, the rocky peninsula has been home to artists, lunatics, revolutionaries, and outcasts. Originally a tidal island, Spitespit was built into a bleak fortress in the reign of King Pollard the First. Not long after, the miasmic conditions and high cost of maintenance saw the crown grant (or sell, depending on the source) the land to a noble with a keen interest in medicine. The fortress was converted into a titanic hospital and asylum. A decade later, the true, darker nature of the noble’s hobbies were exposed, and the former fortress was parceled up and sold off to various creditors of the crown. The twisting passages and strangely angled rooms became tenements and cheap apartments. Thus was the oldest, poorest slum in the whole City of Loreard born. A century ago, Spitespit was a rotten cornucopia of the lowest members of society, a wicked muse for the most brilliant artists, poets, and doctors of the day. Today, following the traditions of the past, the population of Spitespit is made up of the poor, the displaced, and the reviled. Its warren-like streets and claustrophobically leaning buildings are home to cabarets, brothels, artist’s collectives—and many cells of the Defiance.

The Catacombs: Nothing of L’Hospice de Chapelle de Fidèle remains above ground—that once-proud bastion of the Chayodyne Order was burned during the Messernacht, and von Altreich saw to it that no two stones from the building remained one atop the other. Today, a tract of City-sponsored housing blocks stands there, utterly unremarkable. Below ground, however, is an entirely different story. A vast array of ossuaries and charnel alcoves persist, countless galleries and passages lined in human skulls and bones. Claimed from the lost depths of the mines of Loreard, the catacombs are the macabre legacy of a religion officially stamped out in the City above. They are apparently unknown to the Einstadts, and largely avoided by the old folk who do remember their existence. Nonetheless, to those with sufficient need, the catacombs offer opportunities for surreptitious movement in a City where travel is a tightly regulated commodity. To those willing to brave their grim halls and the strange things that sometimes stir in the depths—to members of the Defiance, or homunculi, or individuated automata on the run—the Catacombs are an invaluable, if terrifying, resource.

Groups and Institutions of Interest

The 3rd Mechanized Battalion: Few sights are so quick to disperse enemies of the City as approaching members of the 3rd Mechanized Battalion. Arguably the best fighting unit of jaegernauts in the world, the 3rd Mechanized Battalion has seen combat in countless police actions, limited border disputes, and discreet operations. With their distinctive coal-scuttle helmets and black Rüstungsschmied-pattern powered armor, they are an iconic part of the Einstadt warmachine. The Leader himself retains direct control over the jaegerpanzers of the 3rd Mechanized Battalion, and the group is trained, quartered, equipped, and provisioned within the depths of the Herzenstahl.

Der Beobachter: The Observer, as most call it, is the official newspaper and reporting corps of the Einstadt Party. Operating under the City Division of Public Enlightenment, the Observer is one of the most powerful tools in the Einstadt arsenal, if somewhat indirectly. During the early days of the coup, the Party saw to it that all other newspapers in the City were heavily taxed and encouraged to sell their assets to the members of the Party “for stewardship.” Those that refused were soon shuttered by order of government censors. Today, the Observer simply disseminates the statements of the City Divisions, their words all the more powerful for want of counterpoint.

The City Division of Science and Inquiry: Commonly referred to as the D.S.I. (and thereby earning its member scientists the dubious sobriquet of “Dizzies”), the City Division of Science and Inquiry is responsible for research and development in various key fields. The brightest scientific minds in Loreard are, very specifically, placed into service within the ranks of the D.S.I. Some of the D.S.I.’s past endeavors include the standardization and engineering allowing the mass production of jaegerpanzers, Project Legion, a similar undertaking involving drone soldiers, and, most recently, the very successful Loreardan H.A.V.O.C. program.

La Gendarmerie de la Ville Libre de Loreard: The Gendarmerie of the Free City of Loreard is an institution which predates the solidification of Einstadt power, but only just. In the wake of the Messernacht, the revolutionaries knew that they needed some force to maintain the rule of law during the creation of a new government. The Gendarmerie was created to oversee both civilian and military populations. For obvious reasons, the Einstadts made the Gendarmerie one of the first institutions on which to focus their attentions. Today, it is one of the most feared parts of the Party’s political machine, responsible for the “disappearances” of countless dissidents.

Die Himmelmacht: Operating under the auspices of the City Division of Air Power, the Himmelmacht is Loreard’s air force. As quickly as the Division of Science and Inquiry can make new and improved designs, the Himmelmacht retrofits current aircraft, or retires them to civilian duty, and has new, cutting-edge craft built. This approach has led to one of the most modern air forces in the world—Loreard was one of the first to adopt airship designs capable of transporting, supplying, and deploying fighter craft in combat. Given the amount of funding such efforts require, it is clear that the Leader considers air superiority to be of vital interest to the well being of the City.

The Order of the Silver Torq: One of the most controversial government agencies, especially among the skeptical upper echelons of the Einstadts, the Order of the Silver Torq is Loreard’s official method of investigation into the paranormal and the supernatural. Officially under the direction of the Division of Science and Inquiry, the Order of the Silver Torq predates the City Divisions and sometimes chafes at the arrangement. Originally a group of self-proclaimed mediums and “Practitioners of the Art,” the Leader himself recruited the Order during the coup. Moreover, the Leader has made it the Order’s mission to synthesize science and the paranormal into a single, unified field of study—a proposition which daunts both the Order and the D.S.I. alike.

The Red Stocking Society: Amidst the sea of grey totalitarianism in Loreard, there are rare splashes of color—even if they are hidden by trousers and skirts most of the time. The Red Stocking Society is primarily

made up of academics and religious individuals who have found the rule of the Einstadts to be intolerable. These like-minded individuals have taken to wearing red stockings and socks to signal to one another their shared hatred of the Einstadts. They are responsible for a small number of successful rebellious actions, mostly pamphlet distributions and thefts of food and materiel. Insofar as the Defiance has a core or leadership—the Red Stocking Society is it.

Das Sturmtruppenkorps: Products of one of the D.S.I.'s initiatives, the Shocktroopers are Loreard's most successful iteration of the H.A.V.O.C. process. As with all H.A.V.O.C.s, the Shocktroopers of Loreard are physically powerful, with inhumanly fast reflexes and impressive mental capabilities. Moreover, the rigorous indoctrination program the Shocktroopers undergo seems to mitigate some of the mental instabilities inherent to other Cities' super soldier programs—or at least to channel the instabilities into heightened aggression towards enemies of the City. Kitted out with the best equipment Loreard has to offer, the tread of the Shocktroopers' armored jackboots is an echoing symbol of the Leader's authority.

National Dress

A Note Regarding Costuming a Character From Loreard

Please note that it is especially important that characters from Loreard avoid incorporating Nazi symbols and paraphernalia into their costuming. While some symbols, such as the swastika, are very well known, others (including, but by no means limited to, the S.S. "Sig" bolts, the Iron Cross, and the Black Sun) are less so. Please make sure to double check the meanings of any medals or symbols you use in your costuming.

The Staff of Hellcat Jive reserves the right to remove any person from the game, temporarily or permanently, for the use of such symbols.

Civilian: Those attempting to remain in good standing with the party tend to emulate military fashions, with simple grey suits, skirts, shirts, and blouses of conservative cut with purple accents being most common. Those inclined to support the Defiance in thought and/or deed dress differently—even extravagantly. Dark suits remain common, though with fitted shoulders, allowing for no drape in the chest, and with narrow lapels. Trousers are likewise fitted. Alternatively, some outfits place an emphasis on freedom of movement, with the hemlines of skirts and dresses just below the knee. Similarly, such articles are "shapeless" and hang loosely. Formal affairs often call for the addition of beaded or fur accessories and accents. Hats and ties or cravats are expected—the cloche is ubiquitous, as are caps and top hats. Detachable wing collars, like spats, remain in use.

Military¹: The military of Loreard utilizes a predominantly grey color scheme with black highlights and accessories. National and unit insignia are prominent and generally in a silver tone. Officers and special units frequently have patent leather accessories, while all military personnel have base layers of wool, cotton, or duck cloth. Some mechanized units make use of camouflage with colors and patterns optimized for urban use. Others remain stolidly monochromatic, to enforce uniformity and cohesion.

Iconography: As part of the coup, Loreard's traditional national symbols of the red fox and the grey shield were abandoned in favor of the symbol of the Eienstadt Party—a white circle centered on a purple field, a 7/8ths black bar vertically bisecting the circle, a reference to the Messernacht. The military roundel for Loreard is the central figure of the flag, the white circle bisected by a black line, on a purple field.

Common First Names: Alfred, Alphonse, Camille, Erich, Eva, Gisele, Hans, Hildegard, Ilse, Ingrid, Jean, Leopold, Marcel, Marguerite, Otto, Odette, Roland, Simonne, Vera, Werner

Common Surnames: Albrecht, Broussard, DuBois, Laurent, Lefevre, Martin, Richter, Schmidt, Wagner, Weber

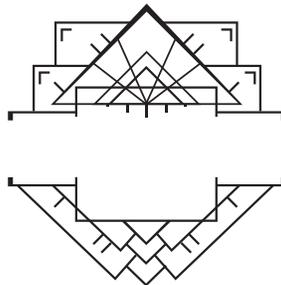
International Relations

Alden:

There is nothing worse than a host that willing feeds the parasites that infest it.

—Zelda DuPris, Cultural Attache, at a soiree held at the Elenzian Embassy in Loreard

Since the Messernacht and the ensuing rise of Walther von Altreich's Eienstadt Party, Loreard and Alden have found themselves in an increasingly antagonistic situation. While the two nations still engage in significant commerce, their respective governments have entered into something of a trade war. Tariffs and quarantines, embargoes and fines—the Cities are doing whatever they can to undercut one another. Further, caustic propaganda flows freely from all quarters, with blatant accusations of various atrocities and acts of moral degradation. Many simply wait for some inevitable spark to light the conflagration of war.



¹ Remember: Player Characters may not serve in the Loreardan Military. This information is offered in this text solely for cosmological purposes.

Elenzio:

The vampire. The dreg. The rogue automaton. These, the rot of society, must be expunged that the City may flourish. The Elenzian Quarters... they are a good start. One which can perhaps be improved upon... I must think on this.

–Colonel Friedrich von Dauer, at a Party meeting, to an aide

Historically enemies, Loreard and Elenzio are quickly becoming allies. Though the Church rails against the atheism espoused by the Eienstadt Party and the Patricians balk at the Party's autocratic leadership, the Elenzian proletariat find much common ground with modern Loreardans. There are significant similarities between classical Elenzian societal divisions and the segregationist policies created by the Einstadts. Further, the Cities have parallel histories of vampiric oppression alleviated only by hard fought rebellion—it is easy to see why the disenfranchised of Elenzio identify with popular sentiment in Loreard, and why the two nations have developed close political and economic ties.

The Federated Cities:

There is hope for them, yet. They have a softness to them. A cancer if you will. Yet a skillful surgeon can remove such things. And after such a surgery, the core of good, clean stock can bloom.

–Lelise Becker, Division Commander for Cultural Purity, Public Statement

At core, the authoritarian underpinnings of the Eienstadt Party fly in the face of the liberal, democratic heritage of the Federated Cities. That said, Loreard and the F.C. have been trade partners in a very lucrative manner for quite some time, and a great many Loreardans have emigrated to the Federated Cities over the years in search of "the Dream." With the tycoons and industry barons heavily invested in Loreard, a considerable amount of shared culture, and the scars of the Dark Times still fresh in everyone's minds, it is little wonder that politicians in the F.C. tend to adopt an isolationist stance rather than taking open issue with Einstadt policies and actions. For their part, Einstadts tend to view the F.C. as a decadent, fallen place—but one that holds the potential to be redeemed.

Phong Tai:

While I cannot commend their people—I have never met any—I respect the work they are doing in automatic technologies, and I have never been cheated during our business dealings.

–Horst Keller, Engineer Third Class, at a bar

Given the issues both Cities have had with Alden throughout history, it is small wonder that Phong Tai and Loreard often find common cause. While Loreard's desire to import drones for domestic use has fallen dramatically since the municipalization of most privately held companies in the City, there has been a commensurate rise in their desire for raw materials. Further, Loreardan factors often hire automatic Phong Tai

agents and elements when engaging in extralegal matters from which they wish to distance themselves. For their part, Phong Tai is only too willing to make such arrangements with anyone at odds with Alden.

Skvalgaard:

Think of it. Beneath the ice, locked away from human eyes for untold centuries, for uncountable eons. An entire City built by some precursor race with technologies that beggar ours. No one shall stand in my way. Not you, not your superiors, and not those Skvaldic imbeciles and their demand for 'excavation licensing.' Now go and get that roadblock removed, or I shall go, remove the roadblock myself, and leave you to walk up the mountain without a coat.

–Captain-Professor Wilhelm von Leichemacher III, en route to Hjemsoktis, stopped at a Skvaldic checkpoint

Until recently, Skvalgaard and Loreard had little to do with one another (aside from Skvaldic raids in the dimly remembered past). Since the rise of the Einstadts, however, Loreard has shown an ever increasing interest in the ruins locked within Hjemsoktis. This interest has risen to a fever pitch in recent months, and the Schiller-DuBois Expedition has become an apparently permanent part of the Skvaldic landscape. The Skvals, for their part, are leery of the nature and degree of Loreardan interest, but have thus far refrained from taking any steps which could incite an armed response of any kind.

Volskagrad:

Their philosophy is exactly backwards. With such a crucial support so badly warped, it is no wonder that their society is corrupt and failing.

–Harald Basburg, Cultural Attache, at a business meeting in Thorncrag

While Loreard and Volskagrad have hardly been the closest of allies at the best of times, it is only since the emergence of the Einstadts that true, unbridled animosity has come to the fore between the two. The Collectivists in Volskagrad point to the enforced classism and racist doctrines of Loreard as profoundly evil, while the Einstadts point to the "equity" of all the people in Volskagradian gulags or exiled to Zyebrinsk. In fact, there are rumors that Loreardan agents have been fueling and supplying revolutionaries in Zyebrinsk in an effort to drain resources and divide the attention of the higher ups in Volskagrad.

Xian Dao:

Poor bastards. Can you imagine if the leeches tried to get us back under their heel?

–Jean-Renee Chevalier, Steel Worker 2nd Class, at a bar

As a City, Xian Dao is still working on integrating two very disparate cultures—that of Phong Tai, and that of Alden. The average Citizen of Loreard, having thrown off vampiric governance by no other means than bloody revolution, feels a great deal of sympathy for the plight of self-identifying Phong Tai citizens still trapped today in Xian Dao under colonial Aldish rule. This sentiment is reinforced almost daily by the Observer and

other Loreardan news sources. Xian Dao, on the other hand, is little interested in the ‘sympathies’ of a fascist regime while it struggles for true self rule.

Il Zindan:

A prime example of the price of anarchy, the cost of consorting with the inhuman. Nonetheless, I believe they could do great things under the proper leadership of a true state.

—Ludwig von Pohl, Captain of the merchant vessel Striking Hammer,
on hearing of the hijacking of a red diesel shipment in Il Zindan

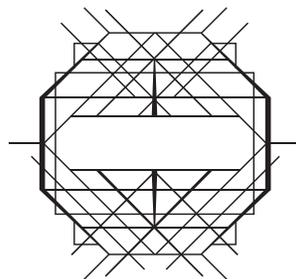
Loreard has long seen the benefits of unearthing and understanding the Thek ruins that lay lost beneath the sand and rock of Il Zindan. Only Alden and the Federated Cities are true rivals in this course of action, and each of the three Cities hire local or imported mercenaries to fight for choice archaeological sites. The Zindani themselves hire out to the highest bidder, using the proceeds to fund their own power struggles, as well as their nascent Red Diesel industry—a resource in competition to production in Alden or the F.C., but one which Loreard is only too happy to buy up.

Zyebrinsk:

We may not speak the same language. We may not have the same ideologies, or religions, or music. But under it all—under it all we have the same driving need. The need to throw off our shackles and be free.

—Viviane Deslys, Ranking Member of the Red Stocking Society,
after a performance at L’Aciérie Écarlate

While members of the Eienstadt Party consider Zyebrinsk to be nothing more or less than the inevitable result of the inherent flaws of collectivism, the Defiance, and more specifically the Red Stocking Society, see another group of people betrayed and abused by the City that should be working with them to create better lives for all. While neither the Defiance nor the rebellious elements of Zyebrinsk are in any position to help each other in any large-scale manner, on those rare occasions when members of each meet, each finds commiseration and sympathy in the other, if not total agreement on solutions.



Phong Tai

A City in self-imposed isolation, the cyclopean pagodas and terraced districts of Phong Tai's Hidden City rear up hundreds of feet higher than the curtain walls of the Diplomatic Cove. That division is emblematic of Phong Tai as both a City and a culture—a carefully constructed facade compartmentalized and juxtaposed against an inscrutable inner world. Phong Tai has never forgotten the gunboat diplomacy Alden used in acquiring a “lease” of Xian Dao. Indeed, the City has focused their scientific research into the development and production of drones such that all interactions with foreigners are conducted by proxy through one form of automata or another, and no one is entirely certain what goes on on the other side of the Silken Veil.

Society: The people of Phong Tai can be divided into two major camps—expatriates, who left before emigration largely ceased, and those who still live within the walls of the Hidden City. Both camps are known to be polite, reserved, and driven. As in many other cultures, the people of Phong Tai place significant emphasis on personal, familial, and municipal honor. A significant dichotomy exists within the fabric of Phong Tai society—though government and military positions are filled on a meritocratic basis, certain political stations are matters of heredity, and familial lines form the basis of much of the economic decision making in the City. While this may seem a set of disparate and irreconcilable circumstances to some, the people of Phong Tai often ascribe to the belief that individuals should strive for personal perfection and right action within their lot in the cosmos. This tenet is the basis for a philosophy known as the Way, which holds that all of existence occurs in cycles and patterns. External influences (particularly the Church of Phenex) have often sought to supplant the Phong Tai following of the Way to little appreciable effect. Even so, the loss of Xian Dao to Alden caused profound changes to life in Phong Tai. Since the annexation, all human citizens of Phong Tai remaining on the island continent have relocated inside the Hidden City, with only the automata of the Diplomatic Corps interacting directly with the outside world. For these reasons, Phong Tai has developed some of the most sophisticated and capable drones on the face of Ayos.

Populace: Approximately 4 million sentients reside within the Hidden City. While humans outnumber all other sentients combined by a wide margin, there remains considerable variation within the population. Proportionally there are no more individuated automata in Phong Tai than anywhere else, but due to the sheer number of automatic laborers, soldiers, and diplomats, there is a sizable community of thinking machines in the City. Perhaps surprisingly, such sentients are allowed to sit for Imperial Exams and are awarded posts at the same rate as humans (or at least at the same rate as humans without any particular lineage). Blooded are regarded disdainfully as something of a foreign blight, but are allowed to exist more or less unmolested. There are rumors of Phong Tai H.A.V.O.C.s, but such rumors have yet to be confirmed. While homunculi have taken to living in the Diplomatic Cove, it is unclear whether any reside in the City proper. There are no Slabs in Phong Tai to speak of—they are seen as aberrations in the pattern of the cosmos, a sort of premature spiritual echo, and are destroyed after trial.

Government: Phong Tai is ostensibly a constitutional monarchy made up of three distinct segments: the Diet of Councilors, the Divine Mechanisms, and the Monarchy.

The Diet of Councilors: Far and away the most public of the sections of government in the Hidden City, the Diet of Councilors was historically made up of publicly elected politicians and officials. More recently, however, there has been an increasing trend towards the appointment of military officers to the Diet, as well as certain powerful industrialists. While this shift has not gone unremarked—indeed, public protests and political unrest have blocked the creation of an entirely military Diet on more than one occasion—the trend is both lasting and real. The Diet of Councilors is responsible for the creation of most legislation, as well as the enforcement of the Emperor’s will.

