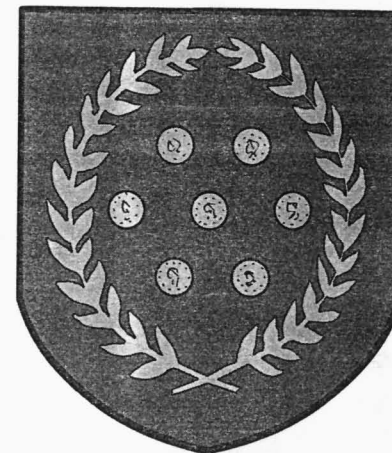


Vodacce

The Spider's Web



"Virtue and power rarely walk hand-in-hand."

– Cristoforo Scarovese

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Writing
Ree Soesbee**Additional Writing**Loren Dean
Kevin Wilson
Rob Vaux
Ray Yand**Editing**D.J. Trindle
Rob Vaux**Art Direction**

jim pinto

Cover Design

Brendon Goodyear

Cover Art

Terese Nielsen

Interior Art**Two-Page Spread**
Dærick Gröss Sr.**Full-Page Titles**
Dærick W. Gröss**Chapter Two Who's Who Art & Maps**
Cris Dornaus**Other Interiors**Cris Dornaus
Dærick Gröss Sr.
Dærick W. Gröss
A. Bleys Ingram**Graphic Design and Layout**Brendon Goodyear
Steve Hough**Line Developer**

Rob Vaux

7th Sea Created by

John Wick & Jennifer Wick and Kevin Wilson

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Joseph Moon — For the white roses, and for San Francisco. 3+3+3+1, and counting.**Dedication**

It would be rude of me to dedicate this book to anyone I thought deserved it, (being a book on manipulation and deceit, after all). So, instead, I'd like to thank Shakespeare's Richard III, without whom our modern thoughts of politics and monstrosities would be a too-pale shadow of true night.

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blood and pain. A sharp scream howled in her ears, and Giuseppe's face distorted in her vision. Lucrezia shrieked, feeling her very soul torn as Sofane's threads pierced her heart and stole her mind.

"Die, whore," Sofane murmured, but the sound was like thunder in Lucrezia's ears. Somehow, Lucrezia's vision blurred, and she could see long strands of cord stretching from Sofane's hands, reaching through her own body and into infinity. "With all your learning," Sofane snarled, her yellowed teeth baring, "all your imagination and reason, you are still nothing more than a peasant brat. What are your skills? They are nothing, compared to this." Her withered face snarled into a darkly wrinkled mass, veined hands grasping at air which suddenly became solid. The old hag began to pull her hands apart, and Lucrezia could see a thick mist gathering between Sofane's leathery fingers. The world spun, and pain lanced through Lucrezia's arms and legs, twisting her into a ball of anguish. She fought to regain her feet, calling Giuseppe's name, but her vision turned black with the anguish of her fate slowly being destroyed.

Then, somewhere beyond vision, beyond knowledge and understanding, a thread broke. Lucrezia felt something beneath her grasping hand, and she pulled with all her might. For a moment, Lucrezia thought that she had grasped someone's velvet belt cord. Then, as she tried to pull herself to her feet, it began to spin and unravel in her hand.

The deep, inky blackness of the strand meant nothing to her, and her anguish only drove her shattered mind farther toward hatred and murder. Lucrezia gripped it with all her power and pulled. Ignoring the pain, ignoring the screams around her, she struggled to make the strand bear her weight. She would stand — she would face her death on her feet, and show Giuseppe that her love was true. Finally, the strand snapped in her hand, lashing back across her face and neck. Though the pain before had been intense, the feeling of the snapped strand tearing through her flesh drove her back from the brink of unconsciousness. She was on her knees in the gardens of the Lucani palace, surrounded by guards and guests, their faces white with shock and revulsion.

Raising her torn hands to her face, Lucrezia felt blood trickling down from her throat. "Theus..." she whispered, and looked down at the ground before her. Sofane's corpse, torn by a thousand lashes, bled darkly into the white flowers. The blood stained Lucrezia's white silk skirt.

"Blasphemer..."

"...Courtesan, using Sorte..."

"She'll be burned at the stake... call the Weavers. The Fate Witches will have questions..."

The faces that had been so admiring stared down at her in fury and repulsion. Powerful hands clutched at her arms, lifting her from the murdered Fate Witch's body. Lucrezia screamed in anguish, reaching out to Giuseppe with bloody hands, her eyes full of fear. The Vestini soldiers gripped her shoulders, dragging her to her feet cruelly. "Giuseppe!" she screamed, terrified and desperate.

"Wait," he said, stepping toward her, and the guards paused.

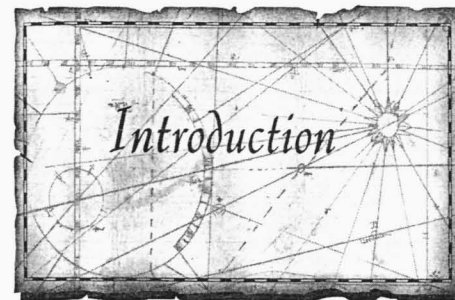
"Giuseppe... please... I don't understand what happened..." A sharp blow across her cheek stopped her, and Lucrezia collapsed, hanging from the clutches of the Vodacce guards.

"Shut up, woman," Giuseppe's voice was hard, uncompromising. No trace of tenderness remained. Despairing, she stared into his cold green eyes. "You are a heretic, a renegade, and a murderer." He grasped the locket at her throat and tore it from her neck, the diamonds and pearls scattering across the floor at their feet.

"No, Giuseppe. I love you..." Frightened and confused, Lucrezia stared up into her lover's face, hoping for any sign of tenderness or forgiveness. Breaking away from the guards, the courtesan gripped him and pressed a desperate kiss to his unresponsive lips. "I will always love you."

Stepping back, he shoved her roughly into the arms of the guards. Throwing the locket to the dogs, Giuseppe stared into Lucrezia's dark brown eyes.

"You will be burned."



a trio of new Swordsman Schools. Finally, **Cunning** provides a set of essays on playing Vodacce characters, as well as some GM's secrets and new monsters native to the country. It also includes an appendix containing three ready-to-play character templates and a pair of maps detailing the infamous island-city of Giovanni Villanova.

Vodacce brims with treachery, but also with passion and pride. Nowhere else does Destiny's hand move so clearly, and danger here is just another word for opportunity. Take a walk through the vipers' pit and see what marvels bloom within. The Great Game waits just beyond these pages, rewarding the brave and punishing the foolish in equal amounts.

Watch your step.

Mention Vodacce to any Théan and the name conjures up images of twisted politics, fierce honor, and decadent merchants. Few nations are as distrusted as Vodacce and yet her people are welcomed with open arms. Her cities are marvels of architecture, her art rivals that of Montaigne, and her Heroes know the true value of friendship. The Vodacce Merchant Princes scheme endlessly with each other even as their people continue to prosper, and the most powerful citizens in the nation are among the most oppressed. Vodacce is a land with two faces: both beautiful and both deadly.

The Vodacce people learned long ago that prosperity comes at a cost. They play their dark games and spin their byzantine plots, yet they haven't forgotten their faith or the meaning of honor. They embrace their darker side but never let it blind them to the light. Heroism has always had a home here, and it grows all the stronger for the villainy which surrounds it. More than any other country, Vodacce sees the world for what it truly is... and they haven't let it break them.

This book is divided into four chapters. It begins with **Vodacce**, a look at the history, territory, and culture of this ancient land. **Hero** covers Vodacce's most important people, including the seven Merchant Princes and those closest to them. **Drama** introduces some new rules for Vodacce Heroes, included expanded Sorte mechanics and



glowing eyes, deliberately designed to contrast with the thick black veils of the Fate Witches at the party. It covered her face — barely — and drew attention to her dark lashes and black-brown eyes. "If a man's wife does not please him, then it is our job to do so. And that includes educating her in the truth about her husband's desires. Like all Witches, her heart is as cold as her bed."

More laughter, and several courtesans clustered to Lucrezia's side. In just three years, she had become the center of Guarre de Portofino's elegant circle, the rising star of the Lucani provinces. She took well to education, and her natural beauty was only enhanced by the courtesan's life. Though she belonged to no man, her wit and charisma drew many suitors. She had become a game to the nobles of the court — the courtesan who refused to be wooed and won. Though many of them stood at her side for an evening of dancing or pleasure, she turned them all away in the end, allowing none to claim her for his own. Her tutors despaired of selling her contracts, but the ruse worked. Lucrezia was the most sought-after courtesan in Portofino, and her fame had already begun to spread beyond the Lucani provinces.

She received the finest patrons, and her wit was unquestioned in the city. Those who loved her showered her with riches, but Lucrezia turned her head away from all of them. It seemed no man pleased her for long, yet her long list of admirers never seemed to fade.

"I will return — after I seduce her husband. Let us see if she has learned anything at all from my labors." Lucrezia smiled. "If she has not, then I'll come away with another expensive gift from the doddering old fool, and another invitation to the Lucani palace at Gallegos."

Chattering happily, the courtesans slowly dispersed, striking out toward their patrons with open arms and sharp ears. Laughter like delicate bells echoed along the highly arched walkways of the garden. Spying her prize, Lucrezia set her skirts in place, straightening her bodice and adjusting her veil.

"Your pardon," a baritone behind her murmured, and Lucrezia felt warm breath in her hair. She did not turn, but paused to tilt her head and smell the scent of his breath,

allowing the daring young man a peep at her décolletage. "I do not wish to disturb you, but I wanted you to know how dearly I have missed you," the baritone continued.

"I do not believe I know you, sir," she smiled, and the other courtesans flowed politely around them, aware that the Great Game was being played once more. "Have we met?" Turning to look up at him through her silvery veil, Lucrezia was at once struck by his beauty. Long dark locks flowed past his shoulders, and stunning green eyes seized hers in a predator's gaze.

"Of course not, *ma belle fiore*. And that is why I have missed you — but by Theus, I do not know how I could have." He raised her hand to press a kiss upon her knuckles. "I shall never miss you again."

"Sir, you are forward," she laughed, rising to the challenge.

"No, my flower. In fact, I am far too late. Too much time has already passed without you in my arms; time that I wasted without your presence. But all of that shall change," he said, sweeping her onto the dance floor. "Tonight."



Two years later.

"I love you, Giuseppe," Lucrezia wept, pressing her head to his chest.

"And I love you, *belle fiore*." He kissed away her tears, wiping the thick dark cloud of hair from her face. "But I have no money to purchase your contract."

"Your wife has money. Convince her."

Giuseppe Vestini sighed, raising her chin in his strong hand. "My wife's money is her father's money. I have none. There is nothing more I can offer you, save this." He withdrew a small box from his cloak and pressed it into her hand. "Wear it tonight at the ball. I will see it, and know that you are still mine."

"I will always be yours." She fell to her knees, pressing her head to his waistcoat.

"And I will always be with you, little one. Somehow. Someday, I will come for you." He held her for a moment longer, pressing a kiss to her dark locks, then moved away. "I swear it," he murmured hoarsely, his face a mask of pain. After one last long look, he stepped into the darkness of the city street.

His wife would be waiting.

Lucrezia opened her hand, nearly blinded by the tears. Within a small red velvet box hung a magnificent necklace. It was white, and shone in the faint light of the hallway with a brilliant flame. The delicate locket hung down from the silver chain, its ornate surface bearing the faint initials L and G in diamonds and pearls.

"I will never remove it," she swore. Standing, she drew her thick cloak about her, straightening the courtesan's mask that decorated her pale features. Upstairs in the house, she could hear other courtesans rushing about to dress, calling to their maids and bickering over dressing gowns and petticoats. Lucrezia clutched the necklace tightly, then placed it around her neck.



A tight bodice of purest white satin clung to her body like a wedding gown, and Lucrezia's dark hair hung down past her shoulders in ringlets and waves, silvery vines twisting and blooming into platinum flowers behind each ear. Pearls spread in a thin sparkle of stars throughout her thick ringlets, shimmering in the firelight of torches that illuminated the Lucani gardens. The locket hung delicately between her snowy breasts, flaring brilliantly when a stray light caught its surface. Her white veil had been shortened, hanging just below her chin in a mockery of the Fate Witches' clinging shrouds. Diamonds hung at the bottom of silver strands, sliding against her jaw as she moved through the guests at the magnificent ball.

"Stunning," she heard the other courtesans whisper behind their fans, staring at her enviously.

Men bowed to her, hoping to catch her attention, but she did not see them. "Darling," they beckoned, and watched as she passed them by.

They were not the reason Lucrezia was here.

He stood on the far side of the gathering; his attention taken up by other merchants that strove to bargain with such a powerful son of the Vestini house. Behind him, Sofane stood in her dull black dress, hands folded quietly in her lap. His wife. The Fate Witch's eyes darted rapidly from one face to the next, her bulging chin not covered by the heavy veil that shrouded her features.

"Giuseppe," Lucrezia said quietly, and the conversation died around them. He turned to look at her, eyes widening at her beauty. His mouth opened, but before he could say anything, Sofane rose from her seat and stepped between them. The Fate Witch was smaller than Lucrezia, and much older, but her presence was like a storm upon the ocean.

Sofane lifted a hand to her veil, staring straight ahead at Lucrezia, and a palpable aura of hatred thickened around them. "Leave him, whore," she commanded. Her pale eyes shone bitterly behind the dark cloud that obscured her face.

"Never," Lucrezia spat, her hands curling like claws. "He is not for you. He is mine, and I will fight for him."

Sofane laughed, a hollow sound in the suddenly silent garden. The other guests hid their faces, pretending not to notice this sudden change in the Game. Many of them whispered quickly to one another, daring the Fates to intervene or placing bets on the outcome. The Fate Witch smiled, folding her hands on her withered, sunken breasts. "Fight for him, my dear? Perhaps. But will you die for him?"

"Sofane—" Giuseppe said, but not swiftly enough. The strands clustered tightly about his wife's hands, and with a terrible ripping motion, Sofane tore Lucrezia's future to shreds.

The agony was tremendous. Lucrezia fell once more to her knees, reaching for anything to hold onto in the sea of

Her Death and Madness

The wind blew ruggedly across the ocean, hurling bursts of salt spray across the sand. The storm had been fierce, and even after the worst of the gale, the sea was restless beneath a dark grey sky. Lightning leapt through the clouds, tearing open thin rivulets of rain that fell into the crashing waves. Scavengers, peasants of Guarre de Portofino, walked along the shore hoping to find anything that had been swept ashore.

"Paolo!" a woman's voice cried above the sound of thunder. "Paolo!" Desperation and surprise warred in her cry, and a faint keening sounded near the rocks of the northern shore.

"What is it, Cella?" her husband replied, climbing slowly through the sharp boulders. "Have you found something?" He was nearing his fiftieth year, and hands that once were strong now shook with age and toil.

"Paolo, look." The graying peasant woman pointed sharply down between two cleft rocks, and Paolo saw a twisted mass of timbers, rope and sail. From atop the tall boulders of the shoreline, the wreckage was clear to see — nothing of value beyond the silk of the sail, which could be harvested for clothing, or sold for some small profit. Nothing of value, no corpses... so why did Cella seem so upset?

Then he heard it again — the keening. He lowered himself between two of the larger rocks and propped his legs to

either side of the shattered timbers. "Paolo, be careful," Cella shouted above the wind, reaching to take his hand.

"I will be. Just let me move this rudder. There is something down here... yes, something... Cella, turn your eyes away." Cella obediently turned her face to the side, still gripping his hand to give him leverage.

First, Paolo saw the corpse, flattened between three twisted ribs of what had obviously been a massive freighter. The sailor's blue face grinned savagely up at the craftsman, arms missing, legs crushed by the waves pounding against the wreckage of the ship.

The keening rose again, closer. It sounded like an animal in pain — some creature, perhaps, that had been transported aboard the ship. Dropping to the uneven deck and pushing aside debris, Paolo uncovered the source of the screams — a luggage chest, bound in brass and tied to one of the masts. Swollen with water, it refused to open. Reaching to the corpse, Paolo drew forth the sailor's scimitar and began to hammer on the sturdy brass hinges.

One blow, two, a sharp strike against the hilt of the saber, and the chest began to give. A few more strokes, and Paolo discovered the source of the noise. "Is there treasure, Paolo? Some merchant's clothes or gold?" Cella called, hopeful.

She was a child, no more than two, her huge brown eyes red with seawater. Dressed in rude clothing, she seemed even smaller than she truly was, swallowed by a seaman's jacket and a sailor's thick hide pants. "Theus and the Prophets," Paolo prayed, lifting the child from her shattered casket and staring warmly into her terrified eyes. "I have found a greater treasure than gold, wife. Cella, oh, Cella. I have found a babe in the wreckage!"

The woman still did not look down, but her wrinkled face smiled in stunned disbelief. "Ten years, Paolo, and now the Prophets answer our prayer. We have been faithful and true, and we have done our duty to Prince Lucani. Now, the Prophets find a way to reward our faith.

"At last, Theus has given us a child."



Twelve years later.

Cella sat by the fire, her sewing idle in her aged lap. The years had not been kind, twisting her face into a mass of wrinkles and white hair, but her eyes were as sprightly and eager as they had ever been.

"Lucrezia," she called to her daughter. "Bring to me the red needle and thread that I left in the pincushion by the fire."

"Yes, Mother." Lucrezia stood from the window and stepped lightly toward the hearth. While she stood in the bright firelight, Cella measured her daughter with her eyes. At fourteen, the girl was lovely — a delicate figure, with the top of her white breasts peeping over the simple bodice she wore. Shining brown hair and eyes that twinkled in fun earned her much attention in the village. When she was older, she could be truly beautiful. *Would that I was truly her mother.* Cella sighed. *Then, perhaps, I would know what decision to make.*

"Here, Mother." Lucrezia knelt to place the needle into her hand. "There were so many strands of thread, I nearly could not tell which one was yours."

"You always say that, dear, but we do not have nearly as many balls of thread as you seem to think." Catching her daughter's wrist, Cella stared down into the maiden's eyes. "You are a woman now, Lucrezia. We must speak about your future."

"Yes, Mother. Of course I will do as you and Father bid me."

"I know that, child. Though you are headstrong, you have always been our dearest child."

Lucrezia kissed her mother's withered hand. "I am your only child, Mother. It is easy to be the dearest."

Thought the joke between them was old, this time Cella did not laugh. "I know that... several men in the village have asked for your hand. But I have a better offer, and I wish you

to consider it." Lucrezia nodded, and her mother continued. "The headmistress at the courtesan school in Guarre de Portofino believes that you have talent. She has asked that I sell you to their care."

"Sell." Lucrezia's voice was even.

"Yes. That is the way of things. They will buy you from your father and me, and you will learn the ways of proper ladies. Think of it, Lucrezia — reading, writing, and knowledge of the world. So much more than your father and I could give you. And you could find a man to care for you. You would never want for food or clothing. You could have so many things that your father and I cannot give."

"And the money would make certain that you and Father never had to beg for food." Lucrezia nodded. The sewing in Cella's lap slid to the ground as she drew her daughter's head closer. Petting her hair, Cella nodded almost imperceptibly. "We are almost starving now, Mother, and without my help, Father cannot continue working. His hands are old, and he is tired. Will there be enough money?"

"Yes, child," Cella said, her eyes filling with tears. "Enough to keep us through this world, and into the next."

Nodding, her daughter laid her head in Cella's lap, listening to the crackle of the fire and the whisper of waves outside their cabin door. "I wonder what it will be like," Lucrezia whispered, "to learn to read..."



Three years later.

"Lucrezia, really!" The courtesans laughed gaily at her wit, hiding their faces behind fans and masks as noble guests faded past.

"Oh, she was a silly duck, that's all." Lucrezia preened, making sure that her hair was still tufted and coiffed elaborately. Her mask was formed from silver strands hung with glittering diamonds. It spun in a spider's web about her



History

The nation of Vodacce spreads across many small islands off the coast of a mainland anchor. Influential and ancient, Vodacce's past contains the legends of the Old Empire, and the foundations of all culture in Théah.

Ancient History

The earliest human settlements in Vodacce represent the first known cultures in Théah. Most modern scholars believe that Vodacce was, in fact, the font of human life, the spot where Theus placed His thumb and caused Man to be born. Most early settlements were situated in coastal caves, in shelters at the base of rock walls, or near lake shores. The early Vodacce based their society around the sea. Coastal settlements supported large populations, and maintained extensive trade with the southwestern coastlands of Acraga (now modern Castille).

Crescent Colonization

As time went on, the traditional hunting and gathering economy of early Vodacce was replaced by the introduction of agriculture, stock rearing, weaving and pottery. These influences came primarily from the lands now known as the Crescent Empire, whose tribes launched incursions onto the Vodacce peninsula. The primitive Vodacce on the mainland quickly learned to defend themselves, even as they reaped the cultural advances that the invaders brought. They became fierce and warlike, fighting among themselves as well as against the early Crescent tribes.

Seven centuries before the founding of Numa, the Crescent interlopers launched a huge invasion into Vodacce, driven from the far east by some unknown cataclysm. Unable to speak the language of the original inhabitants, these invaders formed their own, highly distinct settlements on the southern and western coasts, taken by conquest from the native tribes. As the invaders began to merge and blend with the mainland population, many prosperous colonies began to develop. Often they allied together against

common enemies, but they were also divided by disagreement and rivalry. Primitive city-states began to form; ruled by powerful leaders, they fought each other for control of agricultural resources and territory.

Despite their integration with the mainland, the Crescent tribes could not effectively reach the islands off the southern shore of Vodacce. For the first of many such instances, the islanders were untouched by the internal strife of the mainland. The islands' pastoral way of life eventually developed into a culture known as the 'Arene' which included language and writing as well as other technological inventions.

The Old Empire

AUC 1-102: The Founding of Numa

Théah history truly began with the founding of Numa in the area of the Levanzo Hills, just to the south of the mouth of the Tigres River. Numa initially emerged as a trading center led by a semi-mythic figure named Numus. It flourished in its favorable position along the river, and quickly grew large and prosperous. Numus and his successors governed wisely, and allowed Numa to expand her original territory. They established a rule of law, founded one of Théah's first organized armies, and established the notion of "citizens rights" for those under Numan protection.

The wars and skirmishes that marked pre-historical Vodacce continued during this period, as city-states battled against each other for a variety of reasons. Numa's favorable position and the strength of her leadership allowed her to slowly rise above the other city-states. By 102 AUC, it dominated the entire Vodacce peninsula, and had established colonies on the southern islands and elsewhere. A great and glorious civilization had begun.

AUC 102-228: Republic Rising

Over the next fifty years, the apparatus of the Old Empire developed, based on the necessities of ruling so much territory. A council of noble families formed a governing council which eventually became the Numan Senate. They

elected an Emperor annually to serve as titular authority, and through him established new laws, edicts, and cultural advancement. The most prominent families each gained an island off the coastland. Though rulership remained in Numa, the families' contact with the Arene introduced them new ways of thinking, provoking huge advances in political and philosophical thought. The notion of a republic was first formed at this time, and the early Senators established a system for making the people's will known.

From 148 until about 189 AUC, Numa continued to expand her borders through conquest, allegiance, and treaties. Arene thought stimulated schools of philosophy, which helped stabilize the kingdom and unify the people beneath it. It became a golden era of peace and artistic endeavors, a 'high period' for Numan art. The Emperors began building roads and aqueducts all across Vodacce, using advances in engineering to improve life for everyone.

The army was growing too, as was Numa's military reputation. While those under the city's protection enjoyed a golden era of peace, Numa's enemies were learning to fear her. A series of brilliant generals led conquest after conquest across the peninsula, topped by the spectacular defeat of a superior Crescent army at the Battle of Pulo di Olimpia in AUC 213. Though outnumbered ten to one, the Numan soldiers used advanced tactics, superior weaponry and unbreakable morale to destroy their enemies. By 225, Numa had expanded its borders into the western corner of the Crescent peninsula, and the troops of the XI Legio were making incursions against the Eisen barbarians to the north.

AUC 228-581: Expansion and Decay

With Numan civilization flourishing, the Emperors turned their attention elsewhere: first to Acraga, across the great sea of La Boca, and eventually to the rest of Théah. In 228 AUC, Priscus Tecpatus forged a treaty with the Acragan city-states (see pages 13-15 of the *Castille* book), securing trade and recognizing mutually-exclusive spheres of influence for both peoples. Some cities in Acraga were temporarily granted city-state title and given voting rights in the Senate, though they were later revoked.

Unfortunately, the peace wasn't destined to last. Though bound by the treaty, the Numans pushed further and further into Acragan territory, raising tensions and souring the previously friendly relations. Even as trade flourished, the Numans quietly established a foothold across the sea, preparing for the day when the treaty would collapse. The death of Priscus in 268 and the discovery of precious metals in the Acragan mountains brought the conflict to a head, resulting in a long and brutal series of wars. The Acragans fought fiercely, but the disciplined Numan troops were too strong for them, and though it took almost seventy-five years the Numans eventually conquered their western neighbor. Acraga suffered its final defeat in 344 and became a Numan colony for the next seven hundred years.

Numan conquests did not stop there, however. Though the Eisen barbarians remained a constant problem (and eventually drove Numa out of their territory in 255 AUC), Legia VI, XII, and XV launched numerous incursions north and east from the Numan holdings. They swept across the area which would become Montaigne, pushed the Crescent tribes back again and again, and even staged a few invasions of Ussura. Their invasions reached a pinnacle in 424 AUC when General Julius Caius returned triumphantly from "pacifying" Avalon. Numan-controlled territory now covered almost half of the known world, with millions of people under its rule.

With such power, however, came great corruption. While the armies fought distant wars, the ruling elite back in Numa began to indulge itself. Art and philosophy continued to develop, but the notions they espoused gradually fell away. The Senate grew increasingly corrupt and the apparatus of the Republic slowly fell into decay. This was a decadent time, when the elite indulged their vices at the expense of the people they ruled.

AUC 425-774: The Whims of Fortune

With the world at their feet, the Numans entered an era of uncontested dominance. The corrupt Senate faced a challenge to their power when Julius Caius — the triumphant conqueror of Avalon — proclaimed himself absolute Emperor. The Senate assassinated him as a threat

to their rule, but his son Tigranus demanded vengeance and ultimately forced the conspirators into exile. With his ascension, the position of Emperor became absolute, and a long line of uncontested rulers began. The Senate tried to regain some of the power they had lost, but it was another almost two hundred years before they could finally seize power again.

Fortunes for the Empire as a whole rose and fell during this time. Numan colonies in Eisen fell in the sixth century AUC, and another invasion of Ussura turned back due to inclement weather. In 573 AUC, contact with Avalon was suddenly lost and the island nation seemingly vanished amid a hail of storms and fog banks. When it reappeared, the Empire had lost it and never tried to recolonize.

Despite these setbacks, the remainder of the Empire continued to prosper, and its hold on southern and western Théah never wavered. Thus consolidated, Numa's control reached from the eastern shores of Castille to the central territories of the Crescent Empire. The government set up

a complicated system of alliances between the territory of Numa and the divided provinces of Vodacce and the remainder of the Empire. Towns and colonies were organized and given rank and prestige according to their yearly tithe, enjoying full or partial Numan citizenship ("*civitates sine suffragio*"). These privileges included newer roadways, military protection, and voting privileges in the Senate for the more privileged regions. Over half a million soldiers — both Numans and allies — could be mustered at any moment. At the same time, the monetary system of Numa became the common currency of Théah, popularized with the minting of bronze, silver, and gold coins.

In the capital itself, the political battles remained fierce. The Emperors clung to power while the Senate tried to undermine them, and the Empire's fortunes rose and fell depending upon who had the upper hand. The Senate finally regained power in 581 AUC, following the debauched rule of Emperor Clementes the Mad. His



horrendous indulgences and abject cruelty prompted a popular uprising, behind which the Senate once more seized control. They proclaimed a New Republic and promised to adhere to the ideals of Numa's golden age.

Soon, however, it became clear that little had changed. While an improvement over Clementes, the Senate existed mainly to perpetuate its own power, using the tenets of the republic as window dressing. Occasionally, a new Emperor would rise, but the Senate would always carefully control his power, holding the reins until he died or was replaced. The Senate's excesses were tolerated at first (they were nothing compared to those of Clementes), but as time went on, the people again grew weary of the decadent elite.

So it remained until 698, when General Gaius Philippus Macer seized power following an extensive campaign in Eisen. A hero of the people, Gaius knew that the Senate could not oppose him without popular support. During his return to Numa, he declared himself Emperor and relegated the Senate to the status of "advisors". The citizens hailed him as their savior, and for the next twenty-six years he ruled with absolute authority.

Power shifted again in 724 AUC, when a small group of senators, having researched the ancient artifacts of the long-dead Syrneth race, made contact with a supernatural entity. They bargained for sorcerous powers — the ability to predict the future, the ability to control fire, the ability to step between the shadows — forming the foundation of Théah's modern sorcerous bloodlines. With their newfound abilities, the Senators forced Gaius to give up his authority. They left him in place in order to keep their secret pact hidden, but his power was broken, and the Senate controlled the Empire once more. They taught others their powers, slowly infusing sorcery into the nobility. Eventually, their dark powers became common knowledge. No one spoke of them, however, for fear of earning the Senators' wrath (see the *Rilasciare* book, pages 13–15).

Left largely on their own during this power struggle, many colonies developed semi-autonomous governments, while others attempted open revolt against Numa. The Legia had their hands full putting down rebellions on the frontier, and

new barbarian incursions from Eisen and Ussura taxed Numan military might to the limit.

AV 1–203: The Prophet and his Followers

The first real challenge to the Senators' rule appeared in the year 774 AUC — henceforth referred to as the year 1 AV, *anno veritas* or "year of truth" — though few people knew it at first. The First Prophet of Theus appeared on Numan street corners, pushing for an end to sorcery and advocating a monotheistic form of worship. The senate condemned and executed him, but his word began to spread, and Théah felt the first stirrings of the Vaticine faith. (The appearance of the Prophet is covered in the *Players' Guide*, pages 29 and 85; the *Rilasciare* sourcebook, page 15; and the *Castille* book, pages 61–64.)

The Vaticine cult spread quickly throughout the Empire, despite the Senate's best efforts to crush it. At the same time, new external pressures threatened the Empire's stabilities. The Empire of the Crescent Moon ejected Numa from its territory in 32 AV and Legio II stopped a barbarian invasion from Ussura in 98 AV just short of Numan territory. With the Prophet's cult continuing to grow and government becoming increasingly unstable, the Senate decided to consolidate Imperial control into two distinct entities — the Eastern Empire (governed in Numa) and the Western Empire (governed by what would become San Cristobal). They assigned twin Emperors to head each Empire, although they retained nominal power over both.

Their plan backfired, however: instead of stabilizing the Empire, it gave others a chance to usurp Senatorial power. In 105 AV, driven by the increasing popular support for the Prophet's cult, the Eastern Emperor recognized the Church of the Prophet as legitimate. The Western Emperor soon followed suit, and popular opinion prevented the Senators from stopping the move. They managed to place a moratorium on conversion (it was legal to be a Vaticine, but not to become a Vaticine), but the damage had been done. The Emperors used the Church to regain power, while granting it a legitimacy that it had never before enjoyed.

The next blow came almost one hundred years later. By then, most noble families openly practiced sorcery and the powerful abilities were being passed through noble bloodlines. The people turned to the Church as protection against the Senate, and laid siege to many sorcerous families. Then in 203 AV the Eastern Emperor, Donatius, made a bold grab for absolute power. He declared himself a Vaticine and made the Church of the Prophets the official religion of the Eastern Empire.

The move devastated the Senate; while still wielding temporal power, they could not command the authority that the Vaticines did, and the populace rose against them. Those who were not killed fled into the countryside and outlying colonies, far from the Church. Many retreated to their original power bases on Vodacce's southern isles. With their departure, Vodacce was unified as a single territory under the Emperor. He divided the province into eleven independent administrative regions while allowing the Senate to remain in exile on their islands or in the hinterlands. With power in his hands, he set forth to reforge the Empire yet again.

AV 212-297: The Last Days of the Empire

It was not to be, however. The political infighting had again diverted Numa from threats to the Empire, and increasing economic instability took hold. Renewed barbarian invasions leached the Empire's military strength, and the authority began to splinter as the Emperor tried vainly to reassert some sort of control. He staved off the inevitable during his lifetime, but his successors were less skilled. Territory after territory fell away from Numan control: some crushed by barbarians, some freed by open revolt. The senators in exile began to establish their own mini-kingdoms far from their Vaticine adversaries, and the increasingly beleaguered Legia were deserting in record numbers. It all came to a head in 297 AV, when a rampaging horde of Eisen barbarians sacked Numa and burned it to the ground. The Emperor was killed in the fighting, and the last vestiges of central government were swept away. The remnants of the Western Empire maintained some sort of order, holding the territory that

would eventually become Castille, but for the Eastern Empire – including Vodacce – a long dark age had begun.

The fall of Numa created dozens of principalities in Vodacce: city-states and territories with no real unity. Some were ruled by senators who had survived the sacking of Numa. Others were controlled by warlords or renegade legionnaires who ruled through fear and intimidation. The eastern edges came under control of the Crescent Empire, though they lost them after the first Crusades. Many rulers used Sorte magic – based solely in the female bloodline, called "Fate Witches" by the populace – to consolidate their hold on power. Through them, Sorte slowly spread throughout the land, until it appeared in nearly every noble Vodacce family.

The Middle Ages

As the Empire faded and distinct countries rose from the ashes of Numa, economic conditions throughout Théah reflected the political instability of the continent. The Crescent Empire closed its borders to trade, fearing the destabilization of the Numan currency. The economy deteriorated rapidly, accompanied by a chronic decline in population. Plagues ravaged Vodacce on the heels of starvation and famine, and only the isolated islands were spared. By the 5th century, Vodacce had only six million inhabitants, over two million of whom lived on the bustling, overfull island chain to the south.

AV 297-376: Corantine and the Church

The rise of Corantine in 4th century did not initially affect Vodacce. He claimed the lands of the western Empire, in Castille and Montaigne, and showed little interest in the squabbling city-states to the east. However, his decision to consolidate the Prophet's faith into a single church had a profound impact on the area. At the time, Théah contained numerous cults of Prophet-worshippers, with widely varying tenets. Corantine wanted to unify the faith to prevent it from fragmenting further. The result was the Reformed Vaticine Church... located in Numa, where the first Prophet walked.

Corantine's edict produced a watershed change in the culture of the Vodacce peninsula. With the new church center at Numa, thousands of faithful flocked to the area, creating monasteries and abbeys to reflect Vaticine glory. By the time of Corantine's death these monasteries had become not only places of religion but centers for the preservation and spread of culture. The Hierophancy, monasteries and other ecclesiastical institutions now possessed huge estates that contributed to their political authority and power. Particularly efficient monks and abbots formed a network of control throughout the territory. Thus, with their support and the support of the Vaticine Church, they introduced the feudal system into Vodacce from Castille, with all its juridical implications. Corantine died in 376, but his influence on Vodacce remains to this day.

AV 376-1000: The High Middle Ages and Carleman

The Vaticine Church provided stability to the regional cultures, and it flourished despite the fragmented territories beneath it. City-states conducted trade, warred with each other, and attempted as best they could to follow the tenets of the Prophets.

So it remained for some three hundred years, until the rise of Carleman the Great. Carleman conquered a huge portion of Théah, including the entire Vodacce peninsula. He grouped the myriad territories together, silencing their squabbles and giving them a common name. For the first time since Numa, Vodacce was unified and its inhabitants began to think of themselves as one people again. Carleman encouraged this by evoking images of the Old Empire and establishing a system of government which he hoped would last long after his death.

Unfortunately, it was destined not to happen. Carleman's will divided his Empire among his three sons: Charles of Montaigne, Stefan of Eisen, and Iago of Vodacce. The sinister Iago preferred scheming against his brothers to ruling his own kingdom. When his brother Charles died, he threatened war against Montaigne, hoping to gain that territory for himself. Charles' widow outmaneuvered him,

however, marrying a local noble and consolidating her claim to Montaigne. With the western nation seemingly out of reach, Iago turned to Eisen. His wife (a powerful Sorte practitioner) believed that he could win a war against his brother Stefan, and encouraged him to make a move towards their common border. So intent were the two of them on picking a fight with Stefan that they failed to notice the growing threat at home.

A trio of ancient Vodacce families, relegated to minor status since Carleman, moved to break Iago's power. The first to act was the Delaga family, artisans from the south of Vodacce. They seized a huge swath of land in the south, using mercenaries from the Crescent Empire to solidify their claim. They were quickly followed by the Lorenzos, an ancient line who had long chafed under Carleman's rule. Finally, the Gallilis, a relatively peaceful family of scholars, realized that the kingdom was crumbling and moved to seize power of their own. While Iago's troops massed on the border, they acted to consolidate power within the nation. By the time Iago realized the true extent of their threat, they had snatched his kingdom away from him. The Lorenzos captured Iago and his wife on his way back from the frontier and burned him alive in their castle courtyard. Vodacce, so recently united, fell to pieces again, split between the three families and a dozen or so petty principalities. It would be the last time Vodacce united under one ruler.

Still, Carleman's empire left its mark. The people had felt themselves under a single banner, rekindling a sense of national pride. Even as the three families fought among themselves (and eventually splintered into the merchant Princes who rule today), the people thought of themselves as "Vodacce" rather than members of petty baronies.

AV 1002-1011: The Crusades

Unlike Iago, the three families maintained their hold on power through the centuries. While the Delaga turned their territory into a "haven" for wayward craftsmen, the Gallili turned to the Vaticines and the study of esoteric knowledge. It was the Lorenzos, however, who made the strongest mark. Fierce and terrible, they established an iron tyranny over the northern territories, threatening their subjects and

neighbors alike. So infamous was their reputation that many foreigners believed they were the uncontested rulers of Vodacce, instead of just a single part. Only the force of the Church and the political efforts of the Delaga family kept them in check; otherwise, they might have justified those false impressions.

The rise of the Third Prophet in the 11th century returned Vodacce to the world spotlight. Angry and vindictive, the Prophet declared a Crusade against the heathen Crescent Empire in AV 1002, using Vodacce as a rallying point. While Castille exploded into civil war, attempting to "purge" its dominant Crescent influence, Vodacce marshaled faithful from all over Théah for an attack against the Empire itself. As devout Vaticines, the ruling families wholeheartedly supported the Crusades, and sent many of their youngest subjects to die on the Crescent sands.

The war did not go well for the Vaticines. While they successfully drove the Crescents out of western Théah, they could not make any gains into the Empire itself. The Crescents turned back every offensive, bogging the Crusades down in years of bloody fighting. Vaticine forces did seize a few sizable holdings, but invariably lost them to counterattacks. The Crusades sputtered to a halt in 1011, with the Vaticines too spent to continue the attack.

The conflict also spelled the end of the Lorenzo family. Their ruler at the time, Vincenzo, was a bloodthirsty beast, and his Fate Witch wife "Mad Queen" Marrieta held the entire countryside in fear. Countless subjects of theirs joined the Crusades, preferring the Crescent blades to their rulers' wrath. The drain on manpower weakened the family, allowing the Delaga to make inroads into their territory. Vincenzo responded by promising a "decisive victory" against the Crescents, one which would put the fear of Theus into all of his enemies and allow him to seize power over all of Vodacce.

At his behest, the Mad Queen undertook a massive effort to erase the heathens from the fabric of reality. Marrieta had apparently grasped a way to turn her power backwards – to change the strands that had already been. If Vincenzo could erase the Crescents from reality, he could also erase

anyone who dared oppose him – the Delagas, the Gallilis, even the Church itself. As the dejected Crusaders returned from their final defeat, Marrieta retired to the Lorenzos' island home to rewrite history.

The result was disastrous.

Nearby fishermen awoke to find the Lorenzo island gone, vanished as if it had never been. Marrieta's effort destroyed the Lorenzo island, her husband, their retainers, and the more than ten thousand citizens that lived on the island. Only a sea filled with bitter scarlet blood remained in the island's former location; a testament to the pain and anguish caused by Marrieta in her pride and arrogance. To this day, the sea south of the southernmost island in the chain occasionally runs red, and no sailor can tell you why. Some Sorte practitioners whisper that the island did not vanish from reality, but rather shifted in time. The island could still exist in some frozen time, or it could have simply been physically destroyed. Many peasants and those who were not on the islands at the time of Marrieta's grand experiment still remembered details of the place, so it is certain that it was not utterly eradicated.

The survivors of the Lorenzo family were destitute and homeless, their power broken forever. They split into two minor lines – the Bianco and the Serrano – and left their territory for the other families to divide. The Delaga fell to squabbling amongst themselves, leaving the quiet Gallili to seize the lion's share of the spoils. The Gallili line eventually split among numerous surviving sons, forming the basis of the seven ruling families today.

1012–1019: The Hieros War

The loss of Lorenzo power and the wounds of the Crusade left Vodacce weak and vulnerable for what happened next. Throughout the Crusades, the Third Prophet moved to consolidate Church power in his native Castille. He filled vacant positions with Castillians, moved bishops and Cardinals across the border, and quietly shifted power away from the Church's traditional heartland. In 1012, barely a year after the Crusades ended, the Third Prophet declared that Numa was no longer the head of the Church. A new

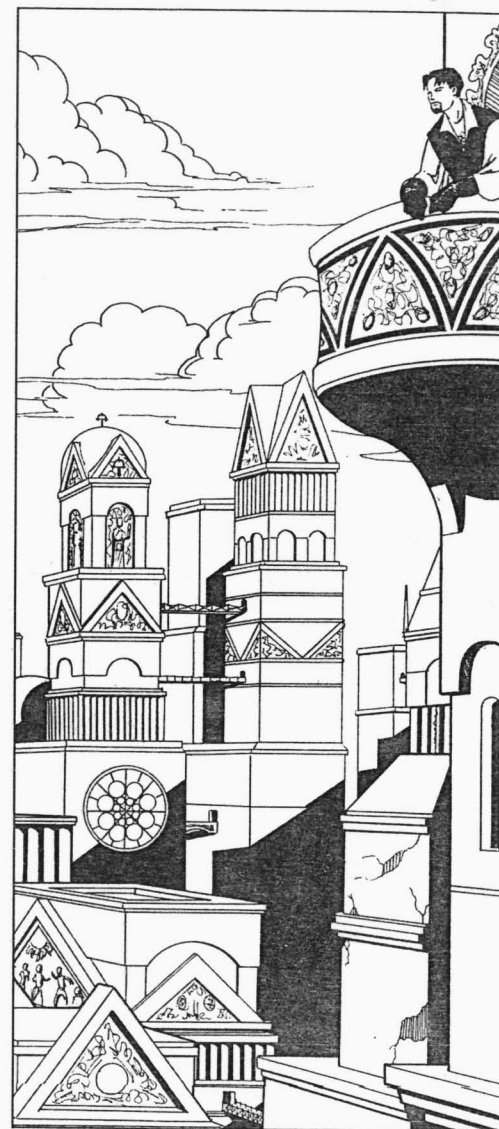
city would be built to house the Hierophant, a Castillian the Prophet had selected only days before. The Vodacce refused to stand for such an insult, and a new war followed even as the two nations were binding the wounds of the old.

