

Faxai-on-the-Caul

From the sea, Faxai-on-the-Caul seems a port city like any other, a grey and brown mass that sprawls along the shore, its ancient, hieroglyph-crusted walls curving around it in a protective embrace. Flags of every house fly in the wind, along with the flags of innumerable outcaste families and martial orders. As the ship ties up at dockside, the first glimpse of the city's strangeness can be seen — the dockside district sways upon the waves, and the docks continue into Faxai, becoming its streets and paths. Every building stands on thick pillars that lift it above the Caul's soil, for the very earth here is sacred, and none tread it lightly. Anything buried in the earth of Faxai will endure beyond time, and Imperial decree forbids the interment of both the living and the dead.

Faxai is the Realm's last foothold in the Caul, the last bastion of civilization before the hills and woods of the interior, where Lunar warlords rule over hordes of beastfolk and whatever unfortunates survived their sudden assault five years ago. The city is a melting pot, houses that loathe each other sleeping beneath the same roof, Dynastic royalty dining across from penniless outcaste crusaders. Here is the last breath of fellowship and safety before the pall of unending dread descends, where scions of Mnemon and Ragara break bread in the name of a greater good — the quest to drive the Lunars from the Caul forever. Yet even here, all the Realm's intrigues remain, set against the Caul's terrifying and alien backdrop. Whether faith in the cause or ancient Dynastic rivalries will win out in the end is yet to be seen.

The Effaced Walls

Faxai's hieroglyph-covered walls tell stories of the First Age, of gods and heroes, of wars against monsters and demons, and of the founding of the Caul's first civilizations. Dynastic scholars study these writings to the extent that they remain legible. Wind, tide, and vegetation have taken their toll, weathering many of these ancient inscriptions to near-indecipherability. But beyond that, some of the writings have been deliberately destroyed.

Centuries ago, when the Realm first seized Faxai, Immaculate monks took chisels to the city walls, obliterating many of its hieroglyphs and bas-reliefs. The people were forbidden to pass on any knowledge thus expunged. Even so, stories linger, whispered from parent to child in Faxai's homes, or chanted among Caulborn tribes in the wild lands. But whether the subjects of these lost stories — Nahundau the Hour-Drinker, Axe Saint Malinti, Walanua of the Many-Colored Dawn, and their ilk — were heroes, gods, or devils is no longer remembered.

Life in Faxai-on-the-Caul

Walking down the street, it seems that every other building houses an Immaculate temple, a chapter of the Wyld Hunt, or a paradoxically quiet urban monastery. Faxai teems with Immaculate monks, no surprise in a land held to be the home of the Immaculate Dragons themselves. A tenth of the resident population have either taken monastic vows as oblates, or serve a martial order (p. XX) that's come to reclaim the Caul; this lends the local culture a deeply spiritual weight. The majority, however, are here for more pragmatic purposes, for all they may kneel on the boardwalks when a procession bearing a portable shrine passes, bells ringing in time with each step and priests calling out the praises of the Immaculate Dragons.

Faxai is kept supplied by some of the wealthiest and most exotic Western and Southwestern satrapies and trade networks. As a result, the city frequently has the air of a slightly crazed celebration that never ends, even in the face of the worst setbacks the Realm has experienced in all its history in the Caul. For some, it's because they've yet to set foot outside the Walled City — for others, it's the only way they can keep themselves anchored having done so. Faxai is a bright, raucous city that never truly sleeps.

The Walled City's Caulborn royal family was extinguished by conquering Dynasts long ago, though rumors persist of a surviving heir. Now **Mayavin Utterdepth**, a puppet prince from a lesser lineage, rules at the satrap's bidding. Young and fearful, she dares not defy Faxai's satrap or engage in Dynastic politics, spending her days painting impossible landscapes and composing philosophical treatises when not acting as a figurehead.

The Earth Shrine

Alone among all structures in Faxai, the Earth Shrine is built directly upon the soil. The sacred, all-preserving earth keeps the shrine in perfect condition even in the midst of a bustling port city at war, seemingly enduring out of time. All pilgrimages on the way to Feng-Yi begin here — a supplicant who's received permission from the Empress (or, now, the Deliberative) ritually cleanses herself with oil and dust before descending the steps into the Earth Shrine, first of wood and then of ancient, unbowed stone. Once she crosses the threshold, the true test begins. A sense of awe and power fills the supplicant if she's judged worthy to undertake the pilgrimage. Should she be wanting, she feels nothing.