The Divine Mechanisms: Due to the extensive automation of the Phong Tai workforce and military, the leadership found it expedient to ensure there be a centralized command structure in case of emergency. While the automatic soldiers of Phong Tai are among the most sophisticated and independent drones on all of Ayos, what makes them truly shine is their potential for synchronized action, essentially acting as extensions of a single consciousness. The amazing processing units at the core of such operations are referred to as ‘Divine Mechanisms.’ Slaving drones to the Divine Mechanisms is a rare occurrence, and no single Mechanism ever controls more than a division or ten at a given time. That said, enemies have been confounded when they pin their hopes on disrupting Phong Tai drone swarms only to have the independent drones revert to “merely impressive” levels of competency on the field of battle.

The Monarchy: The head of the City and the People of Phong Tai is the Emperor. Students of history may recall that slightly more than a century ago, questions arose regarding the balance of power between the Emperor and the council of royal advisors. While the specific outcome of that struggle is somewhat murky, it appears as though the Emperor is in firm control of national policy in the modern era.

The Present Day: First and foremost, anyone studying Phong Tai must examine the separation between the Hidden City and the Diplomatic Cove. The artificial bay of the Diplomatic Cove was created specifically to offer foreign powers a berth for trade and messenger vessels while maintaining the seclusion of Phong Tai proper. This physical separation—commonly referred to as the Silken Veil—is a very concrete and specific reaction to Alden’s annexation of Xian Dao.

Phong Tai founded Xian Dao as a commercial and mercantile colony. Its ability to undertake such a massive endeavor against the backdrop of the Dark Times was a testament both to the prodigious capabilities of the City and to the vision and determination of the Emperor. That Alden was able to force a “peaceful lease” of the colony was a terrible blow to the pride of the people of Phong Tai. Nonetheless, the Emperor saw fit to accede to Alden’s demands for entirely legitimate tactical reasons—at the time, Alden had significantly more powerful naval and aeronautical forces. Rather than engage in a costly military campaign abroad that was unlikely to come to any sort of successful conclusion, the Emperor instead adopted a long term strategy of isolationism and internal improvement. The Diplomatic Cove was constructed (an incredible feat

of engineering in its own right), and the curtain walls surrounding the City proper grew to new heights, topped with a staggering array and amount of anti-aircraft weaponry. Phong Tai donned the Silken Veil.

Behind the Veil, Phong Tai society has changed dramatically. The very intentional, methodical modernization and automation of the labor sector and the military has taken decades, but has had striking results. Only the best and brightest human military officers and personnel remain on active duty, but the attention to militarization has filtered down to all aspects of life. Everything from time management to fashion has felt the keen edge of martial sensibility, and public service has become something of a boom industry.

Amidst such heady days of comparative plenty, there is a growing sense of purpose or inherent righteousness in the common people of Phong Tai. There are those on the fringes of society who caution against giving in to such things, however, claiming that some hand other than the Emperor's may be steering the ship of state.

Locations of Note

The Diplomatic Cove: As mentioned above, the Diplomatic Cove is an artificial bay created to allow foreign vessels safe harbor from which to conduct trade. Miles-long piers sprawl into the sea to handle traffic from gargantuan commercial catamarans, ocean liners, and red diesel tankers. Towering scaffolds of concrete and steel accommodate airships and smaller craft alike. To the untutored eye, the sheer scale of industry in the Diplomatic Cove is boggling. Closer inspection, however, reveals something even more startling—the entire operation is automated. Not a single organic citizen of Phong Tai is present anywhere in the area. Instead, all official representatives of local interests are automata. Visiting merchants and factors are required to check in with one of the countless automatic embassies and conduct all purchases, sales, and trades through one of the mechanical clerks there. It is uncertain how (or even if) people and material goods are moved between the Diplomatic Cove and Phong Tai proper, but the most common theory is that there are subterranean railroads permeating the landward edges of the district for such purposes. The walls closing the cove off from the rest of the City are high enough to significantly shorten daylight hours—theories as to what goes on beneath them are more rampant speculation than informed hypothesis.

The Imperial Compound: Deep within the heart of Phong Tai stands the Imperial Compound, those portions of the metropolis given over to the Imperial Palace and its grounds. The size of a small District, the Compound includes both the Palace itself and a series of temples, gardens, offices, parks, garages, barracks, galleries, theaters, workshops—any number of places and buildings. While hardly a self-contained City, the Compound nonetheless encompasses most every kind of diversion, instruction, or tool of state that a member of the Imperial line could think to want, as well as the various bureaucratic mechanisms necessary to maintaining each and every one of said endeavors. More than this, though, the Imperial Compound is rumored to include a number of esoteric items, artifacts, and locales. The Court of the Unknown Judge, for example, is said to somehow travel far below the surface of Phong Tai, and presently whispers place it nearly a mile directly beneath the throne room. The Lake of Lost Suns is likewise said to exist somewhere inside the Imperial Compound.

The Sea of Lanterns: Just barely visible over the perimeter walls from the air, the Sea of Lanterns is one of the very few districts of Phong Tai known to the world at large. Named after the innumerable lanterns and street lights that flicker on when darkness falls, the Sea of Lanterns is home to hundreds of thousands of artisans, craftspeople, and entertainers. The finest examples of Phong Tai metallurgy and smithing, ceramics work, and fashion are all said to stem from this specific district. Despite this reputation for artistic expertise, rumors persist of some sort of darkness beneath the glamorous facade. While there are certainly the same varieties of mundane awfulness that can be found in any City (narcotics peddling, human trafficking, organized crime, etc.), the aforementioned rumors seem to indicate something less tangible and more spiritual in nature. Such rumors make mention of tales, both from the distant past and more recent history, involving bloodthirsty, inhuman entities able to travel instantaneously between one shadow and another. The theory, then, is that the thousands and thousands of lights in the district are to keep such horrors at bay.

The Temple District: Among the oldest sections of the city, the Temple District of Phong Tai is peculiar for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most obvious of these is that the Temple District is the only district with direct access to the Diplomatic Cove and the outside world. The Monks of the Way maintain countless temples and shrines in the area, their distinctive tile-roofed towers built to sway in high winds and, similarly, to withstand the tremors and earthquakes which periodically strike the island continent. While the exact reason for the relative openness of the Temple District is unknown, most believe that the Monks of the Way entreated the Emperor for dispensation to allow the wisdom of the Way to seep into the world. Even in the Temple District, though, direct contact with foreigners is entirely curtailed, with all face-to-face interactions conducted by automatic envoys. Visitors are allowed access to the various meditation chambers, spiritual sites, and shrines only at very specific times. The guardians of the Temple District—purportedly automata with grotesque faces and wielding fearsome weapons—are quite strict about regulations pertaining to visitation.

Groups and Institutions of Interest

The Emperor's Blade: One of the largest and most technologically advanced airships in the world, the Individuated Naval Airship Emperor's Blade is a marvel of martial engineering. With multiple launch racks and landing bays, the Emperor's Blade is able to single-handedly support a dozen fighter and/or bomber wings, their exact loadouts dictated by the needs of a specific engagement. While precise details of the vessel are obviously considered state secrets, it is widely touted that the ship is entirely piloted and crewed by automata. Highly placed sources have intimated that the Emperor's Blade is actually controlled directly by one of the Divine Mechanisms, though the idea that such an august machinage would be placed on a warship is dubious at best.

The Glorious Seventh Wing: The role of humans in the Phong Tai military has largely become one of command and coordination, with the vast majority of front line positions held by drones. One of the very few exceptions to this is the Glorious Seventh Wing, a fighter wing entirely piloted by humans. Competition for admittance into the Glorious Seventh Wing is understandably fierce given the honor and accolades accompanying membership. As positions in the wing are only opened upon the death of a current member, and the pilots already admitted are likely the best human pilots in Phong Tai, the turnover of the roster is markedly low (even in wartime, though such does speed things along a bit).

The Group for Alternative Resolutions: One of the least-known segments of the Phong Tai defense apparatus, the Group for Alternative Resolutions is a section comprised of military scientists and engineers tasked with exploring the more outre or unorthodox methods of subduing enemies of the state. Purportedly, there has been considerable success in the development program of a particular strain of sentient weapons referred to as “Demons of the Flesh,” but whether there is any truth to this is a matter of some debate among many intelligence services. Some believe the program to be Phong Tai’s version of, or answer to, the H.A.V.O.C. Program.

The Imperial Academy: Far and away the most prestigious institute of learning in Phong Tai, the Imperial Academy has been the center of Phong Tai’s academic culture for centuries. While the societal changes sweeping the nation have not left the Academy untouched, the institution retains a number of its key features—namely an aggressively competitive atmosphere, a grueling curriculum, and a largely meritocratic placement system. Since its founding, final standing in a given class at the Academy has been instrumental in determining a student’s social or governmental post, and while familial connections and graft do come into play at times, it is widely and correctly understood that most everyone who emerges from the Academy has earned the place they find themselves in afterwards.

The Kagekyutei: Called the Court of Shadows by foreigners, the Kagekyutei is more an accumulation of theory and fear than a known quantity. Supposedly a secret group made up of corrupt ministers and officials, the Kagekyutei renounces both the Emperor and the Way. It is unclear exactly what the Court of Shadows follows, worships, or venerates—it may be some pernicious philosophy, some wicked form of revolution, or even a fell creature of some sort. In any event, insofar as people seek to find cause for societal unrest or moral degradation, they often cite the malign (if utterly unproven) influence of the Kagekyutei.

Kwan Cho Motor Company: Easily the equal of Western industrial giants such as Foster Heavy Industries, the Kwan Cho Motor Company is the largest producer of drones, powered armor, and military engines in Phong Tai. While Imperial engineers and scientists designed the Divine Mechanisms, Kwan Cho Motor Company provided the majority of both the automatic workforce that constructed them and the secondary technologies used to keep them running in top form. Similarly, Kwan Cho Motor Company is responsible for large sections of the I.N.A. Emperor’s Blade, as well as the engines which power the aircraft of the Glorious Seventh Wing.

The Way: More a philosophy than a religion, the Way is a system of belief widespread in Phong Tai. Though itinerant monks have brought the Way to other Cities, it remains most prevalent in Phong Tai. Followers of the Way believe that all of reality moves in cycles, and that all creatures, from the mightiest god to the lowliest insect, have roles to play in the patterns of the cosmos. The Way states that individuals should seek to understand their place in the omniverse and, in doing so, work towards fulfilling their true purpose. As the machinations of the omniverse are clearly beyond the understanding of mere mortals, this is a task that borders on the impossible, and monks encourage people to follow the Way as a tool for self improvement and social harmony rather than as a truly specific route to enlightenment as a destination.

The Yorukai: A subculture wending its way through the ranks of Phong Tai society like ivy clinging to a tree, the Yorukai are a phenomenon similar to, but distinct from, a variety of cultural elements seen in other Cities. Somewhat more benevolent than organized crime, more elegant than gangs, more violent than simple neighborhood organizations, and as clandestine as any other secret society, the Yorukai have a few stated purposes. Chief among these is the liberation of Xian Dao from Aldish occupation. While the Yorukai (usually) obey the Imperial Edict regarding direct personal contact with foreign nationals, they use coded radio transmissions and automatic couriers to manage and maintain a steady stream of communication and support to various revolutionary elements in Xian Dao.

National Dress

Civilian: Dark colored suits or skirt-and-jacket combinations of conservative make and cut are common, especially among the working class. With the widespread push towards military design, though, trousers and uniform shirts, or cropped jackets, are increasing in popularity. Hats are somewhat unusual—top hats, bowlers, and caps can be worn depending on station and occasion. Among those wearing suits, ties are exceptionally widespread, as are lapel pins, badges, and any military honors earned through service. Black tailed coats are prevalent at society functions, often paired with thin white gloves. While bright colors and complicated patterns can be worn for special occasions, daily wear tends to be more conservative. Trench coats are very common for the upper and lower classes alike as they go about their daily lives.

Military: Military uniforms have heavily influenced civilian dress—the grey wool and duck cloth of the armed services has no doubt contributed heavily to the somber color palette widely seen in Phong Tai fashion. The grey of soldiers' uniforms is often accented with black and white detailing, hearkening back to the flag of Phong Tai. Automata tend to likewise be painted grey or, more frequently, black, with occasional red highlights.

Iconography: While historically the dragon was the symbol of Phong Tai, with the advent of the Great War and the ensuing consolidation of power by the Emperor, the Septagram of the Way has become the symbol of the City. The flag of Phong Tai is a black field with a the white outline of a hexagon, point down, featuring small white filled circles intersecting the outline at each of the 6 corners. A small filled white circle sits in the center of the hexagon, surrounded by a thin white circular outline. The military roundel is very similar to the flag, save that the hexagon is replaced with an equilateral triangle, side down.

Common First Names: Akari, Aoi, Asa, Chao, Feng, Guiying, Haru, Himari, Jun, Kaito, Kanna, Liu, Quiang, Riku, Sanna, Shuzhen, Tao, Xiuying, Yui, Yuru

Common Surnames: Ando, Cheung, Gao, Guo, Kimura, Liu, Sasaki, Sato, Tamura, Zhou

International Relations

Alden:

They are a lamentably narrow minded and forgetful people. We are neither.

—Magistrate Wu Beimin, in a letter to an associate in Xian Dao, referring to the Aldish

Relations between Alden and Phong Tai are, understandably, rather cool. After the “leasing” of Xian Dao by Alden, Phong Tai entered a period of strict isolationism. Foreigners are restricted to specific quarters and districts within the City, and individuals from Alden are given treatment just shy of insulting. For their part, Alden considers Phong Tai the backwards-thinking, reclusive pauper of the international community, to be exploited as a matter of convenience. More enlightened (and better informed) elements within Alden realize the danger of holding such an attitude towards the City that invented airships.

Elenzio:

In some ways, Elenzians resemble us as we would be without the guidance of the Emperor. Creative, talented, cultured—but with no driving vision linking our venerable past with our glorious future.

—Lady Chen Kuo, at a dinner party, to a young suitor

Elenzio and Phong Tai have a stable, if somewhat detached, relationship. Following the Great War and the Dark Times, the leadership of Phong Tai was a shambles. Contemporary Elenzio, for its part, had almost been destroyed. As the two Cities rebuilt, neither was in any position to make aggressive moves against the other. While one would think the activities of Elenzian merchants would be curtailed by Phong Tai’s retreat into isolationism, “commerce finds a way,” as the saying goes, and Elenzian cargo vessels have continued to carry Phong Tai goods across the face of Ayos almost without interruption for the past century.

The Federated Cities:

So many of our fellow citizens fled so far in search of the Dream the Waypointers natter on about in their moving pictures. Such dreams are nothing more than so much pipe smoke. And now they are on the wrong side of the Veil. I pity them.

—“Grandmother” Chuan Xing, Forty-Seventh Pillar of the Yorukai’s Northern Constellation

The Federated Cities have casual, commercially based associations with Phong Tai. In no position to project influence during the Dark Times, the F.C. had little or nothing to do with Alden’s pseudo-annexation of Xian Dao. Then again, during the Dark Times Phong Tai was one of the greatest sources of manual laborers for the reconstruction efforts of the Federated Cities. During that period, a number of labor unions arose in the construction industry. One (in)famous incident involved a rail company in the F.C. working with an element of the Phong Tai underworld to break a strike using crews of workers displaced by the automation of construction in Phong Tai.

Loreard:

We are very different, and while we disagree as to which star to follow in our metropolitan navigations, we have that rarest and most important of commonalities: an enemy.

—General Iro Karugama, explaining a news report on Loreardan policy to their nephew

Given the issues both Cities have had with Alden throughout history, it is small wonder that Phong Tai and Loreard often find common cause. While Loreard's desire to import drones for domestic use has fallen dramatically since the municipalization of most privately held companies in the City, there has been a commensurate rise in their desire for raw materials. Further, Loreardan factors often hire automatic Phong Tai agents and elements when engaging in extralegal matters from which they wish to distance themselves. For their part, Phong Tai is only too willing to make such mercenary arrangements with anyone at odds with Alden.

Skvalgaard:

Beneath the surface—in some cases quite literally—Phong Tai and Skvalgaard share a number of interesting similarities. For example: did you know that both Phong Tai and Skvalgaard have pre-human structures in their environs?

—Automatic Docent #5535941, the Imperial Academy, National Museum of History

Despite the utterly disparate cultures of the two Cities, Phong Tai and Skvalgaard have a long history of mutually beneficial dealings. Hundreds of years ago, in the days of yore, the seafarers of Skvalgaard were one of the few groups to visit or trade with Phong Tai. Phong Tai's dynastic guard was enough to ensure that such meetings remained peaceful, and the two cultures began a long tradition of mutually profitable mercantile arrangements. Such amicable relations remain in place even today, and, indeed, there are a handful of trade agreements between major families that have been in force since those initial accords.

Volskagrad:

The beasts of winter are hungry. Never forget that.

—Chen Yueng-Xi, Captain, the Glorious Seventh Wing

While the methodologies used by the two Cities may be ostensibly different, both Phong Tai and Volskagrad are, at core, expansionist powers. There is a wary respect between the two peoples, but it is absolutely the respect of a pair of predators, each equally unsure of the pecking order. The collectivist revolution in Volskagrad saw the bloody end of a ruling line that had stretched back to the City's founding, and the Imperial dynasty of Phong Tai is understandably concerned by the potential for such things in their own territory. Nonetheless, Volskagrad and Phong Tai have never gone to war, and trade goods freely pass between the two Cities.

Xian Dao:

Why are you worried? When a river empties into the ocean, the water is just the same—you cannot tell one from the other. So too will it be for the people of Xian Dao. They shall not return to us, for they have never left.

—Brother 27-121, Individuated Automaton, Military Model (Infantry, Obsolete),
of the Yorukai

While the shift from Phong Tai rule to Aldish occupancy was by no means a voluntary one, the population of Xian Dao itself has now spent decades in a position unique in the international community. Though Phong Tai seems to be quietly biding its time for the Aldish lease of the territory to expire, the City makes no secret of its plans to repatriate Xian Dao and its population. For some members of the generation which has grown up under Aldish law, this prospect can seem as much threat as deliverance. While the Yorukai has plenty of sympathetic agents in Xian Dao, the situation is not nearly so cut and dried as Imperial envoys might have the world believe.

Il Zindan:

They are a people still searching for their true purpose. For their true home. If I did not respect them, I would pity them.

—Gao Akari, Monk of the Way, to their pupils

Phong Tai and Il Zindan enjoyed a lengthy period of trade and mutual benefit before the Great War and the fall of the Thek. To this day, Phong Tai nobility and scholars alike prize artifacts and knowledge from the Thek of Il Zindan, and in turn, the Zindani appreciate the industry and skill of Phong Tai artisans and factories. While the Way never found Il Zindan to be particularly fertile ground (the esoteric beliefs of the Thek far too central to life in the Dwelling in Darkness to allow for such alien ideologies), each of the two cultures finds much to honor in the other.

Zyebrinsk:

No one has lost money trafficking in misery.

—Pigeon 42, Automatic Factor for the Kwan Cho Motor Company, at a bar

Given how cagey Phong Tai and Volskagrad are towards one another, it would be reasonable to assume that Phong Tai has very little to do with Zyebrinsk. The truth, though, is quite the opposite. Zyebrinsk offers merchants, information brokers, and clandestine operatives from both Cities a locale sufficiently removed from Volskagrad so as to provide an air of plausible deniability much sought after in such circles. Both Volskagrad and Phong Tai periodically find it politically expedient to “crack down” on imports or agents from the other City—especially when they know they can simply relocate their transactions to Zyebrinsk and carry on with whatever illicit business they may wish to undertake.

Skvalgaard

Skvalgaard is the northernmost human settlement of any size. Small by the standards of most Cities, it is home to a people both fiercely independent and remarkably egalitarian. With politics conducted by way of direct democracy, “politicians” are quite rare among the Skvals. Nonetheless, what is most striking about Skvalgaard is neither its people nor its government, but rather its environs. Built at the base of Hjemsoktis, a gargantuan frozen waterfall or glacier, Skvalgaard serves as not only a trading hub and population center, but also as the base camp and point of origin for many academic expeditions. Adventurers and scientists come from all over Ayos to explore the mysteries of Hjemsoktis—and the ancient, alien city entombed in its icy grip.