The war lasted for seven years; both sides lacked the resources to gain a decisive victory, but the loss of the Lorenzos cost Vodacce dearly. They fought long and hard, but suffered many ghastly defeats. In the end, the Castillians launched a devastating invasion and the Vodacce territories were forced to sue for peace. They allowed the seat of Church power to move to Vaticine City and accepted the new Hierophant as the chosen of Theus. In his benevolence, the Hierophant allowed Vodacce to keep its two Cardinals, permitting them to have a voice in the Church (through intense machinations, the two have since expanded to five). But Vodacce never forgot the humiliation, and the wounds remain to this day.

The Renaissance

Following the twin traumas of the Crusades and the Hieros War, Vodacce once again fell back on its own devices. The ruling families began to fight amongst themselves, forming new bloodlines with their own schemes and agendas. Vodacce territory divided again and again as the nobles fought for dominance. Each new coup brought a new leader to power and a new change in the political landscape. The Vodacce eventually grew to accept such rapid fluctuations. While their external borders remained stable, their internal territories were a constantly shifting mass of principates.

During this period, Vodacce remained devoutly Vaticine. Some say their dedication to the Church allowed art and learning to flourish. Others believe that the constant scheming of the ruling families produced an environment where humanity excelled in order to survive. Whatever the reason, the new movement began in Vodacce's heart, slowly pulling Théah out of the dark ages. At the University of Elena, a Castillian scholar named Manuel Chrysoloras produced brilliant new translations of Numan philosophical treatises. His protegee, Leotano Vincenti, conducted numerous scientific experiments while simultaneously



pursuing artistic creativity on an unprecedented scale. The two of them spearheaded a nationwide movement of painters, sculptors, scientists and philosophical thinkers. From the Church-run universities they spread to the general populace, who used them to create new innovations in crafts and trade. The ruling Princes encouraged this development, using artistic achievement to increase their clout among their rivals. The renaissance not only made Vodacce a center of culture and learning, but also increased their already-potent economic strength. Vodacce merchandise displayed a craftsmanship unseen before in Théah, while new modes of production allowed them to increase the amount which they sold. By the mid-fourteenth century, their ideas had spread throughout Théah, signaling a new era of learning – and making the Merchant Princes some of the most powerful men on the continent.

AV 1400: The White Knight

"My destiny is to be destiny itself."

– Andare del Casigula Rosa

The Bianco branch of the Lorenzo family stayed quiet throughout this period of growth. They lived as bankers and moneylenders, quietly extending their tendrils while disguising their brutal nature behind winning smiles. The façade came crashing down in early 1400, when evidence of rampant Bianco Legion-worship reached the ears of the Church. In 1400, the Vaticine Church gave the ambitious Vestini family permission to wipe the Bianco out forever.

Still, even with the support of the Church, the Vestini assault on the Bianco estates nearly failed. Histories recount that the Bianco used strange powers – probably the result of Legion-worship – to stave off and destroy their enemies. It took the actions of a young knight of die Kreuzritter known as Andare del Casigula Rosa to turn the tide.

Of Rosa himself, little is actually known. He was a man of common birth, adopted into die Kreuzritter as a boy of 11, in 1392. His training was uneventful and he seemed a typical soldier, save for his disturbing visions and dreams. A teacher within the Kreuzritter wrote of the boy, "Andare seems to have skill with the sword, but little else. Perhaps

his waking dreams are the cause of his lack of ambition; I have found him walking the halls at all hours of the night, complaining of a strange bright light and of singing that leads him to the chapel. I do not know if the boy is mad or merely simple-minded."

These visions, according to popular myth, were signs from Theus that Andare was destined to lead a great crusade against evil – culminating in his assault on the Bianco, and their eradication. As the Vestini fought desperately to hold the Bianco in check, he and his holy followers, now revered in shrines in the small town of St. Ivo della Sapienza, bore the brunt of the Bianco's infernal assault. With his help, the Vestini seized control of cities and provinces within Mantua. The Vaticine consider him a great hero, and the local Mantuans see him as the instrument of their freedom from Legion's coils. He is considered the greatest knight in Vodacce history.

Andare died shortly after the final battle with the Bianco; his body is entombed in stone at the small chapel in St. Ivo della Sapienza. More on the Biancos (and the battle which destroyed them) can be found on page 33.

Recent Events

From the renaissance, Vodacce emerged as a bastion of culture and of economic power. Still, their divided nature prevented them from becoming a truly great nation. They used their influence to further plot against each other, ignoring Théah in favor of their own twisted games. They remained a divided nation, though they still referred to themselves as Vodacce. While Vodacce artists and merchants dominated their respective fields, the nation as a whole never rose to prominence.

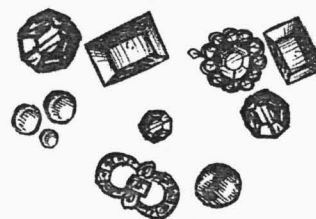
By fighting amongst themselves the Vodacce Princes could not recognize a growing threat from the north: the nation of Vendel, emerging from its pagan roots to establish a growing economic empire. At first, the the Vodacce didn't consider them a threat, but when the War of the Cross broke out in Eisen, the Vendel used the chaos to make

substantial economic advances. By the time the dust settled, their merchants equaled the power of their Vodacce rivals.

Vodacce responded with a quiet trading war. Their merchants closed ports to the Vendel, raised prices to drive out competition, and moved to crush the value of the Vendel Guilder. Nor did they limit themselves to above-the-board tactics. Countless Vendel merchant ships fell to Vodacce-sponsored pirates and Vendel-owned property began to suffer mysterious accidents. The Vendel responded in kind, using their own-strong arm tactics to intimidate the Vodacce. The ensuing surreptitious conflict has lasted for the past five years. So far, it has remained out of sight, limited to economic sniping and the occasional "unrelated skirmish." But very soon one side or the other will go too far, and this cold war will suddenly turn hot.

Vodacce Today

Today, Vodacce remains as divided as it ever was. There are currently seven merchant Princes, each with ambitions of ruling a united nation. Beneath them, the country continues to prosper, while the trade war with the Vendel continues unabated. The future of Vodacce is unstable and hard to see, even for their famous Fate Witches, but the Vodacce don't seem concerned. Disaster may lurk around the next corner, but a thousand years of scheming has made them strong. They await the next challenge with open arms.



The Seven Princes

*"History? History rules the past, my lords.
The future is mine."*

– Giovanni Villanova

From the first days of Vodacce, the powerful few have ruled over the weaker majority. The Numan Senate was only the first of these governments; the tradition continues today in the rule of the Seven Princes, descendants of the first three Senators to take absolute control over the nation that would become Vodacce. In the beginning, three men ruled the mainland of Vodacce from the islands spawned off the southern coastline, keeping tight reins on the principalities and dividing the territory between them. The original three senators were Gallili, Lorenzo and Delaga; the final vowels denote their lineages. Each of the children who received territory and title by means other than inheritance took a different surname from his father, to further separate their territorial unity. Today, none of the Seven Princes hold the names of their original ancestors; those surnames have been lost to pride and intrigue.

Principalities are reborn from infighting, as inheriting sons destroy lineages and usurp the land of the continent from their safe bowers in the sea. There have been as many as twelve distinct principalities, and as few as five. Today seven men rule Vodacce, using wealth and pride as cornerstones for modern culture and extravagance.

The Vodacce princes stand as constant proof that the power controlled by the Numan Senate has not been lost. Indeed, Vodacce is as powerful as Numa ever was, though the territory it controls does not span the continent as the Empire once did. Nevertheless, the control of trade, the Vaticine Church, and their immense powers of Sorte still give the nation a near chokehold on the continent: a chokehold constantly exploited by the rulers of the Seven Isles.

The noble class of Vodacce holds title over both trade and prestige, controlling every aspect of the country with an iron

hand and an unrelenting pride. Vodacce poets speak of the twin hearts of the Vodacce people: one that beats for love, the other for duty. On the islands of the Seven Princes, duty is the primary force guiding their actions, followed only by pride. Love is a secondary concern, to be indulged with open arms so long as you are winning the Great Game — the fanciful title by which Vodacce nobles refer to their nation's cutthroat politics.

The great Vodacce scholar Scarovese's *Means to Ends* has become almost a treatise for the Great Game. Scarovese, a poor noble, gained power and prominence through documenting a minor ruler's control over the political climate of Vodacce. Though Scarovese himself was never a prince, he created two great works, *Means to Ends* and *Victory*, which created and defined the modern Vodacce climate as a backstabbing, manipulative, cutthroat world of politics and danger. Many outsiders who read these works are appalled by their ruthless cruelty and bitter advice, but all those who would reign in Vodacce agree: they are the creations of true genius. You will not survive in Vodacce if you are not familiar with the Great Game, and if you have never heard of Scarovese, don't even get off the boat.

In less than three days, you will most likely be dead.

The Princes, applying the lessons in Scarovese's memoirs, wield almost absolute power within the limits of the State. Scarovese's works stipulate that the chief aim of government is production of power; the wise ruler uses any and all means to erode an enemy's power and enhance his own. Ruthless taxation of the peasantry is the most useful means of obtaining this power, for with money all things can be gained. The peasantry allow the ruler to further his power and therefore the power of the nation; and a ruler's first duty is to increase his own strength so that he might better protect his peasantry, who provide the primary source of his income. Tax income and trade pays for the

Vodacce courts, as well as bodyguards, mercenary troops, and public buildings.

The natural enemies created by a true Prince's rule isolate him and surround him with constant danger. Thus, the liberal bent of early princes has been swept aside by the harsh new generations, and now the Princes rule with absolute authority.

Though wise and noble rulers can be found in Vodacce's long history, the merits of such individuals are overshadowed by the course of the whole. Most men who have become Prince spent only as much labor and time as was necessary to seize power, then indulged in whatever tyrannies they pleased.



The government of each principality is only secure in proportion to the size of the territory; larger principalities are constantly tempted to swallow up the smaller. As a result of outward danger, the princes turned their eyes inward to their own defenses. They became sharks in bloody water, always waiting for the moment to strike. The climate has caused each prince to demand absolute power within his domain, unwilling to suffer even the smallest check or balance on his rule. A Vodacce prince is considered extremely gregarious if he shows trust to even his nearest relations. This, combined with the native Vodacce temptations to luxury and the perils from enemies and conspirators, has turned the Vodacce government into dictatorships in the purest sense of the word.

Bloodlines

The bond between Vodacce noblemen and noblewomen is tenuous at best. Few women of noble blood can read, and they remain apart from many of the luxuries afforded their husbands and fathers. Men take courtesans openly, and permanent mistresses are not unknown in noble circles. This had led to an extraordinary number of bastard children among the Vodacce nobility, a facet of life which the Great Game has not ignored. Some Vodacce scholars devote their entire lives to the study of bloodlines and inheritance.

In a land with so many illegitimate children, there can be no regular law of inheritance. Many times, a noble ruler would transfer his belongings and title to the children of his courtesan rather than his legitimate wife — particularly if the wife had failed to produce sons. The acknowledgment or exclusion of bastards is the right of a nobleman, and men occasionally adopt any male children given birth by his courtesans (refusing any newborn females, of course). Noble women must sometimes raise the children of their husband's courtesans, blurring the lines of legitimacy even further.

The succession and division of a ruler's property has always been a ripe field for political negotiation; consequently any heir named by one of the Princes must guard against

constant danger. If the child is incompetent or still a minor at the time of his father's death, he could easily be supplanted by an uncle or cousin with greater skill in the Game. Bastards are a fruitful source of political contest and most families in Vodacce are plagued with a crowd of discontented and vindictive kinsmen. This circumstance often gives rise to outbreaks of treason and inter-house bloodshed. Occasionally, a wife is put to death for abusing a courtesan's children; more often, a bitter courtesan murders her offspring if their noble father does not formally adopt them. Sometimes, too, a noble will sacrifice a bastard child in order to clear the way for a more 'acceptable' (by lineage or political backing) heir.

Ancient Families

The Family Delaga

Luis Delaga descended from a powerful senatorial family, and his ancestry included several Imperators. He seized the southern section of the country while Iago was squabbling over the northern border, using an army of mercenaries to hold his enemies at bay. Once his territory stabilized, he made a habit of offering refuge to the exiles of other kingdoms, bringing their talents and loyalty to his aid. The illustrious exiles whom he entertained at his court represented the whole of Théah. Lupe Petrai, a scholar of love poetry and scandalous journals of courtly affairs, visited the courts of many nations only to be shunned for the lecherousness of his work. He, among others, was welcomed by Delaga.

Petrai's description of Luis Delaga matches many noble princes even today. In his *Time of Trouble*, Petrai writes of Delaga thus:

"He demands great things from his client, the lord of Ventua, but in a manner which shows that he holds him capable of them. 'Thou must be not the master but the father of thy subjects, and must discipline them as thy children; yea, as the rocks beneath thy feet. Weapons, guards, and soldiers thou mayest employ against the enemy — and a rebellious child is thine enemy. Spare no rod, and

thy country will serve you well. Make citizens only of those who love the existing order; for those who daily desire change are rebels and traitors, and against such a stern justice must take its course."

The Delaga suffered too much from internal strife to realize their powerful potential, however. The fall of the Lorenzo line represented a golden opportunity for them to seize power, but they could not agree among themselves and fell to bickering with each other. Their short-sightedness allowed the Gallili family to move in. Of the seven current Princes, only one – Villanova – claims Delaga ancestry.

The Family Gallili

The senators who ruled Vodacce when Numa fell were by no means all politicians: they ranged from exiled royalty to carpenters and mercenaries. Yet some of them played an important part in conserving knowledge of the old philosophers, Numan histories, and the mathematics and architecture developed in the Numan Empire. Reading and writing were an integral part of Numan education, and the constant efforts of the Gallili family kept literacy and mathematics alive despite the collapse of the republic.

In the farther territories of the Empire, secular education died out in the early Middle Ages. Montaigne, Castille and Avalon had few resources of education, and fewer scholars to pass on the teachings of ancient sages. However, in the northern principalities of Vodacce, education was sustained. In each generation, those who chose to continue their education beyond the age of fourteen would be instructed in the works of the ancient poets, historians, dramatists and philosophers. Educated members of the Gallili family were encouraged to acquire knowledge of their world.

A Castillian scholar named Manuel Chrysoloras arrived in Vodacce at the end of the fourteenth century, seeking to learn at the hands of Prince Gallegos Mondavi of Gallili. Chrysoloras, a member of the Castillian family line and a practitioner of the magic known as *El Fuego Adentro*, came not specifically as a teacher or a scholar but as an envoy seeking allies against a possible assault from Avalon. He remained as an ambassador in Mondavi and Caligara lands

for some time, until news from his own country changed the world. In 1386, the Castillian royal family was destroyed by an outbreak of the White Plague, and the kingdom of Castille was thrown into disarray.

Manuel Chrysoloras chose to remain in Vodacce rather than returning home to his own country, as his claim to the throne was weak and his life would have been in jeopardy if he had chosen to establish his name in Castille. Instead, he took a wife from the daughters of Mondavi, and became a scholar at the University of Laurentia. His teaching proved immensely popular, provoking Leotano Vincenti's own research, and allowing Chrysoloras to remain in Vodacce with his family until his death in 1415. The children of that union were adopted formally by the Mondavi line, and settled in the (then Caligara-controlled) city of Elena.

Of no lesser importance than the teaching activity and family lineages, however, were Chrysoloras' translations from Numan into Castillian and the language of Avalon. During his tenure at the University of Elena, Manuel Chrysoloras translated the manuscripts of the ancient scholars and philosophers. When the Vaticine learned of Chrysoloras' translations and their popularity in other countries, the Hierophant specifically began to encourage the process of translation. Under papal patronage, Chrysoloras and his apprentices, including the famous scholar Leotano Vincenti, produced common-tongue versions of the Numan Laws and of a large part of the *Philosopher's Corpus* by the famous scholar Ditophane.

The availability of these texts in the common tongues of the continent opened other countries to the Renaissance, and encouraged higher education throughout Théah. Indeed, the translated documents caused the revival of Théan as a spoken language; it had become fossilized, used only in the prescribed antiphonal rituals in the Vaticine Church. After the translations of the ancient works became available, however, it became fashionable to learn Théan so one could read these works in their original language. After only a generation, Théan had become widespread among educated people, and no one could pretend to scholarship who did not speak and read the ancient tongue.

However, the teaching and translation of language and literature were not the only contributions Vodacce made to the modern Renaissance. The Princes were also at the center of the debate over the works of the ancient Numan philosophers, particularly those of Ditophane, which had been lost to the continent for most of the Middle Ages. Now, with their rise in popularity and the availability of these works, Vodacce found itself at the center of the new world. In this regard the most important individual was Cardinal Este Lucani, whose household and libraries in Numa had been passed down from the original Gallili family. The estate, often known as the "Academy", became a meeting place for scholars. Cardinal Lucani and his circle became some of the most prominent champions of the works of Ditophane, and did much to encourage the development of Ditophanic studies.

The Family Lorenzo

The Lorenzos traced their lineage to Imperator Tigranus through his eldest child, a daughter. Thus, the family often claimed to be the 'true' rulers of Vodacce, held back from their rightful throne only by the greed and machinations of the Delaga family. The palace on the first Isle, now controlled by the Villanova line, was built by the Lorenzos, and is probably the most magnificent of the princely dwellings of Vodacce, containing sixteen levels of luxury and entire spans of architecture which are unthinkable to modern builders.

Twisted and obscene, the Lorenzo family were sadists in the purest sense of the word: they loved suffering. Masters of the Great Game, they used torture and pain as a counterpoint to exquisite revelry, and they encouraged their descendants and allies to do the same. A Lorenzo party once ended with the murder of all servants brought to attend the feast, in grand display before all the visiting guests. Other stories of the Lorenzo speak of their torture chambers – delightfully decorated in velvet and lush furnishings, designed to destroy the mind as well as the soul. It is said that the family employed no torturers; indeed, they needed none. That skill, they say, was invented by the Lorenzo themselves.

The Lorenzo family were infamous for its bloodthirsty sports: Prince Visconti Lorenzo loved boar-hunting and forced the terrified people of the Lorenzo principality to maintain 5,000 boar hounds, with strict responsibility for their health and safety. Taxes for the Lorenzo fortune were extracted by every conceivable device, from trade to extortion. It is said that Visconti's seven daughters received a dowry of 100,000 gold republics apiece. On the death of his wife an order was issued 'to the subjects' to share his grief as they once shared his joy, and to wear mourning for a year. Anyone found out of his mourning garb – even to bathe – would be executed immediately by Lorenzo's guards.

Though Visconti was the worst of the line, he was by no means alone. His nephew Giangaleazzo displayed a passion for extravagance and sadism which knew no limits. In an effort to seize power from Visconti, Giangaleazzo undertook the construction of gigantic dikes to divert the waters of the Ciccone river from the cities of Elene and Quattro Alle (now known as Fontaine), and thus to render these cities empty of any water supply. When Giangaleazzo seized control of these cities, his uncle's base of power began to fall. Once he had captured Lorenzo's estate, he had the body of his uncle, father, and cousins placed on spikes throughout the city, surrounded by magnificent flowers and water fountains in celebration of his rise to power. They died in exquisite agony, surrounded by opulence and festivity.

The Lorenzo line finally came to an end with 'Mad Queen' Marrieta, the wife of King Vincenzo Lorenzo and a Fate Witch of unsurpassed power. Vincenzo came close to unifying Vodacce in 1011, but the Crescent invaders destroyed his power over the mainland. The Mad Queen earned the name because she often spoke of events, places, and people that did not exist. Her maidservants and her husband's courtesans were terrified of her, whispering of the experiments that lingered late into the night. One maid told of a night spent sitting in tears outside the Marrieta apartment, listening to a man's screams – but when the dawn came, she had no memory of who the man had been, nor of why his death had affected her so deeply.

The Lorenzo family was also said to have inherited Numa's famous library, captured from the city of Alexia just before the Crescent Empire set fire to that coastal city. This library was severely contested by the Gallili families, and many on both sides lost their lives to take control of it. In 1088, the five cardinals of the Vodacce Vaticine Church demanded the libraries of Alexia be 'gifted to the Hierophant' for his personal use in the city of Numa. Also in Numa, the seat of the Vaticine boasts several magnificent buildings sponsored by Lorenzo fortunes, and the great collection of relics of the saints is contained in a building that was once the most famous of the Lorenzo manor houses.

The Lorenzo family which remained after the death of Marrieta and Vincenzo divided into two subfamilies: the Bianco and the Serrano. They divided the territories of the Lorenzo, and grew in power in their progenitor's loss. This change, however, did not bring any greater mercy to those peasants enslaved by the Lorenzo heirs; indeed, it seemed as if the two families rivaled each other in passion and in cruelty, each striving to outdo the other and make a mockery of the sins of their shared past. The western territories which Vincenzo had brought together by violence fell to pieces, divided between these two successors. For a time, the original nucleus at the southern tip of the country was maintained by claimants to the Lorenzo bloodline, but in 1175, the last public member of the Serrano family fell into financial ruin. With the failure of an expedition into the Crescent Empire, the last of the Lorenzo families was devastated, stripped of title and lands, and forced to join the peasants on the mainland. Their island is now controlled by the Caligari family.

What might have become of the last fragments of the Lorenzo line, the Bianco and the Serrano families, is anyone's guess. Rumors maintain that the Serrano sold their daughters to courtesan houses and retired to a moderate life within Numa's established walls, and that the Bianco family was eradicated by their enemies as soon as their protective title was removed. Peasant legends of the lost houses of Lorenzo still surface through the lands of Vodacce to this day, though no true heir has ever appeared. But if they still exist, they would certainly have inherited the cruel blood of

their house. That monstrous capital of cruelty and cowardice which accumulated from generation to generation still exists in Vodacce, buried beneath the surface — for now.

Modern Families

Although six of the great Princes of Vodacce claim to descend from the scholarly Gallili, only five of those families actually have direct male lineage to the progenitor of that line. The Caligari, actually a descendant of the Delaga family, altered its family name because of a famous duel once fought between a Caligari and the last of the 'true' Delaga. (More about this duel follows.) The other line, Villanova, descends from the Delaga house. No noble families claim lineage from the cursed and corrupted Lorenzo house, and those who could do so wisely keep their mouths shut. To claim such lineage would be suicide.

Bernoulli

The Bernoulli family descends from the first son of Gallili, and is often considered the true inheritors of that scholarly progenitor. The family has always been stoutly Vaticine, and claims that it housed the First Prophet on a visit to Vodacce — though such stories are almost certainly false. Nevertheless, the Bernoulli line has a long history of supporting the Vaticine church.

The Bernoulli control the largest section of mainland, from the northern Palo de Olimpia mountains through the southern coast. Pilgrims traveling into the lands of the Crescent to travel through the many shrines and fabulous churches of the Bernoulli lands, seeking Theus' blessing for their dangerous journey. Although the Church publicly frowns on Bernoulli's trade with the Crescents, it has never removed its blessing from their family, nor its support of Bernoulli's principedom. Instead, they turn a blind eye to the decadence and hedonism brought across the border.

In the past, the Bernoulli have protected numerous libraries and monasteries filled with ancient knowledge — both Numan and Crescent. However, that custom has changed under the current ruler. Gespucci Bernoulli has turned many of his scholarly holdings over to the Vaticine,

renouncing his claim on the libraries and histories. Most courtiers believe that he is doing this to protect the knowledge from his three debauched sons, but others speculate that it is part of a deal he has made with the Five Cardinals. Certainly, if Gespucci had full Vaticine support, the Bernoulli family would rule the country uncontested.

All members of the Bernoulli family are competent duelists, though not as dangerous as the Villanova or as treacherous as the Vestini. Their lessons are simple, and their swordsman style is straightforward and direct. It is one of the few things you can count on from a Bernoulli: his sword will always strike true.

Noble Heroes who belong to the Bernoulli family must purchase the Scholar Skill at Hero creation, and must spend at least 5 addition points on Scholar Knacks. They always receive one Free Raise when researching or using a book-learned Scholar Knack (Astrology, Mathematics, Sciences).

Caligari

Some claim that the Caligari family descend from the Gallili; this is not so. The Caligari, who were once the Caligara, are the true descendants of the Delaga family, perhaps more close to that ancestral lineage than their rivals, the Villanova. However, few Caligari would make such a claim publicly — and fewer still would live to back it up.

Three generations ago, Prince Aldo Caligara made an idle boast which changed the family's future forever. He claimed that any true descendant of Delaga could defeat any man in a duel when his family name was on the line. This boast quickly traveled to the ears of Guiseppi Villanova, who immediately took Aldo to task for his hasty words. "Let us not simply put the honor of our name on the line," he proposed, "but our names themselves." Shamed by such a public declaration, Aldo had no choice but to accept — and he was handily defeated. The Caligara were forced by honor to refuse their rightful heritage and alter their family name; they have borne a bitter grudge against the Villanova since that day.

Every member of the Caligari family is oathsworn to find a way to restore their heritage, and many have died in the

attempt. Like a trapdoor spider who lies in wait, so do the Caligari watch the Villanova to find a weakness — they only need one chance to destroy their enemies. To that end, they have sought any means of power to counter their hated foes: magic, new technology, and especially Syrneth devices hidden within the ancient ruins. The Caligari do a lucrative business in Syrneth artifacts, allowing them to maintain their position despite the Villanova's efforts to wipe them out. Of course, the fact that they keep the most potent artifacts for their own use may have something to do with it as well.

Noble Heroes who belong to the Caligari family may purchase the Foul Weather Jack Advantage for 3 points. In addition, their monthly income is increased by 75G, due to their patriarch's constant need to send them on dangerous missions. However, they must also take a 2-point Defeated Background, attached to the Villanova's insult to their family name.

Falisci

Descended from the youngest daughter of the Gallili line and her Charousian husband, the Falisci have close connections to the Montaigne. This makes them even more prone to political maneuvering and backstabbing than the other families of Vodacce. Their loyalty to each other is unbreakable, but rivals outside the family receive no mercy. Few families play the Great Game as well as the Falisci.

The family's strength stems from their control of Vodacce's mainland coast where they grow the finest grapes and olives in Théah. Their wine fetches extravagant prices, and they have made their fortune based solely on the skill of their vintners. The Falisci have held their land from time immemorial, and no other Prince has ever succeeded in taking it. The reason for this is simple: the Falisci have the most loyal armies in Vodacce, since every Falisci peasant and soldier is paid in the family's rich, fine wine. This alone ensures the area's loyalty, and few are willing to backstab or work against them.

The Falisci are not reclusive; on the contrary, they host more grand parties every year than any other family. The notorious Falisci gatherings range from elaborate hunts to grand dances; they commonly last as long as a week, and

host as many as 5000 guests. Wine pours from golden fountains, chefs prepare mouth-watering dishes, and hidden chambers cater to appetites both gross and sublime. The Great Game takes a gentler tone during Falisci's parties: violence is outlawed and duels forbidden. Those who break the rules find themselves banned from future gatherings, a fate worse than death in Vodacce.

Of course, there's nothing outlawing less-fatal maneuverings at Falisci parties, and the family ensures that their political enemies attend every year. They strike their deepest blows here, as their rivals come for the wine and leave with as many dishonors as the Falisci can bring to bear. Loyalty matters in this family, but not outside of it... and the Faliscis play the Great Game as well as anyone.

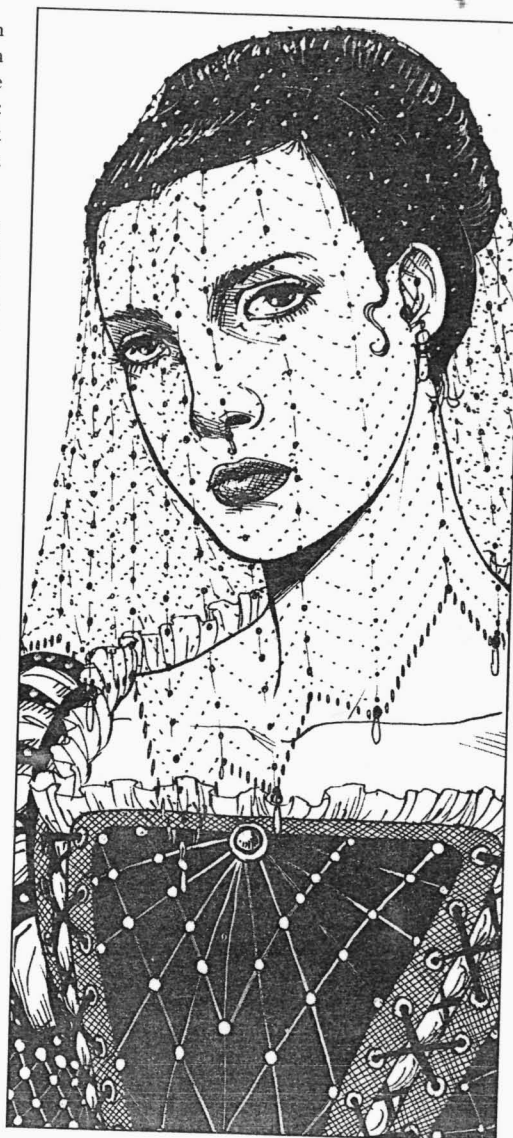
Noble Heroes who belong to the Falisci family gain one Free Raise when trying to manipulate others. In addition, they receive 12 HP if they take the Arrogant Hubris, but they must pay 12 HP for any Virtue. Finally, they are compulsive gamblers, and must roll Resolve against a TN of 15 to resist a bet.

Lucani

The Lucani family, while among the poorest and hardest working of the Vodacce nobility, are also among the most powerful practitioners of Sorte magic on Théah. If this is so, you ask, then why is the family still poor?

The answer lies in a curse laid upon the family over a thousand years ago, when a jealous wife found her husband in the arms of a Lucani girl. Any Lucani Fate Witch who, knowingly or unknowingly, uses her abilities to directly bring wealth or success to the Lucani family will bring herself only ruin, devastation, and madness. This curse has always proved true, no matter how well-intentioned or unknowing the Fate Witch. Daughters of the Lucani line have died horribly attempting to aid their family. It is a tribute to the Lucanis that they have survived so long unaided by their Fate Witches, or indeed that they ever attained a Principedom at all.

The family is very much Vodacce's 'nouveaux riche'. While minor nobles for centuries, they remained beholden to other houses, despite their powerful Sorte magic. It was



only 100 years ago that a secretive deal with the Villanova allowed them to gain territory of their own. (Details of the deal, and what the Lucani sacrificed for their position, have been lost to history). Even today, their fortunes are far less stable than those of their political rivals. Other Vodacce nobles mock their shaky lineage and small fortune even as they covet their powerful witches. Luckily, the family lives well from the constant gifts and tributes which suitors pay to their line, and many Lucani Fate Witches have gone on to lead influential lives as the wives of other bloodlines. This, combined with the renowned needlework of the provincial women, has allowed the Lucani to survive.

Noble Heroes who belong to the Lucani family with Sorte sorcery receive two extra points of Sorte Sorcerous Knacks during character creation. However, they receive 5 fewer HP and they may never use their sorcery to directly aid themselves or another member of the Lucani family. Lucani Heroes who do not take sorcery do not receive the extra Sorcerous Knacks, nor do they suffer the 5 HP penalty.

Mondavi

The Mondavi family, renowned agriculturalists and rice producers, control the western reaches of the Mantua territory (see page 35). The area once belonged to the Gallili, but was long ago divided among his heirs – and much of the land was eventually seized by the Delaga line (though the Caligara). Still, between the Mondavi and the Vestini, most Mantuan lands still remain in their original owners' hands.

Because constant food production is critical to nations, the Mondavi territories rarely suffer war or usurpation. They are inviolate – especially during the growing season. Because of the high mountains to their north and the rugged terrain on their borders, Mondavi lands remain secure from assault – through their princes have paid a great deal to install Eisen mercenaries in order to prevent any hostility between Prince Mondavi and his northern neighbors. Although starving Eisen could certainly use the plentiful food produced by Mondavi lands, they are content to work as guardsmen and soldiers, and be paid honestly for their duty rather than raiding for rice and grain. This system has worked thus far,

but one bad Eisen winter could alter the balance and cause the guardsmen to plunder the stores of their former charge. Should that happen, there will be war.

When the Lorenzo family was destroyed, the last of its daughters married into the Mondavi line. Some say that the infusion of the Lorenzo blood into the once-peaceful Mondavi line caused simple landowners to become bloodthirsty politicians, but for whatever reason, the Mondavi Princes have a fearful reputation for their extraordinary valour in war, as well as their deadly dueling abilities.

They are not, however, renowned for their skill in the Great Game, nor for any sort of good looks. The current patriarch, a pale little man called Alcide Mondavi, is no exception. Still, though he is quiet and boring, his skill with the blade cannot be bested. More than a dozen men have died insulting him or his family, and many more lie dead due to his wife's powerful Sorte magic. If you are looking for enemies in Vodacce, remember the brown recluse spider – though unadorned, it is among the deadliest of all.

Noble Heroes who belong to the Mondavi family may purchase the Ambrogia style of fighting for 20 HP. They must take a Hubris, for which they receive only 8 HP.

Vestini

Founded in 1400 from the fall of the treacherous Bianco family, the Vestini derived their strength from a background as craftsmen and merchants, and created a noble house purely through their own strength of will.

The Vestini family's fame lies not in their illustrious heritage, nor in their skillful swordsmen. Their tie to the Gallili family is weak at best, reinforced through a significant amount of marriages. Initially, the Vestini were servants to the Gallili line (a fact they rarely mention, though it is often used against them) who married into the lineage. They did not marry through valorous deeds or powerful magic, but rather through beauty and wit. They are possibly the most intelligent and crafty of the seven powerful families of Vodacce – a trait which their opponents never forget.

The Vestini family is renowned for its beauty, and many women of this lineage would have made fine courtesans had they not been born noble. The first Vestini, a woman who married one of the weaker Gallili sons, used her own cunning to make him powerful in his own right. She was, however, a courtesan, and her daughters had no Sorte magic. By using their beauty and attractiveness to lure more powerful husbands, the still-young Vestini line has nonetheless thrived.

However, few Vestini daughters show any signs of Sorte, and those who do find their powers to be very weak. The Vestini compensate for their sorcerous inadequacy through marvelous crafts, skills of beauty and art – and treats of rich foods. The chefs of the Vestini family are renowned through Théah, rivaling even those of the Montaigne Empereur for taste and decadence.

The Vestini family are known for their skill, both in concrete arts and in the more personal endeavors. Men lucky enough to have a Vestini wife are considered blessed – both publicly and privately. Vestini courtesans (bastard or legitimate) are highly sought after, and the family often uses its skills of art and beauty to throw elaborate, fanciful parties. The Vestini masked balls are famous throughout Vodacce. Every guest except the courtesans wears a mask – a delightful turn-around from common Vodacce custom.

Although the family throws several smaller balls throughout the year, the Prince himself only holds once such formal occasion – the “Dance of the Spiders.” All attending courtesans go by pseudonyms and alter their fashions such that jealous wives cannot identify them.

Noble Heroes who belong to the Vestini family receive the Above Average Appearance Advantage for free. However, they must take the Hedonistic Hubris for their Arcana, for which they receive only 8 HP.

Villanova

If Vodacce is a place where a single careless word or glance is deadly, then that statement is twice as true in the Villanova lands. Manipulative masters of the Great Game, the Villanova are proud of their skill as swordsmen and

politicians. The last of the proud Delaga line, every Villanova learns to use his abilities to bring about the destruction of the other Princes, to unite Vodacce under a single iron king. It has been the goal of every Villanova since the family began.

Descended directly from the Delaga, the most powerful senatorial family of ancient Numa, the Villanova family can recount many accomplishments and tales of their bravery, political prowess and cunning. Giovanni Villanova may be the most powerful of the Seven Princes (though he still lacks the strength to unite the mainland and Numa stands firmly against him). The largest center of learning in Vodacce, Dionna University, stands in Villanova’s iron grasp. Not that Giovanni or his family seem to care about learning – the Prince uses the university only as another means to make money and solidify his control – but without the patronage of the noble family, Dionna University might wither and fail.

Giovanni controls the provinces on the western coast of Vodacce, drawing income from agriculture and mining of the mountains between Vodacce and Castille. He trades in secrets and research from the scholars at Dionna University, and uses his contacts across Théah to control his holdings at home. He is single-minded, as have been all of his ancestors, and his family shares his unbending will.

The tension between the Villanova and the Vaticine has caused them no few problems; probably the strongest reason why they have not yet united Vodacce. Giovanni’s father once said that if the family became masters of Vodacce, they would banish the Vaticine from Numa and place them in a secondary position to the restored Iron Throne. For this reason, and countless minor slights and deliberate provocations, the Vaticine Church takes a low view of Villanova nobles, and can be trusted to work against them at every opportunity.

Noble Heroes who belong to the Villanova family receive two extra Reputation dice when at court in Vodacce, but must purchase a 3-point Nemesis Background, representing the Church’s resentment.

The Lost Blood

Bianco and Serrano

“Do not search for that which has been lost, but rather concern yourself with that which does not wish to be found...”

– Scarovese’s Means to Ends

The last fragments of the Lorenzo line, the Serrano and the Bianco families vanished from public view centuries ago. The public fall of the Lorenzo occurred in 1175, when the last noble member of the Seranno family fell to Vestini political maneuvering (see page 31). The Bianco held no true political power after the Serrano fell, but continued to exist as sub-families beneath more powerful princes, and made their mark on Vodacce through their merchant power and moneylending until the cataclysm of 1398.

Today, the descendants of both families together number less than 100 men. They have found their way into courtesan houses, Dionna University, and the alchemical trade. Trusted as honored retainers of various noble families and hiding their true lineage, they suffer indignity and dishonor just to get close to their enemies. One day, they will have enough strength to attack one of the other Princes – most likely, Caligari or Vestini – seize their land, and return to power.

The Serrano were infamous for their poisons and potions, which destroyed many of their enemies with only the touch of an oiled hand. Peasants say that the children of the Serrano line were fed poisons on a daily basis, to create immunities that could later be used when poisoning enemies with a touch or through food that both men were eating. The Serrano gardens held a wide variety of plants, both edible and poisonous. The Vestini took their botanical knowledge and turned to less sinister culinary uses, but their talents for death are still unequalled. A true Serrano would believe that poison is a lost art in Vodacce, though modern alchemists have created potions that kill in a few moments.

The Serrano would scoff at such rustic brews. After all, a few moments is still enough time to scream.

The Bianco had an even more sinister reputation. Merchants and moneylenders, they held many of the

princes of the 1300s under their thumb, maintaining their lost heritage without the status of nobles. They covertly controlled the majority of the Mantuan lands (now held primarily by the Vestini), and were considered the elite walkers of darkness. Never afraid to scoff at the church of the prophet, the Bianco allowed no Vaticine churches within “their” provinces, paid only lip service to the Prophet and his Church, and held dark rituals within their family estates. They mocked the Vaticines’ power and continued to deal with dark – some might say, infernal – powers. Some Bianco even attempted to summon the creatures of the Bargain. The monstrous cruelty passed through the Lorenzo line consolidated in the Bianco, and legend states that they had male Fate Witches in their line – given power by the same creatures who created sorcery.

Their dark deeds caught up with them in the late 1300s, when they blackmailed one Prince too many, and the Vestini family received permission to destroy them – backed by contingents from the Vaticine church. Even with their aid, the gambit nearly failed, as the Bianco used strange powers to stave off and destroy their enemies. Only the assistance of a young Vodacce knight named Andare del Casigula Rosa, whose holy armies bore the brunt of the Bianco assault, allowed the Vestini to seize control of cities within Mantua. The Bianco were to be tried and sentenced by Vaticine officials for their practices of black magic. Before the officials could arrive, however, the Bianco manse burned to the ground in a raging inferno. No one knows what occurred, who burned the building, or how they managed to slip past the constant guard of the Bianco Fate Witches. Regardless of the cause, the fire destroyed the Bianco’s ancestral home, trapping the last members of the family within. None escaped the inferno, and the Church declared that the family line had been destroyed.

Or so the story goes.

Today, the eastern mountains of Mantua are still said to be haunted by Legion’s men, searching for lost Bianco souls. Mantuan peasants make the sign of the Prophets at mention of the Bianco name, fearful that the listening demons might come to investigate. No one claims the name of the Bianco

— none would be that suicidal. To do so would gain the immediate enmity of the Vaticine Church and all seven existing Princes (as well as several secret societies). The Bianco are all destroyed. They have been eradicated.

No matter what Legion's forces might whisper in the night.

Characters (for no member of the Serrano or Bianco families can truly be called 'heroic') who belong to the Serrano family receive a 1 point Poison Immunity Advantage for free, and gain two Free Raises when performing any poisoning roll. However, they must purchase a 3-point Nemesis Background, as the Serrano are the sworn enemy of the Vestini family. At least one Vestini knows who you are, and will one day catch up to you.

Characters who belong to the Bianco family gain the Unbound Advantage (see page 99) for only 10 points; but they must take a 3-point Lorenzo Background and are also continually hunted by the Vaticine Church (and attendant elements), which the GM can use to make things exceedingly difficult for them.