When she turns to leave, the sun doesn't shine so high in the sky, or night has fallen, or the season is later than it was. To the pilgrim, she's judged in an instant, but those who cautiously observe from the top of the stairway know the truth — it's been hours, days, even weeks. Those who are worthy, the earth of Faxai preserves. Those who aren't, it leaves to the tender mercies of time while arresting their awareness of its passage — whether they survive or not depends only on how long the earth of Faxai holds them. In some cases, it even seems to speed time along its course — one infamous case, now legend, tells of an unworthy pilgrim who rotted away into dust within seconds of setting foot in the Earth Shrine. The way to Feng-Yi does not open without risk.

Garianghis, The Garden of Dreams

As one leaves Faxai-on-the-Caul, the world simultaneously opens wide and closes in. The walls are left behind, and now it's the trees that deny the horizon to the traveler. Still, the road is well marked with ancient stones that the Lunar Anathema won't defile. The forest grows thicker, darker, more foreboding. Just as one might wonder if the Lunars tampered with the road, Garianghis appears.

The buildings are overcome with vines and moss, but even as the plants force their way into the cracks between the stones, they take up its form — a tree becomes a brick wall, a weed a paving stone, all flowering and reaching for the sun that filters into the clearing that the city fills.

Garianghis is a mélange of natural and artificial, and for the supplicant it serves as the border between. She's left Faxai-on-the-Caul, and now she walks her pilgrimage.

Life in Garianghis

Before the Lunars came, the Realm held Garianghis for centuries, and despite the city's strangeness a thriving community dwelled here, supporting trade and the Realm's presence.

Garianghis wasn't as celebrant a town as Faxai, but there was a certain joie de vivre that seemed to rise up from the soil, present in each bite of food, breath of air, and draught of water.

Now, Garianghis is all but abandoned. When the Lunars rose up in wake of the legions' departure, Third Daughter of the Leaves took Garianghis, and she holds it now for her own, having driven off or slain citizens that couldn't escape. Her turtlewolves are all she needs, and they prowl the woods around Garianghis, hunting animals and would-be pilgrims alike while she contents herself with strange rituals that, rumor has it, are intended to poison the dreams of what few Dragon-Blooded remain in the Caul.

The Wood Shrine

Rising from the center of Garianghis is what seems to be an enormous tree. But as one approaches and lesser structures fall behind, it becomes clear that this is no mere tree, but a majestic shrine whose entire structure has been superseded by plant life. Its many roots do not find purchase in the soil, but coil around the open space of the shrine before coming to rest on the countless banyans that uphold the gigantic trunk like so many pillars. This is the Wood Shrine of Garianghis.

Strictly speaking, a pilgrim may "open the gates" to the Wood Shrine from anywhere in Garianghis, but it's traditional to do it from the shrine's steps, and history bears out that those who do so are more often successful. The physical gates to the Wood Shrine are themselves ever shut tight, and cannot be opened. In any case, the pilgrim lies down to rest and falls into a deep sleep, where she begins to dream.

The dream is always the same — she is chasing something. What it may be, she cannot tell, until she's able to catch it and bring it to ground. Then, and only then, does she see what she's been pursuing, and has a heartbeat to make a choice — does she let her quarry go, or kill it? If she takes its life, when she rises, the gates will be open. If she doesn't, they remain shut.

And of those who were successful in their dream-hunt? The Wood Shrine demands blood, for nature is red in tooth and claw. The prey may be a small animal or a great one, and at times the Wood Shrine makes the dreamer hunt a person. The quarry is always someone or something near to Garianghis, and when the victorious dream-hunter arises, she finds her quarry dead on the shrine's steps, slain in precisely the manner the dream-hunter slew her dream-prey. The way to Feng-Yi does not open without a sacrifice.