Society: The Skvals, as a people, can seem a study in contradictions to foreigners. As a rule, Skvals are famously stoic, and very slow to anger. However, once finally riled, their cold fury is the stuff of legends—sometimes quite literally. A number of the oldest written documents in Skvalgaard are epic poems, sagas devoted to blood feuds, “hall burnings,” and cycles of revenge. Likely because of this capacity for violence, and the close quarters shared by all in the long winter months, civility, hospitality, and honor are considered high virtues among Skvals. Well within the northern polar region of Ayos, Skvalgaard is a land where a single night can last for weeks, where snow and other, worse things can trap a traveller wherever they can find shelter for a fortnight or more. Independence and preparedness are watchwords in the City, and in point of fact, by civil ordinance, “no person or group of persons is permitted to venture into the outer districts without at least one trained marksperson, in possession of a firearm in good working order, being counted among their number.” Perhaps it is these extreme conditions which have led the Skvals to develop a largely egalitarian culture. Alternatively, it could be their long history of international trade, sacking, kidnapping, and nautical piracy which, by virtue of bringing the Skvals into consistent and widespread contact with a variety of peoples, has resulted in a relatively inclusive and enlightened worldview (with the notable exceptions of homunculi and individuated automata, neither of which are considered sentient). Whatever the reason, there is remarkably little stratification in Skvaldic society, with people being judged and accorded quiet respect or equally quiet disdain based on their actions rather than their familial status.

Populace: Arguably the smallest of the Cities, Skvalgaard has fewer than 1 million permanent residents, the population dropping to 500,000 or less depending on the time of year. Humans make up the bulk of the citizenry. While there are no H.A.V.O.C.s native to Skvalgaard, there are a number of Blooded—potentially the largest community outside of Alden (mostly immigrants taking advantage of the long nights). Slabs are regarded with wary curiosity. Due to the harsh environment, skewed circadian circumstances, and seasonally claustrophobic living conditions, mental illness is a common and accepted part of life in Skvalgaard, and Slabs and Blooded alike are often viewed through such a lens. A local Phenexian priest leveraged faith as a major component in a series of votes held some time ago, and saw to it that homunculi were outlawed (in the traditional sense of the term. Rather than being banned, homunculi are simply offered no protection by the laws of the City, and are not considered ‘people’ per se.). Similarly, while the expertly crafted automata of Skvalgaard undergo individuation at a surprisingly high rate, they are strictly considered property under the eyes of the law.

Government: A direct democracy, Skvalgaard operates under the auspices of Things, which relay specific votes and referenda to the Storthing, which in turn is organized by de Lagtaler.

Things: Like most Cities, Skvalgaard is divided into a series of districts. Each district routinely holds meetings referred to as Things. Things usually meet twice a year, though they can assemble as frequently as weekly in times of emergency. While most mundane matters such as building variances, charitable collections, and school budgets are handled by various District Committees and the like, issues regarding taxes, changes to district regulations, and indeed any topic sufficiently championed by a citizen can be taken to up for discussion at a Thing. All adult personages are entitled to speak and vote on issues presented at Things, and matters which may affect the entire City are passed through to the Storthing.

The Storthing: The equivalent of the municipal assembly or legislature in most Cities, the Storthing is both Skvalgaard's unicameral legislature and its highest court. It handles subjects of Citywide import, including civic defense and international diplomacy. The Storthing is made up of elected representatives from the various districts. Unlike many representative democracies, however, members of the Storthing are given relatively little autonomy on matters of legislation, instead acting mostly as intermediaries between their constituents and the matters placed before the Storthing. While this arrangement allows the citizens of Skvalgaard a much greater degree of self-determination than any other City on Ayos, it carries with it the dangers inherent to mob rule—that is, a skilled orator or public panic can wreak havoc through legitimate legislative channels. Such was the case a decade ago when the Phenexian church, acting through the charismatic priest Father Arnfinn Olufsson, swayed public opinion so as to outlaw homunculi and firmly settle automata as property in all cases. Father Olufsson disappeared under mysterious circumstances before he could introduce legislation regarding Slabs or the Blooded.

De Lagtaler: Literally “the Law Speaker” in old Skvaldic, de Lagtaler organizes and leads the Storthing. Historically, the office of de Lagtaler is given to community members renowned for their wisdom, level headedness, and familiarity with both tradition and the law. Presently Milla Ingridsdottir is serving as de Lagtaler.

The Present Day: For a City whose days of raiding and trade blocs are centuries past, Skvalgaard increasingly finds itself the center of attention from a variety of international quarters. As technology relentlessly improved and the world got progressively smaller, Skvalgaard became more and more accessible to the outside world. Foreign powers came to understand that the tales of an ancient, alien City locked forever in mountains of ice were no exaggeration—the stories were understated, if anything. As were the tales of the creatures that stalk the haunted ice floes.

The ramifications of Skvalgaard's increased contact with the other Cities have been profound, and vary widely in character. Alden, Loreard, and Volskagrad alike have all spent considerable time, funding, and various forms of personnel in efforts to secure claims on Hjemsoktis. Indeed, Alden and Volskagrad have both gone so far as to make claims that Skvalgaard is, in fact, a “long lost colony City” belonging to each of them by ancient right (versions of history in direct conflict with Skvalgaard's own understanding of the past).

For its part, Loreard was so impressed by the clockwork-augmented armors worn by the Jaakarit in their hunts for the dreaded skapninger that they developed modern Jaegerpanzers as a direct result, reengineering Skvaldic hunting methodologies and techniques for use against the Blooded.

The Dark Times had a somewhat limited impact on Skvalgaard, especially in comparison to other Cities. As the City was both geographically isolated and determinedly self-sufficient in most ways, the effects of the collapse of international markets and foreign regimes was markedly blunt. While the loss of export markets for furs and fish certainly hurt some mercantile interests, the industries themselves were largely based on supplying the needs of Skvalgaard itself, and as such, demand remained strong.

Perhaps curiously, the sector booming most recently has been academia. The scholarly expeditions sent from many of the other Cities all require supplies, and many require guides, gear, and, more frequently than they would like to admit, rescue. While a number of the “great scientific minds” that lead such foreign ventures consider Skvals quaint at best and woefully ignorant at worst, the more enlightened expeditions have sought to interface with the professors of the University of Sovik, seeking their advice and insights on the alien city and the dangers that abound in the Wylds around Skvalgaard.

Locations of Note

Hjemsoktis: All of the terrain surrounding Skvalgaard is brutal, frozen, and utterly unforgiving. Hjemsoktis, though, holds a special kind of dread for the Skvals. “The Haunted Ice,” as they call it, is a titanic glacier or frozen waterfall, a cyclopean sheet of ice descending among and between mountains of maddening height. On the rare days that sunlight pierces the arctic veil of storm clouds and skirling snow crystals, those intrepid or foolhardy enough to venture out of the City’s North Gate can just make out the strange, starkly geometric towers of the alien city deep within the ice. While the landscape itself is deadly (avalanches, treacherous crevasses, and temperatures which can flash freeze exposed skin are all quite common), the Skvals fear is focused not on the environmental dangers, but rather on the skapninger. Something of a catch all term, the Skvals use the word ‘skapninger’ to denote all the many and varied horrors purported to roam Hjemsoktis, from predatory albino birds taller than people to shapeless, protoplasmic masses that sprout eyes, mouths, and tentacles at a whim. Little, if any, physical evidence survives from supposed encounters with the skapninger, but the tales are sufficiently numerous to make even the most skeptical of Skvals avoid the Hjemsoktis.

MacLeod Station: Perched high atop a wind-scoured plateau, MacLeod Station is the northernmost permanent human outpost on Ayos. It is also the subject of a number of mysteries. Originally constructed by the MacLeod Expedition of 1002 by Aldish explorers, MacLeod Station is comprised of a series of buildings, shelters, and bunkers connected by airlocks, scaffolding, and in some cases, tunnels. The underlying soundness of the station design makes the disappearance of all members of the original expedition even more strange. The expedition had been underway and delivering routine wireless status updates for weeks, until one day the messages simply... stopped. It was some months before a relief expedition arrived on site to see what could be done. The would-be rescuers found the base largely intact, though they did note a number of oddities. While a sizable pile of mixed animal and personnel remains were found in a pit in one

of the yards, the sheer volume did not account for nearly the entirety of the expedition's roster (though it did include all of the sled dogs, as well as the pack and food animals). Both airstrips had been dynamited, and the generators and wireless sets alike had been destroyed. Lastly, a bloody axe was found lodged in one wall. No other signs of any member of the original expedition have been found, and today MacLeod Station is operated by an entirely separate interest.

Old Skvalgaard: At the heart of the City stands Old Skvalgaard. Rather than the brick, steel, and concrete construction used in most modern Cities, Skvalgaard, and especially Old Skvalgaard, is built almost entirely out of timber (brought in from the forests along the coast) and stone (quarried locally). The distinctive Skvaldic architecture emphasises the use of common spaces to conserve heat, with private spaces being relatively small. Old Skvalgaard is partitioned off from the outer districts by a massive stockade, tall as the cloudbreaker pines it's made from, periodically pierced by guard posts and reinforced gates. The district includes a variety of governmental offices, including the Storthing, as well as the houses of the wealthiest and oldest families in the City. While there is little in the way of burnable fuel local to the City, Old Skvalgaard is one of the pioneers in the civic use of geothermal power. As a result, while the snow may drift and the winds will howl, the yellow glow of Old Skvalgaard's lights is a constant in the long polar night.

Vedskogen: In the depths of the forest of the same name, hard up against the steep hills and rocky cliffs of the coast, the village of Vedskogen broods like an old mariner waiting for their last storm to finally claim their vessel for the brine. The combination roadway and rail line connecting Vedskogen to Skvalgaard proper is a twisted thing, full of switchbacks and defensible depots, and lined end to end with towering stockade walls on both sides—travellers moving from Skvalgaard to Vedskogen and back never technically leave the walls of the City. Originally a logging camp, Vedskogen would have failed as most civic expansions do but for Skvalgaard's constant need of lumber. Vedskogen simply could not be allowed to fail. So, with their characteristic quiet determination, the Skvals set about reinforcing the former logging camp and turning it into a district of their City. While the walls of the Skvalgaard-Vedskogen line have made traveling much safer than it was in the past, the wealthy still travel to and fro by way of armored train. The less fortunate find other means of transit, and are exposed to the strange howling and piping calls that come from the dark of the woods. Even today, travellers sometimes find sections of the wall staved in and nothing but splashes of blood and churned snow to mark the passing of their fellows.

Groups and Institutions of Interest

The Barrington-Smith Expedition: A largely Aldish endeavor with some support from the Federated Cities, the Barrington-Smith Expedition is led by none other than the famed explorer John Barrington himself. Having spent nearly a decade in the sweltering jungles of Um'Jhatla, Barrington decided to make for colder climes set their sights on Hjemsoktis as their next destination. Relying largely on funding from the industrialist Vivian Smith, Barrington hired a crack cadre of Aldish hunters, adventurers, academics, and mountaineers, reinforced by a select group of Skvaldic guides. Barrington was last seen leading their group into Hjemsoktis, making for MacLeod Station.

The Fleet: Given the structure of government in Skvalgaard, it should come as no surprise that the organization of the Skvaldic navy is widely considered to be “unorthodox” by other militaries. A direct descendant of the raiding armadas of old, the fleet of Skvalgaard today is entirely made up of fishing and armored coast guard vessels (though to be fair, the weapons Skvaldic fishing boats carry are for taking down polarion ice worms and are perfectly capable of punching through the armored hull of a ship). The crew of each ship swear fealty to their captain for the duration of each voyage, and the captains in turn swear fealty to de Lagtaler when they agree to use their ship as part of the nautical armed forces.

The Grey Lodge: One of the oldest institutions in all of Skvalgaard, the Grey Lodge is a society of poets, historians, and individuals claiming otherworldly powers. The tie that binds the various members together, though, is that they all follow the folk traditions of the Skvals. The Grey Lodge meets to recount the sagas of old, to celebrate almost-forgotten festivals, and to perform ancient rites most would prefer were forgotten entirely. While the local Phenexians frown (quite deeply) at all of this, they are even more confounded by the Lodge members who practice Tyhjalintu, a local syncretic variation of Phenexianism. Some few visiting Volskagradians also seem to find or make reasons to stop in and pay their respects to the group.

The Jaakarit: While many Skvals are at home on the waves, there are some few who feel far more comfortable in the Vedskogen or, even more rarely, in the Hjemsoktis. Hunters of unparalleled skill, the Jaakarit have long used simple but ingenious mechanisms to bolster their weapons and armor, augmenting their speed and strength and helping them to face down the horrors of the snow and the forest. In times of conflict, the Jaakarit serve as Skvalgaard’s infantry. While their firearms and gear may seem antiquated to some, they are unparalleled for use in the harsh conditions of their homeland.

Kolo: The doyens of the clockwork arts, the craftspeople of Kolo are the premier creators of clocks, watches, and automata in Skvalgaard. For a variety of reasons cultural, environmental, and pragmatic, Skvals often practice the same trade their entire lives, developing and honing their skills to incredible levels. The gearcutters of Kolo are no exception—their clocks been know to run for decades without losing a second, their watches can operate flawlessly even in the dreadful environments of the Hjemsoktis, and their automata rival those of Viparri and Mayweather for elegance and performance. To own a Kolo in any form is a sign of rugged luxury the world over.

The Schiller-DuBois Expedition: Operating under the direct oversight of Loreard’s City Division of Science and Inquiry, the Schiller-DuBois expedition marks Erna von Schiller’s second major posting to Skvalgaard. During her first tour of duty, Erna happened to fall in with a crew of Jaakarit and witnessed, first hand, how they hunted and slayed the skapninger. Schiller’s notes (and some gear she ‘acquired’ from fallen Jaakarit) were the basis of Loreard’s jaegerpanzers. Together with Professor Archange DuBois (and their retinue), Schiller has been slowly amassing a mechanized military/academic detachment in the outskirts of Skvalgaard in preparation for an ascent of the Hjemsoktis.

The University of Sovik: The single largest institution of learning in Skvalgaard, the University of Sovik has extensive programs dealing in both the hard and soft scientists, with tuition configured so as to be affordable to all who wish to attend. Their physics department is (somewhat surprisingly) quite advanced, with a handful

of state-of-the-art laboratories. Sovik's engineering department has classes on everything from automatic ethics to geothermal power systems. The school's antiquities department is likewise robust, offering seminars and graduate studies in anthropology, archaeology, and a variety of other disciplines. The academics of Sovik find themselves dealing with the politics of the real world far more often than they would like, however, as Aldish, Loreardan, and Volskagradian representatives constantly try to bully and curry favor with the faculty for insights into the alien city in the ice.

The Embassy of the V.P.C.P.: Located just inside the bounds of Old Skvalgaard is the Embassy of the Volskagradian People's Collectivist Party. A strange amalgamation of styles, the Embassy is a compound which includes a handful of starkly angular concrete bunkers, as well as some very ornate buildings with almost baroque stylizations—sprawling golden carvings draped over filigreed columns, all standing next to plain cement walls. The Volskagradian ambassador is known to hold extravagant galas for dignitaries and prominent citizens, though their treatment of staff and hired help is rumored to border on the cruel.

National Dress

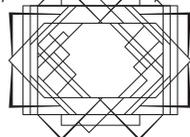
Civilian: Dark suits of very reserved cut and material (usually wool) and conservative black dresses bordering on the severe are worn for formal occasions, especially among devout Phenexians. Even so, the severe weather conditions mean that fashion is as much a matter of survival as of expression. Warm hats and scarves are considered a matter of course, as are sturdy, tall boots and durable trousers or thick wool skirts with hems slightly below the knee. Shirts and coats are usually double breasted. Perhaps the most ubiquitous element of dress are thick, warm sweaters, often with simple geometric designs in bold colors.

Military: Due to the unusual structure of the Skvaldic military, "uniforms" are virtually nonexistent outside of ceremonial guards. Sailors tend to wear watchcaps and dark turtleneck sweaters or pea coats, black or navy being traditional. The Jaakarit dress as their profession requires: clothing elements in mottled white or grey, with occasional bits of brown or green. Gear tends to be dark leather, well worn and oiled, with reinforced pieces of armor at key joints or limbs likely to be bitten or otherwise targeted by the skapninger.

Iconography: Historically, Skvaldic leaders drew on the dragon, sea serpent, kraken, and leviathan as principal sources for their heraldry. The modern flag of Skvalgaard is a white field, an ice blue triangle centered, point up, though the point is covered by a stone grey equilateral diamond. The military roundel of Skvalgaard is the center figure of the flag on a white field.

Common First Names: Aada, Aile, Albret, Cuivi, Dunja, Ello, Gjerlov, Hroaldr, Lagon, Leena, Maike, Nuvtte, Nyfrid, Reija, Ropi, Saebjorg, Tholf, Tollek, Vegar, Yrsa

Common Surnames: Aikio, Dahl, Jorgensen, Korhonen, Knudsen, Larsen, Odegard, Revontulet, Solberg, Virtanen



International Relations

Alden:

A people much concerned with the wellbeing of others.

–Professor Nora Aikio, University of Sovik, illustrating the different meanings of the word “concerned” while in conversation with a colleague

Skvalgaard and Alden get along well enough. There is ongoing debate as to whether Alden or Volskagrad founded Skvalgaard (or, as some fringe academics theorize, Skvalgaard founded one or both of the larger Cities). Skvalgaard’s fiercely democratic system of government is somewhat at odds with the republican government of Alden, but trade and academic interests keep all parties friendly enough. Caulderwood University maintains a significant presence in Skvalgaard, working closely with the University of Sovik to explore and research both the remnants of the Temple at Salappa and the ancient, cyclopean ruins frozen into Hjemsoktis.

Elenzio:

Before it fell as the flaming hawk-pyre on the shores of the seas of Ayos, Phenex was an angel of the Void. Embrace the Void, my students. Know the ashes, know the salt and the dust, and through them find the Truth.

–Knut Manteli, Skald of the Grey Lodge, Practitioner of Tyhjalintu

Skvalgaard has little in the way of a military, and has not acted violently against other Cities since the times when their raiders carried axes and plied the waves in dragon-headed sailing ships. Nonetheless, Elenzians harbor a distaste for Skvalgaard. No doubt this is due to the pre-human ruins extant in the glaciers north of the City, as well as the emphasis Skvalgaard places on secular education. Some few Skvals seem immune to Elenzian contempt—the truly devout, who volunteer for service in the Skvaldic Corps. There are fewer and fewer such volunteers, however, due to the rise of Tyhjalintu, a strange, syncretic branch of Phenexianism which has taken root in the northernmost City—and which is quickly drawing the ire of the Etymarchy.

The Federated Cities:

Nice people. Very concerned with business, but nice people.

–Rana Elafsdottir, on reading a newspaper article regarding rampant corruption in Thorncrag

Skvalgaard and the Federated Cities have a cordial, if not especially close, relationship. Both societies believe strongly in personal freedoms, and enshrine such values in their methods of government. As likely to search for the Dream as anyone else, a number of Skvals have resettled in the Federated Cities, especially in Thorncrag. Conversely, very few people from the F.C. move to Skvalgaard, with the noted exception of

a thriving academic exchange program—a number of professors and scientists from Arkhatonic University spend considerable time and funding on research expeditions to the icy north.

Loreard:

May your journey be a short one.

—Emma Dahl, Jaakarit, to Loreardans on their way to Hjemsoktis
despite inclement weather

Until recently, Skvalgaard and Loreard had little to do with one another (aside from Skvaldic raids in the dimly remembered past). Since the rise of the Einstadts, however, Loreard has shown an ever increasing interest in the ruins locked within Hjemsoktis. This interest has risen to a fever pitch in recent months, and the Schiller-DuBois Expedition has become an apparently permanent part of the Skvaldic landscape. The Skvals, for their part, are leery of the nature and degree of Loreardan interest, but have thus far refrained from taking any steps which could incite an armed response of any kind.

Volskagrad:

No, thank you.

—Milla Ingridsdottir, Lagtaler, in response to an invitation to attend the
V.P.C.P.'s Chairperson in Volskagrad

Despite certain similarities in traditional culture and local climate, Skvalgaard and Volskagrad have a somewhat strained relationship. Volskagrad's increasingly insistent statements that Skvalgaard is, in fact, a "long lost" Volskagradian colony have begun to lose their tone of 'assertion of kinship' and taken on notes of 'ownership and responsibility.' The Skvals, for their part, are wildly unimpressed by such claims, and routinely release (polite) statements to that effect. The Volskagradian embassy in Skvalgaard appears to be as much a military base as a political center, and the Skvaldic Jaakarit have begun leaving one of their number in plain sight outside the gates, blatantly watching the goings on in the compound.