Places

Geographically, mainland Vodacce is a low swampy land, dominated by flood plains and unexplored bogs. The mild weather creates conditions ideal for farming, and most of the mainland consists of vast cultivated fields. Small towns and other permanent structures stand on the few areas of firmer soil; the largest towns are on the coast, or near the firm bedrock of the twin mountain ranges. A few areas have never been fully settled: dangerous swamps and wild forests inhabited only by hermits and a few brave hunters.

The islands are a much different story. Hard and craggy, they rise out of the sea like mountains of rock. They have little space for cultivation and their steep peaks defy most types of human construction. What's left has long been swallowed up by the cities, using brilliant feats of architecture to build upwards rather than outwards. The Vodacce make ruthless use of the space available to them,



creating imposing vistas of stone and steel that rival the mountains surrounding them. Instead of streets, most island cities have an extensive system of canals and waterways, marked by a few pedestrian walkways and land-based plazas. Gondolas and other small boats make their way through the waters, lending an undeniably romantic air to the otherwise treacherous cityscapes.

Politically, the nation of Vodacce is officially divided into eight provinces, seven ruled by the Vodacce princes, and the last ruled by the Five Cardinals of the Vaticine Church. However, the nation's peasants do not divide themselves in this way. They prefer the ancient segregations of territory created by the Numan Empire, which divides mainland Vodacce into four distinct cultural regions: Numa proper, Mantua in the north, Teramo in the east, and Arene

Candide in the west and south. The current political borders are too transitory to affect the deeply rooted culture of the Vodacce people, so they do not culturally segregate themselves outside of the original three Vodacce regions, and of course, the people of Numa. Although modern Vodacce is 'properly' divided into the provinces of the Seven Princes, the peasantry consider themselves Mantuans, Candide, or Teramos respectively, and rarely acknowledge the boundaries of the Princes. The taxes, laws and regulations regarding travel are the only separations between them; the culture itself does not change.

Though each Prince rules a piece of the Vodacce mainland, most of them rarely leave their island homes. Instead, they assign governors to rule in their stead; each territory has a Chief Governor, who controls the entire area, and numerous minor governors who oversee smaller provinces (many of which have their own system of local government). A governor has leave to act in his Prince's name (write laws, command troops, etc.), but had best keep crop production up and civil unrest down. When things go wrong on the mainland, the governor must answer for it. Needless to say, the Great Game pervades every corner of this system, and the governors all scheme amongst themselves in a smaller version of their Princes' endless maneuverings. More information on this system can be found in the "Government" section on page 24.

Locations

The three distinct cultural regions of Vodacce (Mantua, Teramo, and Arene Candide) are detailed below, divided further into the Princes' provinces, Numa, and the islands controlled by each noble family. It should be noted that naming practices for Vodacce cities, islands and territories are notoriously confusing. The provinces of each ruler are named after the controlling noble families, and as such, the province names and borders can change at a political whim. South of the Vodacce mainland lies the archipelago of islands from which the Seven Princes rule. These islands have names, but any island which houses one of the Seven Princes is commonly referred to only as that prince's island

(Mondavi Island, Villanova Island). Each island contains a single massive city which often covers its entire habitable land mass. These cities have their own names (Dionna, Chiarisa, etc.) which are distinct from the name of their island. Although princes may rise and fall, and islands may change hands or alter their names entirely, the names of each island city remain the same throughout generations of political intrigue. Each of these features and political boundaries are described below, with prominent cities, nobles, governors, and other features.

Mantua

Mantua, the northernmost region of Vodacce, borders Castille to the east, Eisen to the north, and the Crescent Empire to the west, across the Palo de Olimpia. Mantua is a forested land and contains the most fertile regions of Vodacce. Currently, three of the Seven Princes control parts of Mantua: Mondavi, Caligari and Vestini. Mantua is a large territory, and those who reside there consider themselves Mantuan first, Vodacce second — despite the borders imposed by the Seven Princes.

Mondavi

Ruler: Alcide Mondavi

Governor: Gallisus Mondavi

The Mondavi province contains some of the most bountiful land in Vodacce, forming the foundation of the Mondavi family fortune. It cherishes its staggering agricultural production as much as it relies on trade with Castille, and the other Princes leave the Mondavi provinces out of direct invasion lest their own food sources be destroyed.

Palizza de Agitazione

Population: 43,000

"When you arrive at Agitazione of Mantua, you must visit the Lorenzo palace there. One side of the building has been completely rebuilt; the other stands, a rotting hulk trapped by age and ugliness. From the courtyard side you see a wretched, top-heavy building, with a façade seven windows long, surrounded

with everything which the imagination could conceive in the way of bad taste. From the garden side, you see an immense and delicate palace whose defects are more than compensated by its beauties."

— Benzoli Poficiare, Architect

Agitation, a city in the foothills of the Mondavi province, is the most well-known city. It is the most direct route from Numa toward Castille, and as such, contains a tremendous amount of trade lanes and cultural attractions. The city itself has existed since the days of the Numan Empire, though it was only a small town when the Senate fell. Since then, trade and the opulence of the Lorenzo family caused the city to grow to more than fifty times the size of that small mountain village.

One of the most notable buildings in the city is the Palizza, the home manor of the Mondavi family. Although the noble family rarely chooses to live on the mainland, their servants keep the manse's façade in exceptional condition. The actual palace contains 2143 windows, 1252 fireplaces, and 67 staircases. The gardens include roughly 1400 fountains, using water pumped up from the nearby Deitan river, which flows out of the Levanzo hills and to the southern sea. The length of the garden front is 670 yards.

Profeta Chiesa

Population: 14,000

Profeta Chiesa, despite its small size and apparent backwoods demeanor, is one of the most financially and politically powerful cities in the Mondavi principality. It is surrounded by the richest farmland in Vodacce, making it the heart of Mondavi power. The governor of the province, Mondavi's eldest son Gallisus, 'lives' in Profeta Chiesa. Although he spends much of his time on the Mondavi island with his family, this is supposedly the central government of the mainland. Profeta Chiesa contains the province's legal system, judicial buildings and tax centers, but whether Gallisus actually organizes such systems is doubtful.

The true ruler of the city is Gallisus' Montaigne wife, Nemice du Arrent Mondavi. On her husband's orders, she

forges letters with his signature and seal and runs the province as best she can in his absence. She does not mind; the two hate each other with a burning passion, and Nemice is happy to see her husband as little as possible. He, too, cares little for her endeavors into government, and claims all the successful gambits as his own. His courtesan, Marifi, is one of the most beautiful in Vodacce, and many other powerful men seek her hand. She remains with him, however, because she delights in provoking Nemice: a terrible circle that creates undying political tension in the small city.

Profeta Chiesa contains one of the largest churches on the mainland (thus giving the town its name "Prophet's Church"). The church's west front consists of a monumental steeple, rising directly behind a grand portico raised by steps from the street. The portico has an arched center flanked by two rectangular openings on each side, which is echoed by the tripartite window behind the chancel to the east. The interior has delicately woven iron columns reminiscent of spiderwebs, screening the entrance with balcony seating above and separating the chancel to the east.

Mondavi Island, Chiarisa

Population: 65,000

Mondavi island is the farthest from mainland Vodacce, surrounded on all sides by the depths of the Forbidden Sea. Chiarisa, the city which dominates it, was founded in the 12th century on the ruins of a Numan city. The mountainous island soars to a massive altitude of 1,850 yards, and numerous freshwater sources permeate the city's heart. Despite this, Chiarisa is one of the most architecturally striking capitals in Vodacce, and countless tourists flock here despite its distance from the mainland.

Like all island cities, Chiarisa consists of towering buildings latticed together in a massive spiderweb of bridges and stone arches. The new baroque style (see page 54) overlaps the remains of gothic architecture, and the higher apartments differ radically in style and construction from those below. As society developed, layer progressed upon

layer, until Chiarisa became a living testament to the ages. Poorer citizens live in the lowest rungs of the city, subsisting on the tossed filth of their social superiors, while the elite dance the night away on terraced rooftops.

Galleria Vittorio Emanuele

Within Mondavi's great city stands his personal palace, a magnificent structure that rises nearly two thousand feet above the seashore, on the mountain crest which forms the spine of his island. Great arched bridges twist out from the structure like the spokes of a wheel, arching over the city below. Held aloft by both architectural ingenuity and the careful work of the Mondavi Fate Witches, 640-foot-long bridges link it with the secular Piazza della Scala on the northern end of the island and the spiritual Piazza della Duomo on the southern tip, beneath the mountain cliffs. In 1627, a triumphal arch was added to the southern end of the island, formally celebrating Alcide Mondavi's birth — his father's only son, after a disappointing four daughters.

Caligari

Ruler: Vincenzo Caligari

Governor: Vito Calligozo Caligari

Laurentia

Population: 35,000

Located in the northern reaches of Caligari province, the city of Laurentia takes its name from one of the ancient Numan rulers, Casum Lauretus. As the Caligari's main trade center and only major continental city, it enjoys more than its share of attention. The Laurentian Library, the city's largest attraction, stands in the cloister of St. Lorenzo. Peasants whisper that the saint in question must have been Castillian, for no Lorenzo ever achieved one-tenth the sanctity needed to become a saint. Despite that, Laurentia has an abundance of playwrights, architects and scholars trying to gain entry into the prestigious academy of St. Lorenzo. Those who do well in the Academy often receive invitations to study at Dionna University, the dream of many young Vodacce lords. The Academy is the number one

source of architects in Vodacce, for the ever-expanding city has plenty of room to accommodate their talents.

The library itself is a massive building, spanning a full city block and filled with Numan and other texts. Those who whisper that the Serrano family still exists would do well to look for them here between the quiet pillars of scrolls and books, for it was once their family's greatest prize.

Caligari Island, Reinascienza

Population: 98,000

Caligari island is the closest land mass to mainland Vodacce, but unlike the other islands of the chain, it contains few mountains or rising hills. Where the other islands rise majestically from the sea, Caligari island rests peacefully just above sea level, with only a few gently rolling hills dotting the placid landscape. Structures weave across the island, crisscrossing the many rivers and small lakes that divide its mass. Gothic bridges of the Middle Ages still stand interwoven with houses and grand apartments of the noble lords who choose to live directly above the waterline.

The population of Caligari island swells to a massive 125,000 during the first weeks of winter, when Vodacce's upper mainland is covered in snow and ice. During this time, nobles of all families arrange their trips home, and most must come through Reinascienza's wide gates in order to reach their respective islands. A grand festival, known as the Winter's Ball, is held in the famous Twin Piazzas to celebrate the opening of the political season.

Piazza Navona and Piazza di Castillia

The Twin Piazzas, grand bricked patios formed of carefully patterned clay tiles, color the ground for nearly a half mile around a famous bronze statue of Senator Delaga, ancestor of House Caligara. The northern piazza, known as Piazza Navona, was built in monumental style of Numa by the Senator's family upon his death.

At the far end of the statuesque garden and dancing square stands the church of Saint Agnese. Taller even than the noble houses surrounding it, the church is a marvel of modern architecture. More than fifteen Fate Witches aided

in its creation, and with the famous architect Stefano Campo del Caligara, caused the church to stand despite gravity and reason. Perching on the edge of reality, it rises nearly twenty stories into the air, and seems impossibly thin and delicate to hold aloft such massive stone spires. The church also holds the ancient and revered monastery of House Caligari, where Prince Vincenzo often comes to pray in chambers deep beneath the church's walls.

The second piazza, Piazza di Castillia (also known as the Piazza of the Castillian Steps or 'Scalla di Castillia') suffered from generations of controversy before finally being completed by Francesco de Sanctis. The piazza was built over a Numan holy site, torn down when the Numan Senate was disbanded. Some say that the Bargainers first made contact with the entities from beyond at this location; whatever the truth, the Piazza de Castillia is said to be haunted by strange ghosts, and unless a grand ball is being held, few visitors venture through the intricately hedged paths deep within the piazza's maze.

Vestini

Ruler: Marco Edoardo Vestini

Governor: Enrico Edoardo Vestini

Though as rich in agriculture as most of the Mantuan lands, Vestini province is also steeped in folklore and vice. Once, the Lorenzo families dominated this area, and the western lands now controlled by the Vestini were the home of the infamous Bianco family. Some peasants refuse to live here, claiming that the souls of the Bianco family still search the hills for victims to sacrifice to Legion's dark hordes.

St. Ivo della Sapienza

Population: 7,000

St. Ivo della Sapienza is a small village on the edge of the Olimpia mountains, and has few claims to fame other than its rich vineyards and wide fields of grain. However, it does house the church where White Knight of Vodacce, Andare del Casigula Rosa, stopped to pray for three full days before facing the infernal Bianco family. Legends claim that while he visited this humble monastery, he received visions of the

battle before him, and was tempted by Legion himself. Andare bore through the terrible visions and resisted all temptation in the name of the Prophets, and left the church renewed by its strength. From here, he led his men to victory against the corrupt black sorcerers of the Bianco family, and burned the city of Quattro Alle. See pages 33-34 for more information.

A statue of Andare del Casigula Rosa stands in the gardens at the center of the village, where pilgrims often come to pray and leave flowers. They believe that the White Knight will come to their aid and give them the courage to carry on. Several miracles have been attributed to Andare, and there is a popular movement in the Vaticine to arrange for the young man's canonization.

Fontaine (Quattro Alle)

Population: 66,000

The growing metropolis of Fontaine was built over the ruins of the Bianco manorhouse (and the attached city, Quattro Alle) when the Vestini family seized control of the area. The Vaticine Cardinals excommunicated it, had it cleansed, and then blessed it again for the purpose of rebuilding and renewing the land. It seems to have worked, for Fontaine is once again the most powerful city in the Mantuan provinces. Some of the grandest and most well-known courtesan houses in the world live here, and those who have the wealth to visit them are never disappointed.

Indeed, Fontaine is one of the largest cities on the Vodacce mainland, supported by its immense craft trade and light taxes. The Vestini believe in lowering taxes for those citizens who actively tithe to the church and contribute with manual labor or craftsmanship to the city's growth; thus, many craftsmen and laborers have chosen to live in Fontaine. Only about 10,000 of Fontaine's inhabitants are natives; the rest have immigrated for the beneficial conditions and gentle rulership provided by the Vestini family.

Nevertheless, all the kind patronage in Vodacce will not erase a city's past, and the atrocities of the Bianco still linger here. Citizens do not wander near sewer openings at night



for fear that something foul will rise up and devour them. Further, there is rumored to be a black cabal of Legion worshippers operating in the city's hierarchy, guiding the Vestini government while the noble family remains on the distant shores of their island home.

The arts in Fontaine are adored like no other city in Vodacce: massive playhouses and museums, art galleries and statue gardens litter the tremendous city. The Vestini make great sacrifices for the arts, and those who receive artistic acclaim in Fontaine can make an astounding profit anywhere in Théah.

Elena

Population: 16,000

Elena is an ancient city, and still holds of many ancient Numan buildings and structures, thriving on the glories of the ancient past. Unfortunately, such glories are not enough. To put it simply, Elena is dying. It did not survive the Vestini family ascension, and now the city is in its final years. Elena could house as many as three times her populace; her University has capacity for as many as 3000 students, but only holds a paltry 600. Only the Vestini's constant struggles to create trade force the city to continue breathing, and only then with great labor.

The University of Elena was once a major scholarly resource. Beneath the great tutor Manuel Chrysoloras, and supported by the achievements of its great alumnus Leotano Vinchenti, it soared to unprecedented academic heights. Chrysoloras's translations of ancient scholars and philosophers revived interest in the ancient Numan teachings and spread wisdom long thought lost. His work, and that of his apprentice, Vinchenti, led to the revival of Théan as a "scholar's tongue." It grew out of the estate of Cardinal Este Lucani, whose household and libraries in Numa had been passed down from the original Gallili family. The estate, often known as the 'Academy', became a meeting place for scholars, and eventually transferred to the University of Elena.

But now, pigeonholed by ancient theories and static teachings, the University has become a laughingstock

regarded as a group of quacks and backwards theoreticians. No serious scientist takes the theories emerging from it seriously, and the University suffers from the same malaise claiming the rest of the city.

Still, the Vestini will not give up Elena. It is their tie to the ancient past and gives them legitimacy among the Seven Princes. If Elena were to vanish, their claim as rightful descendants of Gallili might be questioned, and their principality assaulted from all sides. The Vestini know that they must keep the ancient city alive — at all costs.

Vestini Island, Serine

Population: 105,000

A veiled Fate Witch is a common sight in Serine, which holds Vodacce's largest school for young ladies. The school, known as the Dilatente, is not an educational institution, per se, but rather a place where the daughters of noblemen learn the uses of Sorte, household functions, and how to run their husband's affairs while he is otherwise occupied.

Serine actually consists of two smaller islands, laced together through Vodacce ingenuity. Her rivers and bays support a ceiling of bridges, leaning terraces and hanging gardens, and the port of Serine looks like nothing so much as a row of candles, lit from the top with sunlight and shadowed at the bottom from the clustered city around them. Narrow streets and wide canals open into the center of town, toward a large lake formed from the conjoining of the two islands.

It is also a center for the mysterious organization known as Sophia's Daughters. Beneath the surface, the Vestini family are strong supporters of women's rights — more so, at least, than any of the other nobles of Vodacce. They believe that their daughters should learn the arts of reading and writing, to better use their Sorte magic for the family's benefit. They also encourage courtesans to study at the libraries also housed within the city of Serine — and many of those courtesans in training are not what they appear. Some of the more promising (and more forward-minded) young girls who come to learn at the Dilatente also receive the dresses and masks of the courtesan class, and are brought secretly out of the preparatory school to the libraries throughout the

city. Because so many Vestini women are courtesans, no one questions the large numbers of girls in rich dresses studying in the libraries. Indeed, many of these women are actually courtesans, unaware of the dangerous deception being performed around them.

The woman in charge of this operation is the headmistress of the Dilatente, Signora Denizia Verde della Vestini. She is a quiet, somewhat short woman with a round face and large green eyes. Few gentlemen would call her beautiful, but her face is gentle and kind beneath the slight veil. She has a certain friendliness that earned her a powerful Vestini husband, and after his death, gained her the position of headmistress to the finishing school. She has served the Daughters faithfully, and dedicates herself to the ascension of women throughout Vodacce and Théah. Denizia knows that something greater hides behind their simple façade, and she hopes that the girls who vanish from her care find a better life... wherever the Daughters take them.

Denizia's own daughter has become somewhat of a scandal among the Vodacce. Simona Verde Della Vestini fled the city the night before her arranged marriage, taking the name 'Morgause Mercuri'. Fleeing to the high seas, Morgause has begun to make her name as a fierce gunner aboard the *Santa Cecilia*. She is impractical, headstrong, and nearly bereft of Sorte, preferring to learn the skills of the sword. Morgause's mother was horribly scandalized, of course, but her failure only increased her determination to never make the same mistake again. She took the position at the Diletane to 'do right' by the girls there and her devotion to the Daughters salves her guilt at losing Simona.

Areme Candide

The region known as Areme Candide once contained the most prestigious lands of the Numan Empire. Areme Candide covers the Vodacce coastline from the border with Castille to the east through the peninsula to the tip of the mountains of the Crescent Empire. The land has been divided many times during Vodacce's Great Game, claimed by various Princes and used as a bargaining piece in coup after coup. Currently, Areme Candide contains three

separate Principalities, controlled from east to west by the families Lucani, Villanova and Falisci, respectively. The Areme Candide is a level, sloping land and contains all of the major ports and seaways of Vodacce, as well as the only passage to the islands of the Seven Princes.

Lucani

Ruler: Alberto Lucani

Governor: Fausto Luce del Lucani

Guarre de Puertofino

Population: 27,000

The Lucani provinces are small, but filled with citizens flocking to the two major cities like rats from a sinking ship. A tremendous amount of Castilian emigrés have journeyed from their native land to seek safety in Vodacce, and Guarre de Puertofino is the closest city to Castille. The city itself displays a significant Castilian influence, having once served as the primary port between the ancient lands of Acraga and the growing Numan Republic.

The chamber of government, built just before Numa fell, is Puertofino's most renowned building. It has been constantly updated since completion, most notably in 1516 by the famous Leotano Vincenti. The building is publicly known as the 'Cuore Governo' (Heart of the State), but the citizens call it simply the Rachele, after Leotano Vincenti's lost love. While creating the architectural plans for Cuore Governo, Leotano lost his beloved to a wasting disease. She did not live to see the building completed, and his work was never the same thereafter. A small plaque, engraved by the architect, marks the building's entrance. It reads simply 'For my lost Rachele.' Some say that the building is a testament to love, and that those who are fortunate enough to steal a kiss beneath its dome will be blessed in romance.

The building's curved bays press elegantly into the central domed space — an idea developed from early gothic architecture — but the dome is even more remarkable. The wooden ribs actually carry the lanterns aloft, creating dramatic contrasts of light and shade. The inner roof

becomes a luminous cage of slender ribs over which light cascades; the effect is dramatic and quite striking.

Sant'Andrea

Population: 63,000

Formerly the capital of the Areme Candide lands, Sant'Andrea has a history as old as Numa itself. It was originally known as Speturas, a prominent city-state with a highly warlike culture, which submitted only grudgingly to Numan authority. Today the city has a worldwide reputation for its amazing needlework, currently the rage of Montaigne fashion. The Lucani family holds many balls here, using the resources of the sea to increase its wealth and prestige among the Seven Princes. Indeed, Sant'Andrea is one of the most famous ports in Vodacce, and a popular tourist attraction for visiting foreigners.

Some of the most famous Vodacce ruins lie to the north of Sant'Andrea, possibly dating back before the Numan Empire. Many of these ruins remain unexplored, and Prince Lucani has prohibited any archaeologists from visiting them. Those who wish to venture below the main Speturan ruins must gain permission from the Lucani family. Many similar ruins dot the landscape, some more patrolled than others. All are considered highly dangerous, both due to crumbling architecture and the colonies of crypt ghouls (GMs, see page 121) that call these wasted buildings home.

Lucani island, Gorivari

Population: 83,000

Twinned with Falisci's island, the small city of Gorivari looks out over a thin bay toward Medico, the city of the Falisci family. Bridges once paired the two cities across the waters, but the Great Game has long since destroyed them. Gorivari originally belonged to the Villanova family, and though they have lived here as nobles for some time, the Lucani took control of it only a century ago.

Gorivari exhibits the same Castilian influence which permeates the Lucani cities on the continent. The high structures of the city show a distinct Vodacce cityscape, but the thick walls that surround the port and the wide streets

are far more Castillian than Vodacce. Rope bridges connect Gorivari's heart, spanning terraces and gardens that exist beneath hanging lamps on the tops of high buildings. The Lucani hold nightly revels through the streets of Gorivari as well as within their palatial estates.

One of the most important sites in Gorivari, however, is not a building at all, nor a place of revelry. Locals call it the Perseguita ("Haunting Place"), a mark of black, acid land upon the otherwise beautiful streets of Gorivari. It marks the location where a powerful Fate Witch once cursed the family Lucani. Because of her vengeance, the Sorte practitioners of the Lucani may not use their powers to aid anyone of Lucani blood, lest they be destroyed.

The Perseguita is more than fifty feet across, covered in crumbling marble pillars that once supported a triumphant manorhouse. They now form a strange, misted labyrinth that rejects the sun's warmth even in the heat of the day. The center of the Perseguita can barely be seen from the exterior of the blackened marble strands, and no vegetation grows within the haunted site. Any member of the Lucani family that sets foot in the Perseguita is struck down by a sudden illness, and must retreat or else collapse from repeated seizures. More than a few Gorivari citizens claim to have seen the ghost of the Perseguita: a terrible woman veiled in white, who walks the halls of her once-proud manorhouse and weeps madly for her family's dishonor.

Villanova

Ruler: Giovanni Villanova

Governor: Dimitrius Villanova de la Deus Varna

Porta Serafina

Population: 27,000

Porta Serafina is the heart of the Villanova principality, and the center of her political schemes. Though Giovanni Villanova lives on his sinister island, his cousins, nephews, nieces and other relatives congregate in Porta Serafina. Distance dilutes Giovanni's control here, and his spies are not as efficient as they are in Dionna. Those who plot and scheme to seize control from the ruling Prince come here to

create allies and build family ties. Current governor Dimitrius Villanova de la Deus Varna is a cousin of Giovanni's and his greatest enemy in the family. His spiderweb of infiltrators includes many of Giovanni's most 'trusted' advisors, and some believe that Dimitrius is involved with the Rilasciare to bring about the Prince's downfall.

Besides its ruling family, Porta Serafina is best known for its trade and its effective military. There is no worse place in Vodacce to be a pirate; Dimitrius is renowned for his hatred of buccaneers, and will throw a man in the shackles simply for claiming to be part of the Brotherhood of the Coast.

Bessarion

Population: 67,000

Another coastal metropolis, Bessarion has a strong reputation for its fine horses, its unbridled gambling, and its lascivious nature. One of the 'seedier' cities of Vodacce, it still institutes the time-honored methods of military conscription through press gangs and blackmail. The worst prison in Vodacce stands on a rugged seaside cliff some fifteen miles from the city. It is called 'Il Muro,' the Wall, and many believe that no one has ever escaped it alive. The bodies of those who try are placed on display outside of Bessarion's walls as a warning to others not to defy Prince Villanova. More on Il Muro can be found on pages 117-123 of the *Rilasciare* sourcebook.

Dovunque (Serra Antigone)

Population: 110,000

The Numan city of Serra Antigone was destroyed six hundred years ago by a massive earthquake. Over its crumbling foundation, the new city of Dovunque rose. It lies within a reedy marsh, surrounded by bitter plains of salt water and high grasses. The nearby Yuphades river provides water resources, and a large lake just outside the city's high walls gives opportunity for boating and watersports of all kinds. Ruins of the Numan Empire lie to the east and north, bringing adventurers of all sorts.

Villanova island, Dionna

Population: 167,000

Dionna stands on the smallest island in Vodacce's chain, the headquarters of the infamous Villanova family. Dionna towers impossibly high above the ground, supported by latticework, support beams, and in some cases by Sorte magic. Rope bridges and walkways connect the buildings above the picturesque canals which serve as streets. The shadows are long and deep in Dionna, and hide all manner of skulduggery from the light.

Giovanni maintains several homes throughout the city, including one that only he knows about. His official estate stands at the top of a high mountain, granting him uncontested views of the entire island below. His wife Valentina spends most of her time here, while Giovanni divides his time between the estate and several sumptuous apartments within the city proper.

The famous Dionna University occupies the tallest building on the island. It was allotted space a hundred years ago and has since expanded to fill the entire structure. Students and servants stay on the lower floors while the upper stories contain classrooms, laboratories and quarters for the teachers and administrators. Some of Théah's most groundbreaking medical research takes place here, as Villanova's lack of ethics allows the doctors here to run experiments that other Princes would blanch at. Giovanni pays close attention to developments from the school, and his merchants labor hard to sell the university's discoveries for the glory of their ruler.

Besides its school, Dionna also serves as a colossal trading center, and merchants come from all over Théah looking to trade their goods. Villanova makes a fortune from the high tariffs and levies, but he also welcomes traders who have nowhere else to go. Smuggling is a way of life in Dionna, and the Great Game manifests itself in myriad deadly ways. A full-time crew is employed to fish bodies out of the canals every morning.

Falisci

Ruler: Donello Falisci

Governor: Meander Verde de Falisci

Emelia

Population: 55,000

Emelia serves as the capital of Falisci's provinces, hosting the government organs as well as one of the largest wineries in Théah. The governor of the inland provinces, Meander Berde de Falisci, lives here, as well as his staff of advisors. He is completely loyal to Donello, and believes that the caring young man could be exactly what Vodacce needs. He is also the brother of the famed schoolmistress Denizia Verde della Vestini, of Dilatente in the city of Serine.

Emelia has recently seen an influx of refugees, seeking asylum from the tyranny of nearby Villanova territory. Numerous peasants sneak into Emilia from Dovunque, using rafts and other conveyances to flee down the Yuphades river. Governor Meander is uncertain what to do about these 'rebels'. They cannot be forced to return to their homes, but keeping them is dangerous, and risks war with Villanova. Throughout the Arene Candide, the tales of Donello's kindness and clever politics brings him allies among the common man — and enemies among the nobles. Of one thing Meander is certain: if Villanova attacks the Falisci territories, Emilia will be the first to fall.

Casigula Rosa

Population: 22,000

Casigula Rosa stands at the source of the Yuphades river, where it once served as the capital city of the Arene Candide. Rising high over the surrounding plains, its natural defenses have been augmented by using the river's natural curve to isolate her gates from any prominent land mass. The city can only be entered by one bridge — a bridge of such wonder and grandeur that even the architects of the Seven Isles have not been able to reproduce it. The Span, as it is called, stretches nearly a mile, rising from the plains and up toward the high cliff



wall, over a glistening waterfall, and through an arched gate of stone, ending at the city's fine golden gates.

Some scholars have called Casigula Rosa the "City of Angels", and ancient texts mention the bridge as one of the wonders of the world. It was built from solid, grey stone, as thick as three carriages and wide enough to easily accommodate five horsemen side by side. Slanted walls, barely a foot high, maintain the outer edges of the flying roadway. Fate Witches who walk across the Span become uneasy and sick, perhaps reacting to the strange twist of fate that keeps the mighty bridge aloft.

Estivo della Verde

Population: 59,000

One of the southernmost ports of Vodacce, Estivo della Verde contains a wide harbor with many places to dock. Caves and caverns riddle the nearby seashore, dangerous places to sail but filled with a multitude of fish. After being launched from Estivo della Verde, ships sail around the horn of the Falisci peninsula as a sort of baptism by fire. Those which succeed their initial test serve in the Falisci merchant fleet (the closest thing to a navy in Vodacce) or are sold to one of the Seven Princes. Estivo is the most fortified port in Vodacce, and its shipbuilders are the finest in the nation.

Falisci island, Medico

Population: 97,000

Twinned with Lucani's island and matching the small city of Gorivari across a thin bay, Medico has become quite a hub of politics and fashion. Visitors come from as far away as Avalon to enjoy Falisci hospitality, and the Montaigne nobility have a considerable community here. Once, a series of strong bridges paired the two cities across the rippling but shallow waters, but they have since been destroyed.

The city of Medico is a large, sprawling mass of twisted roads and elaborate canals. It uses dams and canals carved into the stone beneath the city to hold back the sea water. In order to create more room, areas of granite beneath larger buildings have been dug out, creating a new 'subterranean' city filled with the poor, the diseased, and the crawling masses of humanity. Like a trap-door spider's nest, Medico hides its refuse deep beneath the ground, laboring to create underground roads and waterways to irrigate and create sewage movement out of the city.

Teramo

Terramo is the only region of Vodacce ruled by a single Prince, not chopped into pieces and divided among several rulers. The descendants of the Gallili have always controlled

Teramo, and with the powerful Bernoulli family dominating its political and martial scene, it is unlikely ever to fall. The region contains the majority of the Palo de Olimpia mountains, including Mount Olimpia, the crest of the range. It borders the Crescent Empire to the east, and touches the Forbidden Sea at its southern point. It is a mountainous, rugged region with little natural agriculture. Caverns and catacombs dot the mountains of the Palo de Olimpia, and enterprising adventurers have died within its twisting corridors and canyons. Legends say that the gold stores of Numa lie somewhere in the mountains, forgotten when the Empire fell. There seems to be no truth to this rumor, but that doesn't stop dozens of mercenaries and explorers from vanishing into the mountain range each year.

Bernoulli

Ruler: Gespucci Bernoulli

Governor: Denis and Albano Bernoulli

Mount Olimpia

Population: 43,000

Mount Olimpia is said to be one of the most visited tourist cities in Théah. Revered as the seat of ancient learning, scholars such as Ditophanes, Scarovese and others all came to Olimpia to learn at the feet of their masters, creating a tradition of public education and pilgrimage. Today, Olimpia serves both as the center of northern government, and as the home of Denis Bernoulli, a minor member of the Bernoulli line. Although Denis is a poor ruler, the city survives on tradition and ancient law, punishing the unruly with harsh Numan justice.

Porto Spatia

Population: 51,000

The southernmost city of the Teramo region, Porto Spatia rests on the tip of the Vodacce seashore, its docks filled with traders from Montaigne, Castille, and the Crescent Empire. It is woefully undertended, ruled by the hedonistic Albano Bernoulli who cares more about his own pleasure than

governing effectively. The city guards are nearly all corrupt, and gangs rule the streets between the wharf and the common citizenry. Despite all that, Porto Spatia's coffers overflow with Crescent money and trade. The city officials live to keep illegal business alive, and often trade with Crescent merchants for opium, silks, and other rare goods.

The massive St. Baldarrazzo monastery dominates travel on the plains north of the city. Its black walls shine imposingly in the sunlight, and the small streams that dot the plains nearby are always cold and clear. The Bernoulli family spends a great deal of money to keep the Vaticine Church in power, which repays that money with vigilance — and indulgence. Though the monastery is near Porto Spatia, the Vaticine have never tried to stop the open trading with the Crescents, or curb the rampant sinning within the city's walls. The Bernoullis pay well for the church to turn a blind eye, and they expect a return on their investment.

Jesalute

Population: 27,000

Many monks of the Vaticine come to Jesalute to begin pilgrimages to the east, hoping to convert the pagans of the Crescent Empire through faith and devout prayer. The Abbey of St. Giovanna, located in the center of town, serves as a center for missionaries and other travelers into the forbidden lands. Despite their conviction, few return from the Empire, and those who do tell tales of dragons, rakshasha, were-beasts and sirens who walk on land. Preposterous tales flow through the Jesalute, making it seem like a gateway to insanity, perched on the edge of the burning eastern lands.

The city itself has few exceptional qualities, save for the influence of Crescent architects on its low-domed buildings. It makes for an unusual landscape, with pagan mosques dotting the terrain beneath high baroque churches and delicate Vodacce architecture. Tall buildings and a few canalways and bridges span the River of St. Giovanna that flows through the city, and the docks are dominated by merchant sailors in the pay of the Bernoulli.

Bernoulli island, Amozare

Population: 115,000

Amozare is a small, compact city filled with high buildings and arched passages high above city streets. Water flows not only through the canals in the center of the city, but high above — lifted through fountains and water pipes (a Bernoulli secret that the other Princes have yet to crack). The Bernoulli archipelago is shallow, allowing for unusual tricks of architecture. Small, flat plains dot the water like scattered bread, tied together through cunning architecture and tremendous bridges. Few today can place exactly where one island ends and another begins, though the distance between land masses is sometimes as large as a half-mile. Buildings rise out of the water itself, creating the illusion of dry land where none exists.

Prince Bernoulli maintains a marvelous dock in Amozare, which allows his private ship to sail directly into the city's heart through a private channel. The masts fit perfectly within the spread architecture, disturbing no bridges or buildings, and allowing the ship itself to dock directly against the lowest floors of the Bernoulli palace. Several Vaticine churches dot the cityscape, each built with Bernoulli funds and celebrating a patron saint of the family's lineage.

Numa

Population: 430,000

Numa, the ancient heart of the Numan Empire, now stands as both a testament to that glorious past and a tribute to the future of the Vaticine Church. Five of the Cardinals of Théah preside over the city, making the Church in Numa the sole source of power. The Church also controls the land for a hundred miles in every direction, keeping order in its province with the Vaticine guards. Even the Seven Princes consider this land sacred, sacrosanct, and revered.

The city itself is tremendous, larger than any other in Vodacce. It has developed expanding circles of architecture over the centuries: the outer city has a very modern feel, while the inner 'rings' are increasingly primitive, ranging

from Gothic architecture to simple Numan columns and structures. Ruins of ancient Numa still stand in the center, including the tremendous Hippodromos Magnificens, a stone racecourse which once could hold a quarter-million screaming spectators, and dwarfs even modern buildings.

Numa is ruled by a council of five Cardinals who have full autonomy from the Seven Princes of Vodacce. For seven hundred years the city served as the head of the Vaticine church, and though the seat of the Hierophant moved to Castille following the Hieros War of the 11th century, much of its apparatus still remains. The Cardinals still use the numerous Vaticine buildings and Vodacce peasants unable to go to Castille make pilgrimages here to see the streets where the First Prophet walked.

Although the Cardinals nominally separate Numa from the politics of the noble houses, they closely follow the Princes' actions and laws. Numa must keep the peace, and the Five Cardinals work hard to maintain its neutrality and hallowed existence. Numa remains the official capital of Vodacce, where the Seven Princes convene to discuss national business and regional law. The Cardinals ensure that such meetings remain civil, and disobedient Princes run the risk of excommunication if they trifle with the Vaticines here.

All the peasants and locals work for the Vaticine Church and its support structure; all grain raised in the Numan territories goes to feed the monks of the church, and all craftsmen donate their time and energy in tithe to the Vaticine. Taxes are light; tithes are heavy, but all in all, Numa is a nice place to life — if you are devout.

With the recent death of the Hierophant, the Cardinals have begun contemplating a new structure to encourage his successor to make Numa a permanent residence. If this should occur, the glory and grandeur of Numa would reach new heights, and possibly rival the days of the Empire. With the Hierophant dwelling within the city, the Seven Princes would be forced to stop their increasing pressure on Numan politics and respect the city's autonomy.

One of the most powerful men in Numa is Cardinal Teodoro Ciosa, a staunchly religious patriarch whose word

typically carries the Numan Forum. He is well respected and increasingly devout, and even his enemies cannot find any skeletons in his closet. Rumors state that he has produced numerous miracles such as healing the sick and awakening the blind to sight, and there is a petition before the Church to canonize him immediately upon his death. Teodoro only smiles when he hears of such things — he does not seek fame. "Theus rewards his true sons," he often says, and will speak no more of it.

Other Cardinals of Numa include Ernesto Denzelli de Bernoulli, a powerful supporter of Numan independence and the brother of Prince Gespucci Bernoulli; and Benedetto St. Vito of the Manutan region, who has a past shrouded in mystery. Benedetto was serving in the monastery in Elena when he witnessed the miracle of a dead man brought back to life. Details are sketchy, but since that day, Benedetto has remained in strict silence, trusting to his aides and formal letters to voice his will. They say that the young monk traded his voice for the life of the other man, and that if he speaks another word, the man and the entire monastery at Elena will certainly die. He strongly supports Vodacce art and culture, and frequently sponsors promising young artists who use their skills to glorify Theus and the Prophets.

The fourth Cardinal of Numa is Carouso della Spada Lucani, a staunch supporter of the Lucani family and an outspoken proponent of both returning the Hierophant to Numa, and of many more modern — some might say heretical — changes to the Church's doctrine. The fifth Cardinal of Numa is Michel Durand del Falisci, the only brother of the ruling Prince Donello Falisci. Some claim that Michel involves himself too much with the politics of Montaigne, but despite his unusual Montaigne name and heritage, Michel is entirely Vodacce. He works closely with Cardinal Erika Durkheim (see the *Montaigne* book, pages 58–59 and 108) and has even sent a number of passionate letters to *l'Empereur*, insisting that the monarch allow the Vaticine Church to return to his country. Many Montaigne refugees have come to Michel for help, and he has aided them in their escape from *l'Empereur's* religious tyranny.

Culture

"What else means their trumpets and their bells, their horns and their flutes, but a shout to the others: 'Come, hangmen! come, cultures! I do not fear!'"

— Scarovese

The culture of Vodacce is rich and diverse, blending ancient culture with modern vice. The Princes are rich, powerful and dangerous, consumed with the need to increase their power and holdings no matter what the expense. Even the common man displays this sense of 'my own right' (captured by the Vodacce phrase, *'Mi destro'*), using their skills and abilities to increase in power as best they can.

The pomp and display with which Vodacce creates the illusion of pleasant wealth are perhaps more integral to the culture than a casual observer may think. The Vodacce philosopher Scarovese wrote a treatise on his Princes of Vodacce, entitled *Means to Ends*. The work became an instructional text for the nobles of Vodacce, teaching them how best to increase their power and educating them on the 'Great Game' (Scarovese's term for political maneuvering). The castle of the tyrant, as pictured by Scarovese, is lofty and solitary, full of dungeons and listening-tubes, the home of cruelty and misery. Misfortune befalls all who enter the service of the despot, who himself becomes an object of pity. He must be the enemy of all good and honest men: he can trust no one and can read in the faces of his subjects the expectation of his fall. Yet the Vodacce princes abhor this image of tyranny, instead creating the illusion of delicacy, of richness and opulence, and using thin strands to destroy large bridges. Vodacce culture, influenced by their iron grasp, can only bow and follow suit.

Government

Vodacce has no national government, only the seven Princes who meet intermittently to discuss policy. Beyond that, they each rule their principalities with absolute authority, governing their territory as they see fit. With the

Lord's Hand

In medieval times, a schism arose in Vodacce between the ethical tenets of the Church and the ugly realities of the Great Game. Servants ordered to kill their Prince's enemies or commit other harsh acts often refused, fearful of committing a mortal sin and being sent to Legion's flames when they died. Over time, a system arose whereby the Prince himself would take responsibility (both secular and theological) for his underlings' activities. Servants received special writs, signed by a Cardinal, which stated that they were absolved of any sins they committed in the name of their Prince. Thus, leaders could keep loyalty in their ranks without endangering the souls of those beneath them.

Today, it serves more as a legal license than a religious reassurance, permitting servants to conduct their lord's business without fear of personal reprisal. The writs are known as "Lord's Hands" and can be issued to any servant a Prince sees fit. Countless favors have been bought and sold in pursuit of these writs.

addition of Church-run Numa, it effectively makes eight different governments working within Vodacce's borders.

The Princes themselves rule with absolute power. Their word is law and they can institute whatever policies they see fit. They can afford no less: any loss of authority translates to weakness in the eyes of their rivals. A Prince who cannot maintain his rule will never last in the Great Game.

Below the Princes comes a bewildering array of councils, officials, and governing bureaucracies. They do the laborious work of governing: drafting laws for the Prince's approval, levying taxes, and enforcing criminal codes. Most political appointments come from the Prince or his immediate relatives, and serve as bargaining chips in the Great Game. In addition to the Prince's own blood relatives, numerous minor noble families — beholden to the ruling house — can be found beneath his thumb. They form the backbone of the Vodacce court, and occupy most of the bureaucratic positions within a given domain.