Houshou, The Pyre That Consumes Itself

One leaves the forest and the hungry Wood Shrine behind, journeying north through hill and dale. Wet grasses give way to dry shrubbery, and before long Houshou appears in the distance. Houshou is a city with two faces. By day, it seems to be like any other, its buildings erected in the humble, simple style common to the Caul, but the very moment the sun vanishes below the horizon, it bursts into flame, consuming itself and sending flames roaring up into the sky. On a clear night, the Pyre of Houshou is visible as far as Faxai-on-the-Caul, a dull and subtle glow from over the horizon, but to the traveler outside its gates, the flames are almost too intense to behold. The city burns itself to the ground each night, and each morning it stands anew, as though the fire had never been.

Life in Houshou

While Houshou has walls, these burn with the city. The flames of Houshou consume any permanent structures within a mile of the Fire Shrine, and so the Realm forbade construction within this boundary — thus, the outer city of Houshou sprang up, a scattered ring of newer buildings circling the old, all of sturdy stone and fireproof tile. The inhabitants of inner Houshou were never many in number, and at dusk they forsook the city, the population streaming out through the gates as bells tolled out the coming night hours ahead of time.

The legions' earthworks now smashed by the ferocity of the invading Lunars, the outer city stands largely empty. What few inhabitants remain are held in thrall or hunted for sport by the terrifying Skathra Venomchild, who dwells in the inner city by day and by night. In mockery of Hesiesh, Skathra paints each of their scales to resemble a single flame and dances in the light of Houshou's Pyre, cackling and howling as they flirt with the all-consuming flame, darting in and out of the city even as it burns. Even the other Lunars of the Caul, monstrous and puissant though they are, find Skathra unsettling.

The Fire Shrine

A squat structure of onyx and obsidian, the Fire Shrine's sealed gates hide a stairway that spirals down into an ancient lava tube. These gates won't open, however, to any save one who has braved the Pyre of Houshou; the monks, who do so each night, swear a holy oath never to open the gate for a pilgrim who has not embraced the flame. A would-be supplicant must remain behind as any others depart the city, and when night falls, the flames erupt and consume her. Even Immaculate Monks walking the path of Hesiesh never endure such pain as the city of Houshou demands of a pilgrim; it burns them down to their very bones, and then consumes even those. Many cannot endure the pain, and flee the city screaming for help only to be consumed by the flames just outside the gates. While they rise once more with the dawn, the gates will not open for them. Only by accepting the flames can one become worthy of entry to the Fire Shrine. The way to Feng-Yi does not open without surpassing the self.

Sekima, The Whisper of Memory

As one leaves the smoke and flame of Houshou behind and ascends the Ghost-Hand Mountains, the air grows thin and chilly far quicker than it should. The trees give way to scrub grasses and shrubs that cling to cracks in the rock, and at last the pilgrim arrives at the place she's been told to seek, the city of Sekima, only to find no city there. Thin grasses, waving in the near-constant wind, only just hide the scattered remains of foundations of buildings that once stood here, surrounded by few recent villages and a series of pillars draped in pale, ragged banners. In the winter, snowfall will hide them further under gentle inches of pure white. The city of Sekima was destroyed long ago, and nothing, not even the sacred Air Shrine, remains.

For all this, the pilgrim can remember the city as it once was in perfect detail, so vividly that she can walk down what once the high street and smell the scent of cooking meat and pastries, hear the laughter of children and the quiet chatter of friends and neighbors. She remembers conversations with these people that she's never had, homes she's slept in that crumbled eons before her birth. It's impossible to forget the city of Sekima once one has trod upon its sacred earth, even without ever seeing the city as it was.

Life in Sekima

The Memory of Sekima is powerful and vivid, such that even though a pilgrim may, to the outside observer, be eating nothing but empty air as she wanders through a wasteland, she'll

nonetheless be nourished by the meal she remembers. A fire that guttered and died in the ancient past will still warm her in the chill of Sekima's night. When the Realm held the city, a Hearth of Immaculate monks dwelt full-time within, sitting in a circle on the cold ground while remembering their time in a monastery that crumbled to dust ages ago.

Centuries ago, the legions constructed great pillars of stone around the city's circumference, hung with simple banners of white silk, to mark the boundary and prevent the unwary from being enmeshed in a memory not their own. Outside these pillars, they raised settlements around it much in the manner of Houshou, far below. Here the legions and the local population lived, ever mindful of the gaping hole that tugged at their minds. The old walls of the legions' fortresses still stand, a reminder of the days when the Realm held Sekima — fortresses that offered them no protection from the sky.