Xian Dao:

We are a people who answer to no one but ourselves. They are caught between two who would swallow them up. That cannot be easy.

—Rune Mostrom, tavern keeper, to their brother

Skvalgaard and Xian Dao have relatively little to do with one another. While the markets and warehouses of Xian Dao are as open to the goods of Skvalgaard as anywhere else, Xian Dao isn't really on any of Skvalgaard's major trade routes. Further, Xian Dao itself has little need for furs or the oily fish of the polar ocean. With that said, Kolo clocks, watches, and automata are as popular among the wealthy of Xian Dao as they are in any other City, and Xian Dao offers an arms length distribution solution between Kolo and Cities on poor terms with Skvalgaard.

Il Zindan:

I hear it can be a bit warm, sometimes.

—Jorn Solverson, clockmaker

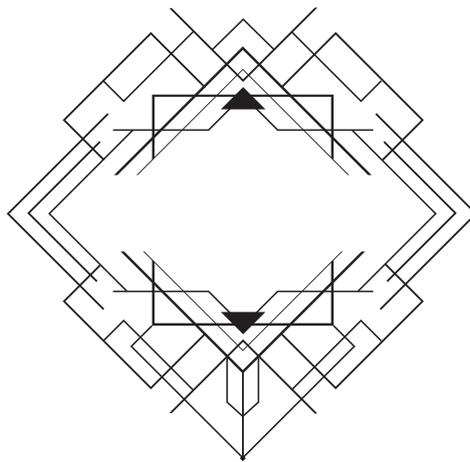
Though it would be easy to believe that Skvalgaard and Il Zindan have had almost nothing to do with one another, there are compelling accounts of interactions between the two cultures spanning many centuries. Zindani records, both financial and historical, indicate that a number of Skvaldic mercenaries found permanent work as soldiers in the Queen's Palace, forming an elite, segregated guard unit. In counterpoint, a Zindani scholar of considerable standing and renown spent more than a decade among the Skvals in their arctic home, even going so far as to accompany the Jaakarit on one of the most famous skapninger hunts of the sagas. Today, the two Cities are more or less estranged, though what interactions there are are cordial.

Zyebrinsk:

I do not want to live there. I do not believe they do, either.

—Captain Sylgi Haukland, of the icebreaker Moon Bear

If one needed an explanation for the Skvals' collective resistance to Volskagradian territorial claims, one need look no further than Zyebrinsk. While the average "citizen" of Zyebrinsk is in no position (fiscally or legally) to purchase imported goods of any kind, enterprising Skvaldic captains with questionable cargos sometimes call at the port nonetheless. The tales such captains tell—of exorbitant taxes, confiscated cargos, and crew members detained or disappeared entirely, nevermind the general conditions of life in the City—make such a prospect almost entirely unappealing. Needs must, however, and on rare occasions a desperate and bold Skvaldic captain may be able to craft a lucrative, if entirely illegal, deal with one of the port officers of Zyebrinsk.



Volskagrad

A monument to the power of the Proletariat, Volskagrad is a study in extremes. Onion-domed minarets and baroque governmental buildings stand in stark contrast to utilitarian housing districts and omnipresent military fortifications. After the Volskagradian People's Collectivist Party overthrew the Tzarina in the Winter Revolution, the V.P.C.P. consolidated its rule by doubling down on military expenditures and civil engineering projects. Every major intersection in Volskagrad is guarded by human troops, in powered armor or backed by automatic soldiers, and lightning cannons are a common sight. Despite the lofty goals of collectivism, dissidents seek to undermine the V.P.C.P. When identified, such enemies of the people are usually either relocated to work assignments in the Volskagradian sister City of Zyebrinsk or simply disappear.

Society: A people both proud and cynical, Volskagradians (or "Volskis" as they are sometimes called) are prone to pragmatism, skepticism, and patriotism in equal measure. Despite a bitterly cold climate and other extraordinarily harsh environmental conditions, Volskagrad has flourished due to the stubborn determination of its people—as well as their often brutal disregard for the rights and morals often considered fundamental to civilization in other Cities. Indeed, many of their national heroes would be considered war criminals elsewhere. Historically, life under the rule of the Tzarina and her nobles was very difficult. While some nobles were just and kind, there were at least as many who were deliberately cruel and treated serfs as the chattel they were in the eyes of the law. Such abuses led, both directly and indirectly, to the Winter Revolution of 1094 A.U.C. Borne upon a great wave of resentment, anger, and desperation, the Collectivists rose up in a series of massive strikes, protests and, eventually, a coup. The coup, in turn, led to a full on civil war between the Collectivists and the Tzarists. When the dust had settled, the Collectivists had control of the City. Instituting a series of purges and pogroms, the Collectivists, now under the banner of the Volskagradian People's Collectivist Party, violently dismantled all rival organizations, often executing or deporting members and placing leaders on trial for crimes against the state. The ongoing cycles of unassailable idealism and vicious oppression have only served to further forge the depths of the Volskagradian soul. As a people they strive for everything, expect nothing, and are stoically certain that things will always be worse.

Populace: One of the largest Cities, Volskagrad boasts a population of almost 4.5 million sentient beings (not counting the unknown number of Homunculi who reside in the depths of the City's outskirts and subterranean infrastructure). Humans are very easily in the supermajority, though there are a number of Individuated Automata. Sentient machines are regarded as an oddity in Volskagrad, with some Collectives granting them full rights as 'people' and others giving them status under the law equal to that of animals. In rare cases, automata are legally considered "personal conveyances." A handful of Slabs make their homes in Volskagrad. Curiously, some of them claim to have never visited Thorncrag. The City has a robust H.A.V.O.C. Program, one of the oldest on Ayos, though as with all things Volskagradian, function comes before form in their enhancement process. The folklore of Volskagrad is rife with stories of vampires, and while there are some blooded in the City, they are considered monstrous and, unless traveling as foreign diplomats, are taken into custody by government officers whenever they are found.

Government: Volskograd is ruled by the Volskagradian People's Collectivist Party. The V.P.C.P. is predicated on and derives political legitimacy from the existence of specified Collectives. Under the direction of the General Secretary, the party performs governmental functions by way of a series of offices, committees, and ministries.

The Collectives: The basis of the V.P.C.P. are the Collectives, the most rudimentary multi-individual unit within the Collective system. Collectives can vary greatly in size and shape, and while they can be as large as a district or as small as a delegation or work detail, most Collectives trace the boundaries of a given neighborhood. Collectives are responsible for providing necessities, employment, and education for their members, and in turn, members must devote themselves to the betterment of their Collective and their City.

The Committee for Party Appointments and Collective Designation: Under the iron rule of General Secretary Arkady Valenov, the Committee for Party Appointments and Collective Designation, or C.P.A.C.D., is responsible for selecting which members will be elected to which offices by party members, and for defining the boundaries and compositions of the individual Collectives within Volskagradian territory. While accusations of gerrymandering are all but unheard of (at least in part because claims are considered unpatriotic and subject to immediate investigation), some of the political demarcations of the Collectives are quite arcane. Though the C.P.A.C.D. is not ostensibly involved in policy creation, it does control the Volskagradian military. It is well known that General Secretary Valenov is the most powerful figure in the Party, and by extension, the City.

The Committee for Policy, Regulation, and Legislation: The C.P.R.L. (often pronounced "Sip-roll") is the governing body responsible for the creation, implementation, and continuing administration of the laws and policies of Volskograd. Every member of the C.P.R.L. is a party member in good standing elected under the auspices of the C.P.A.C.D. The C.P.R.L. sets out all forms of rule and law within Volskograd, from international treaties to criminal codes. It also acts as the most powerful court in the City.

The Present Day: Despite the Great War, the Dark Times, and the Winter Revolution, Volskograd grinds on. A juggernaut of unstoppable industry and iron resolve, the Volskagradian state has traded blows with the mightiest of the other Cities on any number of occasions, and while there are some scars, the City has only grown and expanded. Some see the founding of Zyebrinsk as little more than marking a prison camp with a glorified title, but to others, the foundation of a sibling City is an undeniable testament to the glory of Volskograd. Such power does not come without a price, however.

The Proletariat, so often held up as the true savior of Volskograd, has seen a great many improvements under the establishment of collectivism. All party members in good standing are entitled to housing, food, water, education, healthcare, and the potential for personal advancement. Yet what many take for granted today was reserved for the nobility alone under the Tzarina, or else simply impossible to achieve for anyone without wealth and position. On the other hand, the new regime has no interest in allowing the existence of any competing schools of thought or groups with political power. The establishment of clandestine police

services and intelligence agencies was merely the first step on the V.P.C.P.'s campaign of deportations, executions, and disappearances on a staggering scale. The City controls all mass media, with any voices of dissent ruthlessly put down. Religion, while vaguely tolerated, is technically illegal. Furthermore, graft and nepotism remain as rampant today as they ever were under the old guard—given how employment and prestige are handed down by one's superiors in the party, it is vital to curry the favor of supervisors, overseers, and political officers.

The international community is leery of Volskagrad's ambitions, and rightly so. The City has clashed with Alden and its allies since time immemorial, whether in direct warfare, through proxy pirate fleets, or in the shadows with spies and agents. While not so widely discussed as the northern or western theaters, Volskagrad's battles against Phong Tai during the Great War claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. General Secretary Valenov has the will to move mountains, and millions of pairs of hands with which to do so. AyoS at large is a hostile place, and Volskagrad has no remorse regarding its own actions on the world stage.

Locations of Note

The Citadel: Home to the offices of the Secretary General, the C.P.A.C.D., and the C.P.R.L., the Citadel is the wellspring of Volskagradian power and policy. A sprawling complex of palaces, cathedrals, and museums that have been converted to government use. The Citadel is surrounded by high walls, flak guns, and checkpoints run by an entire infantry brigade supported by a full brigade of jaegerpanzers—the fortifications and monuments above ground are indicative of the gravitas and pride the Volskagradian people feel towards their historic seat of government, while the bunkers and tunnels below the surface of the Citadel are testaments to pragmatism and functionalism. Committee members entering and exiting the Citadel's grounds often require motorcades of considerable size (whether they choose to make use of their honor guards or not, most everyone relies heavily on their security details), and the traffic snarls generated by the checkpoints can reach legendary proportions. Indeed, Secretary General Valenov has been known to use an autogyro to move from the Citadel to other parts of the City and back again.

Facility 713: Located many miles outside of Volskagrad proper, deep in the tundra and connected to the City only by an armored railway, stands the compound referred to as Facility 713. The Facility—a bleak fortress of reinforced concrete, steel doors, and razorwire, all inside a perimeter of pillboxes and towers, and all continually rimed in ice—houses a number of Volskagrad's most secret scientific programs. Originally constructed as a member of the satellite ring of work camps surrounding the City, Facility 713 became significantly more important when a rich seam of tanzolic soil was discovered in a cave system nearby. By happenstance, a number of the original occupants of the camp were Blooded, their superior strength and endurance rapidly boosted the mine's output beyond expectation. The City quickly decided to concentrate their Blooded at the Facility and ship in their rations by way of tanker cars on the railway, and, further, to capitalize on the durability of the inmates by using them as subjects for various scientific trials. Volskagrad has stated in the past that the Facility's experimental infirmary is the origin of the modern H.A.V.O.C. process, though scientists from other Cities actively and volubly dispute such claims.

Revolution Square: A major intersection just outside the walls of the Citadel, Revolution Square is the site of the original Statement of the Collectivist Manifesto delivered by Salkon Petrovovich in 1094 A.U.C., as well as Petrovovich's later execution. During the Winter Revolution, the square was the site of a number of massive battles, the bricks and stones of the buildings facing the site scourged and scorched by voltaic weapons and explosives. Today there are no traces of the carnage of the past. A forty-two-story statue of Petrovovich looms over the square, its steely gaze and determined stance reminding citizens that, through sacrifice, the Proletariat can overcome all tyranny. Revolution Square is the site of frequent military parades and events choreographed to maintain public morale, including athletic competitions, sports, and cultural exposés. Both due to the eminence of the locale and the importance of the constituent roadways to travel and commerce, the neighborhoods near the square have become quite prestigious places to live and work. The Rynoknaholme, one of the largest market districts in Volskagard, borders Revolution Square and specializes in keepsakes, mementos, and souvenirs from the historic site.

The Traktor Factory: Employing more than 150,000 workers on a daily basis, the Factory for the Production and Assembly of Heavy Machinery, Tanks, Traktors, Powered Armor, and Industrial Automata for the Department for the Mechanization and Technical Aid of the Ministry of Building and Municipal Defense of the People's Collective of Volskagrad, or F.P.A.H.M.T.T.P.A.I.A.D.M.T.A.M.B.M.D.P.C.V., is perhaps the largest manufacturing facility on the face of Ayos. Most commonly referred to as the Traktor Factory, the complex takes up more than square mile of the City. Innumerable smokestacks belch sparks and ash into the sky around the clock. The operation's hunger for raw materials is insatiable, its thirst for voltaic current and red diesel unslakeable. While work in the factory is a high risk, low reward proposition, the workers themselves take considerable pride in the machines they produce. That is not to say that they are content with their lot in life, or impressed by the conditions created by the new regime. Rather, they look upon the mighty engines and devastating weapons the factory inexorably churns into the world and feel the satisfaction of a job well done.

Groups and Institutions of Interest

Blue November Steelworks: One of Volskagrad's largest metallurgy facilities, Blue November's vast crucibles and red-hot furnaces work tirelessly to smelt ore and create the steel necessary for the Traktor Factory to make weapons and machines. Despite the hazardous nature of the work, almost everyone working in Blue November is human. Volskagradian patriots often say that this is an important symbolic and practical measure, a gesture by the V.P.C.P. to show that the Proletariat will never be replaced by automatic laborers. Cynics offer a different view, noting with some asperity that the cost of replacing a human worker is much lower than the cost of building a new thinking machine.

The Gloomwitches: The 466th Tactical Bomber Wing was originally created by a Commissariat facing a surplus of 'less desirable' personnel and a shortage of modern weapons and materiel. Flawed H.A.V.O.C.s, Human outcasts, obsolete automata—even a handful of Homunculi were inducted into the 466th. Assigned outdated firearms and antiquated aircraft by their quartermasters, they were expected to fail utterly when thrown into security actions and territorial repatriation endeavors. Their commanding officers were stunned when the 466th began racking up victory after victory due to a combination of their ferocity, their tenacity, and

their 'unique' equipment allowing for unorthodox tactics. Dubbed the Gloomwitches for their preferences for nocturnal raids, the 466th is now something between a black sheep and a guiding light of the Voskagradian military.

The Iron Hands: Named for a controversial historical figure, the 3rd Heavy Infantry "Iron Hands" Division is a group entirely composed of mechanically augmented soldiers. Due to the unique abilities and requirements of such altered individuals, the Central Committee for Civil Defense tends to assign 'upgraded' soldiers to the Iron Hands as a way of consolidating strength and simplifying logistical support (as such individuals require considerably greater access to mechanics, engineers, doctors, and fuel supplies to remain operational). In keeping with the exploits of their namesake, the Iron Hands are frequently deployed as security forces in areas prone to civil unrest and to unequivocally put down riots.

The Ministry of History, Information, and Education: Based out of the former campus of a private university, the Ministry of History, Information, and Education, or M.H.I.E., is responsible for the preservation, dissemination, and correction of historical accounts, governmental and private records, and current news stories. While there are trade-specific publications put out by various Ministries and Committees, there is essentially only one "newspaper" in all of Voskagrado, the periodical put out by the M.H.I.E. and titled simply "The News." The M.H.I.E. is also responsible for the curricula taught in schools and re-education facilities.

The Ministry of Weights and Measures: Ostensibly overseeing the standardization of systems of, and instruments for, the various metrics by which things are quantified and assessed in all ways, there are persistent rumors that the Ministry of Weights and Measures is, in fact, the V.P.C.P.'s intelligence and counter-intelligence agency. The agents of the M.W.M. are primarily given some variation on the title of "clerk." Clerks of the M.W.M. are easily recognized by their consistent dress code—a black trench coat over a black three piece suit, worn with a white shirt, a black bowler hat, and a black or red tie. Obviously, a uniform would be utterly counterproductive for clandestine operatives of a spy agency. The again, such a "blatant oversight" could be part of a campaign of disinformation.

The Orthodox Phenexian Church: Long standing apart from the authority of the Pontiff in Elenzio, the Orthodox Phenexian Church is one of the sole remaining non-governmental bodies of any substantial size in Voskagrado. While religions are widely regarded as antithetical to Petrovovich's philosophies, the Orthodox Phenexian Church recognizes no mortal authority figures outside of Voskagrado. As such, the City has taken a somewhat more lenient stance on the Church than it has against other faiths. While the City maintains its efforts at convincing religious citizens to follow a more "rational and humane" system of belief, as of yet the Orthodox Phenexian Church has not been the subject of purges or large scale seizures of property.

The People's University: After the Eastern Palace was razed during the Winter Revolution, the site remained uninhabitable for some time. Eventually, the M.H.I.E. decided that the 'bones' of the building (ancient stonework of substantial quality, strong even despite the fire damage) were suitable for as the basis for a public university of unprecedented scope and scale. The People's University, as it came to be called, remains the premier institution of higher learning in the entire City. Departments of the People's University are directly integrated with various other government offices and agencies, including the military. Certain

laboratories on campus house important, and often secret, defense projects. A sizable team of academics from the University and their entourage have been put on permanent assignment in Skvalgaard.

The Rovenski Power Authority: Almost two thirds of the voltaic energy powering Volskograd comes from the Rovenski Power Authority. From domestic lights to tempest-caliber lightning cannons, the V.P.C.P. is hugely reliant on the current generated by the R.P.A. A coastal/marine facility, the R.P.A. primarily harnesses the force exerted by waves and ocean swells to generate voltaic energy. The concrete bays, locks, and reservoirs integrated into the R.P.A.'s design ensure consistent energy output regardless of the state of the tide at any given moment, though there are emergency supplies of red diesel on hand as well.

National Dress

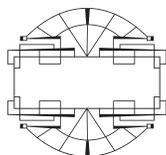
Civilian: The standard Volskagradian wardrobe is utterly utilitarian. Both culturally and politically, conformity is expected. Clothing tends to favor thick, sensible material in grey or black. Hats (often with ear flaps and fur lining) and headscarves are very common. Industrial workers are most commonly seen in grey or black dungarees and matching jackets, and often with slouch caps. Office workers and academics generally wear dark suits, dresses, and coats of thinner material. In stark contrast to the general homogeneity of Volskagradian fashion, there is a distinct subculture most prevalent among Volskagradian youth that seeks to "buck the system." Such individuals tend to favor loose fitting chequered or plaid jackets, wide brimmed hats, brightly colored tops, and ties with matching socks.

Military: Volskagradian military forces tend to fall into one of two camps: forces of the line, which are entirely pragmatic (bordering on ramshackle, at times), and political show pieces (in which case it is expected that leather be polished, metal gleam, and brocade be in good array). Volskagradian armed forces uniforms, drones, and jaegerpanzers are generally brown with red highlights, though there are unit variations.

Iconography: Volskograd has long used the beasts of winter as powerful symbols. The wolf and the bear were both common components of coats of arms. While the Winter Revolution put an end to the nobility, the cultural connection to the symbols remains. The flag of Volskograd is a grey field, three black chevrons centered, nested, pointing to the left. The military roundel of Volskograd is a grey field with two centered black chevrons pointing up.

Common First Names: Alyona, Anna, Anton, Boris, Dmitri, Ivan, Konstantin, Mikhail, Nadezhda, Oleksandra, Opreledeniye, Pyotr, Sasha, Sofia, Taciana, Vera, Viktor, Vilior, Yekaterina, Yuliya

Common Surnames: Barricade, Blok, Chesnokov, Drugov, Galvinochesky, Markov, Medvedev, Ramazanov, Vanzin, Yakubov



International Relations

Alden:

Bloodthirsty tyrants! Their people must rise up and throw off their chains as we have done. Until they do, we must think of our siblings in work only as tools of the corrupt and the depraved.