In the island cities, the government concerns itself mainly with controlling merchant trade and maintaining order in the streets. Since the Prince can usually supervise their activities personally, they must adhere to strict rules of governing, and often find their power limited to certain carefully defined areas. Their policies understandably reflect the personalities of the ruling Prince, from gentle and tolerant to fiercely draconian. A Prince's personal house guard often polices his city, enforcing the laws and defending the populace from the rare external threat.

On the mainland, the government has a little more leeway. The Princes assign governors to rule their mainland territory, who may generally act as they see fit, provided they get results. Beneath them lie a series of territories and city-states, many with governments dating back to the Old Empire. Some of these territories work under a republican system, with governing councils elected by the area's landholders. Others operate under an oligarchy of merchant's guilds, as each prominent business sends a member to help rule. Quite a few belong to minor noble families, who rule them as semi-feudal fiefs. Each governor — and his lieutenants beneath him — controls this patchwork system as best he can, using the Prince's authority and *condottieri* (mercenaries) to keep the more unruly territories in line.

These are all generalities, of course. Each Prince has a different way of doing things, and the governing systems beneath them are as varied and byzantine as everything else in this country. In addition, the Great Game often blurs the line between one territory and the next, as repercussions of Princely maneuvers are felt in the institutions beneath them. Like everything else in Vodacce, government is a complicated web, requiring finesse, subtlety and more than a little ruthlessness to navigate successfully.

Numa and the surrounding territory is controlled by the Church, and the five Vodacce Cardinals oversee a burgeoning theocracy there. More on their rule can be found in the description of Numa on page 14 and in the Religion section on page 60.

Other Nations

Nothing in Vodacce is simple, not least their relations with other countries. The battle between the Seven Princes takes place on many grounds, and it is always better to destroy something that isn't yours than to hold a war on your own fields. The only groups that the Vodacce publicly dislike are the Ussurans and the Vesten (with whom the Vodacce currently have a trade war); the rest are either allies to be won, resources to dominate, or markets to exploit.

Officially, the Vodacce want nothing to do with the Avalon, who have spurned the Vaticine Church, and since the Montaigne invasion of Castille, they rarely open their arms to *l'Empereur* or his followers. Yet the Vodacce maintain open trade relations with both nations, ignoring their distaste long enough to conduct business with them.

Montaigne's refusal to support the Vaticine Church has struck a terrible blow to their relations with Vodacce. However, instead of simply cutting them off, the Vodacce charge Montaigne merchants three times the normal price to exchange their goods in Vodacce ports. Most courtiers believe that the Vodacce princes secretly support Castillian freedom, and ship supplies and arms to that beleaguered nation. The Vodacce wish to use the Montaigne war to force the seat of Vaticine power to return to Vodacce. Once the Castillian people have agreed, Vodacce will most likely support their nation and her fight for freedom more openly.

Eisen is a metaphor in Vodacce: a sign of what happens to thoughtless rulers who do not care well for their power. Eisen's ruined fields and scattered nobility seems to be a deliberate blow from Theus, something the Vodacce desperately want to avoid in their own country. Since Eisen fell, the Vaticine has seen its yearly tithes raise by as much as 10%. Beyond that, Vodacce considers Eisen a staunch ally, and cheerfully supplies money and equipment to those Eisen mercenaries willing to work for Vodacce causes.

Vodacce's relations with Ussura are shaky. There is much opportunity for war between the two nations; differences of religion and sorcery cause strife in their political negotiations, and both nations compete for trade (however limited) with the Cathayans and the Crescent Empire.

Ussura moves warily around Vodacce, always watching the Princes for signs of hostility.

However, the only country with whom Vodacce publicly engages in warfare is Vendel and its league of merchants. They fight this war not with cannon and musket, but with coinage and trade agreements... though a layman might be hard-pressed to tell the difference. Vodacce ships sometimes even deal openly with the Vestenmannavjnar Raiders in an effort to stymie their rivals. The destruction of the Vendel League is the one unifying goal among the Seven Princes, and they never allow the Great Game to interfere with that goal... or so they say. However, their unification will most likely last only until one of the Princes suffers a permanent economic or military loss to the Vendel — and then the wolves of Vodacce will turn on their own once more.

The People

Vodacce social structures are heavily stratified, with societal roles strictly defined and closely monitored. The Vodacce learn to know their place and obey those above them. At the same time, the Great Game thrives on ambition — on men and women aspiring beyond their appointed station. The Vodacce renaissance allowed merchants and craftsmen to attain new status and the Princes have always based their power on personal prowess rather than noble title. While class divisions remain as firm as ever, there's nothing to say that a clever man can't transcend them through his own ingenuity.

There is nothing the Vodacce respect more than strength: strength of will, strength of conviction, strength of arms. The last man standing is always right, and no one ever backs down from a challenge. That strength — in whatever form it takes — is matched by an equal amount of pride; the Vodacce work hard for their accomplishments and aren't afraid to trumpet them when the situation warrants. Both of these traits find a natural extension in the Great Game, which provides the means for the most cunning (or ruthless) to excel while providing an ample showcase for their success.

They also enjoy fighting, both figuratively and literally. While duels to the death are relatively infrequent, non-lethal fights take place every day. Almost every Vodacce male has a scar from a sword- or knife-fight, and brawls regularly punctuate tavern life. The Vodacce also like to argue and can hold combative verbal stances for hours on end. Some businesses practically shut down while haggling with a stubborn customer, and nobles delight in debating the finer points of philosophy.

Vodacce honor plays an large role in the national character, lending focus to their accomplishments and providing a more noble type of strength. Men place a great deal of importance on their word, and never break a promise once they give it. Furthermore, friendship matters a great deal to the Vodacce, and loyalty (if you have it) is more valuable than gold. Other nations look at the Great Game and scoff at such ideas, but the Vodacce treat them very seriously. Of course, they also define their honor in rigid terms, and sometimes adhere to the letter of their intent without considering the spirit. This allows them to maintain their honor — and their pride — while playing the Great Game.

More on Vodacce honor can be found in Chapter 4, pages 91.

The Cymbr

"I am not a Bernoulli man, nor a Villanova man, nor a Falisci man. I am simply a man. Nothing more."

— Arusado, of the Cymbr

Dancing among the villages and towns of Vodacce are an unusual group of people who claim no residency among any of the Seven Princes. The Cymbr can best be described as wanderers, and loners whose wares are labor and design.

Vodacce Cymbr have nothing to do with the nomads of northern Théah, nor do they claim any lineage or linked ancestry. Instead, the Cymbr are staunchly Vodacce — but consider themselves regional or national subjects rather than citizens of any principality or province. They represent a denomination of little minorities scattered throughout Vodacce. Major Cymbr communities winter below the



Qry

mountains of Palo Olimpia, or in the abbeys of the Vaticine. They trade labor for food and shelter, and use their natural skills as craftsmen and handymen rather than establishing a permanent residence. A few more permanent Cymbr villages exist in the Falisci and Vestini lands; Luserna, Belluno and Udine are three of the most well-known. These villages rarely house more than 500 individuals at any given time, and within six months, the entire population may have changed as Cymbr travel in and out of the area.

Though there are general conventions common to the Cymbri, few outside of their lineage know how they identify each other. They use colored patchwork (motley) flags to identify villages or confederations, and they use a peculiar dialect of Vodacce which integrates a significant amount of the ancient Théan tongue. The original Cymbri people are said to be Numan refugees, interbred with Crescent warriors who remained behind when the Crusades struck Vodacce. Other breeds, mostly from Eisen and farther north, also joined their ranks in recent centuries.

The Cymbri welcome good wood-cutters and carpenters, because such workers already know how to sell their labor. Cymbri rarely trust outsiders, who find it difficult to gain permission to travel with their people or visit one of their villages. They are somewhat mistrustful of nobility, and as such, keep their secrets close. However, they do have a strong sense of Vodacce honor, and when a man has proven his worth, the Cymbri fight for him unquestioningly.

The Three Women of Vodacce

Old peasants say that there are three women in Vodacce. In a sense, this is true. First, there are the Fate Witches, the ruling class behind the veil of the women's world. All other females must respect them out of fear of their sorcery, and all men realize that they hold destiny in their hands. Though uneducated and kept behind stone walls, they have more power than the rest of Vodacce put together.

Second, there are the courtesans. Though not as powerful as the Fate Witches, they have their own ways of exercising control. Unlike Fate Witches, they may learn to read, and

many of them have educations which rival those of their male consorts. Their power is more transitory, but also more public; men are willing to listen to a courtesan on matters of mathematics or alchemy, but when a courtesan loses her beauty, she often loses her audience.

Third, there are the *Senzavista*, the 'Sightless' daughters of the noble class. These women suffer more than any other group, being neither a Fate Witch nor a courtesan. They do not receive the respect of Fate Witches, nor are they educated, as are courtesans. Often, a *Senzavista* becomes part of a Fate Witch sister's dowry — a 'second wife.' Vodacce society refers to these extra wives as the *Vedova*. True Fate Witches are never second wives — they wouldn't stand for the insult. However, the *Senzavista* rarely have a choice. Without magic and without educational advantages, they have little else to offer in Vodacce society. On occasion, a courtesan is taken as a *Vedova*, but when this happens she must give up her previous life, dress as a wife and become completely subservient to the ruling Fate Witch of the nobleman she marries. Such instances are rare — limited mostly to courtesans whose beauty has begun to fade — and few courtesan *Vedova* live through the ordeal. Fate is never kind to the *Vedova*.

The Dilatente

In Serine, on Vestini island, lies a small finishing school for Fate Witches known as the Dilatente. Not every noble Vodacce daughter has the opportunity to attend this school. The Seven Princes watch the school carefully, to ensure that women who attend learn only 'womanly duties' such as cooking, running the house and attending to their husband's needs. However, many Fate Witches know that beneath the "traditional" lessons, the Dilatente contains opportunities to learn more than their station allows.

The Dilatente continues to exist beneath the law on the assumption that Fate Witches there never learn to read or write — they cannot be classically educated, or their lives will be forfeit. However, Vodacce law does not say that Fate Witches cannot be read to, and thus, many noble daughters who attend the Dilatente understand more than they allow others to know. They receive lessons on basic arithmetic,

literature and science, along with “traditional” feminine. Fate Witches hold sewing classes at nearby libraries, where they quietly listen to those who may study. The libraries encourage reading aloud, and many courtesans who are willing to assist the cause of women throughout Vodacce find themselves sent to ‘study’ in Serine.

The most promising young girls at the Dilatente receive secret opportunities beyond even these. Late at night, when the Princes’ spies are asleep, they sneak out of the school disguised as courtesans, then travel to the libraries to indulge in forbidden fruit. Their gaudy dresses deflect suspicion, leaving them free to read whatever they wish. Signora Vestini herself oversees the girls, and rarely allows more than two or three a semester to participate in these “extracurricular activities” (more than that would draw suspicion). Still, her efforts have ensured that dozens of Vodacce Fate Witches know far more about the world than their husbands believe.

Tessatore

The enormous power of Sorte necessitates some kind of regulation, over and above the social restrictions placed on its practitioners. The Fate Witches themselves have a ruling council, if you can call them such, called the Tessatore (the word means “Weavers”): the oldest and most powerful Atropos in Vodacce. Elderly and reserved, they serve as a bastion of culture and tradition, and strongly oppose changes to society. When a Fate Witch breaks the cultural rules of Vodacce, the Princes must consult the Tessatore to determine punishment. Usually, they allow the men to dispense justice as they see fit, but if the guilty Witch resists for some reason, the Tessatore take matters into their own hands. They alter the threads and change fate to drive the renegade mad, destroy those close to her, or worse. Discipline at the hands of the Tessatore is always severe, and often lethal.

The Tessatore meet only rarely, but each city has its own inner circle. There are no hard rules to joining the council; when you belong, you’ll know. Even the Seven Princes are afraid of the Tessatore, though they would never say it aloud. These are the most powerful Atropos Sorte users, the

empress dowagers of the Vodacce nation, and the keepers of law and order in the women’s world.

They are not to be trifled with — even by a man.

Nunneries

When a woman becomes engaged in Vodacce, she receives two choices by her father: marry the man he chooses for her, or retire to a nunnery and spend the rest of her life in contemplation of Theus and his glory. Although few true Fate Witches accept this secondary fate, daughters born with no magic — who would otherwise become their sister’s Vedova — often become Vodacce nuns.

Nunneries occupy a strange ‘in-between’ place in Vodacce politics. The women there do not belong to the women’s world, nor are they part of the Great Game, but they have not been forgotten. They spend their days praying or participating in various Vaticine charities. Women in nunneries may never leave the monastery grounds, but those who live beneath the Prophets’ gaze are allowed to speak freely with one another, and even learn to read — but only from the books of Theus, and only to further the cause of the Church. Too often, a true Fate Witch joins a nunnery, raising the fearsome prospect of sorcery and education occupying the same slight form.

To counter this, the Church has placed severe restrictions on its nuns. Fate Witches who join the Vaticine Church must swear a powerful oath never to use their sorcery. If they are discovered using Sorte, or even suspected of such, they are burned at the stake as heretics. The risks are monumental, but the reward is also high. To a Fate Witch, the prospect of an education — even a restricted one under the eyes of the Church — carries enough enticements to take the chance.

Courtesans

Courtesan training is the most rigorous educational pursuit in Vodacce — more, even than the education of the noble males. A good courtesan must be able to converse on an amazing variety of topics, from politics to mathematics, sailing to sporting pursuits. They must be entertaining, witty,

clever and beautiful. Those who fail find themselves in poor jennyhouses, entertaining sailors and traveling adventurers. Those who succeed can rule an entire island at the side of a noble Prince.

The difference between triumph and tragedy hangs on a razor’s edge. A wrong word and an otherwise perfect courtesan might find herself bearing the brunt of a nobleman’s anger, or purchased by an irate admirer who beats her for ignoring him. Worst of all, she might be bought by a man who has no interest in her, but will use her pain and suffering to torture more her more admiring suitors. The life of a courtesan is dangerous — and if she isn’t careful, short.

However, it works the other way as well. A skilled courtesan can find a nobleman who will do anything for her. She can crush his spirit and claim his soul, leaving him a puppet dancing on her strings. Then she becomes the true ruler of his lands and provinces — and she has the wit, education, and skill to do it. Courtesans play a dangerous game, but they play it to win.

Courtesans typically come from the peasant class, or are sold into the courtesan’s guild by a minor noble father eager to make money from his daughter rather than paying for a dowry he cannot afford. No woman with Sorte (and the tests are rigorous) may become a courtesan, and noble-born Senzavista are rarely allowed to become part of the guild. Such a woman might have Sorte, despite what the tests say, and nobleman never trust courtesans descended from another house. After all, she might be loyal to her line of origin, and thus a traitor to him.

In addition to the other risks, courtesans must always protect themselves from their most dangerous rivals: the Fate Witches. Fate Witches have the power of Sorte, the ability to change destiny. If they learn the true identity of their husband’s lover, they may become jealous and vindictive. The lucky courtesans they simply kill. The unlucky ones go mad or find their fortunes stripped from them by the power of Sorte. Courtesans are taught a number of ways to hide their true names, identities and appearances, and are often masters of disguise and subtlety.

A pliant man makes things easier, and many courtesans take powerful lovers solely to protect them from Fate Witch machinations.

Runaways

Vodacce women do not all obey the laws of society. Some try to escape their fate, fleeing the Seven Princes and trying to make a life for themselves outside the country. Woe, indeed, to the family of such a woman, for they will often be scorned, jailed, and even tortured in an attempt to coerce the runaway to return. Many Vodacce swordsmen specialize in hunting down errant Fate Witches or Senzavista, and bringing them to ‘justice’ by Vodacce laws. Such brigands typically carry the personal word of a Prince, and have leave to return these freewomen to Vodacce. Once returned, the trial is typically swift, and the verdict is always the same: execution by burning.

Economy

Though blessed with fairly abundant natural resources, Vodacce’s economic strength stems primarily from its merchants. The Princes’ merchant fleets traverse the globe in search of new markets, while their proximity to the Crescent Empire gives them access to strange and wondrous materials. Vodacce craftsmen are among the most renowned in Théah, and provide the Princes with countless durable goods for trade. The Princes themselves add to the mix with cunning tariffs and trade agreements, and moneychangers receive extravagant amounts to control the exchange of foreign coins. The result has left Vodacce’s economy an uncontested powerhouse.

Recently, however, that has begun to change. Incursions from the Vendel League have grown more aggressive of late, and Vodacce’s tangled politics have prevented the Princes from responding as quickly as they could. Though they still maintain a stranglehold over southern Théah’s economy, their traditional dominance is slowly weakening. If they do not act soon, the Princes may sacrifice their greatest strength to the upstart newcomers from Kirk.

Vodacce's primary currency is the brass *republic*, a throwback to the days of the Old Empire. Several Princes also use copper *senators*, which equal one half of a republic. Republics are broken down into copper *sedilo* or seats; there are ten *sedilo* to a republic and five *sedilo* to a senator. Both *sedilo* and republics are exchangeable for Guilders, but only through a professional moneychanger — one 'sanctioned' by the Seven Princes, of course. Such an exchange rarely is in favor of those who come from outside the country; typically a good exchange rate is five Guilders to one *sedilo*. The Vendel respond by offering a set exchange rate of 1.5 republics for a single Guilder, which cuts into the clout of Vodacce currency abroad.

The primary function of the moneychangers, however, is to ensure that precious-metal money stays out of the Vodacce economy. The profligate Lucani family was the first to institute an all-base-metal coinage, but the other families quickly followed suit. Soon it was illegal to spend silver or gold in most principalities, and money-changing shops

Vodacce and the Swordsman's Guild

Most Théan countries have outlawed duels, leaving them to the Swordsman's Guild. Not so Vodacce. Duels take place here on a daily basis, and no one has the slightest intention of limiting them to Swordsmen alone. Most Vodacce noblemen have trained in Ambrogia or other schools, making the *de facto* members of the Guild. Such large numbers make the Guild's rule about challenging other members unconscionably restrictive — if everyone's a Swordsman, then no one can issue a proper challenge. Most Vodacce pay the Guild lip service at best.

The Guild itself once considered issuing sanctions against the country, but thought better of it after an incident involving Giovanni Villanova. The black Prince killed a rival in a public duel, and the Guild sent ten skilled Swordsmen to collect grievances from him. He mails pieces of them back to their headquarters from time to time, as a reminder to stay out of Vodacce business. The Guild has taken the hint, and leaves the country to conduct duels as it sees fit.

sprang up like toadstools after a rain. This increased the Princes' revenues (thanks to their cuts of the money-changing shops' "nominal change fees") and also increased the amount of gold and silver available for international trade — and for decorating one's palace. Naturally, the Princes were incompletely delighted when the Vendel Guilds took this idea one step further, designating paper instead of metal as the means of exchange and extending it to all the currencies on the continent. It remains to be seen if they can adapt to this new financial threat.

Architecture

Where other countries tout their playwrights or scientists, the Vodacce boast of the magnificent architectural styles created within their borders. The transition from late Gothic architecture to the "baroque" style of the Théan renaissance varies from country to country. Some nations, such as Montaigne and Vodacce, developed this sense of style and taste long before others. Others, such as Ussura, have never developed it at all.

Within Vodacce, there have always been classical buildings (or at least ruins) in common use. Because of their familiarity with and contempt for such structures, the Vodacce architects never developed the Gothic style to the extent that other countries did. Instead, they created an entirely new system, patterning their architectural style after that industrious builder, the spider.

The baroque style in architecture uses space fluently. Rather than thick columns and arches, Vodacce architects use slender strands and twisting iron. Subtlety, rather than imposing strength, became the catch phrase for buildings of note. Baroque architecture incorporates painting, sculpture and stucco decoration to create a movement of space. Vivid colors, hidden light sources, and luxurious materials tried to fool the senses. Paintings of clouds and starlight on wide, vaulted ceilings trigger a simulated view of heaven.

The general characteristics of baroque art include a sense of movement, energy, and tension (whether real or implied). Strong contrasts of light and shadow often enhance

dramatic effects. Originally created in the reconstruction of Dionna University after an earthquake shook the island some 60 years ago, the baroque style immediately took hold and swept through Vodacce like wildfire. Spirituality, immediacy, and individualism, are all frequently present in baroque art. One easily recognizes a baroque façade due to the multi-layering of columns. Statues are placed into a niche in the wall, integrated directly into the structure.

The structure of baroque buildings integrates them seamlessly into their surrounding environment. Vodacce buildings often merge into the streets that surround them, and a church may artfully twist into the garden of a nearby manorhouse. All parts of baroque architecture form to create a fluid whole — like a great, ever-expanding web of some colossal spider.

The Spread Of Baroque

As the baroque style spread outwards from Vodacce, it underwent modification in each of the countries to which it migrated. Different tastes and outlooks altered the delicacy of the original creative style, and true baroque merged with local traditions. In some areas it became more extravagant (notably in the fervent religious atmosphere of Castille) and in others it was toned down to suit more conservative tastes. But nowhere on the continent is there a more 'pure' baroque style than in Vodacce.

The Montaigne call the baroque style 'rococo' and facilitated its greatest expression in the service of the monarchy. *L'Empereur* Leon XIV realized the importance of the arts as a propaganda medium, and his palace at Charouse — with its grandiose combination of architecture, sculpture, painting, decoration, and gardens — represents one of the supreme examples of baroque fusion of the arts.

Catacombs

While baroque masterpieces soar above the ground, architecture of an entirely different sort lurks beneath it. The Vodacce islands hold a massive network of caverns and catacombs, which the Vodacce have put to good use. The basements of their towering buildings hold storerooms, hidden passages, and tunnels carved out of the catacombs.

Smugglers and other criminals broker secret deals within these passages, and some cities even use them as housing for the poor and destitute. They mostly serve as crypts, however, to inter the city's dead. With little space for cemeteries on the land above, the catacombs make perfect tombs for the dead. Peasants and other citizens are usually interred in communal crypts, stacked side by side in crude stone coffins. The more prosperous can afford proper vaults and noble families often have private crypts placed just beneath their opulent estates.

The deepest caverns run far below sea level and have been known to flood during particularly high tides. Although some archaeologists have expressed a desire to study the formations below Vodacce, the flooding makes their work exceedingly difficult. In addition, the sinister creatures known as crypt ghouls often haunt the catacombs, feeding on the carrion there and any interlopers unlucky enough to cross their path.

Art

Like its architecture, Vodacce art is dominated by the baroque style, following the 1563 Vaticine call for art that would instruct and cultivate piety. After the Hierophant's death, this call has become stronger, and the church has supported art as a means of restoring the faith of the people as well as exalting the glory of Theus. Some of the first and most influential artists to undertake a systematic reform of the prevailing style were members of the Carducci family. Vodacce painter Sonya Carducci, a poor craftswoman, rose to prominence after her art showed true greatness. She supposedly developed the ideal baroque manner, and many Vodacce noblewomen have turned their skills to painting, music, and other feminine arts in her memory.

Today, famous artists such as the bold swashbuckler Guido Reni; the handsome and stylish Domenico Zampieri della Villanova (called 'Domenichino' by his adoring fans); and Francesco Alban, the 'sinister poet' of southern Vodacce, all strongly influence the country's artistic climate. Other countries send their own baroque artists to the islands of the Seven Princes, hoping to learn from the masters. Montaigne



painters Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain have established major galleries in the cities of Fontaine and Reinascenza. These two foreign artists emphasize a more 'natural' style of art, adopted into the baroque style with enthusiasm by the native painters.

Artist and architect Benzidi Poficiare currently dominates baroque sculpture in Numa. His works create effects of tension, strong light-and-dark contrasts, and the illusion of variegated colors by playing on the angle of light and setting. Poficiare's fountains are celebrated as masterpieces, and he is much in demand to recreate his greatest works in the plazas of Dionna, Gallegos, and distant Charouse. The secretive artist refuses to sell his designs, however, and never leaves mainland Vodacce for any reason, no matter the price or the buyer.

Vodacce has always had classical Numan buildings and sculpture, or at least their ruins, and therefore the classically reverent Gothic style never flourished as it did in Montaigne and Avalon. Modern sculpture, much like painting, uses vivid colors, hidden light sources, and luxurious materials tried to fool the senses. One easily recognizes a Vodacce artisan's work due to the new baroque style, the weblike layers and crisscrossing strands of light, and the integration of sculpture and architecture into all parts of the structure.

Weaving

One of the most well-known arts of the Vodacce culture is weaving. Although originally a female art, it has become so well-appreciated that many of the modern masters of the loom are male. Still, noblewomen of the Seven Houses practice weaving as a matter of course, and exhibitions and displays can be found at every prominent social gathering. Modern weaving embodies more than the creation of fabric; indeed, few master weavers specialize in wearable goods, and those who do are considered mere apprentices or journeymen of the art. True Vodacce weavers create brilliant tapestries of color and pattern, weaving strands of thread like the brushstrokes of the most delicate painter.

Painting

The art of painting has rapidly declined in Vodacce since the days of the great Sonya Carducci. This year, dark, flat paintings with bright flashes of color dominate the limelight; next year, the design may have changed altogether, and with each change, the artistry diminishes a little further.

One painter, a young idealist known as Giuseppe Ragazzi, has gained some support among the nobles of the land. Patroned by Cardinal Benedetto St. Vito, Ragazzi's art consists of tremendous frescoes depicting stories from the lives of the Prophets. Though well received, few have a chance to see his works, as they tend to be permanently located wherever he paints them.

Literature

Because women of culture may not read or write in Vodacce, literature has become a predominantly male endeavor. Classical literature has dominated Vodacce for thousands of years, and every child grows up on the same tales of gods and heroes that his ancestors heard. Several Numan poets composed formal collections of the greatest myths, which can be found in every literate household in the nation. The modern literature of Vodacce falls into two basic categories: the historic and the bawdy. Most are written solely for amusement, but popular works still give way to more esoteric pieces. Stories of heroic style or masterful politics meet with great success; romances usually fail miserably. A series of philosophical essays for Montaigne have become popular at the major universities in Vodacce, but these are unwelcome topics of discussion at noble gatherings.

Opera

"They did not sing, they did not dance; therefore, they did not entertain."

— Prince Vincenzo Caligari

Vodacce does not have theater; it has opera. If a play does not tell its tale in woven music and song, it will likely be laughed out of the country long before it reaches the courts of the Seven Princes. The new styles of drama all fail miserably in this nation, and any playwright who expects to

make his fortune in Vodacce should have a decent sense of rhythm and tone. From martial drums to romantic operettas, Vodacce playwrights emphasize the complex weave of sound and story. The current favorite of the opera scene is Bartholomeus Corradin, a new master from a long line of composers, supported by the Villanova line.

Playhouses in Vodacce are grand, elaborate designs with masterfully designed echoes. Fate Witches often participate in their production, weaving the sounds of each production into an array of Sorte threads which guide the destiny of each house. The playhouses each belong to a single theater troupe, who make it their primary establishment and jealously guard its secrets and echo effects.

'Common' music, the sounds of the peasantry of Vodacce and other countries, are popular and used to great effect in Vodacce theater, as are the sounds of rare musical instruments from the Crescent Empire and Cathay. Many modern operas incorporate these elements into their work, mixing the sounds in new and exotic ways. Certainly, the most prominent opera houses swiftly snap up any unique sound or display of musical talent they hear, always seeking to increase their prestige and reputation among the Seven Princes.

Music

Music, therefore, is also popular in Vodacce — particularly the entwined and complex ballads and compositions of early Eisen musicians. Vodacce music severely challenges the casual Théan listener, consisting of hundreds of delicately twined instruments, and as many as fifteen themes running through the length of the piece.

Composers from other countries often try to arrange and perform Vodacce works — much to their own frustration. Sorte magic plays a considerable part in each piece, keeping the rhythms and themes alive throughout the performance and righting the critical timing of each note. In Avalon, the Sidhe appreciate Vodacce composition more than the nation's populace does, and Avalon nobles tell tales of Vodacce concerti performed for the Queen of the Sidhe by her own people. Such performances are said to

last as long as ten days, and keep the Sidhe people in an enraptured state of wonder, unaware that time had passed at all.

Breeders

One of the nation's other pastimes involves the breeding of spiders for pets. Where some parts of Théah use dogs and cats for companionship, the spires of Vodacce do not afford the space for such large pets, and so the spider seems the natural choice for nobles of the Vodacce nation.

While cats are common in Vodacce, Fate Witches refuse to keep the beasts; in their eyes, to capture such a creature is unlucky. This is not to say that Fate Witches dislike cats; in fact they are usually quite fond of the animals. They want to see such proud and noble creatures live free, and will not keep them prisoner. Churches of the Vaticine keep food outside to feed the large stray cat population of the Seven Isles, and donations from noble houses are often specifically sent to fill those small troughs. Yet few Vodacce keep cats a permanent pets, preferring to let the animals roam as they see fit.

Vodacce spiders, however, are another matter. Brightly colored or dull and black, the spider is the epitome of the Vodacce Fate Witch, who often serve as trainer/breeders to their own spider families. Certain breeds of arachnid exist only in Vodacce, both through their complex breeding and through the alteration of fate in order to produce spiders for certain unnatural functions. Many Fate Witches keep globes of spiders that glow with phosphorescent light, and some train spiders to rest unmoving in a woman's hair (as a hairpiece) for an entire night.

There is certainly no dearth of spiders for these activities; Vodacce swims with the creatures. Some spiders grow to be as large as dinner plates, others are so tiny that only in a multitude can they be seen. The intellect of such creatures also varies, but the most successful breeders claim that their spiders are as intelligent as dogs, and can be taught rudimentary tricks and tasks.

In addition to these "domestic" breeds, the Vodacce swamps contain wild spiders that grow to monstrous size,

easily capable of devouring a human being. Such spiders have never been domesticated, though the Witches would love to keep them as pets. More on these giant breeds can be found in the "New Monsters" section on page 122.

Great Creators

The great creators of Vodacce changed the world through their insight and actions. Some of them are known across Théah, while others are considered 'local heroes' and Vodacce saints. They are covered here as integral parts of the country's history and essential backgrounds for those players wishing to create a character from Vodacce.

Scarovese

Cristoforo Scarovese, a minor nobleman from the Caligara line, was born in 1369 in the northern provinces of Mantua on the Eisen border. His twin treatises, *Means to Ends* and *Victory*, are notorious for their political commentary and insight, and his inventive term for Vodacce manipulation and political fencing — the 'Great Game' — is still used today.

Scarovese lived a nondescript childhood in Fontaine, and his main political experience in his youth was watching the Caligara Princes from afar. His writing career began when Prince Savanarola Caligara was executed by his own son. Soon thereafter, Scarovese began to write *Victory*, tracing the political coup that had begun seven years earlier and resulted in the Prince's death. In doing so, he noted the current political games and alliances, and became aware of the vast web of connections and betrayals that dominated the Vodacce noble houses. When published, *Victory* gained great popularity in Fontaine and northern Vodacce, and he soon followed it with a longer work, *Means to Ends*.

No man had more impact on Scarovese and his treatises than did Copello Bianco, a merchant descended from the once-noble Lorenzo line. Although the Bianco had no titles or Princedom, they controlled the nobility through money-lending and blackmail. Copello was a cunning, cruel man, very much like the one portrayed in *Means to Ends*. Though Scarovese did not truly like the man's policies, he thought

that a ruler like Bianco could unite Vodacce — Scarovese's goal throughout his life.

When Scarovese published *Means to Ends*, he tried to gain the favor of the Bianco by writing a book about what he thought were their ultimate goals and dedicating it to them. The public reacted to the book with shock and outrage. They wondered how cruel a man must be in order to perform the machinations discussed in *Means to Ends*, and whether Theus would ever permit such a scoundrel to come to power. But the Vodacce nobility saw the book as a grand treatise on their way of life, and adopted it wholeheartedly. Scarovese was appalled, but could do nothing — his instant fame, the money it provided, and his own wife and children required him to embrace his 'success'. Though he hated what his treatise had become, and the way that Vodacce had grasped its methods, he could do nothing — not if he wished to pay his bills or keep his family alive. Scarovese, the reluctant philosopher, never wrote another book, and lived out the remainder of his life as a Villanova vassal in Dionna. He died mysteriously of food poisoning in 1412.

Benzidi Poficiare

Benzidi Poficiare was probably the greatest sculptor in Vodacce, and certainly the father of modern architecture. His style has influenced modern construction, causing numerous nobles to destroy their current residences so that he could rebuild them, and creating magnificent arches and spires that were unthinkable only a few short years ago. While Montaigne currently stands at the peak of modern architecture, Poficiare is singlehandedly returning that title of Vodacce, rivaling the greatest architects of *l'Empereur*.

Today, Poficiare dominates baroque architecture in Numa. His works use Sorte to provide tension elaborating on the the high arches of the ancient Syneth style, creating a strength that passes beyond the support structure of mere stone. He uses strong contrasts and variegated colors, creating tones that were unthought-of and colors that did not exist before he began to create them. Some of the more traditional architects of Vodacce believe that Poficiare is either mad or has sold his soul to Legion for his talent; that does not stop his works from overshadowing theirs.



Leotano Vincenti

At the end of the fourteenth century, a Castilian scholar named Manuel Chrysoloras arrived in Vodacce seeking to learn at the feet of Prince Gallegos Mondavi of Galili. When he died, the world had been changed forever. He specialized in translating the works of ancient philosophers into modern tongues, spreading their wisdom and creating a new era of enlightenment – and returning the language of the Numan Empire to common usage.

His greatest student was Leotano Vincenti, a scholar in his own right and a student at the University of Elena. Vincenti spent his time in the pursuit of science, creating strange inventions and translating books from Numan into Castillian, the languages of Eisen and Ussura, and even into the Avalon dialects. When Chrysoboras died, Vincenti carried on his works, and created a new era of his own.

Vincenti created numerous odd inventions, from flying machines to light without heat. He spent many years trying to unlock the secrets of the Philosopher's Stone (a puzzle that was said to turn lead to gold) and in building and employing traps in which to capture sea monsters for public viewing. In every way, he tried to build society's knowledge, to spread true information and defeat rumor and superstition. Everything from the pipes in noble palaces to the famous Rachele in Guerre de Puertofino has been influenced by his ideas. He could speak some fourteen languages, write with both hands (at the same time) and recited entire chapters of Ditophanes from memory. He built elaborate kites that required as many as ten strings to pilot, many of which have been carefully placed in museums, but some of which are still used by the noble families today.

Though numerous Princes offered him patronage, he remained at the University of Elena all of his life. There, he taught a whole generation of students, while conducting experiments in a wide variety of fields. While not solely responsible for the Vodacce renaissance, he certainly helped it flower, and the nation's boundless admiration of him had nothing to do with the Great Game. He died at the age of 76, and his body was interred beneath the Rachele.

Religion

For the duration of known history, man's spirituality has dominated his life. From primitive tribes who cast 'godhood' upon the storm to the coming of the First Prophet, man has needed religion to give him light, to reinforce the notion that there is 'more to life'. The Church of the Prophets bases its principles on that belief, and offers restoration to those who follow its path. Nowhere in Théah do the people embrace this belief more heartily than in stratified Vodacce. The Numan roots of the Vaticine Church flatters Vodacce's vanity; many of its rituals and beliefs can be traced to early Numan practices that were created on Vodacce soil. The strength of the Cardinals required vast masses of the people to believe in Vaticine virtue; in the rituals of the Church.

Since the seat of Vaticine power left Vodacce some six hundred years ago, the nation's religion has been left with a sizable hole in its heart. The people of Vodacce still refer to Numa as the 'true Vaticine City', and each year, the Five Cardinals of Vodacce draft a letter requesting that the Hierophant 'return home.' Certainly, Vodacce is a truly Vaticine nation, their spirituality dominated by Sorte magic and the knowledge that the future rests in the hands of Theus as well as the hands of man.

The Hierophancy and the dominions of the Vaticine play such a large role in the nation's political and cultural climate that Vodacce appears to be one of the most 'spiritual' of nations. Not so. The deliberate choice and adaptation of the Great Game often results in direct conflict with the Church's policies, and in these matters the Vaticine Church must nearly always withdraw. The bishops in Vodacce do not turn a blind eye to vice; they simply define it in a manner that does not interfere with the Vodacce lifestyle. The Vodacce reciprocate the favor by acknowledging the Vaticines' authority, and permitting them to dominate the nation's spiritual life.

As a result, strange contradictions can be found throughout Vodacce life. Fate Witches devoutly pray for a future that

they could easily control with their Sorte magic. Husbands pray for the lives of their families, then return home to women who are not their wives. The Vodacce honor the sanctity of human life, yet regularly conduct duels to the death. The Vaticine Church has developed an elaborate system to address these contradictions, resulting in a policy as complicated as every other aspect of Vodacce life.

Many Théans mistakenly assume that the Vodacce people are uniformly devout. Some are, but to most, religion is first and foremost a political tool. Vodacce controls five of the ten Arch-diocese seats of the Reformed Vaticine Church, which gives them considerable ability to forge Church policies. The fact that the Hierophant himself was not Vodacce and did not reside in Numa was the only block to complete Vodacce dominance over the Vaticine. The Vodacce realize the power the Church holds, and they wish to control that power for themselves.

Still, Vaticine beliefs have a permanent home in Vodacce. Peasants pray to the Prophets every morning and priests can be found on every streetcorner preaching the renunciation of sin. The idea of Objectionism or any other religion gaining support in Vodacce is ludicrous, and even Giovanni Villanova must still go to church each week. To do otherwise would threaten his power in a way no political rival could even conceive.

The Vaticine and the Great Game

Since the Hieros War (AV 1012-1019), the danger of a permanent schism has loomed over the Vaticines. Neither the Numan nor the Castillian Hierophant had the resources to reconquer those parishioners that had been lost, but with the support of the Vodacce Princes, the nation continued its allegiance to the Castillian Vaticines. For their devotion, the Hierophant showed gratitude; Vodacce Princes gained the support of the Vaticine Church so long as their people continued in the way of the true faith of the Prophets.

New perils and trials came to the Vaticine Church in the early 1300's, when Scarovese's treatises changed political spirit of the nation. His work *Means to Ends* became a

testament to the nature of Vodacce life, quietly supplanting traditional Vaticine beliefs. Those who had previously kept their scorn for the church silent began to publicly whisper their dislike. The Church responded by reinforcing Numa's role as an independent moderator, making itself the balancing force of the Great Game. The Church could mediate between warring Princes, leaving them the only "trustworthy" force in the nation. They drew the peasantry's eye by bringing peace to war-torn regions and solidifying Numa's role as neutral ground, which gave them the clout they needed to keep Scarovese's followers in line. Of course, any effort to influence the Great Game automatically made the Church a part of it. The Cardinals in Numa could not resist the pull of politics forever. To maintain their independence, they were compelled to exercise Scarovese's tenets in their own unique way. The Church's exceptional nature gave a peculiar color to their schemes, but they were schemes nonetheless.

Churches

In many cities of Vodacce, churches are the dominant architectural feature. They are silent witnesses of the turbulent and extravagant history of Vodacce society, arising from Numan, Gothic, Baroque and peasant style to reflect the tastes and identity of a growing and unstable nation. When some Princes seize land, they burn down old churches and rebuild on the site; others build even grander structures over the smaller ones to reflect their own self-aggrandizing natures; but all must acknowledge their presence upon the landscape. The variety of architectural design reflects the multitude of social, political and economical developments in Vodacce over the last one thousand years.

The older the church, the more likely it is to have a mixture of styles due to rebuilding or renovation. These could be minor changes such as the reconstruction of a window in Gothic form instead of the original Numan, or major changes like the ones that occurred quite often early in the present century when the interiors of many churches were ripped out and replaced by baroque-style altars and pulpits.



Hero



The Princes

Gespucci Bernoulli

"The Crescents require a delicate touch, much like a courtesan. Treat them poorly and you won't live long enough to tell us about it."

The Bernoulli family has always been devoutly Vaticine. Their loyalty to the church has never been questioned, and this good faith allowed them to maintain trade relations with the Empire of the Crescent Moon after the 1250s. They are the only group that has Church sanction to trade with the Crescents, and their monopoly has made them one of the wealthiest families in the world.

Gespucci Bernoulli is rich beyond the wildest dreams of the most flamboyant man (save perhaps *l'Empereur* himself). The trade in exotic goods from the Crescent Empire, and by extension Cathay, has made him more money than he could possibly spend. The parties he throws on his palatial island residence are drops in the bucket to him, and he maintains an extensive stable of courtesans, artists, musicians, and craftsmen.

He works hard to maintain good relations with the Crescents and they been known to perform certain favors for him on occasion. While he hasn't left Vodacce in many years, his name carries considerable weight in the forbidden lands (and allows his rapscallion sons to commit acts that

would send anyone else to the headsman's axe). His ties to the Crescents make his lands less of a target for the raids of Kheired-Din — the big Corsair knows that Gespucci's credit is good, and sees no reason to cut down the money tree.

For all of that, his devotion to the Church comes first, and he remains faithful to Vaticine doctrine. Gespucci is the largest single contributor to the Vaticine Church in Théah, donating huge sums annually, and financially supporting both the massive Monastery of Saint Baldarrazzo and the Abbey of Saint Giovanna in his mainland holdings. The monks of Saint Baldarrazzo produce the finest olive oil in Vodacce, and master chefs as far north as Kirk beg for it.

Bernoulli's sons, Augustin, Giuseppe, and Dominic, are some of the most renowned hellions in Vodacce — ironic considering their father's religious convictions. All three make regular trading trips into the Crescent Empire, and theoretically head up all Bernoulli operations there. While they manage to keep things in order, the family's business matters far less to them than their own monstrous appetites. Augustin has a reputation for stamina of an intimate nature, Giuseppe kills people on a whim, and Dominic has discovered several Crescent plants with intriguing pharmacological qualities. They spend most of their time in the Empire, but their few visits back to Vodacce have been unforgettable to say the least: the Faliscis are still cleaning up after their last visit and several courtesans were consigned to the madhouse after a visit from the Bernoulli boys. Gespucci has given up trying to correct his sons, and prays for the safety of their souls after he is gone.

Gespucci is a portly man of moderate height, obviously the product of good living. His snowy white hair is combed back in waves from a high forehead. He is in his sixties now, and feeling the pains of his age — his joints ache, and he has a touch of the gout, though his mind is as sharp as ever. He dresses well, but not extravagantly, and his clothes bear a slightly Crescent flavor. He regularly visits Numa to pray in the cathedral and the Monastery of Saint Baldarrazzo to dine with Cardinal Ciosa, whom he has known for decades. He considers Ciosa his closest friend, and supports the old Cardinal without question.

Vincenzo Caligari

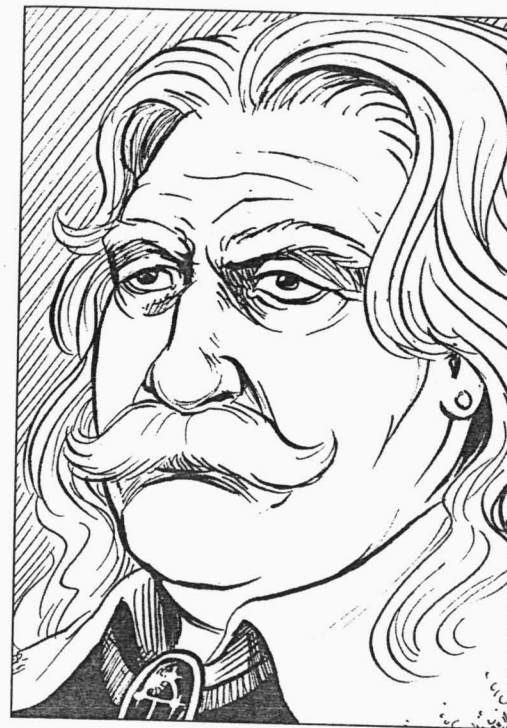
"Theus, grant me the power to change the things I can, the strength to dominate the men I control, and the wisdom to live forever."

The Caligari family has long coveted Syrneth artifacts as a means to defeat the Villanovas, but Vincenzo has taken this fascination to new heights. In his early days, he wished to join the Explorer's Society, but discarded the notion since it would mean discarding his goals for theirs. The Syrneth would serve the Caligaris, he decided, not the other way around.

For more than sixty years he has searched for anything to aid in his family's quest: digging through Numan ruins, dissecting Syrneth remains, and tearing down the magical abilities of other nations in order to understand their power. He became a fierce rival to the Explorers Society, sending teams of archaeologists to all corners of the globe with instructions to plunder anything they could. He showed little interest in the ruins or their history; everything he took was a potential source of strength to be understood and exploited. Within a decade he had become the foremost Théan expert on the Syrneth and the owner of an unprecedented collection of functioning artifacts.

Destroying the Villanovas is only one part of Caligari's plan, however: a fairly small part. He has ruled his family with an iron fist ever since he came of age, and decided long ago that power should be his forever. He never bowed to other Princes nor to coups and plottings from within his own family. For sixty years the Caligaris belonged to him, until a foe finally rose that even he could not defeat: old age. As the years advanced and his robust body became gray and withered, he shifted his research towards extending his life. Over time, it became a full-blown obsession, eclipsing even his family's goal of vanquishing their traditional enemy.

Today he spends nearly all his time in the pursuit of immortality. Any trinket, any snippet of knowledge which can forestall the Reaper's hand eventually finds its way to his palace. He scours every ruin, unlocks every artifact that reaches his grasping hands. Artifacts are disassembled, pored over and discarded like trash if they do not meet his



Gespucci Bernoulli

needs. His collection sits catalogued and inventoried in a vast warehouse, waiting until he can finally unlock its final secrets. Rumor has it he once dissected an Avalon Sidhe to discover what kept it young, though scholars of the alien race scoff at such a notion. He works days on end on his projects, feverishly searching for the key to eternal youth.

Recently, it seems he has found it.

Only a few months ago, he locked himself in the deepest dungeons of the palace, tearing apart some new artifacts that a group of young adventurers brought to him. Caligari



Vincenzo Caligari

vanished for about three weeks, and when he returned, he had become... sprightlier, somehow. More vibrant. The adventurers were paid exceptionally well, and when their bodies washed ashore a few days later, no questions were raised.

Caligari is rarely interested in anything but his personal goal, although his family's original goal — the fall of the Villanova line — still draws his attention. Like his five sons, Caligari has never forgotten the tale of the Caligara family name and its destruction, and when he spends his time out of the laboratory, he is undoubtedly foiling some plan of Villanova's or helping one of his sons undermine Villanova power. Certainly, if Vincenzo has developed some serum or found some item that is slowly restoring his health and youth, he has all the time in the world to exact revenge on the Villanova house.

Though everyone says that Vincenzo looks old, his wrinkles have been less evident of late, and his grey hair thicker. His eyes seem brighter and he laughs more often, holding great parties of celebration without any cause or circumstance. Those who spend time with him find him charming, debonair and full of life and vitality. Certainly, for a man of advanced years, he doesn't look like he's going to die any time soon.

Donello Falisci

"The old days are gone, my friend. We are the future, and with our blades, the present will be forged anew."

Donello is something of an anomaly for a Falisci prince: a decent gentleman who seems more interested in wine than in his family's political machinations. Although his many times great-grandfather was Scarovese the king-maker, Donello shows no signs of inheriting the family's lust for gaming, riddling, and political maneuvering. Instead, he seems content to serve as Vodacce's party host, throwing celebrations of awe-inspiring extravagance and lavishing gifts upon those he favors. The other Princes keep waiting for the façade to drop — for Donello to surrender the friendly host image and reveal his true colors — but he

never does. As result, his influence is staggering and his friends number in the hundreds.

Donello possesses a singular mind and stubborn will. He never takes half-measures and goes about every task with unbridled intensity. His magnificent wine production, the intensity with which he rules his province, and his recent decision to search for a wife all speak to his solid mind and refusal to compromise.

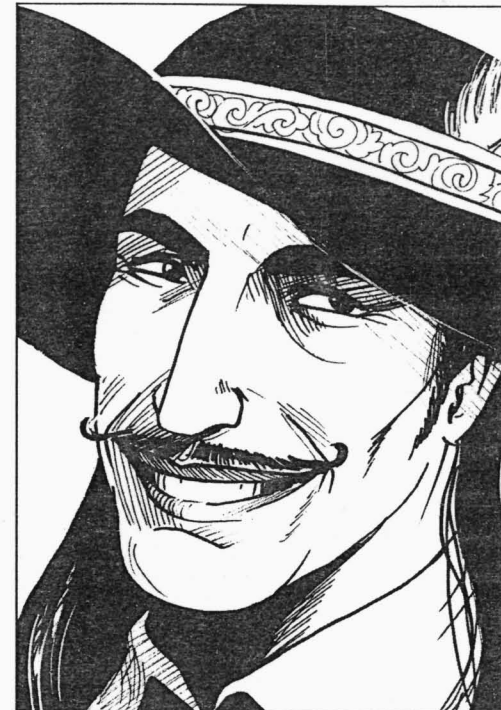
Like all Falisci, he is a hedonist — but he retains a certain amount of his Montaigne mother's pragmatism (another anomaly). He could make a serious bid for the Vodacce throne if he wished, but such matters do not concern him. The effort would only make him more enemies and divert him from his current tasks. The Empereur himself would bend his knee for a bottle of Falisci wine; what better demonstration of power does one need?

Donello's search for a wife recently took an unexpected turn. He became hopelessly enthralled by a visiting Montaigne noblewoman, and currently seeks to earn her hand. The thought of a foreigner — well-educated, clever, and possessing not a spot of Sorte — at a Prince's side fills Vodacce society with dread. Donello knows the situation is hopeless, but that does not stop him from pining for her beauty and silver tongue. Others tell him that he is being ridiculous, but Donello refuses to listen. He composes letters, operas and gifts — all of which end up in his true love's trash heap. He cannot turn to the Fate Witches of Vodacce, who would never allow a Merchant Prince to marry outside the country, much less assist him in his hopeless quest.

Worse, the maiden in question is even more dangerous than they. Her name is Lady Jamais Sices du Sices, the reigning Wit of the Montaigne court. On a recent visit to Montaigne, Donello became the unhappy subject of her criticism, and used Scaroveian politics to turn her remarks into flattery. Since that day, she has hated him. Since that day, he has adored her charm, her intellect, and her biting satire.

He loves her.

She may never even know.



Donello Falisci

At age 30, Donello is finally coming into his own. His youthful features have filled out into handsome maturity and he carries himself with a dignity beyond his years. He speaks softly but with firm conviction, and his generous nature can't hide his natural political skills. His elder brother, Michel Durand del Falisci, is one of the five Vodacce Cardinals, and Donello's closest confidante. The two are very close, and there is little that they would not do for one another.

Alberto Lucani

"Do you like it? I imported a girl all the way from Carleon just to sew it for me."

Lucani grew up being told that his family was worthless. Though they had attained a place among the seven great Houses, there was nothing they did that another family couldn't do better. The Vestini were better craftsmen, the Falisci threw better parties, and the Villanova were better politicians. All they had were some talent in needlework and a powerful bloodline that they dare not use. Every day



Alberto Lucani

as a child, Alberto heard these facts, and every day he vowed to change them some day.

In the meantime, he tried to address the perceived deficiencies by overcompensating for everything. He endeavored to become the best merchant he could, and his ships traveled the globe in search of new markets. He admonished his workers to create fantastic new embroidery styles, and sold his textiles only to Thëah's most noble families (his napkins currently grace the table of l'Empereur himself). He sponsored the Knights of the Rose and Cross, allowing them to establish a chapter house on his island in exchange for occasional aid. He dressed in gaudy and expensive fashions and threw parties just to show off his wealth. By the time he rose to the head of his family, he had a reputation as the greatest fop in Vodacce. Yet for all that, his family remained unchanged: insignificant, financially unstable, the runt of his nation's litter. It galled him to no end.

Things began to look up when he took a wife — a pretty Vestini woman named Francesca — and sired four children, all daughters. Unlike most noblemen, the prospect of girls thrilled him to death. Not only would they never try to usurp his title, but all four demonstrated considerable magical skills, skill he could use as bargaining chips. He had them trained as Fate Witches, each one a gold mine of potential influence. The other Princes would pay any price to have such power in their corner: money, political favors, even additional territory if he played his cards right. The eldest daughter is currently twelve, old enough to begin attracting suitors. He is certain that if he can fetch a suitable dowry for her, his family's fortunes would rise.

There is only one problem in all of this: he loves his daughters like no other. The children are his sun and moon, the only genuine joy he has ever felt. He sees the intelligence in their eyes, hears their innocent laughter devoid of ulterior motive, and his heart breaks with the joy of it. If it were up to him, he'd keep them all in the family forever. But he knows that's not best for him or the Lucanis. In order to fulfill his ambitions, he must give them up — sell them like mules to the highest bidder. The reality of the

situation tears him in two. This is the only way his family can prosper and yet it is the only way to make him truly unhappy.

Fate is a ironic hag, is she not?

Lucani is a small, terrier-like man of about thirty-four with a loud voice and a too-wide smile. His courtier's skills are impeccable, but he rarely employs them to their fullest; his insecurities end up hampering his efforts. His tailors have created Vodacce variants of the latest Montaigne fashions for him to wear, and he stands at the forefront of his country's fashion scene. Dull colors never adorn Alberto; he practically glows with blues, reds, and yellows. His sensitive temper — and skill with a blade — ensures that no one mocks his clothing without paying for it.

Alcide Mondavi

"I have no feud with my fellow Princes. Though Theus has blessed me countless times, I remain a simple farmer at heart."

The northwest lands of Vodacce produce grain — wheat, barley, rye, and so forth. This grain feeds the nation, and the Mondavis export a small amount to Castille and Eisen overland. The province has perhaps the most fertile land of all the Princes, producing uniformly good harvests, and keeping the people of Vodacce fed.

The Mondavi family is very old, and their holdings are equally old. The Merchant Princes recognized long ago that they needed a steady food source to maintain the nation. Accordingly, a tacit rule of the Great Game is that the Mondavi estates be left alone. The Mondavis have returned the silent favor — they do not meddle with the affairs of the other Princes so long as the Princes leave them alone.

Alcide Mondavi is the latest in the long line of unambitious Princes — the lowest ebb yet in an already stagnant gene pool, protected largely because none of the other Princes wants such a mundane responsibility as overseeing wheat production. His father was a dull, plodding man, and his grandfather actually worked in the grain fields alongside his



Alcide Mondavi

subjects from time to time. Vodacce courtiers find this last tidbit endlessly amusing.

Shy and quiet, Alcide could be handsome if he could only gather some courage. He does not pursue the favor of courtesans, and his home life can only be speculated on. He throws the ubiquitous parties because he must. When not performing some duty required of his office, he keeps a low profile. He values his privacy intensely and the other Princes respect that. What could a man like him possibly hide?

He travels to the mainland of Vodacce regularly, and has expressed a desire to reside there permanently. Unfortunately for him, a history of truces and compromises between the Princes keeps any of them from living on the mainland, so he must content himself with constant travel. His wife is ill (and unable to travel), and he returns to the mainland to visit her as well as keep an eye on his fields. He stays apprised of the political situation as she views it through the Strands.

Alcide never looks anyone in the eye, a true sign of cowardice in Vodacce. He has fought at least a dozen duels with men who have called him a coward, and has coolly killed them all. The courtiers whisper about his immense skill with a blade, and while he took training as a youth (as do all Vodacce noblemen) the tongues of Vodacce's nobility regularly return to how Alcide has honed his skill. They say that the only time he meets another man's eyes is when he is about to kill that man. His enigmatic skill and its deadly results tend to keep people away from him, despite his unassuming demeanor. Aside from his strong reactions to accusations, however, he does little of interest to society at large. His lack of eye contact extends even to other Princes, but they tolerate him because he keeps the grain flowing. Prince Falisci has trouble remembering his name.

Alcide Mondavi is a boring man (even his duels are fought with little flair and panache) with a boring job. He dutifully manages his holdings for the good of his country, and has no real ambitions for anything more.

Marco Edorado Vestini

"You may not consider it a sin, boy, but keep it up and you won't live to see your 40th birthday."

As a boy, Marco had his every whim catered to. His father was a revolting boor who indulged his appetites at the expense of his people. At first, Marco seemed ready to follow in the old man's footsteps: he cared not a whit for other people and existed only for the pursuit of his own pleasure. He terrorized his playmates, ran through a score

of nannies, and (some say) drove his mother to an early grave.

That changed on his tenth birthday, when he stumbled across his father while searching for a favorite toy. The sight of the unconscious old man — his clothes stained with wine, his face bloated and unshaven — filled him with revulsion. He saw his own face in that alcoholic stupor: a future that promised nothing but gluttony and sloth.

With an acuity remarkable for a ten-year-old, he sought out his family priest for guidance. The abbot told him that fulfillment came from personal honor and devotion to one's fellow man. As long as he lived for himself, Marco would become more and more like his father. He must place the welfare of others above his own if he wished to avoid that fate.

Marco took the advice to heart, resolving to become the epitome of the enlightened noble. He studied hard, trained in the courtly arts, and tried to see how politics could be turned to honorable ends. On his fifteenth birthday, he challenged his father to a duel. The elder Vestini was a formidable swordsman, but time and gluttony had taken their toll and Marco slew him after suffering a vicious cut above his right eye. From that moment on, the Vestini family belonged entirely to him.

Since then, he has labored to make life in his provinces as pleasant as possible. He employed the finest tradesmen in Théah to create high quality crafts of all types, which he sells at outrageous prices. His peerless courtesan schools often trained destitute girls at no cost. He showered his money on those beneath him: building trade schools, improving roads, and hiring Eisen mercenaries as protection against bandits. As his family prospered, he came to see the wisdom in his old abbot's words.

Today, he stands as the "golden boy" of Vodacce politics: young, handsome and irresistible. He plays the Great Game with considerable skill, but has never let his myriad schemes cloud his overall goals. He currently leads the charge against the encroaching Vendel Guilds while appropriating their most effective methods for himself. He has advocated

upbringing has left him with a strong sense of personal responsibility: he saw how close he came to stepping into the abyss, and has vowed never to fall again.

Giovanni Villanova

"It is not important to be the first man to strike. Only to be the last man standing."

The leader of the most black-hearted family in Théah, Giovanni has few peers when it comes to human villainy. While the pirate Reis induces more late-night shudders and Empereur Léon inflicts more widespread misery, Giovanni matches an utter lack of ethics with a preternatural intelligence. Léon's vanity blinds him to his enemies and Reis is hunted across the seas; Villanova is too smart for any of that. His enemies know better than to look for a weakness.

He began his career when he was only ten years old. His father Allegro suffered an unfortunate fall down a flight of stairs, breaking his neck and leaving Giovanni at the head of the family. No one ever mentioned the young boy's presence behind his father before the fall, or his toy entangled in the old man's feet. It just seemed safer not to mention it.

With Allegro's death, Giovanni's elder brother Giam technically became Prince, but Giovanni had planned for that, too. Sensing the boy's innate power, Giam tried to avert the inevitable by promising to abdicate when Giovanni came of age. It didn't help. The younger Villanova poisoned his brother over a period of two years, ensuring that Giam would never change his mind about the position.

Since then, he has risen to the top of the Great Game, exhibiting ruthless ambition with no morals to balance it. He has killed dozens of would-be rivals and thwarted countless failed coups. He never underestimates his opponents, and stays absolutely objective at all times. Emotion has no place in his schemes; he engineers his plots with clock-like precision. His reputation as a villain keeps



Marco Edorado Vestini

outright war with the northern nation on more than one occasion. While the other Princes consider him little more than an upstart, he deflects their machinations with a shrug and a smile. Theus will judge him, not his peers.

The spoiled little boy Marco once was has vanished, replaced by a noble and confident leader. He stands almost six feet tall, with piercing eyes and a soft smile on his lips. A lock of white hair grows above the scar on his forehead — his father's legacy, as he refers to it. Marco knows how to throw a party, but never enjoys his social soirées. His



Giovanni Villanova

the other princes aligned against him, or else he would have seized the throne long ago.

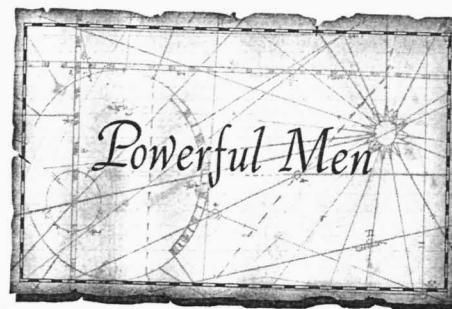
Today, Giovanni rules with absolute authority, threatening war upon his neighbors in the Arene Candide and supporting the largest and most prestigious university in Vodacce. He keeps a careful eye on the discoveries and inventions of the Dionna scholars, always seeking something that will increase his power and prestige. He knows about the plans of the other Merchant Princes – Bernoulli's army in the hills, Mondavi's Eisen mercenaries – and intends to use their mistakes for his own benefit. A man cannot fight

a war on all fronts; Villanova plans to make certain that the other Princes begin the war... and he ends it.

Villanova trusts only two people: his courtesan Juliette and his wife Valentina. One is his lover, the other no more than a servant beneath his care – but a servant that he takes care to treat with the greatest respect. The future she controls is his own, and he has no intention of allowing her to change what he sees as his rightful future: the mastery of Vodacce.

Though Valentina is a powerful Fate Witch, she is not as powerful as others, and Villanova often wishes that her talent were greater so that his own power could be increased. Recently, he has learned that Bernice Caligari is practicing new, strange powers of Sorte. She will not discuss it even with her closest maidservant (Villanova's spy), but from her secret journals (which his spy reads), he knows that she is attempting to duplicate some strange Sorte first discovered by Mad Queen Marietta. Any other man might have had Bernice killed, but Villanova is certain that he can turn this to his advantage. If she is as powerful as she seems, then her abilities can be of use to him. Juliette insists that they can control her, and Villanova believes his courtesan.

Giovanni is a tall, slender man in his early thirties with short black hair and an immaculately combed goatee. His aquiline nose gives him a sinister handsomeness, complemented by an everpresent evil smile. He speaks with smug confidence and never raises his voice; after all, he has the advantage in every situation. His manners are impeccable, which makes his actions all the more horrible. Giovanni is a perfect sociopath; he understands morality perfectly but sees no need to adhere to it. Since he has no conscience or feelings of guilt, he is free to commit whatever evil he pleases. He never hides his villainy and revels in the open hatred it produces. As Scarvese said, it is better to be feared than loved.



Cardinal Teodoro Ciosa

"Theus will protect you, my child, in the next world if not this one."

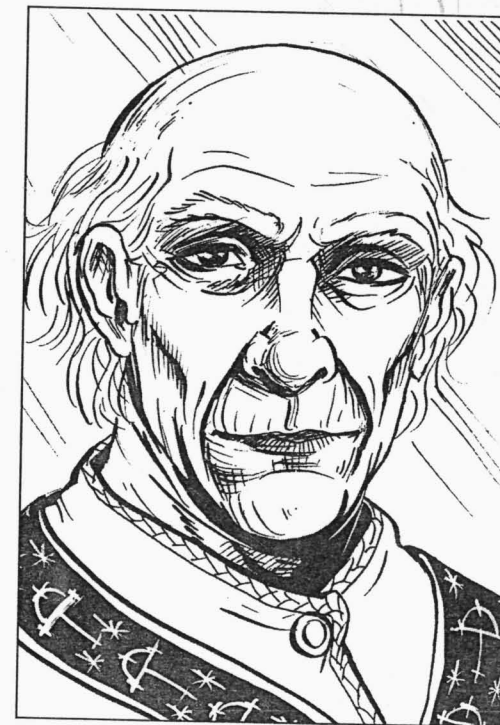
Born into a family of landed gentry beneath the Bernoullis, young Teodoro wanted for nothing growing up. A pudgy, well-fed youth, he entered the clergy more because of family expectations than anything else. He eschewed the idea of being a monk, disliking the idea of the ascetic life, and opted instead for the priesthood. His studies were adequate and unspectacular, and he took holy orders at the appropriate age, being assigned to the cathedral at Numa.

At the cathedral, his views began to change. He had viewed the Church as little more than a place to feed and clothe him, but once he began to associate with peasants he came to genuinely care for them. He caught fire working in the cathedral, his new sense of purpose leading him to study harder and live a more ascetic life. He shot through the ranks of the cathedral staff, astounded the high-ranking priests around him with his knowledge and dedication, and grew very popular both in and out of the church.

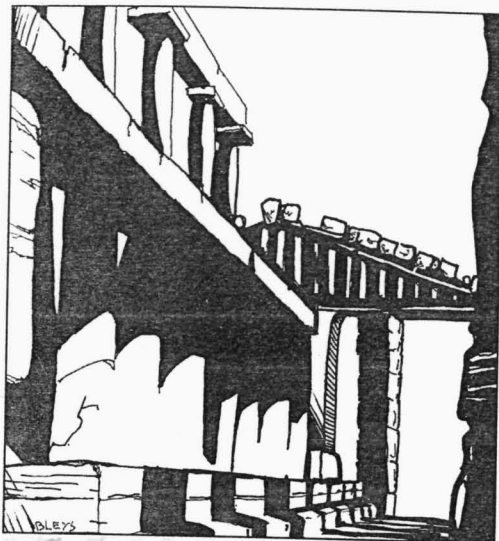
The watershed moment in his life came when he inherited his family's lands. His older brother died without an heir, so the lands passed to him. He promptly gave it all away – dividing the lands and all that they held amongst the

peasant farmers who lived there. Prince Bernoulli respected his wishes, allowing the peasants to select a governor from their own ranks. Ciosa then left the cathedral for the Monastery of Saint Baldarrazzo, where he quickly rose to the position of Monsignor.

He reformed the monastery heavily during his tenure, and soon controlled the most successful monastic order in Vodacce. His spiritualism and generosity had by now become legend, and at an advanced age, the Church brought him out of the monastery to become Cardinal at the same cathedral he had been assigned to as a young



Cardinal Teodoro Ciosa



selfish initiate. Today he is responsible for nearly half of Vodacce — and has given no one reason to regret his office. He maintains residences in the Vaticine City, the Cathedral of Saint Matheus in Numa, and the Monastery of Saint Baldarrazzo, where he is technically still Abbot. He spends most of his time in Vaticine City and the monastery. The cathedral is a short trip from Saint Baldarrazzo, and he prefers the simplicity.

A reformer at heart, he has put forward several ideas for getting the Church back on track with a full complement of Cardinals and a Hierophant. He advocates a controversial plan to add a Cardinal to Castille, replacing the missing Montaigne Cardinal and effectively shutting Montaigne out of Church politics. From there, election of a new Hierophant would be simple. He faces surprising resistance to his plan from Castille, led by Cardinal Verdugo, whom Ciosa trusts less and less every day.

Cardinal Ciosa is a kind, caring man with a thin frame and close-cropped white hair. He has willingly sacrificed his own

comfort for those around him and he lives simply, without the ostentation that surrounds other ranking churchmen. His sole indulgences are his meetings with Gespucci Bernoulli, who has been his close friend for years.

Bartholomeus Corradin

"Opera must come from the heart. If I can't feel the power of my work, then no one ever will."

Bartholomeus Corradin comes from a long line of composers. His early works were unspectacular, a series of concertos and suites that were technically proficient, but lacked a certain something. Though competent, he had trouble maintaining his patrons' good graces.

Then, last year, he wrote his first opera.

Vincenzo and Belloza is a tale of love and passion, chronicling the two title characters and their love affair, with all its twists and turns. Young and shy, Vincenzo loves the beautiful Belloza, but is afraid to approach her for fear of rejection. Belloza is attracted to Vincenzo, but cannot bring herself to make the first move out of respect for Vincenzo's manhood. She hits on the idea of flirting with Matteo, another boy from the city, in the hopes that it will make Vincenzo jealous enough to approach her. Feeling stung by Belloza's affections for another, Vincenzo finds refuge in the arms of Lucia. All four confess their deeds to wise Father Giovanni, who gently guides them to one another through separate conversations. The final act climaxes with the four lovers confessing their true feelings in an argumentative quartet that turns into a beautiful harmony. The four realize that Vincenzo and Belloza are meant for each other, and Matteo and Lucia discover affections as well. *Vincenzo and Belloza* received popular acclaim, and several patrons of the arts tagged Bartholomeus as an up-and-comer who should be watched.

Six months ago, Corradin wrote his second work.

Rosetta exploded onto the Vodacce stage. At once bright and revelrous, tragic and brooding, the opera chronicles the life of a serving girl named Rosetta who marries an

uncaring husband, Nicolo, only to fall in love with the dashing Prince Dante, who carries her off. The sorcerous dwarf Pasquale witnesses the elopement and punishes everyone involved — Nicolo for being a swinish fool, Dante for carrying off another man's wife, and, most controversially, Rosetta for living above her station. At the end of the opera, Rosetta returns to a new and caring Nicolo, and the two express new love for each other in a stunning duet that leaves audiences weeping from its beauty. *Rosetta* has enjoyed a fabulous run in the fantastic island opera house of the Falisci family. It is universally hailed as perhaps the greatest opera ever written, beloved by

commoner and noble alike. Bartholomeus plans to take *Rosetta* to Montaigne, where everyone predicts another triumph.

Rosetta made Bartholomeus a celebrity in Vodacce, and also made him *very* wealthy. He spends his money lavishly: he struggled for many years and his sudden fortune has led him to a life of excess. He dresses in the absolute height of fashion — a pinnacle that can only be maintained by one who dedicates much of his energy to watching the trends.

Personally, Bartholomeus is friendly and flamboyant. He kisses his fingers and waves them at crowds. He swishes wine in his mouth and applauds the vintage. He eats large amounts at a time, and loves every mouthful. He bows low to beautiful courtesans. He also does everything in his power to avoid challenges, and has hired a silent and fearsome swordsman named Giorgio Filin to be his bodyguard.

Bartholomeus does not take students, nor does he accept visitors at his home; he is in process of writing his third opera, which he promises to be his best yet. Those who wish to see him need only attend the next party, as Bartholomeus Corradin will undoubtedly be on the guest list.

Sebastiano Scogna

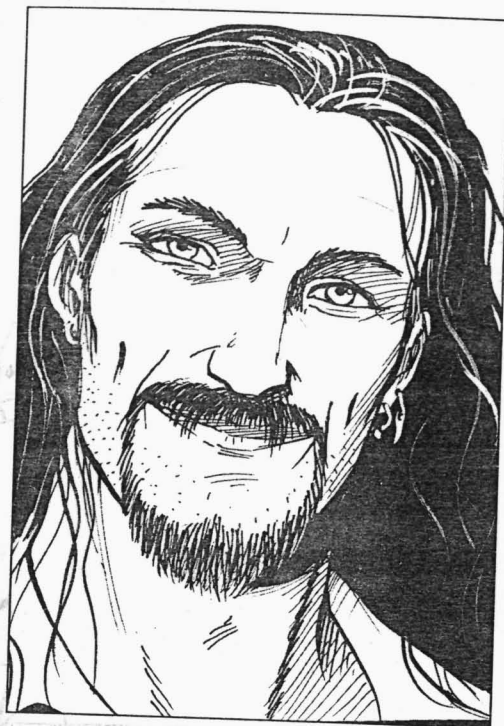
"We have to go around. The reefs out there have torn Castillian galleons to driftwood and the Santa Cecilia's a lot more delicate than that."

The blood of half the nations of Théah runs in the veins of Sebastiano Scogna (Skoneya). His mother was the daughter of a Montaigne merchant and an Eisen ship captain's daughter, his father the result of a union between a Vodacce navigator and a Castillian dancer.

Sebastiano's father was also a navigator for a trading ship, and Sebastiano set out to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather as a youth, going to sea on his father's ship. He learned to sail, learned to swear, learned to think fast, and learned to pray, all at sea. He also learned to dream,



Bartholomeus Corradin



Sebastiano Scogna

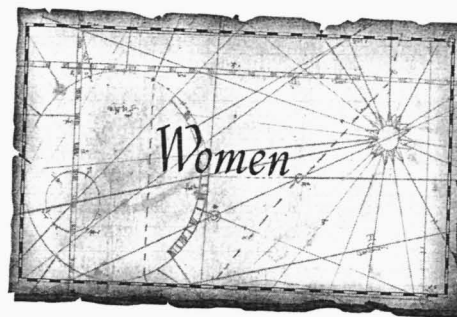
Sebastiano's captain let Sebastiano claim it rather than lug it home to haggle for salvage. Sebastiano took a skeleton crew with him, and skillfully and delicately sailed the crippled ship to Vodacce for repairs.

The *Santa Cecilia* (named for the Patron Saint of Wanderers) has now weathered several battles under the command of Captain Scogna, and her crew is fiercely loyal to him. They have sailed in all six seas, traded in the ports of every nation, fought pirates, bought drinks for pirates, helped pirates hide their booty, and been pirates themselves.

Now 37, Sebastiano knows seven major languages and a handful of minor dialects. He has contacts from Cathay to Avalon, and is as comfortable taking coffee with a heathen Crescent as he is debating philosophy with the scholars of Montaigne. His first mate is a Crescent, his ship's master is a Vesten *skjæren*, his head boarder hails from Ussura, and his chief gunner is a Vodacce girl about the size of a mouse. Navigators who understand quality would kill for his charts and rutters, and his stories of the high seas leave many listeners breathless.

Sebastiano is a handsome, dashing Vodacce with a rich booming voice, a ready grin, and a twinkling eye — the perfect image of a rakish sea captain. His skill with the sword is passable, but his true gift lies in his ability to communicate and persuade. He is a first rate navigator, and the *Santa Cecilia* has never been off course with him at the helm. His cargoes have made several Princes quite a bit of money (not all of it above-board), and they would be loath to give up a good thing.

Above all, however, Sebastiano keeps an open mind. He has seen enough to understand that nearly all men are the same at heart. Sebastiano is a Benefactor in good standing in the Order of the Rose and Cross, and maintains a membership in the Explorer's Society. He tolerates people who would be considered shocking by much of the rest of Théah, and generally tries talking before fighting — but when he does fight, he fights for keeps. This mindset has contributed in large part to his success, and he sees no reason to give up a good thing, either.



Beatrice Caligari

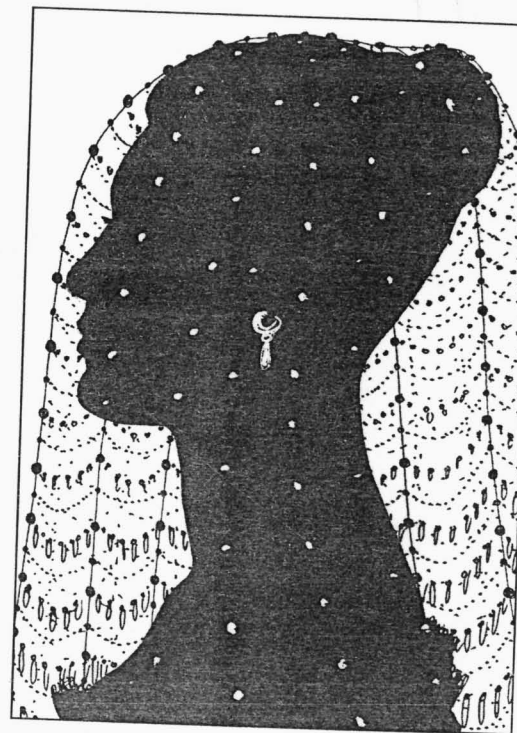
"The threads run in both directions."

The only child of Vincenzo Caligari's favored brother, Beatrice has been left on her own for a long time. Her father and mother fell to Villanova machinations when she was very young, and Vincenzo adopted her. She grew up with Vincenzo's daughter Morella, and the two were considered sisters despite the difference in their age. She exhibited strong Sorte tendencies at an early age, and Vincenzo sent her to the Diletante finishing school to finish her training under Denizia Verde della Vestini. While there, they taught her to dance, sew, maintain a household — and most dangerously of all, they taught her to read. She kept her knowledge secret from everyone except Morella.

She made three prophecies upon her sister's sixteenth birthday day: that Morella would marry the most powerful man in the world, but that she would displease him. She also predicted their marriage would lead to the birth of the most powerful sorcerer ever to walk the face of Théah, and that Morella's death would mark the beginning of the worst bloodbath that Montaigne had ever seen. The first prophecy has already come true — Morella married Empereur Léon — and Beatrice fears that the others will come true as well. Her prophecies have never been wrong.

Beatrice has always felt alone. Her parents left her early, her uncle is too interested in finding the fountain of youth, and her male cousins are too overwhelmed by the demands of running the Principality. She married the minor lord Aldo Falisci, who was scared to death of her, and the two have dwelled in separate chambers ever since. When Morella, the only sister she ever knew, became Imperatrice of Montaigne, Bernice was completely left alone. She does not mind so much; after all, she has always been alone.

She does not speak, does not invite friendships or companionship, and never goes to visit her husband in his



Beatrice Caligari

private chambers. That is probably best, as the man keeps a stable of four courtesans and a buxom blonde Vesten lover who would as likely kill Beatrice as look at her. She keeps a journal, hidden in a secret place known only to herself and her maidservant. She spends days practicing Sorte, manipulating the threads for some unknown purpose, and those Fate Witches with the misfortune to live near her chambers often find themselves disoriented and sick.

Beatrice is a beautiful woman; more even than her cousin Morella. She fears such beauty, though, and avoids mirrors at all costs. She has had all mirrors removed from her chambers, and will not enter any rooms which have them. Beatrice always wears a heavy veil decorated with black pearls to avoid any stray glances. Once, when she was still young, she tried to pluck out her own eyes because of some terrible sight within the threads. Her servants stopped her, and since then, her 'fits' have been mostly harmless.

Juliette

"Come to me, my Prince. I know your body, and I know your mind."

Beautiful, charming and aloof, Juliette is an owned woman whose life and livelihood depend on the mercies of a single man. Luckily for her, that man is completely smitten with her, and considers her his most valuable possession — and his greatest conquest. He is Giovanni Villanova, and she is his courtesan.

Juliette is the daughter of Veronica Ambrogia, the courtesan who created the Ambrogia Swordsman School. Her mother never allowed her to learn the fencing techniques, though she taught her plenty of other ways to protect herself. Juliette always knew she was going to be a courtesan, and trained from an early age to become the very best. She absorbed lessons like a sponge, using her considerable intellect to augment her natural beauty. In addition to the traditional (and not-so-traditional) courtesan skills, she learned that no one else was going to look after her, and that she must depend on her own skills if she wished to prosper.

She began her professional career in Dionna and soon had the entire male population eating out of her hand. They provided her with an adequately decadent lifestyle, but the shifting politics of the Great Game meant that her position remained precarious. As long as she bounced from one admirer to the next, she could never be truly secure. She needed a permanent consort, one who would protect her from her enemies and support her lifestyle for the remainder of her life. Only one man in Dionna could possibly fit the bill — Giovanni Villanova himself.



Juliette

It took almost a year to earn his affections and another two before he became her only admirer. Juliette needed all of her considerable skills to lure him in: he was slippery and dangerous, and one misstep could easily get her killed. But her status as Dionna's most desirable woman made things easier — Villanova only wants the best — and she never made a single mistake.

Three years ago, he asked her to become his permanent consort. She allowed him to believe that his own prowess had finally won her over.

Since then, she has done whatever it takes to make her lord happy. Giovanni has shown her a life that few could ever dream of, and she knows that she must stay on his good side to maintain it. Fortunately, she is bright, witty, and dangerous in her own right, and knows Villanova better than he knows himself. Though she never learned her mother's famous swordsman school, Giovanni has begun to teach her his family's own technique; he finds it amusing when she can better his students. Juliette has excelled at this as she has at everything else, but knows better than to appear overly interested. Tomorrow, the Prince's mind might change, and her amusing sword prowess might suddenly be out of favor.

The one vexation in her life is Villanova's wife Valentina. The Fate Witch truly hates her and would like nothing better than to see Juliette face down in a Dionna canal. Giovanni protects her from assassins' blades (and she's perfectly capable of defending herself as well), but Valentina is an implacable opponent. Juliette returns the hatred with wicked verbal barbs of her own, always keeping the courtiers' favors on her side. She fully intends to be toasting her own health long after the Fate Witch has died.

Slender and dextrous, Juliette sports curly black hair and winning smile above her courtesan's gaudy dress. She speaks clearly and decisively, using large words and a devastating wit to make her points. She's pretty, but not truly beautiful, a deficiency she more than compensates for with her shrewd mind. Her face is a perfect mask, hiding her true intentions behind her constant pleasantries. Juliette is currently the finest courtesan in Vodacce, and it shows.

Morgause Mercuri

"My parents tried to make me marry a man like you. Do you want to know what I did, or shall I just shoot you?"

Morgause Mercuri (formerly Simona Verde della Vestini) is the daughter of Denizia Verde della Vestini, the headmistress of the Diletante finishing school. Simona was a small girl, bullied and abused by her father and brothers. All she ever got from her mother were vague promises of better times after she came of age.

When she was 13, her father arranged a marriage for her to a pathetic cloth merchant who told her in no uncertain terms that he would have little use for her as anything more than a bedwarmer. The night before her wedding, she climbed out a window of the school and left home forever.

Taking the name "Morgause Mercuri" — a new name for a new life, she told herself — she stowed away on a merchanter, and was only found when the merchanter was attacked and boarded by Castilian pirates. The captain of the *Caballero Negro* took her as his share of the loot, and she became a bedwarmer in his cabin for several months. She learned what she could about ships while on board the *Caballero Negro*, and after the captain tired of her attentions he let her learn gunnery, since her size made it easy for her to scramble about in the bowels of the ship. She learned about powder. She learned how to use a knife. She learned how to use guns. She learned and plotted.

After a few more months, the *Caballero Negro* sighted a Vodacce merchanter and closed for the kill. Simona put her plan into action, blowing the powder charges she had secreted all over the ship and killing a good majority of the crew just as they prepared to board. The crew of the *Caballero Negro* was decimated by the merchanter's sailors, and she hid in the powder room, hoping she would not be pitched over the side by angry Vodacce.

Fortunately for her, the Vodacce were more curious over why a series of explosions had gone off on the *Caballero Negro* than they were angry over being attacked. The navigator of the merchanter led a party belowdecks and found Morgause cowering in the magazine, half starved and



Morgause Mercuri

black with gunpowder. The navigator's name was Sebastiano Scogna. He took pity on the poor wretch, saw to it the other sailors kept their hands off, and took her off the *Caballero Negro*.

Back aboard Scogna's ship, the captain was not happy with the condition of the pirate vessel. He had hoped for salvage on the craft, but Morgause's charges had blown out much of the decking, destroyed most of the cannon, and dropped a mast. Sebastiano asked the captain if he could take the ship, and he agreed rather than try and tow the thing home. Sebastiano took a handpicked skeleton crew, including

Morgause, and the wounded ship limped back to Vodacce. There, the *Caballero Negro* was repaired and renamed the *Santa Cecilia*.

Now 28, Morgause is the chief gunner of the *Santa Cecilia* and serves Sebastiano with fierce loyalty. She is a good shot with a cannon, a good shot with a pistol, and the most savage knife-fighter the crew has ever met. Morgause is still small, and keeps her hair cut short (it's extremely hot and dirty on a gundeck, and she hasn't got time for hair in her face). She hasn't worn shoes for years, and her feet are twin messes of horned callouses. Still, she is a pretty woman when she cleans up, and her gunners love her (though they'd never actually use that word).

Valentina Villanova

"I know exactly what Villanova will do. Do you think I would have survived this long if I could not tell his strand from the others?"

Valentina Vestini showed the signs of genius from an early age. Shortly after Valentina's birth in Numa in 1642, her mother noticed her precocious talent for painting, sculpture, and mathematics. Afraid for her daughter's life, she took the child to a nunnery, hoping that the nuns could drive the evil from her soul. The Mother Superior of the Vatican nunnery was dumbfounded by the child's almost instinctive grasp of theoretical mathematics even though she could neither read nor write, and at first suggested to the parents that the girl be trained as a courtesan.

Then Valentina's powerful Sorte abilities surfaced and destroyed all her hopes for a educated life. The nuns curbed the child's eagerness to learn, punishing her severely if she showed any interest in learning to read, do figures, or recognize written languages. Only one person encouraged Valentina: a local girl named Giulia. Though the two could not be friends (Giulia was a commoner), they developed a strong kinship. When Valentina was taken away from the nunnery at 14, the girls wept fiercely, certain they would never meet again.