—Yuri Izmailov, Political Officer

The history of Alden and Volskograd is a long and contentious one. The two Cities have come to blows numerous times over issues ranging from spheres of influence to religion, from ideology to fishing rights. After the Great War there was a brief period of peace. A few generations later, though, when the Dark Times were at their worst, the Collectivist Revolution swept the then-moderate duChenko dynasty from the pages of history. The relatively young populist Volskagradian government is thoroughly critical of the autocratic methods of Alden, and in turn Alden condemns the various purges conducted under the banner of the Lords of Winter.

Elenzio:

You see what happens when you place power in the hands of the few? Even their religious leader is but one person, and look how that's turned out. "The Pontiff." Pah.

—Kotik Ivanova, line worker at the Blue November Steel Works

The cultural divisions between Elenzio and Volskograd are old and deep. Emotions run hot with Elenzians, while few peoples are so stoic and somber as the Volskagradians. Elenzian tastes run towards ornamentation and complexity, while Volskagradian aesthetics are drastically pragmatic out of necessity. One of the few points of agreement the two Cities ever had was religion, and that ended long ago with the advent of the Orthodox Phenexian Church in Volskograd. Many in Elenzio see the Collectivist Revolution in Volskograd as nothing more than a seizure of power by anarchists, pointing to the various political purges as evidence of the bloody folly of such movements. Such commentators are generally members of the upper class.

The Federated Cities:

Some see their towers of glass, steel, and dreams as cultural rot. Maybe so. But have you not heard their workers cry out? Have you not seen the strikes? They do not need our scorn—they need our help.

—Sergei Kudrin, Student at the People's University

Given the close ties between the Federated Cities and Alden, as well as the vast sociological differences between collectivism and commercialism, it is little wonder that the relationship between Volskograd and the F.C. is an acrimonious and contentious one. Historically, the Federated Cities have not held enough power to threaten the V.P.C.P., but with recent innovations and expansions in the west, the Lords of Winter are taking

more and more notice of the upstarts across the ocean. For their part, the barons of industry in the F.C. justifiably see collectivism as a threat, and they ruthlessly quash any outspoken Collectivist advocates.

Loreard:

It is not a question of 'if,' but of 'when.'

—Lieutenant Colonel Alin Antonova, 466th Bomber Wing, on the chance of hostilities between Loreard and Volskagrad

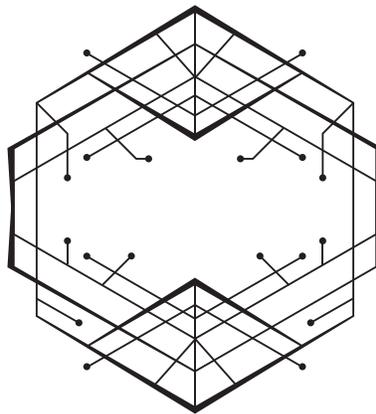
While Loreard and Volskagrad have hardly been the closest of allies at the best of times, it is only since the emergence of the Einstadts that true, unbridled animosity has come to the fore between the two. The Collectivists in Volskagrad point to the enforced classism and racist doctrines of Loreard as profoundly evil, while the Einstadts point to the “equity” of all the people in Volskagradian gulags or exiled to Zyebrinsk. In fact, there are rumors that Loreardan agents have been fueling and supplying revolutionaries in Zyebrinsk in an effort to drain resources and divide the attention of the higher ups in Volskagrad.

Phong Tai:

I have never met anyone from Phong Tai. Maybe it is like in the movies? Or maybe it is like in Zyebrinsk. Who can say?

—Alexi Zhenkovich, Shift Supervisor, the Traktor Factory

While the methodologies used by the two Cities may be ostensibly different, both Phong Tai and Volskagrad are, at core, expansionist powers. There is a wary respect between the two peoples, but it is absolutely the respect of a pair of predators, each equally unsure of the pecking order. The Collectivist revolution in Volskagrad saw the bloody end of a ruling line that had stretched back to the City's founding, and the Imperial dynasty of Phong Tai is understandably concerned by the potential for such things in their own territory. Nonetheless, Volskagrad and Phong Tai have never gone to war, and trade goods freely pass between the two Cities.



Skvalgaard:

To our siblings, our cousins, our children in our sister City, we open our arms. The time has come to set aside the petty political divisions Skvalgaard has erected around itself. There is no need to deny yourselves the support of your homeland any longer. Embrace your heritage. Embrace your destiny. Embrace Volskagrad.

—Natasha Molonovin, Radio Personality, during a public address

Despite certain similarities in traditional culture and local climate, Skvalgaard and Volskagrad have a somewhat strained relationship. Volskagrad's increasingly insistent statements that Skvalgaard is, in fact, a "long lost" Volskagradian colony have begun to lose their tone of 'assertion of kinship' and taken on notes of 'ownership and responsibility.' The Skvals, for their part, are wildly unimpressed by such claims, and routinely release (polite) statements to that effect. The Volskagradian embassy in Skvalgaard appears to be as much a military base as a political center, and the Skvaldic Jaakarit have begun leaving one of their number in plain sight outside the gates, blatantly watching the goings on in the compound.

Xian Dao:

Their money spends like anyone else's. Hell, it spends better than ours, half the time.

—Captain Sasha Mathinov, of the V.M.A. Chartreuse Danger

There is no love lost between between Volskagrad and Alden. Likewise, Volskagrad and Phong Tai have a quietly strained relationship. Such is the foundation of the strange, complicated set of arrangements between Volskagrad and Xian Dao. Xian Dao has built a very profitable reputation by being a 'legally disinterested' port of call for all manner of vessels, and Volskagrad makes good use of that circumstance. However, Volskagrad has a keen political interest in Xian Dao as well. As either Alden or Phong Tai would benefit from a stable situation in Xian Dao (whether in the short term or long), Volskagrad makes a point to consistently steer trade, both official and illegal, to factors and houses supporting or affiliated with Xian Dao's independence movement.

Il Zindan:

I have a cousin there. They sound happy in the letters. I blame sunstroke.

—Rivka Oksanova, Textile Worker, during a game of primero

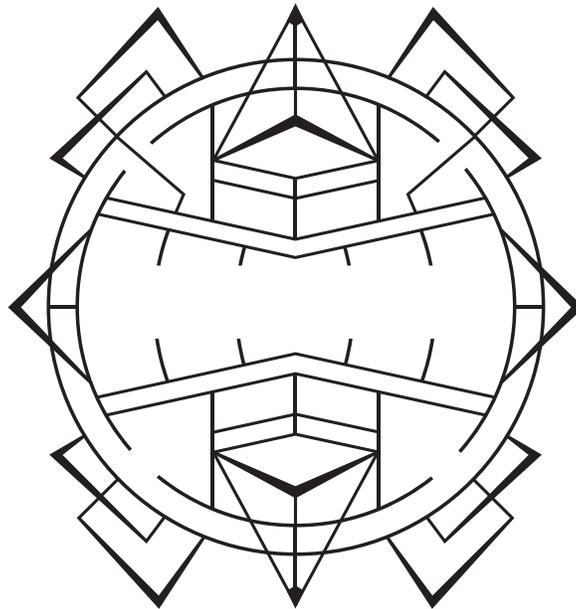
There have never been strong martial, cultural, or commercial ties between Volskagrad and Il Zindan. Perhaps it is that very distance, the enormous geographic and social removal, which made Il Zindan such an alluring destination for many during the Winter Revolution. A small but significant number of Volskagradians found common cause with the philosophy of the revolutionaries—but not with their methods. Unwilling to back the Tzarists, but wanting nothing to do with the purges they knew would come after the end of the war, such individuals packed their belongings and fled as far as they were able—all the way to the City in the Sands.

Zyebrinsk:

It could be worse. We could be going to Zyebrinsk.

–Sofia Markov to fellow traitor before their summary execution for
Crimes Against the People

Volskograd created Zyebrinsk. Whether as a true expansion of the City, as a method of resource collection, or as a penal colony for political dissidents and undesirables makes no real difference. Neither Volskograd nor Zyebrinsk has any illusions on the subject. While some Volskagradians view a tour of duty in Zyebrinsk as a way to advance their military or political career, there is no denying the added risks that come with such potential rewards. Only the most desperate of civilians voluntarily visit Zyebrinsk for any reason—it is all too easy for guards to ‘misplace papers’ and prevent their return to Volskograd until the traveler is able to find ‘gifts’ for the border officers.



Xian Dao

Nominally a colony City of Phong Tai, Xian Dao is currently a protectorate of Alden thanks to a ninety-nine year lease obtained by way of superior naval firepower. Needless to say, this has created a society with deep divisions—Phong Tai loyalists, Aldish expats, and Xian Dao separationists all earnestly claim the title of “patriot.” Despite these inherent and abiding issues of cultural identity and political sovereignty, Xian Dao serves as a very attractive (and lucrative) port of call for trading factors and merchants. Due to the unique situation of this island City, official taxes and tariffs are remarkably low. Bribery is something of a constant among customs officials, but for that small price visitors can buy and sell just about anything anyone could want.

Society: Both the people of Alden and the people of Phong Tai are known for their often taciturn natures. Despite such demure cultural parentage, the people of Xian Dao are given to expressing their opinions openly, and often at volume. While there are certainly plenty of individuals from Xian Dao who would fit in perfectly well in either Alden or Phong Tai, the emerging Xian Dao personal norm seems to be one of vociferous commentary, deeply seated loyalties, and significant internal conflict. As a colonial City of Phong Tai, the infrastructure of Xian Dao (both in regards to population and civil engineering) was originally very artificial in nature, with specific people brought in to create and manage the City. Phong Tai builders carefully placed structures with a mind towards both efficiency and aesthetics. In the bureaucratic chaos following the Aldish occupancy, that careful planning fell to the wayside (or, in some instances, was violently and specifically cast aside). Developers and business owners bought up tracts of land which they then subdivided and sold off at hefty profits. Streets were often privatized and rerouted. The end result is a labyrinthine City of blind alleys, streets with multiple names, and a deafening cacophony of industry and commercial transactions unlike anyplace else on Ayos. Of all the many external parties which had a hand in shaping modern Xian Dao, it is perhaps the interests of the South Crocellan Trading Company which have had the most profound impact. The Aldish trading corporation has massive sway over the politics and economics of the City, and serves as one of the more divisive figures in both arenas.

Populace: Despite being of the youngest Cities, Xian Dao has a very sizable population. Boasting some two and a half million sentient citizens in a City just over half the size of Alden, Xian Dao has one of the highest population densities of all the Cities. Humans remain in the majority, but that majority is considerably smaller than in most any other City. There are significant numbers of homunculi and individuated automata—large enough numbers, in fact, to form technical majorities in certain Districts. There are negligible numbers of slabs and H.A.V.O.C.s in Xian Dao—between the geographic and cultural distances from Thorncrag and the warm, humid climate (which hastens decomposition), Slabs are quite anomalous in the region, and H.A.V.O.C.s are entirely foreign as Xian Dao lacks the advanced military science programs to produce super soldiers. Though there are a handful of Blooded residing in the City, they are mostly Aldish expatriates abroad as adventurers, entrepreneurs, or fugitives, with only a handful occupying stations of rank.

Government: As a protectorate of Alden, Xian Dao is ruled by the Governor-General, the Legislative Council, and the Executive Council.

The Governor-General: The highest ranking Aldish official in the Xian Dao colonial power structure, the Governor-General has tremendous authority over local affairs. Empowered through an act of the Aldish legislature (specifically the Gold House), the Governor-General is a plenipotentiary of the government they serve. They are capable of fully binding autonomous action, manage the executive and legislative offices, and are the ranking commander of Aldish armed forces in the area as well. The office of Governor-General of Xian Dao changes hands with remarkable frequency, though the present Governor-General, Sir Emily Marsh, has had one of the longest terms to date at just over five years.

The Legislative Council: All members of the Legislative Council are appointed by the Governor-General of Xian Dao. Historically, members of the Legislative Council were exclusively Aldish expatriates, but in recent years members of the local population have more frequently been included in the Council's makeup, today accounting for twelve of the forty extant seats. Whether this shift in policy is meant to mollify critics or merely serves to further entangle Alden in local business affairs by leveraging Council appointment among local business leaders remains unclear. The Legislative Council is responsible for the creation and workings of law and day-to-day policy in Xian Dao, including the establishment of taxes, and also selects individuals to serve as judges and magistrates throughout the protectorate.

The Executive Council: As with the Legislative Council, the Governor-General appoints all members of the Executive Council. Whereas the Legislative Council performs its duties through open debate and consensus, the Executive Council is significantly more removed from the public eye (though not public concern). Serving as advisors and secretaries to the Governor-General, the Executive Council exists to make sure the Governor-General is well informed of pertinent local and world events, and to enforce the policies and decisions of the Governor-General through direct action and oversight. Such activities can range from delivering edicts, to meeting foreign dignitaries, to commanding military units. Unlike the Legislative Council, the Executive Council has always contained members of the local population.

The Present Day: At first glance, the streets of Xian Dao seem much as they have since the occupancy became old news, a bustling network of thoroughfares and traffic-clogged byways emblematic of the thriving metropolis. Beneath the hubbub, though, those "in the know" can sense a tension in the people, something akin to the air before a summer storm.

Xian Dao is divided into no fewer than four main political camps: Conventionalists (those who seek to maintain the status quo, whereby the Aldish occupancy is respected and the scheduled return to Phong Tai is regarded positively), Traditionalists (individuals who regard the occupancy as an egregious affront and want to immediately throw off Aldish rule and influence and return to the sovereignty of Phong Tai as quickly as possible), Imperialists (sentients who regard membership in the Aldish Empire as a benefit to Xian Dao and wish to extend the occupancy indefinitely, or come to some other Alden-facing arrangement when the occupancy ends), and the Secessionists (those desiring a Xian Dao with full political and economic autonomy and self-determination, subject to neither Alden nor Phong Tai).

While none of the four groups are so organized as to deserve the distinction of being called a “party” (especially as, given the structure of the Aldish political systems, such a status would be just shy of meaningless in the protectorate), each of the movements has a variety of sub-sects and supporting institutions. Members of such groups often engage in roiling debates on politics and culture, and occasionally come to blows. While actions of any real scale have been rare historically, such incidents are occurring with increasing frequency as time goes on, and clashes between groups such as the Red Tigers and the South Crocellan Trading Company take up more and more of the newspaper headlines.

Despite the undercurrent of unrest and the occasional organized protest or demonstration, life continues more or less as normal in Xian Dao. As international relations across Ayos chill and sour, the City remains a major port of call and an effective facilitator of trade between otherwise hostile parties. While there is no doubt that Alden retains control of Xian Dao, commercial interests necessitate continued dealings between strange bedfellows indeed, and airships and mercantile vessels from across Ayos continue to bring their cargos to Xian Dao without pause.

Locations of Note

Black Cloud Square: One the most famous and infamous landmarks in all of Xian Dao, Black Cloud Square is the intersection between Tai Fung Road, Gao Chen Way, and Citadel Street, and is the beating heart of the Xian Dao commodities market. As perhaps the busiest interchange in the entire City, Black Cloud Square was of tremendous strategic and tactical value in the opening days of the Occupancy. While most of Phong Tai’s garrisoned troops obeyed their orders to stand down and refused to engage with Aldish forces, a number of units joined with local militia in efforts to oppose the foreign military. The two forces inevitably wound up contesting the plaza, with the fiercest fighting lasting for the better part of three days. The final charge of the local forces against the Aldish lines was a ferocious, though ultimately futile, effort, as the Aldish military unleashed a withering hail of fire from mounted machine guns and artillery pieces. The smoke and smell of the spent gunpowder and shells created an almost impenetrable black fog that hung in the air for hours and gave the square its new name.

Kensington Street: Indisputably the wealthiest strip in Xian Dao, Kensington Street is home to the richest and most powerful members of City society who are either part of, or on good terms with, the Aldish occupancy. Skyscrapers dominate the street’s environs, the foreignness of their concrete, glass, and steel forms softened somewhat by the inclusion of Phong Tai architectural lines and design elements. At street level, small parks and large private gardens create some of the greenest spaces in all of Xian Dao, a stark contrast to the wide boulevards and walkways that offer pedestrians access to fine boutiques, shops, and restaurants. Nobles, dignitaries, tycoons—the residents of Kensington Street inhabit a bubble of prestige whose sanctity is enforced by any number of bodyguards, mercenaries, and law enforcement officers. Despite the fine routes for foot traffic, armed motorcades are an almost non-stop phenomenon in the neighborhood, as many of the ranking officers of the South Crocellan Trading Company reside in the high-rises along the street, and revolutionaries have made more than one attempt on their lives.

Lao Sing Hill: Rarely seen by tourists and travellers, Lao Sing Hill is one of Xian Dao's most prominent (and unusual) topographical features. Encircled by a secondary curve of wall outside the main City wall, Lao Sing Hill is a great mound of rock and earth whose magnitude approaches mountaintop proper. The stone of Lao Sing Hill has been carved by wind and rain into strange, almost organic shapes, with flowing lines and smooth, irregular holes and caverns. The strange rock formations seem to sing and howl during the frequent windstorms that wrack the area. Scientists believe that a crater on one side of the hill marks the impact site of a great meteorite—a meteorite that most likely accounts for the metals and minerals that can be found on Lao Sing Hill and nowhere else on Ayos. Various academic and commercial ventures routinely make efforts to establish mines in the hill, and while they have been able to extract some of the weird materials, such efforts are consistently plagued by bad luck and crippling labor shortages due to worker desertion, disease, or breakdown.

Seven Mile Quay: While constant construction and ever-changing traffic patterns prevent any accurate measurement, Seven Mile Quay is undoubtedly one of the largest maritime structures on Ayos. Hundreds of commercial vessels tie off at the docks every single day, and the tonnage of cargo they load and unload is staggering. Aldish naval vessels maintain a visible presence at all times, though military vessels from other Cities can be spotted at the fueling depots, emergency repair docks, and ambassadorial moorings. Such grand and important ships are fairly rare, though, and the vast majority of traffic tends to come in the form of civilian merchant transports, stealthy pirate ships, and smuggling vessels of all descriptions. It is little wonder that abandoned or impounded cargo containers are used as living quarters by the homeless or destitute, and there are thriving black market operations that have had uninterrupted dealings since before the Aldish occupancy began. Of note, certain experienced sailors and deckhands claim that some of the currents near Seven Mile Quay can only be explained by the existence of some great submerged mountain, but to date no submarine has gone so deep as to be able to confirm the supposition.

Groups and Institutions of Interest

The Consulate: The series of events leading to the creation of the Phong Tai Imperial Consulate in Xian Dao is not entirely understood, though what is known borders on the bizarre. Originally the Aldish embassy, the building changed hands sometime after the beginning of the occupancy, though neither of the governments involved seems willing or able to produce a clear chain of title, orders authorizing the change, or any sort of ongoing agreement regarding tenancy. Large crates bearing diplomatic seals regularly arrive at the Consulate, though they are never opened in public, and the Aldish can only speculate as to their contents.

The H.M.S. Locutor: One of the most visible symbols of Aldish might in Xian Dao, the Locutor is a massive ship anchored near the center of the Bay of Xian Dao. An experimental craft, the Locutor was constructed to perform the launching and maintenance duties of an aircraft carrier as well as filling the direct fire and support role of a battleship. While the design has never been fully recreated due to the extreme expense involved, the Locutor itself is widely touted as a success and has brought victory to the Aldish crown in every engagement in which it has seen action.

The House of Jade Memories: Rumored to be as much a museum as a merchant house, the House of Jade Memories is an urban anomaly. While any number of questionable establishments and endeavors routinely change venue, the House of Jade Memories is said to physically change location, though whether there is any truth to that or whether the place is just remarkably exclusive is unclear. A holdover from the days of Imperial rule, the House is said to contain all manner of curios, cursed objects, and storied relics, each displayed individually atop its own plinth, waiting for their owners to find them.

Hutchins and Grear: Renowned as home to some of the greatest fashion designers on Ayos today, Hutchins and Grear is a venerable fashion house originally based in Alden. While their suits and dresses were respected and well regarded for their century-long tenure in Alden, it was only after the occupancy began and the company relocated to Xian Dao that their popularity soared. Rumor states that Hutchins and Grear set up shop in an existing textiles complex and found bolts of fine silk in storage. From that day to this, Hutchins and Grear shifted their focus away from wool and cotton, and specialized in silks of unparalleled quality.