Her parents began presenting her to potential suitors, and she eventually caught the eye of a powerful lord... too powerful, some would say. Valentina was married to Giovanni Villanova and rapidly produced two sons for the black-hearted Prince. Her duty finished, Giovanni ignored her and has since had little use for her outside of her Sorte abilities. Aware of her husband's dangerous nature, Valentina only allows him to see what he wishes — a meek wife who is an eager servant, and whose abilities of Sorte are just enough to "do the job", but no more. It would not do for him to know her capacities or her intelligence. It could only be dangerous, and possibly mean her death. It has not entirely worked. Villanova once caught Valentina looking at books, and beat her senseless, leaving her body broken on the library floor and forbidding the servants to aid her in any way. "It will teach her her place," he said, and it has. She has never touched a book again.

When Giovanni took his first permanent courtesan, Juliette, Valentina wept, screamed, and demanded that the woman be killed. She even attempted to hire assassins — all of whom were easily foiled by Villanova, who beat her again for her arrogance. Still, he expected nothing less.

In order to taunt her for her ill temper and bad behavior, Giovanni introduced Juliette at a grand ball in their honor. Valentina screamed, threatened the courtesan's life with a hidden dagger, and when she was subdued, fell into a fit. Forced to leave, she was summarily forbidden to return — exactly as Giovanni had intended. Villanova was pleased, amused, and content.

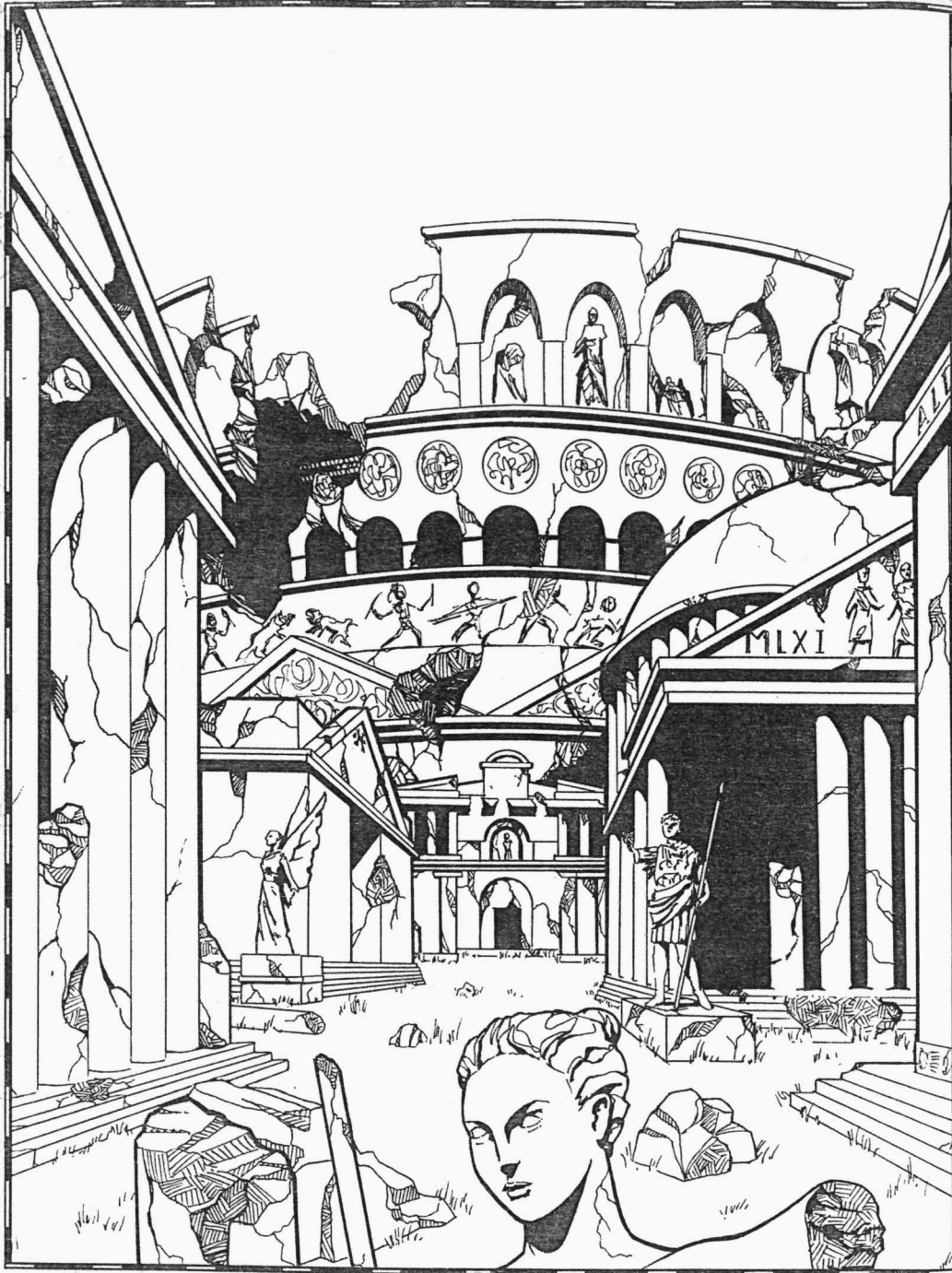
Valentina has never forgotten the humiliating incident, and it changed her life forever. Now she is a quiet woman, dedicating her life to her two small boys. She rarely comes to parties except to obey her husband, and never speaks out of turn or looks up. Juliette, Giovanni's courtesan, taunts her in public, calling Valentina "the old hag." It is believed that one day the two will actually do each other harm — which is enough to keep other nobles' attention and even raise a few wagers on the winner.

Valentina is a slight, pretty woman with pitch-black hair and pale white skin. She dresses in the traditional garb of a Fate

Witch and keeps her head lowered reverentially to the ground like a nun. Her veil hides the fierce intelligence in her eyes, fierceness which has dimmed to a dull obedience since she married Villanova. She speaks quietly and politely, always deferring to the other speaker... unless Juliette is mentioned. Then her voice rises to a shrieking hiss and her anger becomes a force of nature. Other courtiers used to deliberately rile her by mentioning Villanova's courtesan, but her Sorte power soon taught them better.



Valentina Villanova



Drama

The Destiny Spread

Fate Witches have a particular form of reading they use to give their querent a general idea of what his destiny is like. They use a 5-card spread from the Sorte deck in a cross formation to accomplish this.

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

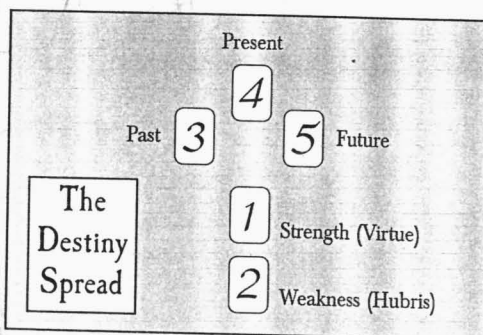
The second card is the querent's Weakness. This shows his greatest flaw.

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

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

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

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



The Destiny Spread in Hero Creation

To use this system properly, you need a Tarot deck. Perform this reading right after assigning Traits and Nationality to your Hero, but before assigning anything else. Separate out the Major Arcana, shuffle them, and put them in one pile. Next, pull out the two suits that are most significant to your character — here, Coins and Cups — leaving out the Page, Knight, Queen, and King cards. Vodacce have a strong affinity to the suits of Coins and Cups; Coins because of their strong trading ties throughout Théah, and Cups because of the web of emotions and deceit that runs throughout the nation.

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

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

Note: In some Tarot decks, Coins are referred to as Pentacles, and Staves are referred to as Wands or Rods.

A Note to GMs and Players: Vodacce Destiny Spreads are slightly different from those of other nations. Please see the Game Master section of Chapter Four for further details. And players, if your GM someday pulls a surprise out of his hat for your Hero, don't say we didn't warn you.

Past

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

Ace of Coins: When you were a child, you received a gift of money by a noble to be held in your name until you were older. *Your starting income is increased by 500G.*

Two of Coins: You have been betrothed to someone who is not certain of their feelings for you. Sometimes they seem to love you; other times they seem to hate you. *You receive a 3-point Betrothed Background for free.*

Three of Coins: You have found that you have a great deal of talent in a particular craft, and you enjoy practicing it. *You receive the Merchant Skill for free. In addition, whenever you use the Basic Knack that you chose to receive for free when taking the Skill, you receive a Free Raise to your roll.*

Four of Coins: You found early on that you enjoy having money — not because of what it can bring you, but because of the feeling you get when you hold it in your hands. *If you take the Greedy Hubris, you receive 15 HP instead of 10. In any event, your starting income is increased by 50G.*

Five of Coins: You once unintentionally angered a Fate Witch, and she cursed you to be unlucky with money. *You start out with two Coins Curse dice (see Sorte, in the Player's Guide). In addition, you receive a 1-point Nemesis Background with the Fate Witch for free. If you get the Free Agent Advantage, ignore the Curse dice.*

Six of Coins: You once offered charity to a poverty-stricken family. In return, they asked you to take their daughter as a servant. *Your starting income is halved. However, if you take the Vodacce Valet Advantage, then your Valet has Full-Blooded Sorte in addition to her normal abilities.*

Seven of Coins: One day while browsing the library, you came across a book that explained the mechanics of acquiring and holding on to power, something very near and dear to your heart. You have taken the book's philosophy to heart and become one of its most skillful practitioners. *If you purchase the Scarovese Advantage, your*

Reputation can dip 10 points lower than the Advantage would normally allow before you become a Villain.

Eight of Coins: When you were young, you fell in love with another bright-eyed Vodacce. Unfortunately, they've since been betrothed to someone they hate, and you find yourself in the same situation. *You receive a 2-point Betrothed Background and a 3-point Romance Background, for free.*

Nine of Coins: Your great-aunt, a powerful Fate Witch while she was still alive, presented you with a beautiful sword while you were young, and it has saved your life many times since, sometimes seeming to have a life of its own as it twists in your hand to parry an incoming attack. *You receive a 6-point Twisted Blade Advantage (granting the Blade 3 Destiny Dice) for free.*

Ten of Coins: You are ambidextrous. *You never suffer an off-hand penalty, no matter which hand you fight with, and you receive the Left-handed Advantage for free.*

Ace of Cups: Your family has always been devoutly religious, and you are no exception. *You receive the Faith Advantage for free.*

Two of Cups: One of your closest friends has grown up to be a Governor, and the two of you still visit with one another frequently. *You receive a 3-point Connection with the Governor of a city for free.*

Three of Cups: You never lacked friends while growing up. *You receive two 2-point Connections and one 1-point Connection for free.*

Four of Cups: Early on, one of the Vodacce Princes saw your potential and made you a member of his Hand. On one occasion, you saved his life, and your Prince does not forget such deeds. *You receive the Membership: Lord's Hand Advantage for free.*

Five of Cups: When you were barely grown up, your parents fell upon hard times and you had to become a courtesan in order to support your family. Your family's finances have since recovered, and you learned a lot from the experience about Vodacce nobility. *You receive the Courtesan Skill and two 2-point Connections for free.*

Six of Cups: Your family has always had a distinguished lineage, and you can capitalize on that if you so desire. *You receive a 5 HP discount on the Noble Advantage if you decide to purchase it.*

Seven of Cups: When you were born, the Fate Witches were unable to foretell your future, and their powers don't work right on you. This caused them some distress, but you've since often used it to your own advantage. *When Sorte magic is used on you, roll a die to determine what type of strand the Fate Witch has actually affected (1-2 Cups, 3-4 Coins, 5-6 Swords, 7-8 Staves, 9-0 None). Do not draw a card for your Future.*

Eight of Cups: You have traveled widely and seen things that most people your age only dream of. *You never suffer the -2 unkept die penalty for being in a strange city or culture, and you receive 4 HP to spend on foreign Languages.*

Nine of Cups: Growing up, you found that sharp senses and an awareness of your surroundings were your most reliable protection in Vodacce. *You receive the Keen Senses and Combat Reflexes Advantages for free.*

Ten of Cups: When you were a child, a Fate Witch cursed you to "live in interesting times". Since then, events have swirled around you, usually out of your control. *You receive the Foul Weather Jack Advantage for free.*

Present

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

Ace of Coins: Recently, you discovered talents you never knew you had. *You receive two Skills of your choice for free.*

Two of Coins: Lately, you've had more romance than you can handle. Three separate people have shown interest in you, and you're not sure which of them you actually like the best. *You receive three 1-point Romance Backgrounds for free.*

Three of Coins: Your hard work has been noticed by your superiors, and they intend to reward you for it. *Your monthly income is doubled for three months.*

Four of Coins: You have recently come into a great deal of money. Technically, you should've shared it with one of your relatives, but you chose instead to keep it all for yourself. *You receive a 3-point Inheritance Advantage and a 2-point Rivalry Background for free.*

Five of Coins: You've been through some hard times recently, but you've come out of them stronger than ever. *You receive the Toughness Advantage for free.*

Six of Coins: Recently, a handsome man saved you from certain death, and the two of you became friends. He has invited you to join his organization, but you have yet to give him an answer. *You may take the Membership: Rose and Cross Advantage for free. If you choose not to, you receive a 3-point Connection within the Knights.*

Seven of Coins: You have received the position of Governor in your town. However, now that you have risen to a position of such notoriety, you are more frightened than ever that your family's taint will be discovered. *You receive the Governor Advantage and a 2-point Lorenzo Background for free. However, you must choose your Weakness as a Hubris; you cannot choose your Strength as a Virtue.*

Eight of Coins: Just last week, you were in a duel with a Noble, and he brought a Fate Witch to the duel. Halfway through, she started to tug on your strands, then screamed and fled into the night. *You have a Fear Rating of 3 with respect to Fate Witches. When they look at your strands, they always see a Black Strand stretching from you to them. It is up to the GM to determine the reason for this.*

Nine of Coins: You have blossomed into a very attractive person. *You receive the Above Average Appearance Advantage for free.*

Ten of Coins: Your family ensured that your education was the most complete they could give you. *You receive both the Academy and University Advantages for free.*

Ace of Cups: You have recently joined the clergy. *You receive the Ordained Advantage for free.*

Two of Cups: A wealthy friend of yours has recently given a servant to you. This friend pays the servant's wages, and takes care of everything the servant needs. *You receive a 2-point Connection and the Servants Advantage for free.*

Three of Cups: You have found that building a reputation as a dangerous rebel has increased the number of people pursuing romantic relations with you. *You receive both the Scoundrel and the Dangerous Beauty Advantages for free.*

Four of Cups: You have recently been made two very tempting offers, but you can only accept one of them. *You receive either a 5-point Inheritance or Membership in a Secret Society of your choice.*

Five of Cups: An older Vodacce recently took you under their wing and taught you everything they knew about their trade. *You receive a Skill of your choice and 3 points to spend in it for free.*

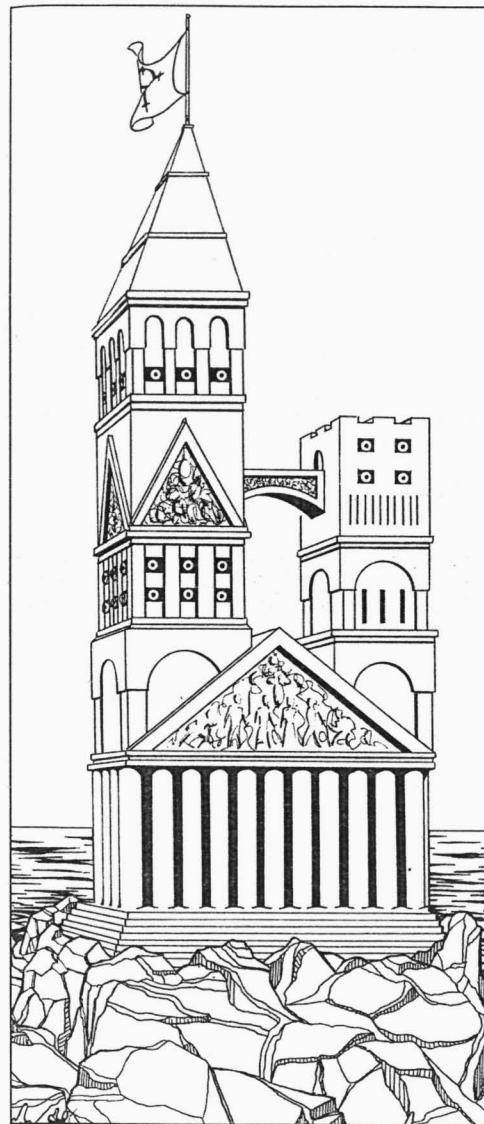
Six of Cups: After recently joining the military, you've acquired a stubborn streak that makes you unpopular with your commanders. *You receive the Indomitable Will Advantage and a 2-point Commission Advantage for free.*

Seven of Cups: You have always been an extremely intelligent and versatile person, and that strength has recently come to the forefront of your personality. *You receive both the Legendary Trait (Wits) and Linguist Advantages for free.*

Eight of Cups: One of the Princes has taken a personal interest in you, and taken you under his wing. *You receive an 8-point Patron for free, but you must beware the political machinations of the other Princes.*

Nine of Cups: Recently, you performed a valiant deed that everyone's talking about. *You receive the Citation Advantage for free.*

Ten of Cups: You've heard that a suitor of yours has hired a Fate Witch to make you fall in love with them. You'll



have to stay on your guard against any manipulation of your emotions. *You receive a 2-point Romance Background. You don't particularly like your suitor, who has a Vodacce Valet with Full-Blooded Sorte magic.*

Future

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

Ace of Coins: Gifts are often wrapped in strings. (Obligation 2)

Two of Coins: Be careful what you agree to. (Betrothed 2)

Three of Coins: You will soon meet a tall, dark stranger. (Romance 2)

Four of Coins: Learn to let things go. (Hunting 2)

Five of Coins: Keep your hands off other peoples' property. (Hunted 2)

Six of Coins: Words once spoken cannot be recalled. (Code of Honor 2)

Seven of Coins: Secrets have a way of becoming common knowledge. (Lorenzo 2)

Eight of Coins: Embark on spiritual journeys only with caution. (Vow 2)

Nine of Coins: Choose, and choose soon. (Romance 1 and Betrothed 1)

Ten of Coins: Your family is always there for you, so be sure to return the favor. (Obligation 2)

Ace of Cups: The Church will soon take someone from you. (Lost Love 2)

Two of Cups: Be careful how you behave around your friends. (Rivalry 2)

Three of Cups: A dark force moves through your life sowing discord. (Nemesis 2)

Four of Cups: Temptation is best resisted, but giving in doesn't mean the end of the world. (Defeated 2)

Five of Cups: You will soon agree to something you'll regret forever. (Obligation 1 and Debt 1)

Six of Cups: You are not what you seem. (True Identity)

Seven of Cups: People see what they want to see. (Mistaken Identity)

Eight of Cups: Your heart will cross blades with your mind. (Vendetta 1 and Romance 1)

Nine of Cups: Keep your opinion to yourself. (Cursed 2)

Ten of Cups: Ignorance is bliss. (Amnesia 2)

New Sorte Rules

Vodacce's Fate Witches can control destiny itself — a power unrivaled even among other sorcerers. Listed below are a series of Arcana card spreads related to this potent ability, as well as a new Knack related to its most terrifying thread.

New Sorte Knack

Black Strand

The black strand represents impending death in Fate Witch lore. However, it doesn't always appear before every person dies, so there is probably another condition attached to its formation as well. Black strands cannot be tugged, stretched, created, or cut. However, Fate Witches who learn this Knack can see black strands when they form, and sometimes seem to remain young longer than they have any right to (see the Black Spread, below). Only Adepts or Masters may learn this Knack.

Card Spreads

Fate Witches are capable of performing complicated sorcerous rituals using their Sorte decks as a mental focus. To do so, the Fate Witch must meet the Mastery Level requirement in parentheses next to the spread's name. Next, she must have a Sorte deck, and ten minutes of uninterrupted concentration. Then she simply lays out the cards in the proper configuration, and follows the rules given under the spread itself, noting that Spreads can cause Fate Lashes as usual to the Fate Witch. Using an actual Tarot deck instead of rolling dice can make performing these Spreads more enjoyable.

Coins Spread (Apprentice)

The Coins Spread is one of the simplest a Fate Witch can perform. She simply pulls out all of the Coins cards from her Sorte deck, shuffles them together, and chooses three at random, laying the second lengthwise across the first, and the third above those two. By doing so, she hopes to cause fortune in monetary endeavors that will increase the recipient's income temporarily. *To perform this Spread, either the Fate Witch must spend 1 Drama die or the recipient must spend 2 Drama dice. The Fate Witch rolls a number of exploding dice equal to her Coins Knack (or draws that many cards, treating Court Cards as 10s), adding the total to the recipient's income for the next month. This Spread may be performed as often as the cost can be paid.*

Cups Spread (Apprentice)

The Cups Spread is also quite easy to perform. The Fate Witch simply pulls out all of the Cups cards from her Sorte deck, shuffles them together, and chooses three at random, laying the second lengthwise across the first, and the third below those two. By doing so, she hopes to increase the attraction of a particular person to the recipient, in essence casting a temporary love spell. *To perform this Spread, either the Fate Witch must spend 2 Drama dice or the recipient must spend 4 Drama dice. The Fate Witch rolls a number of exploding dice equal to her Cups Knack (or draws that many cards, treating Court Cards as 10s). For every 15 points she rolls, the recipient rolls 1 extra unkept die when making Charm*

Sorte and Music

Some Fate Witches have learned to weave fate strands into musical compositions, infusing the notes and tempos with their powerful magic. If properly performed, such pieces allow the listener to experience new heights of emotion. Of course, few Witches can claim credit for their compositions, since the most successful composers are male.

If the GM wishes, he may allow Fate Witch Heroes to affect their Composer Knack with Sorte magic. For every rank in Sorte, they may add one unkept die to any check involving the Composer Knack. This bonus only applies if the Knack is greater than 2; particularly difficult compositions may require the expenditure of a Drama die to gain the bonus (GM's discretion).

repartee attempts against the target for the rest of the month. This Spread may be performed as often as the cost can be paid.

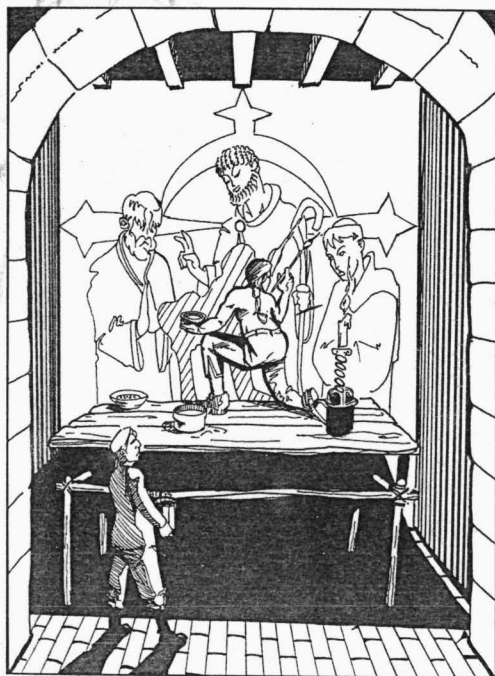
Staves Spread (Adept)

The Staves Spread is much more complicated than the Coins and Cups Spreads — not in physical practice, but in the Sorte power required by the Fate Witch. Similar to the first two Spreads, the Fate Witch simply pulls out all of the Staves cards from her Sorte deck, shuffles them together, and chooses three at random, laying the second lengthwise across the first, and the third to the left of those two. By doing so, she hopes to temporarily increase the recipient's fame and influence over others. *To perform this Spread, either the Fate Witch must spend 3 Drama dice or the recipient must spend 6 Drama dice. The Fate Witch rolls a number of exploding dice equal to her Staves Knack (or draws that many cards, treating Court Cards as 10s), adding the total to the recipient's Reputation for the next month. This Spread may be performed as often as the cost can be paid.*

Swords Spread (Adept)

The Swords Spread is one of the most valuable that an Adept Fate Witch can perform, allowing her to instill a powerful destiny in a weapon that is usable by others. To

perform it, she pulls out all of the Swords cards from her Sorte deck, shuffles them together, and chooses three at random, laying the second lengthwise across the first, and the third to the right of those two. *To perform this Spread, either the Fate Witch must spend 4 Drama dice or the person the sword is intended for must spend 8 Drama dice. This adds one Destiny die to the weapon, as described under the Twisted Blade Advantage (page 99). The weapon to be enchanted must be an ordinary weapon – puzzle swords, dracheneisen blades, etc. are all immune to this effect. This Spread may be performed as often as the cost can be paid, but the total number of Destiny dice the Fate Witch has bestowed cannot exceed her Rank in her Swords Knack. The Fate Witch may cancel at will any Destiny dice that she has bestowed.*



Black Spread (Master)

The Black Spread is seemingly very simple, but seldom performed by any but the most powerful Fate Witches, and always only for themselves. To perform it, she uses a special suit of cards called the Skull suit. This suit is rarely seen in Théah and includes the standard 1–10 cards as well as the normal Court Cards. In addition, however, the Tower card from the Major Arcana must be included. The Fate Witch shuffles these cards together, blindfolds herself, and chooses two at random, laying one above the other. The purpose of this secretive ritual is to keep the Fate Witch young beyond her years. It doesn't actually extend her lifespan, but she may appear as a young woman up until the day she dies. However, if the Tower card is chosen, the effects of all previous Black Spreads are instantly undone. *To perform this Spread, the Fate Witch must spend 5 Drama dice. The Fate Witch rolls a number of exploding dice equal to her Black Strand Knack (or draws that many cards, treating Court Cards as 10s). For every 15 points she rolls, the recipient adds 1 year to her Middle Aged and Old categories (see "Aging" in the GMs' Guide). Thus, after adding 1 year, a Fate Witch would be Middle Aged at ages 27–41. This Spread may be performed as often as the cost can be paid, but if any dice ever cause the Fate Witch a Fate Lash, then her age categories reset to the ones listed in the GM's Guide.*

Arcana Spread (Master)

Finally, the Arcana "Spread" is the most powerful Sorte effect commonly known to Fate Witches. Rather than lay out an actual spread of cards, however, the Fate Witch instead weaves a tapestry and incorporates Fate Strands into it. To do so, the Fate Witch selects a single Major Arcana from her Sorte deck and weaves a tapestry of her intended target, depicting him or her in front of the picture on the card. This effect is so powerful that it can temporarily change the target's personality, making a cowardly man brave, or a holy man greedy. Eventually the original personality reasserts itself, but often not before significant damage is done. *To weave the tapestry takes two months of uninterrupted labor and 50G of materials. Once it is woven, the Fate Witch must spend 10 Drama dice to weave the Fate Strands into it, giving the target the Arcana of her choice (either a Hubris*

or a Virtue for Heroes, or a Wile or Flaw for Villains) for 10 months, minus 1 month for every Rank of Resolve the target has. This replaces any Arcana the Hero might normally have for the duration of the spell. This Spread may be performed as often as the cost can be paid, but a Fate Witch may only have three tapestries active at the same time.

New Backgrounds

Betrothed

Your parents have arranged for you to marry another Vodacce. You probably don't know this person very well, and might not have even have met him or her. The marriage represents a political alliance or a payment of goods, nothing more. While you are not expected to love your betrothed (and can pursue other romances if you're a man), you must follow the tenets of marriage and fulfill your expected duties to the best of your ability. The number of points you take in this Background determines how convenient the marriage is, whether or not it comes when you're ready, or how personable your future spouse is. The more points you spend, the less pleasant the marriage is likely to be.

Code of Honor

The Vodacce take honor very seriously (despite what others may say), and many would rather die than violate their code of ethics. For each point in this Background, choose a rule in the "Vodacce Honor" box (right) which you can't break. The GM may dock you a Drama Die if you violate this rule during the game. Consequently, if you follow the rule even when it hurts you in an adventure, the GM should grant you an additional XP or two.

Vodacce Honor

The Vodacce honor system is quite complex, balanced between the tenets of *virtù* (see Chapter 4) and the realities of the Great Game. It can be boiled down to a few basic rules, however, rules which every Vodacce knows by heart. While not all Vodacce follow these rules, all understand them, and noble Vodacce try their best to fulfill its edicts.

1. Never harm a child. Children are innocents and do not understand the Great Game. Therefore, they are immune to its rules.
2. Similarly, never harm a mother or an expectant mother. They must raise tomorrow's leaders.
3. The Vaticine Church is sacrosanct. Never do anything to harm it or damage its institutions.
4. Always meet a man's eyes unless he is clearly your superior. To do otherwise is an indication of cowardice.
5. Once you draw your sword, it must taste blood before it can be sheathed again.
6. Always repay your debts; a man who cannot return favors has no honor. Similarly, always collect what others owe you; a man who cannot collect his debts has no strength.
7. Family loyalty is more important than anything. An insult to a member of your family is an insult to you.
8. Never refuse a challenge. Cowardice achieves nothing.

Lorenzo (Vodacce only)

You can trace your lineage back to the infamous Lorenzo family: brutal sadists who shocked even the jaded Vodacce. While you don't necessarily exhibit any of their characteristics, your reputation could be damaged beyond repair if knowledge of the connection came out. The number of points you spend on this Background determines how strong the connection is, and how much it could damage you if your enemies learn of it.

New Skills

Courtesan (Civil)

Courtesans are more than simple jennys. Clever, witty, and well-educated, they advise, seduce, and entertain their male clients, providing companionship on every level. They also learn to manipulate others to their advantage, for they lack the protection of family or marriage. Vodacce courtesans are charming to a fault, and as dangerous as they are alluring. There are no male courtesans; men may not learn this Skill.

Basic Knacks

Note: You begin with 3 of the following Basic Knacks at Rank 1. You may purchase additional Basic Knacks at Rank 1 for 1 Hero Point each.

Acting: Slipping in and out of character is your forte. You can pretend to be a member of a different social class, exhibiting the humility of a beggar or the arrogance of a king. Of course, this is much more effective when combined with the proper costume.

Dancing: You ease your way around the dance floor with grace and poise. Ballroom dancers with great skill are in high demand at noble balls, while ballet dancers can earn a decent living performing at stage shows and paid recitals.

Etiquette: While it might be acceptable to throw the bones of your meal upon the floor in some regions, it is certain that other nobility would faint upon seeing some ruffian throw a greasy bone on their new rug. You have learned the niceties of events sponsored by the nobility and can avoid such social *faux pas*. When you are using this Knack in a place whose customs you are unfamiliar with, you are at a penalty of -2 unkept dice.

Fashion: When appearing before nobility, it is an affront to their gentle senses to be ill-attired. The conscientious courtier keeps careful tabs on the latest trends in fashion, no matter how ridiculous. With enough knowledge, you can

quickly throw together a presentable outfit, even if the materials at hand are less than satisfactory.

Jenny: The courtly art of escort and the less refined variants thereof.

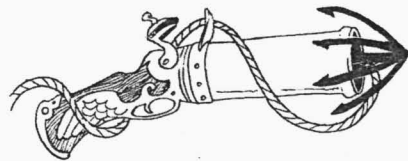
Masseur: You can give expert massages, a skill often in demand among nobility.

Unobtrusive: Sometimes a courtesan must remain unnoticed while her employer works off a fit of rage. This is not actually hiding, but rather blending in with the background. Like the Stealth Knack, Unobtrusive is used to generate a TN against which those around the courtesan must make a Contested Wits Roll to notice her.

Advanced Knacks

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

Conceal: A woman with a dagger in her bodice has a means of defense, even though she may appear helpless. If you wish to get a pistol into a well-guarded ballroom, or a lockpick into a jail cell, you need this Knack. To use this Knack you must make a Simple Roll with it, and the total generated becomes the TN for anyone nearby to see through the concealment. Anyone searching you receives a Free Raise, and anyone thoroughly searching you receives two Free Raises.



Gossip: A rumor flies faster than the swiftest arrow and bites twice as deep. Gossips always have an ear to the rumor mill and get the latest news before anyone else, but with this Knack you also have the ability to determine which are true and which are important. This is generally used to acquire information, as a Lore Check.

Mooch: With a combination of entertaining conversation, hollow promises, and sheer audacity, you can convince others to provide for your needs. Care must be taken not to do this in one place too long, however, as even the most flattering guest must eventually wear out his welcome.

Poison: When diplomacy fails and a military victory is impossible, an ounce of arsenic will sometimes suffice. This Knack lets you know what poison to use and how much to administer, as well as how to handle it safely. Your GM will have rules for using this Knack in the GM's Guide.

Politics: Politics is power, and the truly clever courtier understands this. You can sense the ebb and flow of a noble's influence and determine whose coattails represent the quickest ride to the top.

Seduction: The breathy whisper of a sultry woman has thrown more than one empire into chaos. Armed with this Knack, you have the potential to be more dangerous to the stability of a nation than a hundred soldiers.

Sincerity: Even the most adept lie is useless if the listener detects a tremor of fear or a pair of downcast, nervous eyes. While Oratory allows you to utter glib words for entertainment or impact, Sincerity puts the ring of truth behind them, concealing even the most bold-faced lie behind a veneer of honesty.

Guide (Civil)

Vodacce cities are bewildering mazes of narrow streets and towering buildings. Foreigners – and even Vodacce from other cities – constantly complain about difficulties in getting around, and city visitors often find themselves lost the instant they arrive. Many natives hire themselves out as guides, offering to lead travelers wherever they need to go.

Most guides are familiar with one particular city, which they know like the back of their hand. They sometimes double as gondoliers or coach drivers when tourist traffic is low.

Basic Knacks

Note: You begin with 2 of the following Basic Knacks at Rank 1 and Street Navigation at Rank 1. You may purchase additional Basic Knacks at Rank 1 for 1 Hero Point each.

Climbing: You understand how to find hand- and footholds, how to use climbing gear, and how to seek out the easiest path to climb in the first place. If you are attacked while climbing, you use this Knack as your Defense Knack.

Ride: This Knack is what you use for ordinary horseback riding. Your GM may call for checks when you do unusual things such as gallop the horse (TN 15), or jump the horse over a hurdle (TN 20). A well trained mount may reduce such Target Numbers by 5.

Stealth: Stealth is the art of going unnoticed. You can use it to go places you're not allowed, hide from your pursuers, or avoid being caught in a compromising situation. This Knack is commonly used as a Contested Roll against the victim's Wits.

Street Navigation: Racing through the streets at night is no time for you to acquaint yourself with the layout of the city. Without this Knack you may quickly find yourself lost or cornered in a dead-end alley. Successful rolls with this Knack will grant you information about the locale, as determined by the GM. You are a penalty of -2 unkept dice when using this Knack in a city that you are unfamiliar with.

Survival: Foraging for berries and nuts isn't exciting, but it's often necessary during the winter or in unfamiliar territory. With the Survival Knack you can always find enough food to survive on, although it may include such delicacies as mice, grubs, and termites. Your GM has rules for the use of this Knack in his Guide.

Tracking: You know the signs that animals and people leave behind as they move through the woods: a broken twig, a crushed leaf, or a muddy footprint. More difficult, but much more impressive, is determining how long ago the signs

were made. This Knack will commonly be used against a TN generated with the target's Stealth Knack when he last passed through the area.

Trail Signs: Hunters have a private language all their own, in the form of carefully bent twigs, stacked rocks, and notched limbs. You can leave a trail for others to find and follow later, warn of danger, or indicate a good fishing hole. Your GM will have a list of basic TNs for using this Knack; success means that the person you are signaling automatically sees the trail signs when he passes by it (possible trail signs are listed in the GMs' Guide).

Advanced Knacks

Ambush: You have learned to spot likely places for an ambush to occur and to watch for signs that people have concealed themselves there. Naturally, this Knack cuts both ways, allowing you to set up an ambush of your own. Rules for the use of this Knack are located in the Drama chapter of the Players' Guide.

Cartography: You can make reasonably accurate maps using a set of cartographer's tools. Reliable maps can fetch a high price if sold to the right buyer. Success with this Knack grants legible, accurate maps. Failure might send the ship using them hurtling mercilessly into the Seventh Sea...

Direction Sense: You are able to keep yourself mentally oriented with respect to true north, provided you've had an opportunity to use the stars or sun to determine it and haven't since been spun around in the dark. This can also allow you to retrace your steps through an unfamiliar city or forest, although identical or darkened passages are much harder to remain oriented in.

Navigation: Using nautical charts and a set of navigator's tools, you can plot courses that will take a ship out of sight of land without getting hopelessly lost, and communicate that information to the pilot of the ship. Success with this Knack steers a vessel onto the correct course. Failure could result in your being keel-hauled for getting everyone lost. Your GM has rules for sailing sea vessels in his Guide.

Swimming: Provided you aren't too heavily weighed down, you do a nice job of not sinking (stormy seas and sharks notwithstanding). Your GM has rules for swimming (and drowning) in his Guide.

New Knack

Merchant Skill Basic Knack

Perfumer: This Knack is used in the creation of pleasing scents and perfumes.

New Swordsman Schools

In Vodacce, blades are as quick as their owners' tongues, and a man who can't use a sword never lives long enough to regret it. Nowhere else is the fine art of self-defense such a necessity.

Bernoulli School

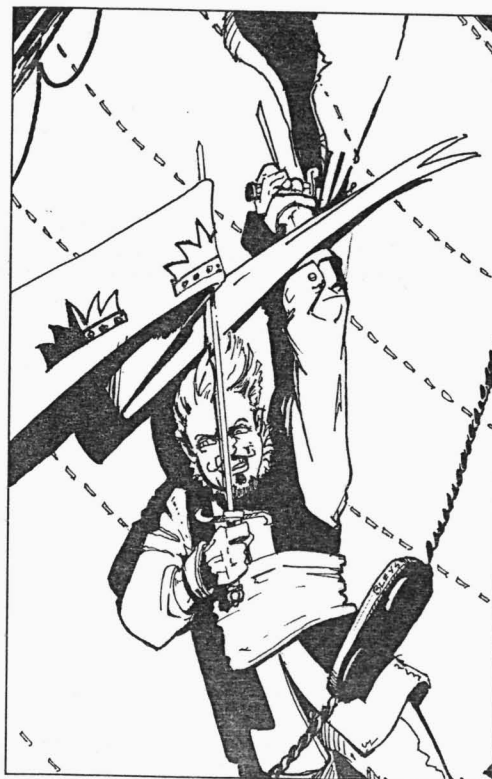
Country of Origin: Vodacce

Description: The Bernoulli import more than just artifacts from the Crescent Empire; they bring knowledge as well. The Bernoulli school developed out of the Crescents' use of the scimitar, incorporating a western cavalry saber into its stylistic flourishes. Bernoulli swordsmen learn to present their side to an opponent (much like the Aldana style of Castille), thus limiting their vulnerable spots. The blade's sweeping movements keep opponents at a distance until they weaken or show an opening, which a Bernoulli master can take full advantage of.

The school suffers from an overly defensive approach, and the nature of the saber prevents any quick strategic adjustments. On the other hand, it also makes it very difficult to be hit, and Bernoulli swordsmen can keep their foes at bay for a long time without tiring. In Vodacce combat, where quick strikes are the order of the day, the methodical flourishes of the Bernoulli school are a life-saver.

Basic Curriculum: Fencing, Pugilism

Swordsman Knacks: Beat (Fencing), Corps-à-corps, Lunge (Fencing), Exploit Weakness (Bernoulli School)



Apprentice: Bernoulli students first learn to use their saber as a defensive weapon, deflecting multiple blows with its broad sweeps. Add your Mastery Level to your TN to be hit.

Journeyman: You have learned a saber maneuver known as a *fleché*. You point the tip of your blade at your opponent's head and run, leap, or spring towards him. To do this, you perform a Lunge as usual, but then you may give up any number of extra Action dice for the attack. Each extra Action die you give up adds 1 unkept die to the Damage Roll and increases the TN to Actively Defend against the attack by 5. In addition, you are extraordinarily skilled at lunging and receive one Free Rank in the Lunge Knack upon becoming a Journeyman. This may increase your Rank to a 6. If it does not, you can later increase your Lunge Knack to a 6 by paying 25 XP for the increase from a 5 to a 6.

Master: Bernoulli masters have reached a stage where they can press an attack from a defensive position – even if they're retreating or pulling back. Once per Round, you may re-roll an unsuccessful Attack Roll.

Cappuntina School

Country of Origin: Vodacce

Description: Though not recognized by the Swordsman's Guild – indeed, in many circles it isn't considered a school at all – the women of Vodacce have found Cappuntina an invaluable tool. It is mainly a form of self-defense; the name is derived from the phrase "hat pin," and the school developed out of a woman's need to protect herself when her husband wasn't around. Today it employs thrown knives, which a woman can easily conceal up her sleeve or pinned into her hair.

The main strength of Cappuntina is its surprising swiftness. Students learn to disable their opponents by pinning their hands or sleeves, cutting tendons to slow pursuit and striking when their defenses are down. Cappuntina practitioners learn to strike swiftly, then flee before their opponents have a chance to recover.

The weakness of Cappuntina is that it lacks the stamina of other Swordsmen schools. If a student can't disable her opponent quickly, she can do very little to stop him. Masters of Cappuntina can hamstring attackers before they know they're under attack, then escape without ever having to face a drawn blade.

Basic Curriculum: Knife, Performer

Swordsmen Knacks: Pin (Knife), Throw (Knife), Trick Shooting (Knife), Exploit Weakness (Cappuntina)

New Swordsmen Knacks

Pin (Knife): You may use a missile weapon to pin an opponent's hand to a nearby surface, such as a tree. To do this, you must throw a single missile weapon using this Knack instead of your normal Attack Knack, and add 10 to your TN to hit (which cannot be negated with Trick Shooting). If you succeed, your opponent's arm is pinned, and he drops whatever he was holding in his hand. In addition, he must spend 1 Action to free himself. This Knack can only be used on targets wearing cloth or other soft clothing. Pinning a suit of dracheneisen armor to a tree just isn't feasible.

Trick Shooting (Knife): For each Rank of Trick Shooting, you subtract 5 from any penalties to your shot (range, cover, etc.) Trick Shooting cannot lower your TN below the base Target Number to be hit, nor can it be counted towards Raises to Damage. However, its bonuses can be applied towards Called Shots. For example, if a target has a TN to be hit of 15, plus 15 for modifiers (such as a Called Shot to the hand), a knife thrower with Rank 5 Trick Shooting would negate all 15 points of modifiers, but he would not lower the base TN to be hit (15).

Apprentice: Apprentices of Cappuntina learn to produce their weapons quickly and hurl them on the fly. They receive no off-hand penalty when throwing knives, and may draw and throw a knife as a single Action. In addition, you may purchase the Throw (Knife) Knack as if it were a Basic Knack.

Journeyman: Cappuntina Journeymen know how to strike with more than weapon at a time. When you spend an Action to attack, you may throw a number of knives equal to your Mastery Level. All knives from a single attack must be aimed at the same target, and you make a single Attack Roll for all of them. Should they hit, they deal damage as a group, inflicting 1k1 Wounds for each knife (i.e. two knives would inflict 2k2 and three would inflict 3k3).

Master: Masters of Cappuntina can disable more than one attacker; some can take down entire brute squads in a single flight of knives. When you become a Master in this school, each of your thrown knives in an attack may be aimed at a separate target, but you must make a separate Attack Roll for each target you aim at. In addition, for each knife you choose not to throw (of the three per Action available to you), you gain a Free Raise to the Attack Rolls of each remaining knife.

Villanova School

Country of Origin: Vodacce

Description: The sinister Villanova family has long used political machinations to enforce their will, but they are also deadly swordsmen. The Villanova school developed as a way to quickly return blows, as well as incorporating all number of dirty tricks into its fighting style. Students learn at a secluded academy hidden deep within the swamps of Villanova territory. Is it whispered that all graduates must swear fealty to the Villanova family, although enough practitioners can be found elsewhere to discount such rumors.

The greatest strength of the Villanova school is its ability to turn opponents' attacks back on themselves. It uses a move called a stop-thrust, which slides your blade up your foe's to deal devastating damage. It also makes extensive use of feints and other deceptive moves, allowing a Swordsman to conceal his true intent from his foe.

Unfortunately, the Villanova school also encourages overconfidence in its practitioners, who often believe that

opponents cannot see their true intentions. More than a few Villanova students have underestimated their foes, dismissing their abilities only to be gutted by an unexpected move. A cautious Villanova swordsman is almost unstoppable, but cautious swordsmen usually find other schools to attend.

Basic Curriculum: Fencing, Knife

Swordsmen Knacks: Double-parry (Fencing/Knife), Feint (Fencing), Stop-thrust (Fencing), Exploit Weakness (Villanova).

New Swordsmen Knacks

Stop-thrust (Fencing): A stop-thrust is a combination of parry and counterattack that uses the opponent's blade as a guide for the swordsman's own. When an opponent attacks you, you may spend a Held or current Action (not an Interrupt Action) to perform a stop-thrust. To do so, roll Wits + Stop-thrust as an Attack Roll against the attacking opponent. If you hit, you deal 3k2 Wounds to them. If this causes a Dramatic Wound to your opponent, then the attack they were about to make is canceled without effect.

Apprentice: Beginners at the Villanova school learn to use easily concealed secondary weapons against their opponents. You suffer no off-hand penalty when using a knife in your off hand. In addition, you receive a Free Raise when using your Parry (Knife) Knack. Students of this school often make use of Fencing Ring Grips (see page 101) as well.

Journeyman: Villanova Journeyman are skilled enough to conceal their movements behind a series of feints. You receive one Free Rank in the Feint Knack upon becoming a Journeyman. This may increase your Rank to a 6. If it does not, you can later increase your Feint Knack to a 6 by paying 25 XP for the increase from a 5 to a 6.

Master: At the final level, you learn to trap opponents by "inviting" your opponents to attack you. At the start of any Phase, you may voluntarily lower your TN to be hit in increments of 5, to a minimum of 5. If you are attacked and perform a stop-thrust while your TN is lowered, then you

receive a Free Raise to your stop-thrust attempt for every 5 points by which you lowered your TN to be hit.

New Advantages

Cymbr Connection (3 Points)

Either through birth or some past deed, you have earned the trust of the wandering Cymbr people. You know the location of several Cymbr villages and understand the signs they use to communicate with each other. You can use those signs to recruit help if you wish, or hide from pursuit by taking shelter in one of their permanent enclaves. *Though you receive no tangible benefits, the Cymbr know and trust you, and will be considered friendly to you and your companions (provided you do nothing to break that friendship).*

Governor (6 Points, Vodacce only)

You control a portion of territory on the Vodacce mainland, governing it for the ruling family. Each month, you receive a certain amount of money from your Prince for the purposes of bettering the province: building roads, employing guardsmen, and handling various and sundry problems. While the office has many perks, it is also hard work, and most governors are deeply entrenched in the Great Game. Step carefully if you wish to prosper. *You receive 1,000G in starting income. Your monthly income, on the other hand, is not set. You receive 50G a month normally, but*





you may attempt to embezzle extra money from your Prince. If you do so, you must make a Wits + Accounting roll against a TN of 5 + 5 for each additional 50G you are attempting to embezzle that month. If you fail the roll, you get caught, and your GM will determine what happens then.

Membership: Lord's Hand (4 Points, Vodacce only)

You serve as the instrument of your Prince's will, conducting various actions in his name. You have received a personal reprieve for all criminal actions in Vodacce, provided you act solely in the name of your Prince. Lord's Hands have certain responsibilities; in exchange, they may act without fear of legal reprisal (though personal reprisals are another matter entirely).

Membership Requirements

Vodacce Nationality.

Wits and Panache of at least 3.

10+ HP spent in Knacks from the Courtier Skill.

No fewer than three Martial Skills.

Duties

Obey their Prince's orders.

Report treachery to their Prince.

Benefits

A Lord's Hands have their equipment, room, and board paid for by their Prince. In addition, while acting under orders from their Prince, they are exempt from punishment by the law in Vodacce. Any trouble someone has with the Hand's actions must be taken up with their Prince.

Poison Immunity (1 Point)

Either through natural immunity or gradual exposure, you have no fear of a specific type of poison; it is no more harmful to you than children's milk. Select a single type of poison. You may ignore all effects of that poison when you are exposed to it. You may purchase this advantage as many times as you like.

Scarovese (Varies)

All Vodacce study the works of Cristoforo Scarovese, but you have a keen insight into his work. You can use his lessons to hide your tracks, deflect blame, and generally prosper in the folds of the Great Game. By spending 1 HP in this Advantage, your Reputation may drop to -40 before you become an NPC. By spending 3 HP in this Advantage, your Reputation may drop to -50 before you become an NPC.

Twisted Blade (Varies, Vodacce only)

Vodacce's Fate Witches sometimes attach fate strands to newly-formed weapons, increasing their potency. These "twisted blades" are in high demand among Vodacce's nobility. While witches usually "twist" swords, they can also influence knives, pistols, and other weapons if they choose. For every 2 HP you spend in this Advantage, your weapon receives 1 Destiny die. You may purchase up to 5 Destiny dice for your weapon. You may spend these dice before making any roll that has something to do with the weapon (Attack Rolls, Damage Rolls, Swordsman Knacks, Active Defenses, etc.) with each spent die adding +1k1 to the roll. Your Destiny dice refresh at the start of each Act.

Fate Witch Heroes may Twist a weapon; see the Swords Spread under "New Sorte Rules" (page 88).

Unbound (15 Points, Male Vodacce only)

Every generation, a handful of Vodacce men are born outside of the webs of Fate. No strands connect to them and Sorte sorcery slides off them like water off a duck. Any effort to read their fate in a Destiny Spread results in incomprehensible gibberish. "The Unbound," as the Fate Witches call them, constitute some of the greatest heroes in Vodacce history, as well as the most reviled villains. You are immune to all uses of Sorte sorcery. All Fate strands attached to you are considered Court Cards, whether they are actually that powerful or not. In addition, when facing a Fate Witch in combat, you have a Fear Rating of 2 in regards to her.

Vodacce Accent (0 Points, Vodacce only)

An accent is an identifying characteristic or characteristics in the way a person speaks indicating that he's from a particular area. Only a Hero fully proficient in the language can identify accents. Language Acquaintance and Pidgins are no help, and non-Vodacce may never have an accent. There are four primary accents in Vodacce: Mantua, Teramo, Arende Candide and Island. In addition, there are the wandering peoples of the Cymbr who have a distinct accent all their own. Vodacce Heroes with one of these accents pay slightly different costs to learn foreign languages. An explanation of each accent follows the language chart below.

Vodacce Language Chart

	Island	Teramo	Mantua	Arenda	Cymbr
Avalon	2	3	1	2	3
Castille	1	1	2	2	2
Crescent	4	2	3	3	2
High Eisen	3	3	4	4	3
Eisen	2	2	3	3	2
Montaigne	1	1	0	1	2
Théan	2	1	2	1	1
Teodoran	4	3	4	4	4
Ussura	3	2	3	3	3
Vendel	2	3	1	2	2
Vodacce	0	0	0	0	0

Mantua: speakers with this accent hail from the northernmost region of Vodacce, near Eisen and Ussura. Their speech is harsher and shorter than most Vodacce residents, with clipped accents and heightened consonants. Northern languages are easier for Mantua citizens to learn, and they are considered fairly cosmopolitan for mainlanders.

Teramo: Teramo has always belonged to the Gallili and their descendants the Bernoullis. Its proximity to the Crescent Empire has given locals a soft, lilting voice with emphasis on the vowels. Because of their proximity to the Crescents, Teramo residents are considered strange and exotic; their accent is often construed as mysterious or romantic.

Arenda Candide: The heart of mainland Vodacce has changed hands countless times since the fall of Numa. Its people consider themselves "true Vodacce," though other areas consider them somewhat backwards. *Arenda Candide accents are pronounced and excitable, and supposedly the mark of a rural upbringing.*

Island: This accent has developed on the Princes' islands amid the cosmopolitan culture of the great cities. *This is the Vodacce accent described in the Players' Guide.*

Cymbr: This distinct accent marks the wandering communities of the Cymbr. They hail from a wide variety of sources, and their speech patterns echo a mixture of Eisen, Crescent and traditional Vodacce sources. Strangely, they have retained a great deal of the original Théan in their speech, and find the formal language easy to learn. *The Cymbr dialect has a rhythm all its own and even non-Vodacce can identify its distinctive pattern.*

Vodacce Valet (6 Points, 5 for Vodacce)

You have a Vodacce valet in your employ at the start of the game. Besides his normal servant's duties, he is skilled in the Great Game, and can conduct covert activities at your request. *The Valet is considered a Henchman and should be built as other Henchmen are. He receives a 3 in all Criminal Knacks in addition to the normal 75 HP a Henchman is built with.*

Trained Spider (2 Points, 1 if Fate Witch)

The spider is a natural embodiment of the Vodacce Fate Witch, and many women train spiders to serve a variety of purposes. You have acquired one of these specially-bred spiders, ranging in size from a fingernail to a dinner plate. Spiders are considered Brutes with a threat rating of 1. They cannot engage in extended combat and are considered pets, not servitors. It fulfills a single specific duty; choose one or roll on the list below.

1 — Glow. You have a small globe filled with tiny spiders which produce a bright phosphorescent glow. The globe can illuminate an area of 10' by 10'.

2 — Poison. This spider can be trained to bite anyone who enters a specific area no larger than a single room. The bite is intensely painful and causes 3k2 Wounds, but can only be administered once per day.

3 — Theft Mark. This spider has been trained to bite anyone who touches a specific object. While not fatal, its poison causes the skin to swell like a balloon. The effects last for several days, making it very easy to spot the thief.

4 — Door Marks. This spider has been trained to spin webs across doors, windows, and other entrances, allowing the owner to know when intruders have crossed them. It takes the spider ten minutes to "mark" a single entrance. Once marked, the owner will know with a single glance if anyone has passed by.

5 — Tough Lines. This spider produces a very strong thread, which may be used as thin rope. It takes one week to spin fifty feet of thread, which can support up to 250 pounds.

6 — Retrieval. This large spider has been trained to retrieve small items — pens, rings, sheaves of paper, etc. — and return them to its owner. The items cannot weigh more than one pound, and the spider is limited in what it can retrieve to either one single type of item (pen, ring, etc), or an item which the spider has had an opportunity to mark with its scent.

7 — Message Transfer. The spider's bite can effect a brief transfer of information from one subject to another. The message transfer must be fifteen words or less and compose a single sentence. The information only travels one way (from a sender to a subject) and cannot be transferred to more than one person. Keep in mind that an unwitting subject may not realize what the spider is up to and squash it before it can bite. The spider may only use this ability three times per week.

8 — Tracking. The spider can track a specified person, leaving a distinctive thread on buildings and other landmarks for its mistress to follow. Distance is no object; the spider can follow its subject for hundreds of miles if necessary. The tracking ability only works if the subject is on foot: the spider is too slow to follow horses or wagons, and ships leaving no place to mark passage.

9 — Hide Object. The spider can take a single object (weighing no more than a pound) and hide it in a secret place, cocooning it with thread and then retrieving it when ordered. The object is considered invisible for purposes of searching; it simply cannot be found by normal human means. The spider can hide up to three objects at a time with this ability.

0 — Roll twice on this table, ignoring this result hereafter.

Raise to the Attack Roll when thrown, and the TN to Actively Defend against them is increased by 5.

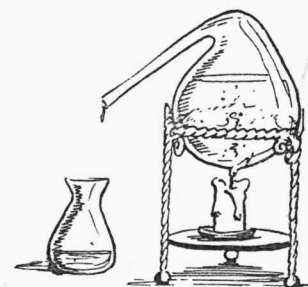
New Poisons

Anything goes in the Great Game, and Vodacce has long appreciated the value of deadly chemicals. They import toxins from exotic locales and also brew them using domestic resources. Spider breeders do a brisk business extracting poison from their "pets," and the Princes ensure that there will always be a market. Rules for Poison can be found on pages 184–186 of the *GMs' Guide*. Keep in mind that many Vodacce are just as repulsed by the use of poison as other nationalities; the Great Game need not be played so ruthlessly.

Crimson Thinner

Special, see below / 4 Phases / 4 Phases

This chemical compound interferes with the body's healing process, preventing clotting and preventing wounds from closing. It is usually smeared on weapons or introduced to the bloodstream through open cuts. Price: 100G. *Causes 1 die of Wounds for every Dramatic Wound the victim currently has.*



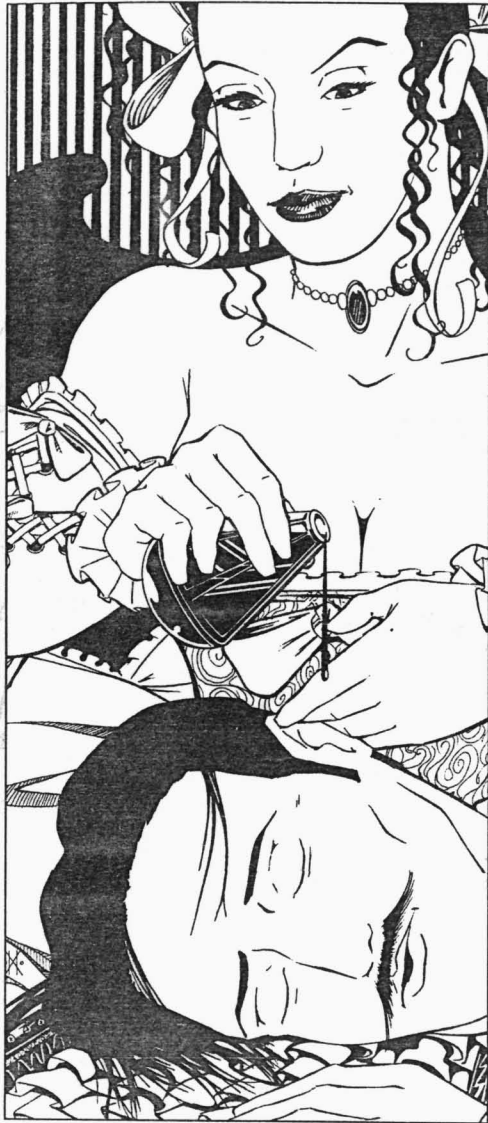
New Equipment

Fencing Ring Grip

The grip is a ring above the quillions of a blade; the user can put his or her fingers through it, allowing for greater control of the weapon. *A fencing ring grip gives a Free Raise to any Feint attempt the wielder makes. However, should the wielder be disarmed of his fencing weapon, he suffers 1k1 Wounds, as any fingers he has in the ring grip are battered and possibly broken.*

Throwing Knives

The Vodacce use throwing knives for a variety of purposes, since they are easily concealed and quickly replaced. Students of the Cappuntina school learn to hide them up their sleeves, in their bodices, or even disguised as hat pins. *Throwing knives only inflict 1k1 Wounds, but they give a Free*



Blind Thorns

Special, see below / Varies / Varies

This plant extract interferes with eyesight, causing blurry vision and mild headaches. It is typically sprayed in the victim's face, though it can also be ingested. Price: 50G. While in effect, the Hero suffers the penalties of being in Dim Lighting.

Witchflesh

15 Flesh Wounds / 1 Round / 10 Rounds

A fairly potent poison, derived from certain swamp roots. It acts very quickly once ingested, and its victims rarely have time to realize their dilemma. Price: 40G.

Woundwort

1 Dramatic Wound / 1 Hour / 31 Hours

This venom is quite potent, but loses its strength quickly. Price: 15G. The interval doubles every time the victim takes damage.

Syrneth Mist

Special, see below / Special, see below / Unlimited

An import from the Midnight Archipelago, this poison comes from an exotic flower, which releases it as a cloud of gas. It is not normally available, and can usually only be found in Syrneth ruins. While exposed to this poison, the victim suffers the effects of Drowning.

Ethera

Special, see below / Varies / Varies

The Bernoulli import this drug from the Crescent Empire, where it is used as a painkiller and mild hallucinogen. The medical school in Dionna purchases the bulk of Ethera, but it has found its way into more public use. Price: 50G. While the victim is under the effects of this "poison", he ignores the

effects of being Crippled, but the GM secretly keeps track of his wounds and makes his Wound Checks for him.

Trembling Moss

Special, see below / Varies / Varies

This poison induces powerful shudders and can cause permanent loss of muscle control. It is usually crumbled into powder and ingested in food. Price: 100G per dose, depending upon interval and duration (GM's discretion). While under the effects of this poison, the victim must drop his highest die when making any roll involving Finesse.

Legion's Caress

1 Dramatic Wound / 1 Month / Unlimited

The medical school in Dionna developed this particularly nasty poison while researching methods of chemical preservation. Only the vilest and most villainous killers use it, and then only when they wish to inflict a long and painful death. Price: 200G.

Godiva's Tears

Special, see below / Varies / Varies

This isn't strictly a poison, but rather an aphrodisiac developed by Sophia's Daughters for use by their courtesan agents. It clouds the judgment and renders the subject highly susceptible to romantic suggestion. Price: 25G per dose. Interval and duration are up to the GM. While under the effects of this "poison", the victim's Resolve is at a penalty of -2 (minimum 0) versus Seduction attempts.

Nightmare Powder

Special, see below / Varies / Varies

The hallucinogenic drug causes no damage, but induces a deep-set fear in its victims. Brave men have been reduced to terrified whimpering while under the influence of Nightmare Powder. Price: 50G per dose, depending on

interval and duration (GM's discretion). While under the influence of this poison, the victim gains the Cowardly Hubris if he does not already have it. If he is already Cowardly, then he loses the ability to oppose the GM's activation of his Hubris.

Spider Venom

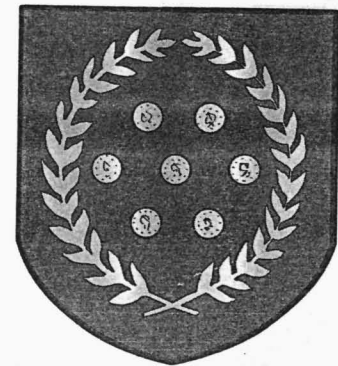
Special, see below / Varies / Varies

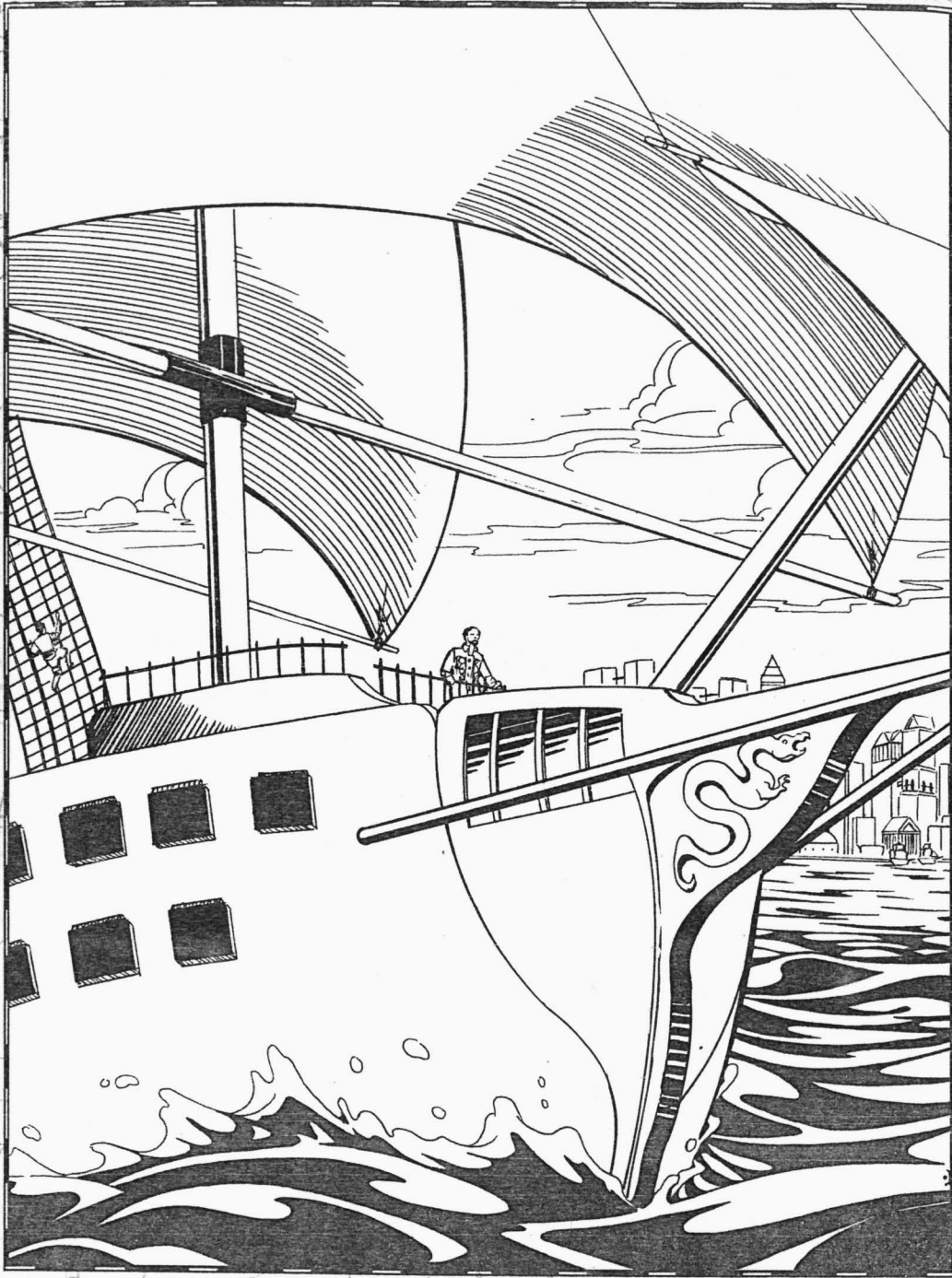
This paralytic spider extract causes permanent muscle damage and in large doses can permanently paralyze a victim's limbs. Price: 40G per dose, depending on interval and duration (GM's discretion). While under the influence of this poison, none of the victim's dice explode (as if he were Crippled).

Prophet's Breath

Death / 1 Phase / 1 Phase

The perfect poison, if you want fast results. It is odorless, tasteless, and invisible once dissolved in liquid. It must be taken internally, and is extremely difficult to get. The poison comes from Cathay, and only three men in Vodacce know how to mix it. Price: 5,000G per dose.





Cunning



Her Death and Madness, Part Two: Webs

The white was gone, replaced by scarlet and black. His clothing, stolen on the day she escaped. She could still smell him on the cloth, his scent strong and wild even after all this time. Some nights, it overpowered her and she almost thought she could see him. Other nights, there was just the pain. She had long ago forgotten which one to fear more.

More, more, she saw threads everywhere. She could touch them now, understand them. A tangled web, ensnaring everything in its path: the future, the past, the horizon and all that lay beyond. It stretched from a past filled with horror into a future she should not have. A future lost. Stolen. Taken. Destroyed. Her brown eyes gleamed with madness, and she could not help but laugh as she stared into the void.

"Her?" Rodriguez peered upward at the black shadow that hung from the main mast. Echoing laughter danced down from the sails, mingling with the clean sounds of the sea beneath the ship. "One day, she just appeared up there, laughin' like a storm."

"You don't know where she came from?" the boy asked, twisting a thick rope around his forearm and folding it into the rigging cables.

"Nope," the older sailor replied. "Though somewhere in Vodacce's a good guess. I always figured she was city-born; I know she can read, and they don't teach women that in the countryside. If she ain't from a city, she ended up there somehow. Dionna, maybe. Chiarisa. Other than that, your

guess is as good as mine. Nobody seen her show up, and she ain't never come down. Since nobody's got the guts to go up and get her, she's been there ever since."

Lightning flashed and the black-clad form leapt across the deck. The boy gasped as she caught a loose sail line, then somersaulted over twenty feet of empty air before landing with a dancer's grace on an outlying spar. Her cackles rose as she spun a near-perfect pirouette and curtsied to the indifferent sky.

"She's mad, I think," the boy said somberly, as if this was the first time anyone had ever said it.

"Mad? Oh, I think so." The other sailor nodded. "Calls herself Lucrezia. The only time I've ever heard her talk is when I'm in the crow's nest. On occasion, she'll let me get close enough to give her food, and some men says she tells them stories."

"A Vodacce Witch? Telling stories?"

Rodriguez shrugged. "S'what they say, boy."

"What's she have to say?" the young sailor asked, staring up at the figure in black that continued to swing atop the spar. She stopped, raising her hands to the wind, and screamed a high-pitched keening wail. It sent shivers down the boy's spine, but Rodriguez hardly seemed to notice.

"Love, mostly. And death. She says she's got a strand to find, one that keeps escaping her. Something about changing what has passed." Rodriguez sighed. "I think she wants to find her lover. A man named Giuseppe. She talks mostly about him, when she can't remember that he's died and left her."

"How'd he die?"

"Easy question, boy. He died when she killed him."

Sailing on the masthead high above the tossing ship, Lucrezia opened her arms to the world and laughed.

Player

The Great Game

"Among other evils which going weaponless causes, it causes one to be despised."

— Scarovese

In Vodacce, the brutal, cutthroat politics of the noble houses is typically referred to by Scarovese's artistic label, the "Great Game". It determines rank, respect, and the sheer power its participants can exercise. Every courtier in Vodacce must participate out of sheer necessity, and only those skilled in its nuances can truly prosper. The Great Game is more than mere politics, however; it extends to all facets of noble life. Choice of clothing, decisions to attend certain parties or gatherings, and even the selection of a courtesan can stamp a ruler for good or ill, and rarely is that stamp removed once it has been created.

Vodacce men are students of the political scholar Scarovese, whose teachings are the bone and sinew of Vodacce life. His interpretation of the Great Game involves the movements of troops, the subtle politics of treaties and alliances, and the fortune of economics. In all things, the Vodacce say, "Scarovese has been there."

In Scarovese's treaty *Means to Ends*, he created certain rules by which Princes (and those who wish to become princes) should play the Great Game. Some of these rules are:

• There is no avoiding war — but you always have the choice of battlefields.

• Whoever helps facilitate another's power ruins himself. This power comes into being either by ingenuity or by force — either is suspect to the one who becomes powerful.

• There are two ways of becoming a Prince: by prowess or by fortune. Thus it can be said that there are two ways of becoming a prince: by crime or by public support. One is prowess, and one is fortune.

• Cruelty is best used as example, execution as punishment. The first teaches others not to repeat the crime; the second teaches only one man.

• A prince must have no other thought or object but to acquire skill. Skill in two things is required of a ruler: skill in war and skill in treachery. With these tools, he can rule the world.

• Do not worry about reproach, so long as you keep your subjects united and loyal. Any means necessary to accomplish this goal are worthy of a prince's labor.

• Fear is more sturdy a foundation than love. The bond of love is one which men, wretched creatures that they are, will break when it is in their advantage to do so. Fear is strengthened by a dread of punishment, which is always active.

• A prudent ruler cannot, and must not, honor his word when it places him at a disadvantage and when the reasons for which he made his promise no longer exist.

• Never join in an aggressive alliance with someone more powerful than yourself. If you are the victors, you will become his prisoner; if you fail, then you will not have the resources to fight off his enemy.

Despite Scarovese's relentlessly cynical outlook, the Great Game serves more than just ambition. Those who survive it are often strong, capable, and wise enough to rule effectively. While they often serve selfish ends, they also understand that oppression cannot breed loyalty. Even the most wicked Prince must strive to ensure that his people are

cared for, lest they turn on him in favor of a more benevolent (and ambitious) pretender.

If you are going to play Vodacce's Game, then you should take care to study Scarovese. His principles guide the people of Vodacce through the twisting corridors between honor and ruthlessness, and impart morals and ideals which the Vodacce Princes uphold even today.

Vodacce Honor

Outsiders look at the Great Game and see nothing but corruption. They watch horrendous acts of deception and betrayal, see brother murder brother in the pursuit of power, and wonder if anything decent can flower in Vodacce. Honor doesn't exist there, they say, and nobility is a hollow word.

If that is so, the Vodacce reply, then why hasn't Villanova taken over the nation? Why does the Inquisition refuse to show its face here? Why do the peasants seem happier in Vodacce than anywhere else in Théah? Because for every villainous schemer in the Great Game, there is an honorable man fighting for what's right. For every wicked Prince there are hundreds of noble heroes. For every scheming courtesan, there are scores of virtuous women working to improve their lot. Like everything else in this country, Vodacce honor is convoluted and byzantine. But it does exist: stronger and more fervently than most Théans would dream.

Honor, the Vodacce say, springs from virtue (*virtù* in their language), which they define as the successful demonstration of human abilities. Virtuous men make the most of their opportunities, using resources from within to excel in their given field. A virtuous artist creates works of unsurpassed beauty, while a virtuous warrior fights battles with cunning and grace. A virtuous ruler ensures that those beneath him prosper while protecting them from enemies. From virtù, humanity learns to better itself and, in the process, improve the world.

The Vodacce hold virtù in high esteem; it forms the foundation of their honor system. By setting goals for

"Smiling, Damned Villain"

In a place like Vodacce, the Reputation scale is often a less definitive guide than it is elsewhere. Indeed, some Vodacce Villains have Reputations that would qualify them for Hero status elsewhere — but only because Reputation does not take into account those depravities committed out of the public eye.

To take these Villains into consideration, we are officially endorsing the following house rule: A Villain who has the Deceitful Wile and the Scoundrel Advantage may have any Reputation score at all without losing his Villain status. Such a Villain with a high (positive) Reputation may pass as a Hero if it suits his purposes.

themselves, they never allow their spirits to stagnate. They strive to fulfill their potentia and inspire others to do the same. It is not enough merely to become Prince. What will you do once you have done so? Power in and of itself is of no use to a Vodacce; they must use it wisely or it has no function.

Similarly, how a Vodacce achieves something matters less than what he achieves and why. While this facilitates all manner of political dirty tricks, it also means that the Vodacce never lose sight of their goals and always keep the benefit of their actions in mind. Suppose a courtier poisons his Prince in the middle of the night. Most Théans would consider that an evil act, but if the Prince were starving his populace, and his death allowed the peasants beneath him to feed their children, then it is completely justifiable — indeed, even noble in its own way.

In political terms, virtù often translates into personal responsibility for one's actions. The ruler does not blame others for his mistakes or shy away from making difficult decisions. Honorable Vodacce always pay their debts and never allow those in their care to suffer unduly. Similarly, a Vodacce is accountable for anything he says or does. If you didn't "mean" to insult someone, you should have never opened your mouth in the first place. If you kill a man,

don't complain when his family comes looking for revenge. While outsiders many see this as brutal or callous, it also means that a Vodacce never shirks from his duty or hides behind his friends.

In this environment, it's no wonder the Vodacce stress loyalty so much. A Vodacce needs friends if he wants to survive the Great Game, and friends don't come without trust. Loyalty is one of the true signs of virtù: if a man willingly dies at your command, you must have done something to earn his respect. The Vodacce reward those loyal to them and never leave a friend in the lurch. While the Great Game thrives on betrayal, it also makes for some strong judges of character. The Vodacce appreciate true friendship more than any other people in Théah.

Vodacce honor is more than just chest-beating and duels in the street. It reminds them what they're fighting for and keeps their unpleasant political maneuverings in context. The Great Game requires skill, cunning, and deception, and its players use every tool necessary to survive it. But through virtù, they can not only survive, but find value within its twists and turns. In their treacherous world, honor is the only thing they can count on... and the only thing they trust.

Women in Vodacce

Vodacce society is cruel to women. Harsh, demanding and jealous, the men of Vodacce envy their women for the sorcery they possess, and worse, they fear them for it. For this reason, the world of Vodacce women is drastically different from the world of its men — so different, in fact, that men are often completely unable to see the coups and politics that occur behind hooped skirts and heavy veils.

Playing a female Vodacce in a Théan campaign is difficult but well worth it. If you are good at behind-the-scenes politics and subtlety, then you're ideal for the task. Where other women in Théah rule openly, the women of Vodacce must create 'pawns', men willing (or unable to refuse) to do their bidding. As the Fate Witches have control of a man's destiny and fortune, it is not often that they are directly refused anything, so long as they have the resources and



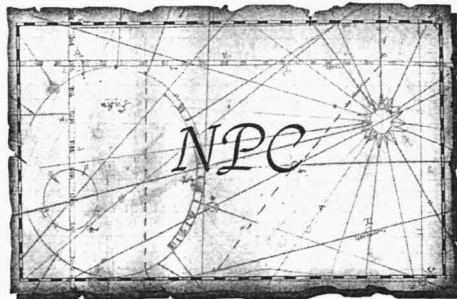
subtlety to ask. A Vodacce woman cannot demand anything, but they can insist in far more subtle ways.

Do you wish a champion to fight your duels? Promise a man that he will never fail in his swordplay, so long as he is fighting your enemy. Twist the strands to make it so. If he is a poor choice, untwist them, and let him know of your disfavor. Many times, you don't even have to do anything — much of the power of the Fate Witches lies in their supposed abilities. Their renown and reputation will often scare a man into their hands, more than their actual magic.

Remember that the men fear you. It is your greatest advantage, and your most dangerous flaw. People are motivated by fear more easily than any emotion other than love, but they are most unpredictable when fear is their spur. Don't talk often — not out of submissiveness, but to see what your opponent will say. And everyone in Vodacce is your opponent. But, of course, that is no different from the world of men.

Many times, the world of men intrudes upon the world of Vodacce women — but far less than the men like to think. Yes, it is entirely possible that your father will insist that you marry an 80-year-old tyrant to cement his political gain: but with only a small tug, the 80-year-old can die of a heart attack, or other physical failure. How sad. No alliance, and no Fate Witch bride.

It doesn't pay to treat a Fate Witch callously, particularly when you cannot tell coincidence from malice. The men in Vodacce know that, and treat them with care, despite their bravado and surface chauvinism.



Players should stop reading now. The section contains material for the GM only. Reading it will spoil countless surprises for you during the game.

NPC Secrets

This section contains the secrets of the characters in the **Hero** chapter which were too sensitive to give to the players.

Gespucci Bernoulli: Hero



Brawn: 2
Finesse: 2
Wits: 5
Resolve: 3
Panache: 4
Reputation: 67
Background: None
Arcana: Worldly

Advantages: Crescent, Montaigne (R/W), Vodacce (R/W), Faith, Left-handed, Noble, Membership (Vodacce Merchant's Guild), University
Courtier: Dancing 2, Diplomacy 5, Etiquette 5, Fashion 3, Oratory 4, Politics 5
Merchant: Accounting 5, Steward 5, Trader 5

Scholar: History 4, Law 4, Mathematics 4, Philosophy 3, Research 2, Theology 5

Ambrogia (Journeyman): Feint (Fencing) 4, Pommel Strike (Fencing) 4, Riposte (Fencing) 4, Exploit Weakness (Ambrogia) 4

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 5, Parry (Fencing) 4

Dirty Fighting: Attack (Dirty Fighting) 3, Attack (Improvised Weapon) 3, Kick 3

Bernoulli is a wily old trader, adept at predicting business trends and staying ahead of them. He has been quietly subsidizing the Lucani textile industry, and is waiting for the right moment to call in all the markers and take control. He also covets the Falisci vineyards, and is only waiting for a bad harvest or two to swoop in on Falisci like a hawk. He never makes the first move, but has plans for every contingency and can put them into practice in a matter of days.

He can afford to hire all manner of scum and villainy to harass his enemies. He is the wealthiest of the Princes, and can afford to throw money away, buying things out from under those he dislikes, even if he then must liquidate them at a loss. He has warehouses full of such stuff — things that were bought just to spite an enemy. Resourceful people may find all manner of things in his "long-term storehouses."

He also has several secret treaties with the Crescent warrior tribes that are his neighbors across the mountains. He trusts no one, and is simply waiting for another Prince to make the first aggressive move, upon which time he will bring a horde of Crescent mercenaries over the passes to crush his enemies and take everything.

Unfortunately, the right time to strike has not presented itself, and Bernoulli recognizes that he may die before that time comes. He has restructured his will, and it does include provisions for large Church donations, but those donations are not nearly as massive as popular opinion holds. His will sets up his right hand man and chief financial advisor, Angelo Vercelis, as heir to the fortune, with trusts set up for the three Bernoulli sons. Gespucci believes that the sons won't care who controls the land as long as they can continue their sinful ways, and considers this the best way

to ensure that his holdings remain intact. He is also frequently visiting his stable of courtesans in an attempt to produce a fourth heir, whom he can make Ward to Vercelis until the boy is old enough to claim his father's lands.

Vincenzo Caligari: Villain



Brawn: 2
Finesse: 3
Wits: 5
Resolve: 4
Panache: 4
Reputation: -70
Background: Hunting
Arcana: Brilliant

Advantages: Montaigne (R/W), Théan (R/W), Vodacce (R/W), Connections, Left-handed, Membership (Vodacce Merchant's Guild), Noble, Scarovese, Synneth Artifact
Courtier: Dancing 3, Diplomacy 2, Etiquette 4, Fashion 3, Gossip 4, Oratory 3, Scheming 5, Sincerity 4
Merchant: Accounting 3, Appraising 5, Haggling 4, Scribe 4
Scholar: Astronomy 3, History 3, Mathematics 5, Natural Philosophy 4, Occult 5, Philosophy 5, Research 5, Theology 2
Spy: Bribery 5, Conceal 4, Cryptography 3, Forgery 4, Interrogation 3, Poison 4, Shadowing 3, Stealth 4
Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 4, Parry (Fencing) 2
Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 5, Reload (Firearms) 3

The Caligari family has one of the greatest secrets in Vodacce; one reason they have not yet lost their power as Princes despite the constant Villanova assault. Their island is not what it seems. Powered by strange artifacts deep beneath the surface of the sea, it stays above the waves only through some mysterious technology and secret power. The key is a great Synneth ship of some sort: a watercraft powered by unknown technology. It serves as an engine, keeping the other machinery functioning and the island above the waves. Only the Caligari inner circle know about the ship and they do not share it with others.

Vincenzo Caligari believes that the Syrneth have the power to seize immortality, and that the great machines beneath his city could be the key. Awed and afraid to significantly alter the device, he collects Syrneth artifacts in hopes of discovering some means to control or understand his own. Thus far, it has succeeded only marginally — Vincenzo Caligari is over 120 years old, yet looks only a bit over 70.

Donello Falisci: Hero

Brawn: 3
Finesse: 3
Wits: 4
Resolve: 3
Panache: 5
Reputation: 82
Background: None
Arcana: Focused

Advantages: Castille (R/W), Montaigne (R/W), Vodacce (R/W), Connections (Cardinal Michel Durand del Falisci and too many others to count), Left-handed, Membership (Swordsman's Guild) (Vodacce Merchant's Guild), Noble, Scarovese

Courtier: Dancing 5, Diplomacy 4, Etiquette 5, Fashion 4, Gaming 4, Oratory 4, Politics 5, Seduction 4, Sincerity 4
Hunter: Skinning 2, Stealth 3, Survival 3, Tracking 3, Trail signs 3

Merchant: Accounting 2, Vintner 5

Ambrogia (Journeyman): Feint (Fencing) 5, Pommel Strike (Fencing) 4, Riposte (Fencing) 4, Exploit Weakness (Ambrogia) 4

Athlete: Climbing 3, Footwork 4, Sprinting 2, Throwing 2, Leaping 3, Side-step 3

Dirty Fighting: Attack (Dirty Fighting) 3, Attack (Improvised Weapon) 4, Parry (Improvised Weapon) 3, Kick 3

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 5, Parry (Fencing) 4

Donello has no wish to be king, but he realizes that no prince can unite the country without his support. His extensive contacts make him a necessary element to any bid for the throne, and he intends to parlay that power into an

advisor's position once a single ruler emerges. True power lies behind the throne... a place Donello intends to occupy for a long time.

His recent infatuation may cause problems, however. Not only does Lady Sices du Sices despise him, but his love for her is public knowledge. It wouldn't be hard for a rival to twist that to his advantage. He's trying to move carefully, but his intense feelings for the Montaigne woman may prove his undoing.