Mau Dhai's House of Games: Of all the many dens of iniquity in Xian Dao, Mau Dhai's House of Games may have the best reputation regarding fairness and survivability. Originally an industrial catamaran, the combination hotel/casino is now semi-permanently affixed to a berth in a seedy (though popular) section of Seven Mile Quay. Promising 'fair' games of gambling and chance, comfortable, pest-free rooms, and live entertainment, Mau Dhai's House of Games has a large and well-trained staff of mercenaries who serve as bouncers and security agents. In some circles (mostly criminal), the value of chips from the House of Games is more stable and fungible than that of national currencies.

The Red Tigers: An active and militant group of Secessionists, the Red Tigers seek to guide Xian Dao free of the influences of both Alden and Phong Tai. While the group has a fairly limited membership, each of their members is quite busy, and their radical politics can be seen frequently in graffiti and on pamphlets. Their dedicated agitators mingle constantly with crowds, disappearing at the first sign of Aldish authorities. The Red Tigers are not simply rhetoricians, though—far from it. They have claimed responsibility for a number of actions against Phong Tai agents and Aldish forces, and are especially likely to target personnel and materiel linked to the South Crocellan Trading Company.

The South Crocellan Trading Company: The South Crocellan Trading Company is a mercantile corporation founded well before the Great War. The Company's mission was initially to conduct, oversee, and protect Alden's commercial interests in Phong Tai markets. With the founding of Xian Dao, the Company's duties were both broadened and given greater prestige. Indeed, the Company's responsibilities became so large and its influence so great that, in the depths of the Dark Times, the Company had more troops under arms than Alden had in its standing army. The Company's fortunes have waned considerably since then, however, with the Crown stripping away many of its legal authorities and lines of business.

Triple Five Courier Service: With the official motto of "Quick and Quality Delivery Services"—and the unofficial motto of "No questions asked, no refunds given"—Triple Five Courier Service has become a household name in Xian Dao, and a significant player in other Cities. Known to be both fast and discreet, the

company hires only the best, most scrupulously disinterested couriers (and smugglers) to make its deliveries. While it would be uncharitable to say that the majority of Triple Five Courier Service's business is in illicit goods, black market valuables, and sensitive information, it would be equally disingenuous to ignore the frequency with which organized crime and other such groups employ the agency.

National Dress

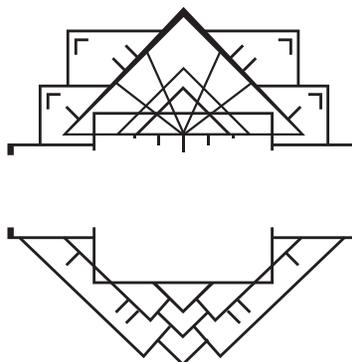
Civilian: As with all other aspects of culture, the fashion of Xian Dao is a complex melange of influences from Alden, Phong Tai, and beyond. For daily wear, trousers paired with light, short-sleeved shirts (in deference to the heat) are common, as are high waisted pencil skirts and short, cropped jackets. High waistlines are common for both skirts and trousers. Formal occasions call for dark suits, tailed coats, or elegant dresses, all of wool, cotton, or silk. Hats are quite common, especially fedoras and caps. Veils, while worn, are rare. In deference to political leanings, Traditionalists or Secessionists will often wear clothing with subtle military stylings or lines, and while such garb is not inherently a political statement, it has been known to draw attention from authorities.

Military: As the active military in Xian Dao, Alden's colors and designs are most prevalent—olive drab coats and jackets worn with khaki trousers, generally. Forces loyal to the South Crocellan Trading Company tend to sport green jackets and black trousers, while Traditionalists wear grey. Secessionists lack a unifying color scheme, though the Red Tigers dress to match their name, in red, orange, or oxblood work jackets.

Iconography: Xian Dao presently flies an Aldish colonial flag—one of the black shields of Alden to the left, on its left side and pointing to the right, leading to a red field. A white circle, a nod to Phong Tai and the Way, is centered in the black shield. The military roundel for Xian Dao is a white circle on a downwards facing black wedge, flanked from below by sections of red.

Common First Names: Akari, Alice, Asa, Arthur, Charles, Dorothy, Edith, Elsie, Feng, Florence, George, Himari, Jun, Liu, Quiang, Riku, Robert, Sanna, William, Xiuying

Common Surnames: Ando, Barnett, Cooper, Gao, Hobbs, Rampton, Sato, Tamura, Webb, Zhou



International Relations

Alden:

They are not right. They are not good. But they are here, and they are many. We must simply wait, and they will wither and leave. Inaction is a form of action all its own.

—Jun Reginald Ko, Conventionalist barkeep of the Three Moons Bar

While technically under lease from Phong Tai, Alden generally treats Xian Dao as a protectorate or colony (depending on whether or not one believes the claims of autonomy touted by the local government and the Aldish ambassador alike). With virtually no tariffs, taxes, or duties, trade booms in Xian Dao. Moreover, the customs officials are notorious for corruption and graft—the Aldish military presence in the area is concerned with strategic military matters, not smuggling. When taken altogether, there is almost nothing that can't be bought, sold, or rented somewhere in Xian Dao. While some in Alden question the morality of the arrangement, none dispute its profitability.

Elenzio:

Have you heard the rubbish coming out of that place recently? Whether you follow the Pontiff or Rossi, it's coming down to Us and Them, and whenever they talk like that there's a damn Crusade. Or a war. Or... Almighty, just pass me a shot, won't you?

—Lieutenant Gabriel Fogg, South Crocellan Trading Company Armed Forces, Blooded

Alden and Elenzio see eye to eye less and less as time marches on. Happily for the economies of each, however, Xian Dao serves as a port of convenient origination. Goods which might otherwise be subject to heavy duties are shifted from one Xian Dao pier to another, the labels on their crates are changed, and what once was an import from Elenzio is suddenly a repatriation of goods from an Aldish territorial possession. The Merchant Princes of Elenzio are both familiar and adept with such dealings, and with the added benefit of acting as a conduit into the sequestered markets of Phong Tai, Xian Dao is a frequent and favored port of call for Elenzian vessels.

The Federated Cities:

You ever hear Mau Dhai say 'Hello, Friends!' to a group from the F.C.? It almost sounds like he means it. You don't think he plans to go to Waypoint, do you? To try to make pictures? He's a good boss, but he's got a face for radio if anybody does...

—Wu Gao Fong, waitstaff, Mau Dhai's House of Games

Officially, Xian Dao and the Federated Cities do not have much of any sort of diplomatic interactions—such business is conducted with Alden. Unofficially, of course, Xian Dao and the Federated Cities are close partners in trade. As the "Gateway to Phong Tai," Xian Dao offers the F.C. access to one of the largest and

busiest markets of the world, to say nothing of its own voracious appetites. For every airship that carries films, gadgets, and tourists from the F.C. to Xian Dao, another carries silk, ore, and spices from Xian Dao to the F.C.

Loreard:

Their policies are inefficient, venal, and low-minded, but we do have a common enemy. What did you say that agent's number was? Maybe we can use them for a shipment of weapons, then burn them as a cutout. Get'em on the line.

—Franc Azikodo, Cell Leader of the Red Tigers

As a City, Xian Dao is still working on integrating two very disparate cultures—that of Phong Tai, and that of Alden. The average Citizen of Loreard, having thrown off vampiric governance by no other means than bloody revolution, feels a great deal of sympathy for the plight of self-identifying Phong Tai citizens still trapped today in Xian Dao under colonial Aldish rule. This sentiment is reinforced almost daily by the Observer and other Loreardan news sources. Xian Dao, on the other hand, is little interested in the 'sympathies' of a fascist regime while it struggles for true self rule.

Phong Tai:

How can they be my people when I have only ever met their tin soldiers? No. My people are here, and here alone.

—Xiuying Zhou, Operative of the Red Tigers

While the shift from Phong Tai rule to Aldish occupancy was by no means a voluntary one, the population of Xian Dao itself has now spent decades in a position unique in the international community. Though Phong Tai seems to be quietly biding its time for the Aldish lease of the territory to expire, the City makes no secret of its plans to repatriate Xian Dao and its population. For some members of the generation which has grown up under Aldish law, this prospect can seem as much threat as deliverance. While the Yorukai has plenty of sympathetic agents in Xian Dao, the situation is not nearly so cut and dried as Imperial envoys might have the world believe.

Skvalgaard:

They lack firm leadership. Skvaals do not understand their place in the cosmos. A remarkably chaotic state of affairs for a people who made such a wonderfully precise watch.

—Lewis Li, Entrepreneur

Skvalgaard and Xian Dao have relatively little to do with one another. While the markets and warehouses of Xian Dao are as open to the goods of Skvalgaard as anywhere else, Xian Dao isn't really on any of Skvalgaard's major trade routes. Further, Xian Dao itself has little need for furs or the oily fish of the polar ocean. With that said, Kolo clocks, watches, and automata are as popular among the wealthy of Xian Dao

as they are in any other City, and Xian Dao offers an arms length distribution solution between Kolo and Cities on poor terms with Skvalgaard.

Volskagrad:

They are quiet. So are wolves in wait.

–Tu Gailoon, Traditionalist Doctor

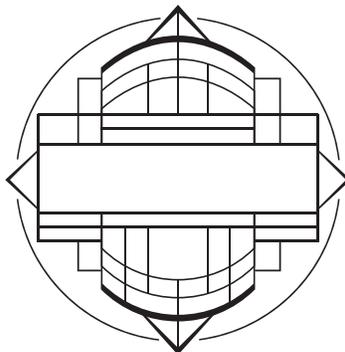
There is no love lost between between Volksagrad and Alden. Likewise, Volskagrad and Phong Tai have a quietly strained relationship. Such is the foundation of the strange, complicated set of arrangements between Volskagrad and Xian Dao. Xian Dao has built a very profitable reputation by being a ‘legally disinterested’ port of call for all manner of vessels, and Volskagrad makes good use of that circumstance. However, Volskagrad has a keen political interest in Xian Dao as well. As either Alden or Phong Tai would benefit from a stable situation in Xian Dao (whether in the short term or long), Volskagrad makes a point to consistently steer trade, both official and illegal, to factors and houses supporting or affiliated with Xian Dao’s independence movement.

Il Zindan:

Aside from the sand, the mercenaries, and the ghosts of the giant bugs, I don’t think it sounds all that bad.

–Petra Grimaldi, Merchant

Though separated by wide gulfs of both geography and culture, Xian Dao and Il Zindan have surprisingly strong commercial ties. As the Zindani struggle to throw off the various controls and interests of foreign Cities, they have found that red diesel—their chief export aside from irreplaceable Thek artifacts—can be the subject of bitter trade disputers. Between Xian Dao’s considerable domestic demand and its access to all manner of markets, the Zindani are only too willing to work together towards profitable distribution of their product. The parallel struggles for self-determination in the midst of oppressive foreign interference doesn’t hurt their Civic relationship, either.

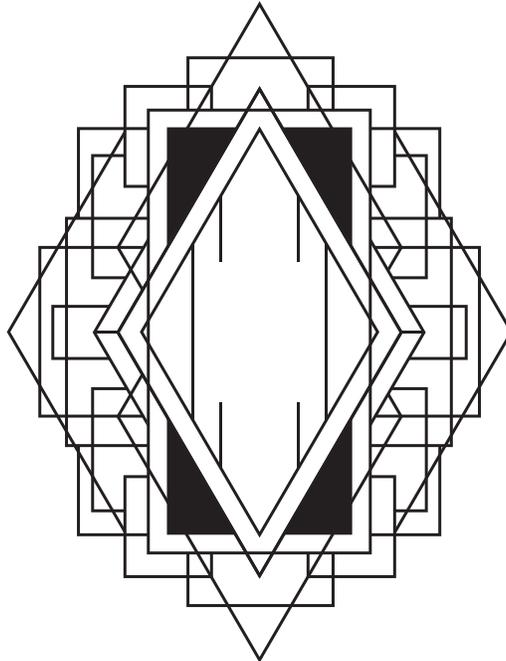


Zyebrinsk:

I wonder sometimes—after the occupancy is over, will Phong Tai welcome us back? Or will they simply use us, like Volskograd uses Zyebrinsk?

—Professor Thomas Fellows-Wei, of Xian Dao University's Department of Mathematics

The relationship between Xian Dao and Zyebrinsk is strange to say the least. All official channels of communication between the two Cities are entirely controlled by other Cities—it is as though two cagey puppeteers talk to each other through their dolls, only speaking directly to one another when absolutely necessary. Unofficially, of course, the situation is quite different. Smugglers from Xian Dao and Zyebrinsk often run into one another in ports all over Aeos. Such meetings can lead to anything from cordial trade agreements and exchanged tips on navigation to gang fights and blood feuds—a state of affairs likely to continue until Xian Dao and Zyebrinsk can have meaningful, independent discourse.



Il Zindan

All of Ayos suffered when the Thek went mad—but no place came closer to total annihilation than Il Zindan. The Dwelling in Darkness, once a bustling metropolis of ziggurats and tunnels, is now known as the Dead City, its ruins and broken remnants shrouded in the depths of the crevasse. The descendants of those few humans who survived the fall of the Thek no longer reside in the chasm itself, but have instead built a small City of their own—New Kyfe. For years, the Zindani economy relied heavily on the agents and expeditions sent to New Kyfe by foreign powers to purchase or procure Thek artifacts, but with the recent discovery of considerable Tanzolium reserves nearby, the Zindani people are poised on the brink of an industrial resurgence.

Society: The Zindani have survived tremendous hardships, and those hardships have marked both the people and their culture quite deeply. The Great War, the Fall of the Thek, the Dark Times—even the desert itself have all required the Zindani to chase continued existence with a stark, unflagging determination. That drive for survival, and the acceptance of the sacrifices such survival sometimes requires, are core tenets of the Zindani psyche. Despite such grim circumstances, or perhaps because of them, the Zindani are known for their love of life (and their gallows humor), and the emphasis they place on ‘familial’ ties (whether by blood or deep camaraderie). After the fall of Il Zindan, many Zindani left the ruined City in search of a fresh start. Some stayed, however, and over the course of decades laid the foundations of the settlement which would become New Kyfe. That core division—the decision to stay and rebuild or to leave and start anew—defines certain aspects of Zindani society. The Oldest Children, families that stayed in Il Zindan, are considered both the most prestigious and the most stubborn. The Middle Children, families that emigrated and returned in later years, are considered somewhat less prominent, but also more adaptable and innovative (a pill hard to swallow by the most traditional of the Oldest Families). The Youngest Children are those families who immigrated to New Kyfe in the past generation or two—they are accepted into the community, though not afforded any great respect. Tourists, visitors, and other “outsiders” are welcomed for their money and trade, but the overwhelming history of foreign interference has created a significant cultural barrier between the Zindani and the people of other Cities.

Populace: Standing at roughly 1 million sentient beings, the population of Il Zindan is much smaller than that of most Cities. Between New Kyfe and all of the various dig sites, mining operations, and refueling depots, nearly three quarters of a million humans live in the area. Blooded are quite rare, and very definitely a foreign element. Similarly, there are no local H.A.V.O.C.s, as the Zindani lack the dedicated resources and infrastructure to create them. There are a considerable number of automata in Il Zindan, chiefly used for labor and mining, though should a drone become individuated it is regarded as a person, if an odd one. There are very few slabs in Il Zindan—while the climate is good for their “health” as the dry heat helps prevent putrefaction, the sand from the desert can physically erode them if they do not take precautions. Homunculi are considered odd, though as they are somewhat reminiscent of the Quiet Children of old, they are largely left to their own devices.

Government: While not an official national government as recognized in other Cities, in the wake of the fall of the Thek the Zindani established a representative kriticracy comprised of Magistrates, Courts, and the High Court.

Magistrates: Zindani society is very focused on family groups, lineages, and bloodlines, often referred to simply as “Great Families.” Magistrates are itinerant officials appointed by the elders of a Great Family. Travelling from family holding to family holding, Magistrates handle local civil disputes, non-capital criminal cases, and as low ranking “officers” in times of emergency or war. All Judges begin their careers as Magistrates—the Zindani believe that travelling seasons people and contributes to wisdom, understanding, and shrewdness. Magistrates are empowered to recruit family members to serve as advisors, law enforcement agents, or warriors as need be, though such arrangements last only until the immediate need for their service passes.

Courts: When the elders of a Great Family decide that a Magistrate is ready, the Magistrate is promoted to the rank of Judge. Judges are given a stipend and lodging in a community or district as the needs of society dictate. Judges are expected to regularly hold Court, at which time they will preside over disputes between members of different Great Families, cases concerning capital crimes, and matters of great import within a given Great Family. Judges serve as the equivalent of mid-ranking officers in times of war or extreme hardship. Judges tend to send their own personal agents or Magistrates to enforce laws and decisions in the field, handling only the most important actions personally.

The High Court: The wisest and most respected of Judges are elevated to serve in the High Court. The High Court meets as frequently as need be, and handles cases with implications for all Zindani—precedent setting matters, issues at an international scale, declarations of war, and other such momentous decisions. Judges of the High Court can command whole armies when the need arises, and have done so in the past. During the greatest of emergencies and the fiercest of wars, the Judges of the High Court confer to appoint one of their number to be the Chief Justicar, leader of all Zindani, until the crisis ends. At present, there is no Chief Justicar.

The Present Day: Il Zindan stands on the brink of monumental change. Until a few short years ago, the Dead City served as the only real attraction to foreigners—Thek artifacts can fetch vast sums of money in the right circles. So vast, in fact, that Cities such as Loreard, Volskagrad, and Alden have fought proxy wars for years in the Zindani desert, hiring locals as guides to the best finds and as mercenaries to fight on their behalf, keeping their hands clean and their countries of origin from outright war. For generations, that was the way of things for the residents of New Kyfe—subsistence farming, trading with foreigners, acting as a guide, or fighting as a mercenary. Recently, though, that entire paradigm has been threatened.

With the discovery of great veins of tanzolium in the area, foreign powers rushed to exploit the region’s natural resources as they have its archeological treasures. While many of the local mercenary groups—mostly those hailing from the Oldest Children—stood by their employers, a number of the warrior companies drawing membership largely from the Middle and Youngest Children enforced their own territorial claims on

key reserves. The fighting was quite vicious for a number of years, and even today mines and refineries left too lightly guarded may be “annexed” by other groups. Nonetheless, the more industrial-minded Zindani were able to gain control over enough tanzolium and refinery equipment to establish their own red diesel industry. Hallach Red Diesel, the most prominent of such companies, is on the verge of making its first round of intercontinental deliveries.

Politically, tensions are running high in Il Zindan. The Oldest Children seem to feel that the Dead City can fend for itself, and that leading foreigners to their deaths (and being paid for their trouble) is an entirely legitimate basis for an economy. In counterpoint, the industrialist Middle Children seek to reform and reshape the desert to their liking, while the almost collectivist Youngest Children are willing to engage whatever strategy seems most beneficial to their Great Family, and to all Zindani, at the time. Add to that stew of opinions the resentment most Zindani harbor towards foreigners, the attempts of other Cities to undermine the burgeoning Zindani red diesel industry, and the heightened hostilities between Cities across Ayos, and it is easy to understand how volatile the situation is.

Locations of Note

The Dead City: The Dead City, the Old City, the Dwelling in Darkness—all terms used to describe the Thek metropolis-hive built on the floor, into the walls, and in the bedrock beneath the bottom of a titanic chasm. Indeed, the Dwelling in Darkness earned its name because of the depth of the chasm, and the irregularities in the walls which prevent sunlight from ever reach certain parts of the inhuman megalopolis. The Dead City is ostensibly as empty as its name implies, its towering ziggurats and labyrinthine warrens long since fallen silent of the chattering and chitinous bustle of the Thek. Nevertheless, those brave or desperate enough to attempt to plumb its depths have consistently reported the feeling that they are being observed or, as one archaeologist put it, “catalogued.” Adventurers and academics seeking to loot or study the ancient City frequently disappear. Those that do return often do so empty handed save for unsettling stories of strange lights and subtle, terrible noises following them in the murky depths, and it is all but unheard of for an expedition to emerge from the ordeal unscathed.

The Empty Creche: One of the better known locations in the Dead City, the Empty Creche was one of the Thek’s preeminent brood chambers. To this day a sizable clutch of long-dead eggs remain in this most sacred vault, alongside the crushed and mummified corpses of their sibling pupae. Located in the heart of one of the tallest ziggurats in the old City, navigation through the stygian ruins often relies heavily on a triangulation of position between the Empty Creche, the Plain of Shards, and the Contemplars’ Hall. For all that the Empty Creche is a known landmark, it remains one of the most mysterious sites in all of Il Zindan. At one end of the chamber stands a pair of great black doors, taller than even the tallest of old Thek Myrmidons, and each covered in sigils and symbols. All efforts to breach the door (up to and including the use of mining drones and demolition charges) have failed to so much as mar the unsettling, dark material from which the doors are hewn.

New Kye: Named for the old human settlement (or perhaps tribe, the records are unclear) which was absorbed and assimilated into the northernmost Thek hive to become Il Zindan, New Kye is a dusty

collection of buildings the colors of sunset. Despite its relative youth, the buildings have a worn and weathered appearance, owing in no small part to the frequent sandstorms that wrack the area. While small by the standards of most Cities, the life and colorful clamour of New Kyfe stand in stark contrast to the desolation of the surrounding desert and the cold, unwelcoming depths of the nearby chasm. The markets are loud, crowded affairs, where tradespeople hawk their wares and miners and refinery owners trade in commodities, favors, and cold, hard currency alike. All of that, though, is in some ways a great masquerade—the ‘heart’ of New Kyfe is more likely to be found in the small, shadowy cafes and bars that line the back alleys, where stories are told and secrets about foreign powers quietly auctioned to the highest bidder.

The Scree: Originally the surface outskirts of Il Zindan, the Scree has been reduced to a series of hills of rubble, boulders, and sand. Torn apart in battles between Zindani mercenaries and archeological excavations alike, what was once a unique example of joint human/Thek architecture and civic planning has been blasted to so much dust. Long ago stripped of any artifacts of interest or importance, today the Scree is the site of much of the proxy fighting surrounding Il Zindan. A number of the easiest approaches to the Dead City pass directly through the craters and bluffs of the Scree—and the terrain is perfect for ambushes. While the majority of such engagements are between groups of mercenary guards, with the foreigners backing the losing side captured and ransomed back to their governments, every so often the attacks are motivated by patriotism or religious fervor (there are a handful of local cults which still revere the Thek or follow what they understand of the insect’s religion). Such fights are far bloodier and captives, if taken at all, tend to envy the dead.

Groups and Institutions of Interest

The Burning Sun: A splinter sect of fundamentalist Phenexians, the Burning Sun are based somewhere in the sands outside the walls of New Kyfe. Eschewing all forms of mortal authority beyond their own group, the Burning Sun recognize the legitimacy of neither the Zindani Courts nor the Pontiff in Elenzio. Members of the Burning Sun often come from families labeled the “Oldest Children,” though they reject the moniker as they do all things derived from the Thek hive-state. Indeed, the Burning Sun makes a special point to destroy all Thek artifacts, as they view the fall of the Thek, and the associated loss of human life, as divine retribution for associating with the Inhuman.

The Circle of Dust: Very little is understood about the group referred to in fringe literature as “the Circle of Dust.” While some believe it to be a form of political party or philosophical school, the predominant theory among those aware of the Circle (an admitted rarity in their own right) is that it is a religious organization. If so, it has no discernible ties to any known branch of Phenexianism, or any other human religion for that matter. The known tenets of the Circle of Dust, including the name itself, are based on fragments of dogmatic tracts scavenged from the ashes of ominous private libraries burned by Magistrates ‘for the public good.’

The Children of the Jackal: One of the most famous (and smallest) of the Zindani free companies, the Children of the Jackal are named after the nom de guerre of their leader. The Jackal’s penchant for unorthodox tactics, savvy strategies, and the heavy use of jaegerpanzers has led the crew to innumerable victories. While it would be a stretch to describe the group as “honorable,” they have never sold out an employer while under contract. On the other hand, they have also been known to undertake elaborate

revenge schemes that take years to achieve in order to utterly ruin former employers who abused their contract or refused to pay their bill.

Dastbourg Antiquities: One of the foremost Loreardan interests in Il Zindan, Dastbourg Antiquities has been in the business of acquiring and exporting Thek artifacts for more the half a century. While no spokesperson for the business has ever made a statement regarding the purported “supernatural properties” of such artifacts, the company routinely purchases “storied” Thek objects for small fortunes. Classically, Dastbourg Antiquities has been one of the most frequent employers of Zindani mercenaries, especially when acting opposite their rivals, Fury-Baker Excavations. Lately, however, they have been using more and more “private security operatives” from Loreard, some of whom have been seen wearing the insignia of the Order of the Silver Torq.

Fury-Baker Excavations: Established more than a hundred years ago by a pair of legendary adventurer/academics, Fury-Baker Excavations has undertaken archaeological digs across the known face of Ayos. From the jungles of Um’Jhatla to the ice of Skvalgaard, the company has blithely gone about securing artifacts of interest or historical import and installing them in various museums. After a speedy relocation following an incident involving the remains of a former Emperor in Phong Tai, Fury-Baker established an apparently permanent base of operations in Il Zindan. The company routinely hires Zindani guides and mercenaries to aid them in their efforts in the Dead City, and in foiling similar endeavors by Dastbourg Antiquities.

Hallach Red Diesel: The largest and most prominent Zindani tanzolium concern, Hallach Red Diesel has faced strict (and, in some cases, vicious and bloody) opposition at every turn. Despite sabotage, instigated strikes, legal battles, and localized wars, the closely-held corporation has managed to create and maintain a network of mines, refineries, and fueling stations. Within the past decade, Halach Red Diesel has assembled and acquired significant infrastructure, and they are poised to become a significant competitor in a variety of intercontinental markets in the very near future. Their positioning has attracted considerable attention from competitors, and it seems likely that further “commercial actions” may be imminent.

The Silent Children: Before the fall, the Silent Children acted as bodyguards and agents for Thek nobility. Humans who swore fealty to the Queen were given the honorable title of “Silent Children”—accepted as members of the hive court who would never speak directly to their sovereign. Only a handful of the Silent Children survived the fall of the Thek, loathe as they were to turn their blades on those they had sworn to protect. Each year, a scant few initiates are inducted into the Silent Children, trading their lives in general society for the ritual masks, martial prowess, and esoteric knowledge of the order—binding themselves to the service of a dynasty already fallen to dust, ash, and madness.

The Temple of the Princess of Deepest Night: The Temple of the Princess of Deepest Night is a shrine carved into one of the walls of the great chasm of Il Zindan. While most other such sites were sacked or “explored” by looters and archaeologists long ago, the temple has remained occupied and under guard since the fall of the Thek. Though not connected to any major line of Thek mythology, adherents, especially the Silent Children, make a practice of regularly performing rites to call to the Princess of Deepest Night, a young Thek queen they believe disappeared into the abyss centuries or aeons ago. The acolytes of the temple and the Silent Children have defended the shrine many times against the forces of the Burning Sun.

National Dress

Civilian: Both the environmental extremes of the Zindani region and the alien sensibilities of the Thek have influenced fashion in New Kyfe. Those who call the City home favor comfortable, loose fitting suits and dresses of light materials such as cotton and linen. General purpose clothing tends to be solid black or white, though formal occasions see people wearing everything from blood red and saffron to bottle green and voltaic blue. Most everyone wears a hat or scarf of some kind, with wide brims popular for obvious reasons. Foreigners often try to retain their wardrobes as best they can, though they tend to find lighter-weight versions of their favorite pieces. Locals and foreigners alike tend to favor sturdy, though breathable boots suitable for managing the dust and grit left by sandstorms in the City streets.

Military: While Il Zindan has no formal military uniform (as it has no formal military), mercenaries and judges hailing from New Kyfe tend towards gear colored to match the mottled colors of the desert. Tans, reds, and browns, are all common, with jaegerpanzers most frequently painted in similarly colored camouflage patterns. The Silent Children most often wear loose black clothing and grimacing silver masks.

Iconography: The Zindani flag showcases the desert sun, a bifurcated field, khaki below and orange above, with a saffron semicircle rising from the dividing line. The Zindani roundel is a khaki field below and the rising saffron semicircle, surmounted by an orange semicircle, surmounted by a crimson semicircle.

Common First Names: Aiva, Almia, Chazkel, Cephus, Daniyal, Esther, Ibram, Mar, Matya, Rachael, Ruth, Samuel, Shaul, Sulomon, Tabthia, Tahn, Velvel, Yosef, Zacharya, Zarah

Common Surnames: Amir, Awwaad, Bazora, Benreuen, Dagan, Essa, Kamman, Shamon, Surat, Zur

International Relations

Alden:

Honestly? I do not think we shall need to worry about these vultures much longer. The other vultures will see to it. Until they do, though, remember to smile. They pay more when you smile, and they think you are simple.

—Araf Varroke, proprietor of the Three Palm Cafe, to one of the Youngest Children

As Il Zindan lacks for any sort of formal central government, it is difficult to state with certainty any kind of formal relationship between the two Cities. What is true, though, is that Alden is one of a number of powers that have taken an interest in the Thek ruins and artifacts that practically litter the area. Indeed, Il Zindan stands as something of a proxy battlefield between Alden and Loreard, with other Cities invested to lesser extents. Hiring local militias and tribes as soldiers and guides, Alden seeks to explore (and some would say plunder) the forgotten secrets of the Dwelling in Darkness while preventing all others from doing the same.

Elenzio:

They call us infidels and unbelievers, yet they hold the word of their Pontiff in the same hand as they hold their obedience to the will of Phenex. We shall offer them the same choices that we offer to all of the angel's children—the pain of service, or the pain of the flame.

—Unknown member of the Burning Sun

When the Thek went mad during the Great War, their armies devastated both Il Zindan and Elenzio. After Elenzio shook off the control of a vampire, the rebuilding began—and so did the blame for the insectile invasion. A Thek Queen had ruled Il Zindan, one that the Church had launched more than one crusade against over the centuries. Elenzio and the Church have consistently, volubly laid the blame for the Thek invasion at the feet of the Zindani people. Unlike many other Cities, Elenzio has neither the resources nor the desire to hire Zindani mercenaries to scavenge 'blasphemous' relics and artifacts from the Thek ruins. While Zindani petroleum and tanzolium sell as well in Elenzio as anywhere else—that is the extent of the 'polite' relations between the two Cities.

The Federated Cities:

They have stood with their boots on our necks for long enough. We have weathered their lies, their sabotage, their attacks. Let us stand up, out of the dust and the sand, together.

—Gurien Hallach, to an assembly of independent tanzolium derrick operators

Somewhat surprisingly, the Federated Cities are much less concerned with Zindani Thek artifacts and lost knowledge and much more concerned with the potential threat of Zindani tanzo. Thus far, the tanzolium fields and refineries of Waypoint have maintained a comfortable technological edge over their Zindani counterparts. With the advent of Hallach Red Diesel's most recent set of derricks, however, that edge is rapidly dwindling, and tanzo markets the world over are paying keen interest to the situation. Waypoint's tanzo sector is understandably worried about their newly invigorated competitor.

Loreard:

I know they have never been late paying an invoice—but sometimes, when you know something is wrong at the heart of it, all the gold in the world cannot gild it. Redirect that shipment to our contact in Zyebrinsk—I hear there may be some lost Children there.

—Rasa Daffeni, tanzolium factor

Loreard has long seen the benefits of unearthing and understanding the Thek ruins that lay lost beneath the sand and rock of Il Zindan. Only Alden and the Federated Cities are true rivals in this course of action, and each of the three Cities hire local or imported mercenaries to fight for choice archaeological sites. The Zindani themselves hire out to the highest bidder, using the proceeds to fund their own power struggles, as well as their nascent Red Diesel industry—a resource in competition to production in Alden or the F.C., but one which Loreard is only too happy to buy up.

Phong Tai:

I think they rely too much on their machines, but then—they do have some marvelous machines. Nothing so good as me, of course, but still...

—J.Faiz #227, automatic leader of the Mourning Hawks, Zindani free company

Phong Tai and Il Zindan enjoyed a lengthy period of trade and mutual benefit before the Great War and the fall of the Thek. To this day, Phong Tai nobility and scholars alike prize artifacts and knowledge from the Thek of Il Zindan, and in turn, the Zindani appreciate the industry and skill of Phong Tai artisans and factories. While the Way never found Il Zindan to be particularly fertile ground (the esoteric beliefs of the Thek far too central to life in the Dwelling in Darkness to allow for such alien ideologies), each of the two cultures finds much to honor in the other.

Skvalgaard:

They say that our family's resolve is drawn from our forebears in the Queen's Guard. That helps, I think, but perhaps the crucible of our City helps too.

—Magistrate Chazkel ben Noach

Though it would be easy to believe that Skvalgaard and Il Zindan have had almost nothing to do with one another, there are compelling accounts of interactions between the two cultures spanning many centuries. Zindani records, both financial and historical, indicate that a number of Skvaldic mercenaries found permanent work as soldiers in the Queen's Palace, forming an elite, segregated guard unit. In counterpoint, a Zindani scholar of considerable standing and renown spent more than a decade among the Skvals in their arctic home, even going so far as to accompany the Jaakarit on one of the most famous skapninger hunts of the sagas. Today, the two Cities are more or less estranged, though what interactions there are are cordial.

Volskograd:

Such a pity. Such a pity that ideals of equity and camaraderie led to such bloodshed and ruin. Then again—that is how the Queen left us, is it not?

—Lania Theruz, Mechanic

There have never been strong martial, cultural, or commercial ties between Volskograd and Il Zindan. Perhaps it is that very distance, the enormous geographic and social removal, which made Il Zindan such an alluring destination for many during the Winter Revolution. A small but significant number of Volskagradians found common cause with the philosophy of the revolutionaries—but not with their methods. Unwilling to back the Tzarists, but wanting nothing to do with the purges they knew would come after the end of the war, such individuals packed their belongings and fled as far as they were able—all the way to the City in the Sands.

Xian Dao:

If I could live anywhere in the world, I would not live in Xian Dao. But if I had to live somewhere that is not here, I could do much worse, I think.

—Captain Ari Machim, of the mercantile airship Windslip

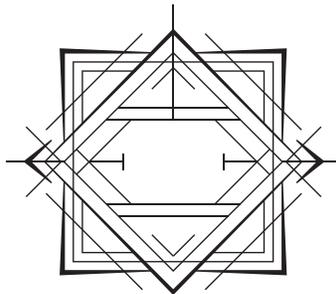
Though separated by wide gulfs of both geography and culture, Xian Dao and Il Zindan have surprisingly strong commercial ties. As the Zindani struggle to throw off the various controls and interests of foreign Cities, they have found that red diesel—their chief export aside from irreplaceable Thek artifacts—can be the subject of bitter trade disputers. Between Xian Dao’s considerable domestic demand and its access to all manner of markets, the Zindani are only too willing to work together towards profitable distribution of their product. The parallel struggles for self-determination in the midst of oppressive foreign interference doesn’t hurt their Civic relationship, either.

Zyebrinsk:

Can you imagine what it must be like to be in prison from the day you are born to the day you are told you must die? Some say life in the hive was like that—but the hive was family, was you, just as you are you. Theirs is soulless mockery of such oneness.

—Beletha Tifin, professional guide

While the Zindani feel some sense of kinship with Volskagradian political ideals, Zyebrinsk is seen as an embodiment of everything that can go wrong when collectivist goals face the unbridled power of human ambition. A fair number of Volskagradians relocated to Il Zindan in the wake of the Winter Revolution, and more came when the situation of Zyebrinsk became clear. The Zindani awareness of Zyebrinsk is far more informed than most, and a remarkable number of smuggling operations occur between the two Cities, with contraband flowing into Volskograd’s “sibling City” and people coming out.



Zyebrinsk

The people of Zyebrinsk are much like their City—cold, grey, and grim. Ceaseless plumes of ash from the City’s manufactories combine with frequent snow falls to blanket everything in a sooty, staining muck. Touted abroad as “Volskagrad’s Sister City,” it is an open secret that Zyebrinsk is little more than a penal colony of monstrous size. Regardless of species or origin, the population of Zyebrinsk can be neatly divided into two categories—those who are free to leave, and those who are not. For some, a tour of duty in Zyebrinsk is a means to career or political advancement. For most, though, existence is nothing more than a grimy repetition of days spent paying off a crushing debt to the State—real, imagined, or inherited.

Society: Zyebrinskis are survivors. No matter who or what they are when they arrive, anyone who remains standing at the end of their first day in Zyebrinsk has weathered some of the worst City life has to offer. Entire districts of Zyebrinsk are nothing but giant cell blocks, and the sections of the City touted as “free” are stricken by poverty and crime. In the Blocks, mealtimes, rest periods, work details—all are dictated by routines created by V.P.C.P. psychologists, and those patterns insinuate themselves into the lives of all Zyebrinskis. From certain points of view, Zyebrinsk is nothing but a gargantuan machine with sentient individuals serving as belts and pistons. And, as with any machine, broken parts are removed and discarded—the mortality rate in the City is appalling. Just under half of the population was born in the City, with the vast majority of “residents” being made up of Volskagradian political dissidents, outcasts, and impoverished criminals. Zyebrinskis are divided into two categories: Nizkiy, “residents,” those with no papers to allow for their passage out of the City—prisoners, the children of prisoners, or those technically free but with no means to leave—and Vsokiy, who rule and run Zyebrinsk, those who can leave whenever they like. While the two castes almost never officially mingle, for the right price, meetings can be arranged in either direction. The forces of Volskagrad tend to take the path of least expense when it comes to managing Zyebrinsk, and they do not care if it is cheaper to use bullets or silver so long as the machine works as they want it to.

Populace: The majority of the 2 million residents of Zyebrinsk are human. There are vanishingly few Blooded in Zyebrinsk, and almost all of them are interred in the Experimental Infirmaries as maintenance staff and test subjects. Similarly, there are very few individuated automata. Automata are generally considered too valuable to deploy or confine in Zyebrinsk, where unwitting drones can be lured into blind alleys and quickly stripped for parts. While there are no Zyebrinski H.A.V.O.C.s per se, there quite a few Volskagradian super-soldiers stationed or imprisoned in the City, causing commensurate issues and benefits for staff. Likewise, there are a number of Slabs in the City. While hardly any of them were Zyebrinski while alive, a number of Slabs have reported feeling a “pull” or “calling” drawing them to the place. Last, though certainly not least, no one has any idea how many Homunculi make their homes in the myriad abyssal tunnels and access shafts that run throughout the City—but it would be safe to say that there may well be more Homunculi in Zyebrinsk than in any other City on Ayos.

Government: While ostensibly an independent City, Zyebrinsk is very much controlled by Volskagrad. The end result is a three-way split in power between the Warden, the Secretary’s Representative, and the Vors—the criminal warlords of the City’s underworld.

The Warden: Traditionally a native Zyebrinski for political reasons, the Warden and their staff are responsible for the general operation of the City, as well as the oversight of the People's Correction and Rehabilitation Program—the cell blocks and related infrastructure that take up entire districts of Zyebrinsk. The Warden has command of the local military and police resources, and will occasionally use mercenary forces to bolster their ranks. While the Warden can request the aid of Volskagradian units, doing so is considered a tremendous loss of face. On paper, Warden Evsei Oniani is the highest ranking person in the City.

The Secretary's Representative: Despite what official documentation may say regarding rank, however, it is broadly understood that the Secretary's Representative, an agent acting under the direct guidance and authority of the General Secretary Valenov of the V.P.C.P., is the true power in Zyebrinsk. Alternately providing "suggestions" to the Warden and remaining silent when asked to consult on important matters, the Secretary's Representative seems willing to offer aid when doing so is good for the V.P.C.P., and is otherwise content to let the Warden twist in the wind.