Alberto Lucani: Hero

Brawn: 3
Finesse: 4
Wits: 4
Resolve: 4
Panache: 5
Reputation: 30
Background: None
Arcana: Ambitious

Advantages: Castille (R/W), Eisen (R/W), Théan (R/W) Vodacce (R/W), Above Average Appearance, Membership (Swordsman's Guild) (Merchant's Guild) (Knights of the Rose & Cross Patron), Noble, Servants

Courtier: Dancing 5, Diplomacy 3, Etiquette 4, Fashion 5, Oratory 3, Politics 4, Scheming 4, Sincerity 4

Merchant: Accounting 4, Haggling 4, Spinner 5, Weaver 5, **Scholar:** Astronomy 4, History 3, Law 5, Mathematics 3, Research 3, Theology 2

Rider: Mounting 3, Ride 4

Ambrogia (Apprentice): Feint (Fencing) 3, Pommel Strike (Fencing) 3, Riposte (Fencing) 3, Exploit Weakness (Ambrogia) 3

Dirty Fighting: Attack (Dirty Fighting) 3, Attack (Improvised Weapon) 2, Parry (Improvised Weapon) 3, Kick 1

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 4, Parry (Fencing) 3

In his darkest moments, Alberto debates murdering his daughters in their sleep. He cannot stand giving them away, and believes that killing them is the only way to keep them

safe from the Great Game. He has worked out a scheme to make it work in the family's favor. All he need do is engage the girls to members of another House, then kill them and arrange for a third House to take the blame. The engaged family would be honor-bound to avenge their deaths, and the resulting war would give the Lucani ample opportunity to increase his prestige. He would never have to see his girls fall under another sphere, never have to watch while an enemy used their powers for his own ends, and never see their innocent smiles turn cruel and scheming. All it would take is a little nerve.

Of course, he never seriously considers this course of action. Not in the daytime, anyway.

Alcide Mondavi: Villain

Brawn: 4
Finesse: 5
Wits: 3
Resolve: 3
Panache: 3
Reputation: 24
Background: Obligation
Arcana: Deceitful (Cowardly)

Advantages: Castille (R/W), Eisen (R/W), Théan (R/W) Vodacce (R/W), Above Average Appearance, Combat Reflexes, Left-handed, Membership (Swordsman's Guild) (Vodacce Merchant's Guild), Noble, Scoundrel, Toughness
Courtier: Dancing 2, Diplomacy 2, Etiquette 3, Fashion 2, Oratory 1, Politics 3, Sincerity 2

Merchant: Accounting 5, Farming 3, Scribe 4

Servant: Etiquette 3, Fashion 2, Menial Tasks 4, Unobtrusive 5, Drive Carriage 3, Seneschal 4

Bernoulli (Master): Beat (Fencing) 5, Corps-à-corps 5, Lunge (Fencing) 5, Exploit Weakness (Bernoulli School) 5

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 5, Parry (Fencing) 5

Pugilism: Attack (Pugilism) 5, Ear Clap 5, Footwork 5, Jab 5, Uppercut 5

Mondavi is a blackhearted sadist of the first order. He travels to the mainland so often for two reasons. First, he

imports peasants and criminals from all across Vodacce — the dregs of society that no one will miss — then releases them onto his private game preserve, where he hunts them down and kills them. He is enchanted by the fear of others, and prolongs his hunts to squeeze the maximum amount of terror from his prey. He keeps a private collection of bones from his kills, and has even had a local craftsman make furniture for him from these "trophies" (the craftsman became prey later). Crossing Mondavi is a good way to wake up in an unknown forest being stalked by the Prince himself. That is, if he doesn't kill you in an unnervingly emotionless duel first.

The second reason he travels to the mainland so often is much more sinister. He has made a secret deal with Erich Sieger of Eisen, and is importing Eisen soldiers from the latter's province in return for grain to feed Sieger's starving population. Sieger's battle-hardened veterans are training Mondavi's personal army, and now number enough to form shock-units of their own. When the time is right, Mondavi intends to have several Princes assassinated at once, then march his Eisen-backed army onto the rest of the mainland and take total control of Vodacce. The islands do not interest him as much as the resources (and the Crescent trade route) of the mainland. Mondavi believes that his plan can and will succeed, but depends on total secrecy and surprise. It is fortunate for him that none of the other Princes think him worthy of their attentions, and he will quietly remove anyone who tries to alert his rivals.

Alcide's wife, Mea Mondavi, is genuinely ill, and stays on the mainland for constitutional purposes. She is fully aware of his plans, and pays strict attention to the Strands to determine the time to act. Alcide trusts her viewings implicitly.



Marco Edorado Vestini: Hero



Brawn: 3
Finesse: 3
Wits: 4
Resolve: 4
Panache: 4
Reputation: 53
Background: None
Arcana: Exemplary

Advantages: Eisen (R/W), Montaigne (R/W), Théan (R/W), Vodacce (R/W), Faith, Membership (Vodacce Merchant's Guild), Noble, Scarovese

Courtier: Dancing 3, Diplomacy 4, Etiquette 4, Fashion 3, Gossip 3, Oratory 3, Scheming 4, Sincerity 5

Merchant: Accounting 3, Appraising 5, Ceramics 4, Cooper 3, Glassblower 4, Haggling 4, Potter 4

Scholar: Astronomy 3, History 3, Mathematics 3, Philosophy 2, Research 5, Theology 4

Ambrogia (Journeyman): Feint (Fencing) 4, Pommel Strike (Fencing) 4, Riposte (Fencing) 5, Exploit Weakness (Ambrogia) 4

Dirty Fighting: Attack (Dirty Fighting) 2, Attack (Improvised Weapon) 3, Parry (Improvised Weapon) 3

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 4, Parry (Fencing) 4

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 5, Reload (Firearms) 3

Marco is intensely frightened by the idea of the Abyss. He saw Legion's face in his father's drunken stupor and is convinced that the old man now burns amid the flames. He will do whatever it takes to avoid joining him there. As a result, he has allowed the Inquisition to make subtle incursions into his territory. Small bands of Inquisitors operate out of Vestini Isle under his quiet protection, and he has allowed several churches on the mainland to be converted for their use.

In addition, Sophia's Daughters have found a firm base within his courtesan schools and actually use his island as their headquarters. Marco is aware of the secret society, but rarely interferes with them. As long as they don't talk his own wife into leaving him, he's content to let them be.

Giovanni Villanova: Villain



Brawn: 3
Finesse: 3
Wits: 5
Resolve: 4
Panache: 5
Reputation: -130
Background: None
Arcana: Willful

Advantages: Castille (R/W), Montaigne (R/W), Vodacce (R/W), Combat Reflexes, Dangerous Beauty, Evil Reputation, Left-Handed, Noble, Scarovese, Servants, Membership (Swordsman's Guild) (Merchant's Guild) (NOM)

Courtier: Dancing 4, Diplomacy 4, Etiquette 4, Fashion 4, Oratory 5, Politics 4, Scheming 5, Seduction 5, Sincerity 5

Scholar: History 3, Mathematics 2, Philosophy 4, Research 2

Spy: Bribery 3, Conceal 4, Interrogation 3, Poison 4, Shadowing 5, Stealth 5

Ambrogia (Master): Feint (Fencing) 5, Pommel Strike (Fencing) 5, Riposte (Fencing) 5, Exploit Weakness (Ambrogia) 5,

Athlete: Climbing 3, Footwork 5, Leaping 4, Side-step 5, Sprinting 3, Swinging 4, Throwing 4

Dirty Fighting: Attack (Dirty Fighting) 5, Eye-gouge 4, Kick 4, Throat Strike 5

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 5, Parry (Fencing) 5

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 4, Reload (Firearms) 2

Knife: Attack (Knife) 5, Parry (Knife) 5, Throw (Knife) 5

Villanova (Master): Double-parry (Fencing/Knife) 5, Feint (Fencing) 5, Stop-thrust (Fencing) 5, Exploit Weakness (Villanova) 5

Villanova's stats have been updated from their previous version in *The Arrow of Heaven*. These are considered the official version.

Giovanni carries enough secrets with him to fill an entire sourcebook. His plots, schemes, and maneuverings span all of Théah and can potentially influence every person in the world. As a lifetime member of Novus Ordum Mundi, he

constantly seeks to spread his influence further. If the GM needs a powerful villain behind the scenes, Villanova is the perfect choice; he has a hand in every sort of conceivable wrongdoing.

For all of Villanova's power, however, he's still human and occasionally makes mistakes. People can still deceive him and he cannot monitor his underlings as closely as he would sometimes like. His own courtesan has managed to pull the wool over his eyes, and he deeply underestimates Valentina... an oversight which may cost him dearly. Giovanni is a potent villain, but he's not infallible, and smart Heroes can still find ways to defeat him.

Cardinal Teodoro Ciosa: Hero



Brawn: 2
Finesse: 2
Wits: 5
Resolve: 3
Panache: 3
Reputation: 98
Background: Vow
Arcana: Altruistic

Advantages: Castille (R/W), Montaigne (R/W), Vodacce (R/W), Faith, Noble, Ordained, University

Courtier: Dancing 3, Etiquette 5, Fashion 2, Gossip 4, Oratory 5, Politics 4, Sincerity 4

Merchant: Calligrapher 5, Ceramics 3, Scribe 4

Priest: Oratory 5, Philosophy 5, Writing 5, Diplomacy 4, Moch 2, Theology 5

Scholar: History 3, Law 4, Mathematics 3, Occult 3, Philosophy 5, Research 4

Servant: Accounting 3, Drive Carriage 3, Etiquette 5, Fashion 2, Menial Tasks 4, Unobtrusive 3, Seneschal 4

Streetwise: Shopping 3, Socializing 5, Street Navigation 4

Pugilism: Attack (Pugilism) 4, Footwork 3, Jab 3, Uppercut 3

Rider: Ride 4

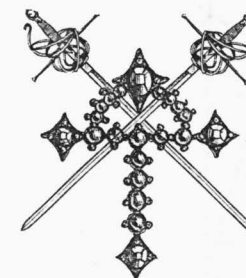
Ciosa is a genuinely good man, one who would give a beggar the shirt from his back. He is one of the only truly

good man who moves in Vodacce's upper circles, and the fact that he has held his position would make Scarovese roll over in his grave.

He is deeply troubled by the current situation in the Vaticine Church. He considers Montaigne stubbornly shortsighted, and believes to his bones that if the Montaigne could only see the damage they have done in Castille by removing the Hierophant and giving Verdugo free reign, they would reconvene their Archdioceses immediately. He does not hate. He is just deeply disappointed to see men with their imperfect understandings holding hostage the work of the Divine for their own ends.

Ciosa believes the Inquisition to be a child that never should have been born, and has run amok. He has joined the Invisible College in an effort to slow the Inquisitors' rate of devastation. He yearns for the day when a new Hierophant will put down Verdugo and his thugs, allowing the Church to get back to the business of truly saving souls. He would also have no apprehensions about being the Hierophant that did just that.

Politically, Ciosa is untouchable. No scandals are in his past. No skeletons are in his closet. He has no personal dirty secrets (save perhaps his association with the Invisible College). He is beloved of the people, and if he were to die mysteriously the populations of entire cities could be easily inspired to riot. If he were proved to be the victim of foul play, Gespucci Bernoulli would likely bankrupt his family to see justice done.



Bartholomeus Corradin: Villain

Brawn: 2
Finesse: 3
Wits: 4
Resolve: 2
Panache: 5
Reputation: 99
Background: None
Arcana: Deceitful (Ambitious)

Advantages: Montaigne (R/W), Vodacce (R/W), Membership (Merchant's Guild), Musical Ear, Patron, Romantic, Scoundrel, Vodacce Valet

Artist: Composer 5, Writing 5

Courtier: Dancing 4, Etiquette 4, Fashion 5, Gaming 3, Gossip 4, Mooch 4, Oratory 5, Seduction 4

Merchant: Scribe 5

Scholar: History 4, Law 2, Mathematics 2, Philosophy 3, Research 3

Servant: Drive Carriage 4, Etiquette 5, Fashion 5, Menial Tasks 4, Unobtrusive 1

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 3, Reload (Firearms) 3

Bartholomeus has a secret that could potentially cost him everything. He's never actually written an opera.

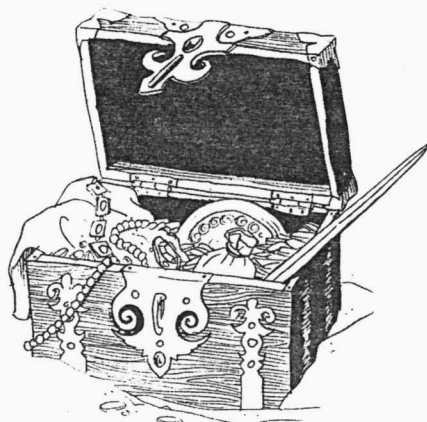
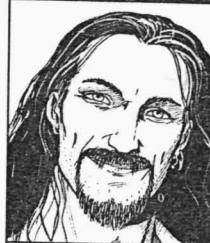
Bellafanta Corradin, Bartholomeus' wife, is a Fate Witch, and Bartholomeus taught her music to give her something to do while he was trying to scrounge money from his patrons. He heard her compositions after a time, and took down the libretto as she dictated it (Bellafanta, like all Fate Witches, cannot read or write). He saw the quality of *Vincenzo and Belloza* immediately, and published it under his name. Bellafanta also wrote *Rosetta*, and Bartholomeus has taken all the credit while she sits at home waiting for him to return.

The secret to the operas' successes, however, is not in the writing. Bellafanta has structured the opera in such a way that it weaves a series of thin Strands through the entire listening audience, entrancing them, and instilling in them a love for the music and the characters. Because the Strands

are so subtle, take so long to structure (it is no coincidence that the best parts of each opera come at the end), and play on emotions the audience already want to feel (opera is entertainment, after all), they evade all detection and warding. Vodacce love the operas of the Great Corradin not because the music is great (though Bellafanta is certainly a composer of no small merit), but because they have been magically duped.

The writing of these operas has taken its toll on Bellafanta. Her work is extremely dangerous, and she has received numerous fate lashes over the course of her writing. Worse, Bartholomeus has become conceited beyond measure, and beats her intermittently in drunken rages. Bellafanta is a classic abused woman, making all manner of excuses to herself for her husband's behavior, driving herself even harder to gain his acceptance (which may well kill her — Corradin's third opera may be "his" best, but it may also be the last), and believing with all her heart that he really does love her, he's just got problems.

Bartholomeus guards Bellafanta jealously. He knows he cannot afford to make her abilities known. He will use Filin to remove anyone who gets too close to the truth, and has the resources to hire at least a dozen more swordsmen if he needs to.

**Sebastiano Scogna: Hero**

Brawn: 3
Finesse: 4
Wits: 4
Resolve: 3
Panache: 5
Reputation: 34
Background: None
Arcana: Adaptable

Advantages: Avalon (ACQ), Castile (R/W), Crescent, Eisen (R/W), Montaigne (R/W), Ussuran, Vendel, Vodacce (R/W), Linguist, Membership (Explorers Society) (Knights of the Rose & Cross Patron)

Courtier: Dancing 3, Diplomacy 5, Etiquette 4, Fashion 2, Oratory 5, Seduction 4, Sincerity 5

Merchant: Shipwright 4

Sailor: Balance 4, Cartography 5, Climbing 4, Knotwork 3, Rigging 3, Navigation 4, Pilot 5, Swimming 3

Scholar: Astronomy 5, History 3, Law 2, Mathematics 3, Philosophy 4, Research 2

Athlete: Climbing 4, Footwork 5, Leaping 4, Sprinting 2, Swinging 3, Throwing 2

Captain: Ambush 3, Gunnery 3, Incitation 5, Leadership 5, Strategy 4, Tactics 3

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 5, Parry (Fencing) 4

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 4, Reload (Firearms) 2

Sebastiano tries very hard to see the good in people first. He has met Yngvild Olafssdottir (the Vestenmannavnjar pirate) on several occasions, and would like to meet her again, for reasons that have nothing to do with the sea, and everything to do with the two of them alone, somewhere quiet. Heroes who can get Sebastiano and Yngvild together will find Sebastiano ready to do nearly anything in return.

Sebastiano is an excellent backstop for Heroes. The *Santa Cecilia* can show up anywhere, at any time, for any reason, and Heroes coming to Vodacce for the first time (or leaving it in a hurry) could benefit greatly from making the acquaintance of Captain Scogna.

The Santa Cecilia : 40 point Caravel

Brawn: 4
Finesse: 9
Resolve: 4
Wits: 8
Panache: 7
 Lucky (3), Friendly Spirit (5)
Draft: 4
Cargo: 4
Crew: 6

An old pirate ship, the *Caballero Negro* was in rough shape when she came into the hands of Captain Scogna. It took months of repair (and prayer), but when it was all over, the *Santa Cecilia* was grateful. She's saved the crew's life many times over, and they lavish attention on her. Surprisingly fast and agile, the aged craft still has a lot of years left in her.

Beatrice Caligari: Hero

Brawn: 2
Finesse: 4
Wits: 4
Resolve: 3
Panache: 2
Reputation: 45
Background: Cursed
Arcana: Insightful

Advantages: Vodacce (R/W), Stunning Appearance, Indomitable Will, Noble, Servants

Courtier: Dancing 4, Etiquette 4, Fashion 3, Gossip 4, Oratory 3, Politics 4, Scheming 5

Merchant: Steward 4

Performer: Acting 1, Dancing 4

Servant: Accounting 3, Etiquette 4, Fashion 3, Menial Tasks 4, Seneschal 3, Unobtrusive 3

Spy: Conceal 5, Lip Reading 3, Shadowing 3, Sincerity 3, Stealth 4

Sorte (Master): Arcana 5, Coins 5, Cups 5, Staves 5, Swords 5
Cappuntina (Apprentice): Pin (Knife) 3, Throw (Knife) 4, Trick Shooting (Knife) 2, Exploit Weakness (Cappuntina)

Knife: Attack (Knife) 3, Parry (Knife) 2, Throw (Knife) 4
Rider: Ride 4, Mount 4

Because of Morella, Beatrice has opened the journals of Mad Queen Marietta Lorenzo, the powerful Fate Witch who died in 1012. No one knows what she found there, but other Witches have said that she has developed Sorte powers beyond what should be possible. Somehow, she can control the black strands — mysterious and elusive to other Witches — though for what purpose, no one can tell. Other Fate Witches can see a large number of black strands attached to her — their ends flailing around wildly in the air — and they avoid her like the plague. Occasionally, a strand lashes out and connects to someone nearby; the unlucky soul has always died within a week. She is hated, she is feared, and she is still alone.

Juliette: Hero

Brawn: 2
Finesse: 4
Wits: 5
Resolve: 3
Panache: 3
Reputation: 35
Background: None
Arcana: Self-controlled

Advantages: Montaigne (R/W), Vodacce (R/W), Stunning Appearance, Connections, Membership (Sophia's Daughters), Noble, Patron (Villanova)
Courtesan: Acting 5, Cold Read 5, Conceal 5, Dancing 5, Etiquette 5, Fashion 5, Gossip 5, Jenny 5, Masseur 3, Mooch 5, Poison 5, Politics 5, Seduction 5, Sincerity 5, Unobtrusive 5
Scholar: Astronomy 2, History 3, Law 3, Mathematics 2, Philosophy 4, Research 3
Servant: Etiquette 5, Fashion 5, Gossip 3, Menial Tasks 3, Unobtrusive 4, Valet 4
Spy: Bribery 3, Conceal 4, Forgery 3, Hand Signs 4, Lip Reading 3, Shadowing 4, Sincerity 5, Stealth 5

Villanova (Apprentice): Double-parry (Fencing/Knife) 3, Feint (Fencing) 3, Stop-thrust (Fencing) 2, Exploit Weakness (Villanova) 2

Fencing: Attack (Fencing) 2, Parry (Fencing) 3

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 4

Knife: Attack (Knife) 2, Parry (Knife) 1

Juliette holds almost as many secrets as Villanova, but two in particular are worth noting. Firstly, she is an important member of Sophia's Daughters. Juliette believes that women should be equal in all ways to men and has dedicated herself to aiding the Daughters however she can. Her contacts have helped smuggle dozens of abused women out of the country, and her influence allows the Daughters to move freely throughout Villanova territory. Juliette holds a high position within the secret society, and her discretion keeps even Giovanni in the dark.

Secondly, and perhaps even more shocking, her worst enemy is actually her dearest friend. Juliette was born Giulia Ambrogia — the same Giulia who befriended Valentina Vestini as a girl (see page 119 for more information). When Valentina left the nunnery, they never thought they'd see each other again. Imagine their surprise years later when they came face-to-face again, only to learn they were sharing the same man! They kept their friendship a secret (lest Villanova find out and kill one of them), and began plotting ways to improve their fortunes.

Since then, they have convinced everyone that they are the worst of enemies, spending an inordinate amount of time cursing each others' names. They have fooled everyone, even Villanova himself, and no one suspects their childhood connection. They communicate through a secret cipher that only they understand, and together have kept the most cunning Prince in Vodacce completely in the dark. Juliette wishes to help Valentina escape her husband's clutches, but knows she must move carefully. She didn't get where she was by underestimating Villanova and if he ever learns how badly they have fooled him... When the time is right, they will act; until then, they must maintain their near-perfect façade and wait for an opportunity.

Morgause Mercuri: Hero

Brawn: 3
Finesse: 5
Wits: 3
Resolve: 3
Panache: 4
Reputation: 22
Background: Obligation
Arcana: Reckless

Advantages: Castille, Crescent (ACQ), Montaigne (ACQ), Vodacce, Connections (Sophia's Daughters), Small
Criminal: Ambush 4, Gambling 2, Lockpicking 2, Quack 1, Scrounging 4, Shadowing 3, Stealth 4

Sailor: Balance 4, Climbing 4, Knotwork 3, Leaping 3, Navigation 2, Pilot 2, Rigging 2, Swimming 4

Boucher (Journeyman): Double-attack (Knife) 4, Double-parry (Knife) 4, Riposte (Knife) 4, Exploit Weakness (Boucher) 4

Captain: Gunnery 5, Incitation 4, Leadership 4, Strategy 3, Tactics 3

Firearms: Attack (Firearms) 4, Reload (Firearms) 4

Knife: Attack (Knife) 5, Parry (Knife) 5, Throw (Knife) 5

Morgause has a deep-seated fear of physical affection. In her formative years, she was never touched with anything approaching gentle intimacy, and she still believes that love means abuse. She doesn't like to be touched. Heroes who overcome these odds to win her affection will find her fiercely loyal, as she will release years of pent-up romantic frustration and let herself love fully and without reservation. Meanwhile, she keeps things businesslike, scolding her gunners for lagging, and praising them for good work. She is brave to the point of foolishness, and has near-flawless confidence in the abilities of her gun crews.

She has been approached by the Daughters of Sophia, and discussed their agenda urgently with Captain Scogna. Morgause feels that the Daughters have a legitimate cause, and would do anything short of betraying her ship and comrades to help remove women from the hell she herself went through as a child. Captain Scogna has concerns over the potential repercussions of smuggling Fate Witches out of

Vodacce. To date, however, the *Santa Cecilia* has not been contracted to do anything for the Daughters, so Sebastian's reservations have gone unresolved.

Valentina Villanova: Hero

Brawn: 2
Finesse: 4
Wits: 5
Resolve: 3
Panache: 3
Reputation: 29
Background: Defeated
Arcana: Perspective

Advantages: Vodacce (R/W), Keen Senses, Noble, Small

Artist: Painting 4, Sculpting 5

Courtier: Dancing 4, Diplomacy 3, Etiquette 4, Fashion 3, Gossip 4, Lip Reading 3, Oratory 3, Politics 4, Scheming 5, Sincerity 5

Merchant: Seamstress 4, Steward 4

Scholar: History 2, Law 3, Mathematics 5, Philosophy 3, Research 2, Theology 2

Servant: Accounting 3, Etiquette 4, Fashion 3, Menial Tasks 5, Seneschal 3, Unobtrusive 4, Valet 3

Sorte (Master): Arcana 5, Coins 5, Cups 5, Staves 5, Swords 5

Knife: Attack (Knife) 4, Parry (Knife) 3, Throw (Knife) 4

As discussed in Juliette's write-up, Valentina is actually dear friends with her supposed rival. They met in childhood (see pages 80-81) and were reunited soon after Giovanni began appearing with the beautiful courtesan. Since then, Juliette has taught Valentina to read and cipher — and found that the Fate Witch has one of the most adept minds in Vodacce. Her abilities rival the greatest inventors in Dionna, and her grasp of mathematics is astounding. However, both women keep up the charade of bitter hatred to fool Villanova (and the rest of Vodacce for that matter). They play their parts to perfection, and Valentina has come to relish her moments of "jealous rage". When the time is right, they plan to escape his clutches, but both of them know that they must be cautious. Giovanni does not take well to being fooled.

The Vodacce Destiny Spread

Vodacce Heroes are more tied to the strands of Fate than most. In fact, the Fate Witches have been tinkering with the strands here for so long that plots started over a century ago may suddenly come to fruition with the aid of a Vodacce Hero. These plots culminate in what's known as a Fate Knot, and each Vodacce Hero secretly has one of these Knots urging him or her onwards towards their Fate. Only Vodacce Heroes with the Unbound Advantage are exempt from this.

Fate Knot Chart

For each Vodacce Hero who used the Destiny Spread and who doesn't have the Unbound Advantage, roll a die and consult the following chart, recording the result secretly:

- 1-2 — Betrayal:** The Hero is Fated to betray someone close to him. Whoever created this Fate Knot hated the person he will betray and wants them to suffer greatly.
- 3-4 — Murder:** The Hero is Fated to kill someone he may or may not know. Whoever created this Fate Knot is using the Hero as a tool to get rid of an enemy.
- 5-6 — Justice:** The Hero is Fated to solve a mystery. In doing so, he will discover that someone close to him was the culprit, and did something abominable in the past. Whoever created this Fate Knot wants vengeance, and is using the Hero's friendship to make the criminal pay for his crime.
- 7-8 — Discovery:** Something that is lost will be discovered by the Hero. However, whoever created this Fate Knot wants the object back, and plans on reclaiming the object as soon as the Hero recovers it.
- 9-0 — Task:** The Hero is Fated to perform a specific task, such as pulling a sword out of a stone, breaking a thousand-year-old curse, or rescuing a captive. Obviously, whoever

created this Fate Knot will benefit from the successful completion of the task.

Fate Knots in the Game

A Fate Knot is an event that the Hero is secretly being pushed towards. In *7th Sea* mechanics, this works something like a Hubris that the Hero can't oppose, and isn't even aware of. You as the GM should spend a Drama die whenever you introduce an element to your campaign that urges the Hero towards his Fate. This includes side adventures that help set the stage, characters who will be involved in the final act, and items that the Hero must have for the plot to complete itself. These dice aren't lost: they're merely stored up until such time as you've spent enough of them to close the trap (15 or more). During the session you've decided to bring the character's Fate Knot to a conclusion, take those spent Drama dice and add them to your normal pool for the session. If the players complain, thank the player whose Hero is about to meet his Fate, and point out the warning under the Vodacce Destiny Spread to them.

During this session, you can do the following special things with your Drama dice:

Cancel (1 Drama die)

You may cancel one Drama die spent by the Fated Hero.

Failure (1 Drama die)

When the Fated Hero attempts an Action, roll an exploding die. Subtract your roll from the Hero's die roll.

Catastrophe (2 Drama dice)

Something goes horribly wrong near the Fated Hero. This could be anything from the Hero's ship springing a leak to the Hero stumbling backwards into the person he was defending... and accidentally pushing them over the edge of a cliff. These catastrophes shouldn't kill or maim Heroes or other characters out of hand — merely make the Hero work harder to avoid that eventuality.

New Monsters

While Vodacce lacks the truly terrifying creatures of Eisen or Avalon, its dark corners still contain their share of supernatural threats. Fierce monsters roam its untamed swamps while the island cities hide all manner of threats beneath the bustling streets.

Crypt Ghouls

Henchmen

Points: 65

TN: 15

Brawn: 2

Finesse: 3

Resolve: 2

Panache: 2

Attack Roll: 3k2 Claw, 3k2 Claw, 3k2 Bite

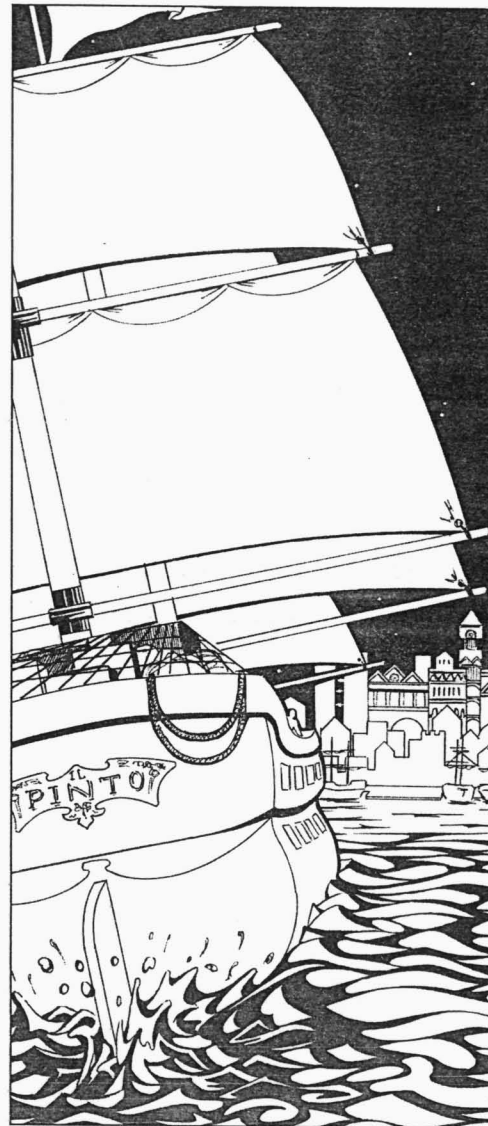
Damage Roll: 2k2 Claw, 2k1 Bite

Skills: Ambush 3, Stealth 4, Shadowing 3, Swimming 4, Tracking 3

Special Abilities: *Lung Capacity:* Crypt Ghouls have a Resolve of 10 for purposes of Drowning.

Scholars argue whether these creatures are related to the simian ghouls most Théans are familiar with, or whether they're an entirely new species. They lurk in the caves and catacombs beneath Vodacce cities, feeding on the corpses of the dead. Crypt ghouls are pale, emaciated humanoids with sharp teeth and oversized eyes. Their bodies are completely hairless, revealing a sickening pattern of veins beneath the skin. They often dress in burial shrouds left behind by their food, and can masquerade as corpses to confound pursuers. The periodic flooding of Vodacce's lowest catacombs has made them strong swimmers, and they can hold their breath for hours on end.

Unlike normal ghouls, crypt ghouls are quite intelligent, and while they mainly scavenge food from dead bodies, they're not above hunting fresh meat if the opportunity presents itself. Stragglers in the catacombs often fall victim to their





cunning ambushes, and stories of “haunted” crypts often begin with an attack from these creatures. They flee if strongly confronted, but have no fear of fire and will stand their ground if circumstances favor them. Some work alone, but many congregate in groups of 3–5 to share resources. The Princes have made a point of eradicating these creatures, but as long as there are dead to feed upon, they will continue to thrive.

Swamp Spiders

Brutes

Points: 100 per squad

Threat Rating: 3

Usual Weapons: Bite (Medium, plus poison)

TN to be Hit: 15

Skills: Stealth 4, Grapple 4, Attack (Web Strand) 3

Special Abilities: *Poison:* When a swamp spider successfully bites someone, it injects a paralyzing venom that saps the strength. Each round, a bitten victim suffers –1 Brawn and –1 Finesse. If reduced to 0 in any trait, he is unable to move until the poison wear off (6–12 hours).

Webs: Swamps spiders spin sticky webs to trap their prey. Anyone who stumbles into a web must make a Finesse + Dodge roll (TN 25) or suffer –2 Finesse until freed from the web (10–15 minutes of unmolested work). In addition, swamp spiders can shoot individual strands at targets. A successful hit lowers the target’s Finesse by 1 until freed. Individual strands may be broken by a simple Brawn check (TN 15).

Threats of all varieties lurk in the Vodacce bogs, from creeping vines which can strangle a man in an instant to ruin monsters large enough to swallow a horse. Not the least among these are swamp spiders, a huge species of arachnid that grows to the size of a dog. They move easily across the

stagnant waterways of their homes and spin intricate webs designed to snare larger creatures.

The Vodacce have made many efforts to domesticate swamp spiders as they have domesticated the creatures’ smaller cousins. All have been dismal failures. Swamp spiders cannot be trained, nor do they respond to conditioning. They have been known to destroy entire caravans passing through their territory; local peasants quickly learn to spot signs of their habitation and avoid them.

The swamp spider attacks by ambush; it uses a paralyzing venom to render its victim harmless, then drags him to the top of the web to be exsanguinated at leisure. Unlike most arachnids, swamp spiders are social creatures, living in colonies of twenty or thirty. Every member of a given colony shares in the kill; they swarm around a paralyzed victim and drain him dry from dozens of puncture wounds. Mummified bodies of past victims can be seen hanging from the trees around a colony’s lair.

The Unraveled

Villain

TN to be Hit: Varies by skill

Brawn: As in Life

Finesse: As in Life +1 (maximum 6 without modifier)

Resolve: As in Life +1 (maximum 6 without modifier)

Wits: As in Life

Panache: As in Life –1 (maximum 4 without modifier)

Attack Roll: Varies by Skill

Damage Roll: –1 Drama Die or 1 Dramatic Wound; see below

Skills: As if life, plus Attack (Fate Strand) 2–4 (GM’s discretion)

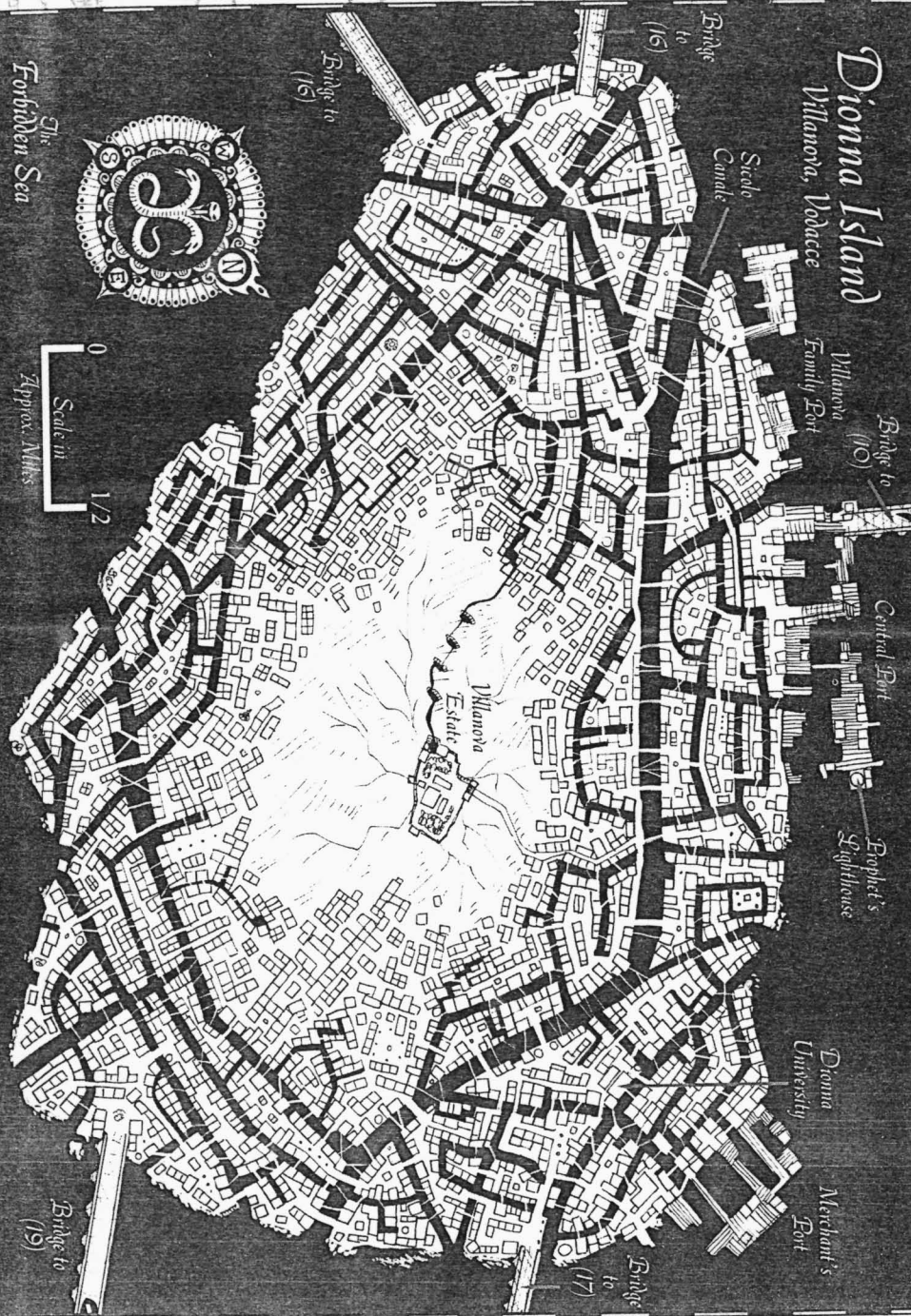
If a Fate Witch pulls too hard on the strands of fate, they lash back at her, leaving a painful, red oozing wound. Sometimes, Fate Witches who have died from such injuries return from the grave as undead monsters. The Vodacce call them “The Unraveled” and legends abound of their horrifying powers.

The Unraveled appear as ghostly images of their former selves: haggard Fate Witches surrounded by lashing black fate strands which bind their bodies. They tend to seek out the people they knew in life, wreaking terrible revenge for wrongs both real and imagined. Courtesans are a favorite target of theirs, but they also attack children, their former husbands, or anyone else they take a disliking to. For some reason, they steer clear of churches and will not attack ordained Vaticanines, though this seems to be less an actual weakness than some residual memory of their former faith.

They strike by lashing out with the fate strands surrounding them, raking across their victims like whip blows. Each strike robs the victim of a Drama Die; those who have no Drama Dice to spend suffer a Dramatic Wound instead. The strands also block blows against them, deflecting swords and bullets with equal proficiency. The Unraveled roll an extra unkept die on Wound Checks, and if they fail, they divide the amount they failed by in half (rounding up) before suffering any Dramatic Wounds. Those slain by the Unraveled must be buried on holy ground, or rise in three days as Unraveled themselves.

Vodacce members of die Kreuzritter believe that the Unraveled are somehow related to the Nights (see *Die Kreuzritter*, pages 106–107) and watch closely for signs of their activity. Die Kreuzritter have secretly slain at least three Unraveled in the past century. Luckily, Unraveled appearances have grown increasingly rare: most Fate Witches are wise enough not to toy with the forces they control, and thus avoid the injuries which create these foul creatures.

The easiest way to make an Unraveled is to simply create a Fate Witch and then kill her, adjusting her stats as outlined above. Most Unraveled hate the living with a vengeance, but they retain all of their cunning and will not reveal themselves unless circumstances favor them.



Vodacce Courtesan

Traits		Advantages	
Brawn	1	Vodacce (R/W)	(1)
Finesse	3	Castillian (R/W)	(2)
Wits	2	Théan (R/W)	(3)
Resolve	2	Vodacce Accent: Any	(0)
Panache	2	Patron	(4)
		Trained Spider	(2)

Arcana: Overconfident

Civil Skills

Courtesan

Acting 1, Dancing 2, Etiquette 3, Fashion 2, Jenny 3, Unobtrusive 1, Gossip 1, Mooch 1, Seduction 1, Sincerity 1

Performer

Acting 1, Dancing 1, Oratory 1, Singing 1

Scholar

History 2, Mathematics 3, Philosophy 1, Research 3, Law 1

Streetwise

Socializing 3, Street Navigation 2

Martial Skills

Cappuntina Swordsman School (Apprentice)

Pin (Knife) 1, Throw (Knife) 1, Trick Shooting (Knife) 1, Exploit Weakness (Cappuntina School) 1

Dirty Fighting

Attack (Dirty Fighting) 2

Knife

Attack (Knife) 1, Parry (Knife) 1

Income: 120G starting / 40G per month

Vodacce Merchant Captain

Traits		Advantages	
Brawn	3	Vodacce (R/W)	(1)
Finesse	3	Castillian	(0)
Wits	2	Montaigne	(0)
Resolve	2	Avalon	(1)
Panache	2	Vodacce Accent: Any	(0)
		Linguist	(2)
		Member: Merchant Guild	(4)

Arcana: Lecherous

Ship (Merchant Pinnacle)

Brawn 2, Finesse 3, Resolve 4, Wits 4, Panache 4

Flaws: Small Keel (2)

Draft: 4, Crew: 3, Cargo: 4, Reputation: 0

Civil Skills

Merchant

Shipwright 2, Accounting 1, Appraising 1, Haggling 2

Sailor

Balance 1, Climbing 1, Knotwork 2, Rigging 1, Navigation 1, Pilot 2, Swimming 1

Streetwise

Socializing 1, Street Navigation 1

Martial Skills

Athlete

Climbing 1, Footwork 1, Sprinting 1, Throwing 1

Fencing

Attack (Fencing) 3, Parry (Fencing) 1

Firearms

Attack (Firearms) 1, Reload (Firearms) 1

Income: 36G starting / 2k2G per month

Vodacce Fate Witch

Traits

Brawn 2
Finesse 2
Wits 2
Resolve 3
Panache 2

Advantages

Nobility (5)
Vodacce Accent: Any (0)
Indomitable Will (3)

Background: Betrothed (2)

Civil Skills

Sorte (Full-Blooded)

Arcana 2, Coins 1, Cups 1, Staves 1, Swords 2

Courtier

Dancing 1, Etiquette 1, Fashion 1, Oratory 1, Politics 1,
Scheming 1

Martial Skills

Rider

Ride 1

Income: 1500G starting / 500G per
month