The Vorovskoy Mir: Literally the "Thieves' World," the Vorovskoy Mir is something akin to other Cities' black markets and organized criminal elements. The Vorovskoy Mir is controlled by the Vors, or "Crowns," sentients who are ruthless and powerful enough to command the respect and obedience of many other criminals. New Vors are appointed by general consensus of existing Vors. Under the leadership of Agron Kalashov, the Vors exert a tremendous amount of clout in and control over Zyebrinsk, despite one of the most strident fixtures in their code of conduct: Do not, under any circumstance, help anyone serving the V.P.C.P. Whereas most Cities see collusion and corruption between organized crime and the official government, Zyebrinsk exists in a state of perpetual, simmering struggle between the two factions.

The Present Day: Living conditions for the Nizkiy in Zyebrinsk are deplorable. While the Warden and the ranking political officers live a life almost indistinguishable from the elite of Volskograd, the average resident of Zyebrinsk (whether a prisoner or otherwise) lives in abject poverty and squalor. Starvation is a serious concern, as are depredations by prisoners and guards. Warmth is another major issue—as there are no nearby trees or other burnable plants, residents do what they can to secure coal, tanzolium, or other flammable materials to heat their homes. The fumes, soot, and smoke from these strategies contribute to the impenetrable, frigid smog that envelops the City. Tenements that share walls with public works like steam tunnels are considered incredibly valuable.

These conditions have frequently led to rioting. Strikes have proven entirely inadvisable, with participants being rounded up and summarily executed by the Warden's forces. Rioting, however, is somewhat more difficult for the authorities to suppress, and many who participate in such societal conflagrations are never apprehended or identified. Impromptu (and, occasionally, choreographed) uprisings have swept through entire districts. The governmental reaction to the riots is eminently predictable: soldiers, often supplemented by mercenaries, are ordered to put an end to the situations by any means necessary. The brutality of the restoration of order further enflames the Nizkiy, and drives many to join the Vorovskoy Mir. The cycle is then perpetuated by the arrival of new prison transports from Volskograd, and the prisoners who have served out their terms being granted their "freedom" (though not their travel papers).

Beneath all of this, three forces appear to be at work.

Volskagrad itself seems more than willing to let the population of Zyebrinsk die a slow, lingering death so long as the tanzolium mines produce to quota. If Enemies of the People perish in the process and the feeding costs of the City are reduced—that is no great loss.

Then there is the Vorovskoy Mir, working at every turn to thwart both City governments (for entirely selfish reasons). The Vors seek to line their own pockets, and a well orchestrated riot can be quite profitable indeed.

Lastly, while largely unnoticed, Zyebrinsk's Homunculi seem to be much more numerous, and somewhat more coordinated, than in any other City. Whispered rumors blame the Homunculi for all manner of strange occurrences.

Locations of Note

The Myrnie Tanzolium Mine: A gaping pit the size of an entire district, the Myrnie Tanzolium Mine is one of the largest tanzolium production facilities in Zyebrinsk, Volskagrad, or anywhere else in the world, for that matter. In fact, many historians cite the discovery of the Myrnie tanzo vein as the single most important factor in Volskagrad's establishment of Zyebrinsk as a City at all, rather than as a simple mining complex. Despite the prodigious scope of the mining operation visible from the surface, the vast majority of the mine is a truly massive network of branching tunnels and passages deep underground—the deepest tunnel on public record is almost two and a half miles beneath the streets of Zyebrinsk. As with all mining operations, the work is incredibly dangerous—between cave ins, toxic fumes, and vicious subterranean horrors, the mortality rate among mining crews is truly staggering (Zyebrinskis view assignment to a mining detail as tantamount to a death sentence, and for good reason.). It is little wonder that the Myrnie complex has one of the highest rates of rebellion in the City, with a matching level of military presence.

The People's Armory: A titanic structure of cold stone, reinforced concrete, steel sheeting, and armored hatchways, the People's Armory is the political and military heart of Zyebrinsk. Though countless Zyebrinski conscripts serve in the Armory as soldiers, countless others serve as clerks, typists, and bookkeepers—petty cogs in the great bureaucratic machine. True to its name, the Armory contains vast stores of weapons and equipment. From small arms to field artillery pieces, from jaegerpanzers to gyrocopters, the People's Armory holds enough materiel to outfit an entire army should the need arise. Just as important for the City's daily operations, though, the Armory contains vast halls of records and document storage. Given how valuable papers are in Zyebrinsk (slips of paper are frequently matters of life and death, allowing for everything from travel to access to food to determination of work detail), it is little wonder that mountains of the things are kept in the most secure facility in the City. Such an arrangement carries with it its own complications of course, and a frequent (and entirely believable) plot device in Zyebrinski literature are the many and tragic repercussions of a clerk misfiling a single document in the Armory.

The Plants: The Plants of Zyebrinsk are wretched, dangerous places. Whereas such work in Volskagrad has at least the veneer of "honest labor" and "working for the common good," the prisoners and Nizkiy

of Zyebrinsk have no such illusions about their lots in life. Shifts are very long and quotas are brutally high. Failure to meet quota can result in a punishment as lenient as a beating or food voucher withholding, though decimation among prison shifts thought to be shirking is a common practice. The Vorovskoy Mir have a firm grip on a number of the Plants, skimming from both the receiving and the production ends of the operational equations. Vorsk with enough clout and subordinates often use their positions to ensure that rivals' facilities do not meet quota, or have deadly "accidents" on their production lines. It should be noted, though, that even workers who manage to steer clear of industrial sabotage, organized crime, and official sanctions still lead much shorter lives than workers in other Cities—little or no consideration is given to environmental safety in the Plants, and chemical exposures are frequent, with debilitating long term effects.

The Work Blocks: The Zyebrinski Work Blocks are vicious, feral places. Though they come in a variety of shapes and sizes—tenements of concrete with bars in place of windows and doors, walled compounds with rude shelters of corrugated metal, or warrens of oversized pipes with mattresses and blankets strewn about—Work Blocks all basically operate along the same lines: the Warden's forces ostensibly keep prisoners from leaving the Work Blocks during Rest Periods, escort the prisoners to and from their work details during Work Periods, deliver pallets of food and supplies to be distributed among the prisoners as the prisoners see fit, and occasionally take census of the prisoners within a given block. This system allows for a degree of self-government by the inmates (augmented with the judicious use of bribery), though it also obviously lends itself quite well to the Vorovskoy Mir. Curiously, as punishments for missing quotas are sometimes meted out to entire Work Blocks rather than individuals, distribution of the delivered goods, while hardly equitable, is more widespread than may at first be thought—even the lowest "ranking" member of the Block must be kept well enough to contribute to the work detail.

Groups and Institutions of Interest

The Coven of the Open Eye: Despite the walls, security forces, and rampant bureaucracy of Zyebrinsk, no one is quite certain when or how the Coven of the Open Eye first appeared in the City. Some say that the Coven predates the City entirely, that all of Zyebrinsk sprang up around a hut raised above the snows by rickety, leg-like stilts, inhabited by the oldest member of the Coven. Others say that the Coven arose out of a group of weirdly gifted inmates, each of whom independently predicted the appearance of a bleak and foreboding comet in the sky. Whatever their origin, today the diligent and the desperate can sometimes find members of the Coven wandering the backrooms and twisted alleyways of Zyebrinsk, disturbingly regal in their tattered black raiment and strange golden masks.

The Gore Hounds: Perhaps the most infamous of the Zyebrinski mercenary troops, the Gore Hounds are known as much for their methodical cruelty as for their effectiveness. Though the Warden's office does not turn to the Gore Hounds as often as it does to some other outfits (largely to save on the cost of repairing the inevitable collateral damage), when an entire district erupts in riots, or when inmates gain control of military hardware such as jaegerpanzers or aircraft, the Warden does not hesitate to unleash the Gore Hounds upon the rebellious section of the City.

Hospital 14: Hospital 14 is one of the better known government-run healthcare facilities in Zyebrinsk. A stark, grey building with small barred windows and armored doors that could (and did) withstand a siege, from the outside Hospital 14 seems to be divided into two main wings—the Citizen’s Wing, where unincarcerated Nizkiy are treated, and the Resident’s Wing, where prisoners are treated. Few, if any, civilians realize that the Resident’s Wing connects to a subterranean third wing, as the third wing does not appear on any map of the city. Similarly, no civilian has any inkling of the experiments that are conducted in that terrible place.

The People’s University of Zyebrinsk: While routinely derided by the faculty of universities from other Cities (especially the People’s University of Volskograd), the People’s University of Zyebrinsk carries on with its pursuits as best it can. While the University is woefully lacking in equipment and funding, it nevertheless opens its doors to all free Nizkiy who can pass the entrance examinations. Though the school cannot provide its students and faculty with much in the way of laboratory materials or other such physical resources, the school has remarkably robust literary and mathematics programs—some of the sharpest “Volskagradian” minds are, in fact, Zyebrinski.

The Truth: In perhaps the largest scale act of ongoing rebellion in Zyebrinsk, despite countless raids by the Warden’s forces and undercover “sting” operations, certain parties continue to produce a newspaper entirely independent of the Volskagradian Ministry of History, Information, and Education. Offering context or contradiction to government publications, the underground paper frequently features articles and stories regarding political figures, military operations, and important trials. In sharp contrast to the M.H.I.E.’s publication “The News,” the Zyebrinski paper is simply titled “The Truth.” This juxtaposition is widely considered to be a prime example of both Volskagradian and Zyebrinski humor.

The Unspoken: Deep beneath the streets of Zyebrinsk, in the tunnels, sewers, and caverns that riddle the ground between unused basements, abandoned mineshafts, and industrial drainage canals, live the Unspoken. The single most numerous and best organized group of Homunculi on Ayos, the Unspoken travel through the underbelly of Zyebrinsk unimpeded by the walls and soldiers of the surface world. When Zyebrinski Homunculi are spotted above ground, they tend to move quickly and furtively, often carrying away mechanical rubbish or barrels of spent chemicals. It is entirely unclear what, if anything, the greater purpose of these scavenging parties may be—once they reach an entrance to their subterranean sanctuary, they effectively disappear, and thus far no one in power has seen fit to investigate the matter.

Work Block 32: Work Block 32 is widely regarded as a “model” Work Block by the powers that be. The corrugated metal buildings have been reinforced and insulated by the inmates through ingenuity and hard work, and supplies are shared out among inmates equitably. Lenient corrections officers often assign political criminals and rogue intelligentsia to Work Block 32, while steering more violent prisoners elsewhere. Sometimes there is a mistake, and a truly vicious criminal winds up in 32—but such criminals suffer an alarming number “accidents” during Work Periods. Despite such relatively benign appearances, the resentment of the Volskagradian political machine runs deep and bitter in the inmates of Work Block 32, and there are whispers of closely held plans—not of rebellion, but of revolution.

Work Block 47: Home to the most violent offenders and the most twisted and dangerous criminals, a transfer to Work Block 47 is often used as a threat against prisoners that the powers that be believe to be actually capable of conformity to the Collectivist Party ideals. It is said that Agron Kalashov earned his rank as a Vor in Work Block 47, and that the founder of the Gore Hounds came up in a similar fashion. New transfers to the Block quickly find themselves integrated into the Vorovskoy Mir—or else quickly find themselves to be a corpse. While cooperation with the authorities is discouraged at best, obedience and loyalty to the Vorovskoy Mir is both demanded and enforced.

National Dress

Civilian: The clothing of Zyebrinskis is dependent on their status in society—prisoners are given a uniform upon their committal, a baggy, wide-striped affair in grey and a subdued color such as navy, hunter green, or maroon. Free Nizkiy dress almost indistinguishably from Volskagradian factory workers, though Zyebrinski clothing is universally much worse for wear. Hats (often with ear flaps and fur lining) and headscarves are very common. Most everyone, Plant Workers and clerical workers alike, wears grey or black dungarees and matching jackets, often with slouch caps. The two exceptions to this rule are doctors, who wear white laboratory and surgical coats, and the (exceptionally rare) people of wealth, who dress in furs and brightly colored formal attire. Such individuals are generally criminals of one kind or another, and showcase their status through their ensembles.

Military: Zyebrinski military personnel are technically part of the Volskagradian military, and as such they dress accordingly: forces of the line are kitted out pragmatically (if somewhat provincially), while forces acting as honor guards or in parades are far more carefully armed and attired. Zyebrinski military forces' uniforms, drones, and jaegerpanzers are generally brown with red highlights, though there are unit variations.

Iconography: Zyebrinsk shares the national symbols of Volskograd—the beasts of winter. The wolf and the bear are both common components of governmental coats of arms, while tools and weapons are frequently used in insignia. The flag of Zyebrinsk is a black field bordered on the top, bottom, and right with a grey line, two grey chevrons centered, nested, pointing to the left. The military roundel of Zyebrinsk is a black field with a grey border, two centered grey chevrons pointing down.

Common First Names: Alyona, Anna, Anton, Boris, Dmitri, Ivan, Konstantin, Mikhail, Nadezhda, Oleksandra, Opreledeniye, Pyotr, Sasha, Sofia, Taciana, Vera, Viktor, Vilior, Yekaterina, Yuliya

Common Surnames: Barricade, Blok, Chesnokov, Drugov, Galvinochesky, Markov, Medvedev, Ramazanov, Vanzin, Yakubov

International Relations

Alden:

It is amazing such a soft people have trammed so many places beneath their boots. Now that their fangs have quite literally been pulled, we shall see how long that situation lasts.

–Nely Delisovna, Vor, Work Block 55

A satellite City of Volskograd, Zyebrinsk is often regarded as either a glorified garrison or an oppressed slave state. While the City shares a great deal with Volskograd (including weather, political systems, and what both Cities assure the rest of the world is “humor,”), it is given noticeably short shrift by its parent state, receiving little in exchange for steep tithes. Some elements in Zyebrinsk have begun a tentative “turn towards the West,” trading with foreign merchants to alleviate widespread shortages of food, technology, and materiel. Such activities have brought the calamitous specter of Volskogradian wrath down on the City—but also promises of further support and aid from the West.

Elenzio:

Can you imagine, Luka? Books, so many that shelves made of wood bow under their weight. So much knowledge! Art and science just there for the taking! And also, alas, the Pontiff. Decisions, decisions.

–Professor Kondrati Makar to a friend, whilst drinking

While Zyebrinsk and Elenzio have a great many differences, they have this much in common: both have vast populations of indigent, desperate people. While the poor of Elenzio can see the ostentatious consumption of the Patricians and the ceremonial grandeur of the Church of Phenex, the poor of Zyebrinsk are much more removed from the political elite in Volskograd who dictate so much of their lives. Nonetheless, there is in each population a subtle but strong and brewing sense of resentment. Some political factions in both Cities, including Elenzio’s S.C.P. and the Zyebrinski Mason’s Cooperative, regularly exchange tracts and advice and, on somewhat rare occasions, agents and materiel.

The Federated Cities:

Yes, the philosophical hypocrisy and moral rot of the Federated Cities will undoubtedly lead to the exploitation of the masses—but a ‘bot can Dream like anyone else, and I want to be in pictures.

–Drone 459-962-A2G4, convicted of 47 counts of murder in Volskograd, on their desire to become an actor in Waypoint

The vast majority of anti-Collectivist posters and news articles focus not on Volskograd itself, but rather on Zyebrinsk. While it is true that a number of Union members in the F.C. are Collectivists, it is also true that many

more are Commercialists who simply want a “fair shake.” That latter group sympathizes with the plight of the people of Zyebrinsk—the political impotence, the deplorable working conditions—but they tend to view the whole situation as the inevitable conclusion to collectivism. The people of Zyebrinsk, meanwhile, are starkly divided. Many view the F.C. as a decadent dystopia, while others hold it up as a land of infinite opportunity.

Loreard:

There is a difference?

—Ernet Vili, convicted counter-revolutionary, at a parole hearing, when asked to explain the differences between collectivism and authoritarianism

While members of the Eienstadt Party consider Zyebrinsk to be nothing more or less than the inevitable result of the inherent flaws of collectivism, the Defiance, and more specifically the Red Stocking Society, see another group of people betrayed and abused by the City that should be working with them to create better lives for all. While neither the Defiance nor the rebellious elements of Zyebrinsk are in any position to help each other in any large-scale manner, on those rare occasions when members of each meet, each finds commiseration and sympathy in the other, if not total agreement on solutions.

Phong Tai:

I have never met a human from Phong Tai, but their automatic merchants are both discrete, generous, and unscrupulous. Where do you think your coat came from?

—Marfa Svyatof, Customs Worker, to their spouse

Given how cagey Phong Tai and Volskagrad are towards one another, it would be reasonable to assume that Phong Tai has very little to do with Zyebrinsk. The truth, though, is quite the opposite. Zyebrinsk offers merchants, information brokers, and clandestine operatives from both Cities a locale sufficiently removed from Volskagrad so as to provide an air of plausible deniability much sought after in such circles. Both Volskagrad and Phong Tai periodically find it politically expedient to “crack down” on imports or agents from the other City—especially when they know they can simply relocate their transactions to Zyebrinsk and carry on with whatever illicit business they may wish to undertake.

Skvalgaard:

They say it can be just as cold there as it is here. I do not believe them.

—Zykova Raya, Plant worker

If one needed an explanation for the Skvals’ collective resistance to Volskagradian territorial claims, one need look no further than Zyebrinsk. While the average “citizen” of Zyebrinsk is in no position (fiscally or legally) to purchase imported goods of any kind, enterprising Skvaldic captains with questionable cargos sometimes call at the port nonetheless. The tales such captains tell—of exorbitant taxes, confiscated cargos, and crew members detained or disappeared entirely, nevermind the general conditions of life in the City—make such

a prospect almost entirely unappealing. Needs must, however, and on rare occasions a desperate and bold Skvaldic captain may be able to craft a lucrative, if entirely illegal, deal with one of the port officers of Zyebrinsk.

Volskograd:

They are killers and thieves, hypocrites and lunatics. I despise them all, and would see that City burn around them—and yet I would give my eye teeth to go back.

—Ruchkin Gerasmi, Plant worker (formerly Professor of Antiquities,
the People’s University of Volskograd)

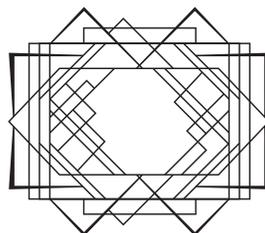
Volskograd created Zyebrinsk. Whether as a true expansion of the City, as a method of resource collection, or as a penal colony for political dissidents and undesirables makes no real difference. Neither Volskograd nor Zyebrinsk has any illusions on the subject. While some Volskagradians view a tour of duty in Zyebrinsk as a way to advance their military or political career, there is no denying the added risks that come with such potential rewards. Only the most desperate of civilians voluntarily visit Zyebrinsk for any reason—it is all too easy for guards to ‘misplace papers’ and prevent their return to Volskograd until the traveler is able to find ‘gifts’ for the border officers.

Xian Dao:

Do not worry, Vera. Should anyone try to take Zyebrinsk like Alden took Xian Dao, you will have more than enough to do. I promise.

—Kapitan Dobronakov Hale, H.A.V.O.C., member of the Gore Hounds,
to their heavy assault rifle

The relationship between Xian Dao and Zyebrinsk is strange to say the least. All official channels of communication between the two Cities are entirely controlled by other Cities—it is as though two cagey puppeteers talk to each other through their dolls, only speaking directly to one another when absolutely necessary. Unofficially, of course, the situation is quite different. Smugglers from Xian Dao and Zyebrinsk often run into one another in ports all over Ayos. Such meetings can lead to anything from cordial trade agreements and exchanged tips on navigation to gang fights and blood feuds—a state of affairs likely to continue until Xian Dao and Zyebrinsk can have meaningful, independent discourse.



Il Zindan:

Wait, wait, wait—you are telling me they can cook eggs by cracking them onto the street? It cannot possibly be that hot. And they cannot possibly have that many eggs. How much will it cost to get me there?

—Zinon Luchak, free Nizkiy

While the Zindani feel some sense of kinship with Volskagradian political ideals, Zyebrinsk is seen as an embodiment of everything that can go wrong when collectivist goals face the unbridled power of human ambition. A fair number of Volskagradians relocated to Il Zindan in the wake of the Winter Revolution, and more came when the situation of Zyebrinsk became clear. The Zindani awareness of Zyebrinsk is far more informed than most, and a remarkable number of smuggling operations occur between the two Cities, with contraband flowing into Volskagrad's "Sister City" and people coming out.