Sandswept Garda-Empress, a Lunar who wears the shape of a titanic eagle, has claimed the city, her hawkfolk flocking around the mountain peaks surrounding Sekima and eagerly awaiting unaware pilgrims. Any who approach the city now must deal with them, for their mistress doesn't suffer pilgrims disturbing what's hers and hers alone, and they'll fight eagerly for the hope of gaining her favor.

The Air Shrine

How does one enter a building that no longer exists? This riddle sits at the heart of the pilgrimage to Sekima, a koan that must be understood before the Air Shrine's gates will open. The city lives on in memory, perfectly inscribed into the mind of anyone who has stood upon the ground where it once was. Though the bustling, raucous city may seem nothing but a strange miracle and a distraction from one's true purpose, these memories are in fact the key to progressing on one's pilgrimage.

The Memory of Sekima is such that one can interact with it, remembering conversations as they take place. The pilgrim speaks at once with the empty air and with an innkeeper, and she remembers taking a room as any traveler might. She remembers meeting a lovely person in a teahouse that's now little more than scattered stones, conversing with that person for hours, and walking home with them that evening. With a little effort, an entire life in Sekima begins to unfold within the pilgrim's mind as she acts out its particulars, comes to know the locals, and, in time, finds her way to the sacred Air Shrine, where she petitions for entry. Such a petition isn't always granted by the monks within the memory, but the greater ties one has with the community, the more likely they are to look on a request favorably.

After a journey to Sekima, many take up an artistic pursuit, the better to craft representations of the city so indelibly carved into their minds. Yet, no matter how many are made, one difference persists — no one ever renders their perfectly remembered Air Shrine quite the same. The way to Feng-Yi does not open without remembrance.

Melilune, the Reflection of the Self

Crossing the Ghost-Hand Mountains at the pass of Sekima, the pilgrim now descends onto the western slope, past streams that coalesce into ponds, which feed great rivers that pour into an enormous freshwater lake. Here, the stories say, is Melilune, and tall, beautifully worked spires gleaming with opal and pearl indeed rise from the lake, reaching into the sky. As one draws closer, it becomes clear; the lake is but a few inches deep, leaving an undisturbed surface that acts as a perfect mirror, which echoes the graceful towers down into vertigo-fueled infinity.

The water of Melilune is, despite what one might expect, nothing but pure, clean stream water, still cold from the glacial runoff that feeds it. It has no unusual properties, though vials of it fetch unheard-of prices from collectors of relics. Beneath the shimmering surface are great wells that suck excess water into underground channels, ancient magic and artifice perfectly regulating the flow that carries the water to a spring a few miles distant, from whence it flows into the sea. Water Aspects on pilgrimage have plumbed these depths, but there are no answers to be found in the caves beneath Melilune.

The Water Shrine is an enigma beyond enigmas, for though it appears solid, carved of a single enormous piece of lapis lazuli, its form wavers and ripples when touched, and objects pass through as though it's not there — what seems real and solid is only the Water Shrine's reflection. A majestic waterfall descends from its heights, cascading over its walls; this waterfall has no source that can be found, nor does it raise the level of the lake's water.

Life in Melilune

Throughout the Realm's tenure in the Caul, Melilune has never hosted a large population. This is partially due to the city's indefensibility — it has no walls, and archers taking advantage of the tall towers quickly find themselves stranded with no hope of escape.

But there's another reason few choose to live in Melilune: It's simply too strange. The first of Melilune's secrets isn't difficult to intuit: By day, the skies reflected in the water's surface twinkle with starlight, and by night brightly lit clouds play in the reflected sky, all while reflections go about their lives — some without any visible source, others cast by those standing atop the mirror-flat surface of Melilune's lake-streets. More unsettling is the fact that the reflections differ from those who cast them, sometimes in significant and disturbing ways, and few can long bear the sight of it.

The Water Shrine

Melilune is not one city, but two, one reflected by sunlight and one by moonlight, that become one only when both of those light sources are extinguished — in other words, at the new moon or during an eclipse. For these brief moments, it's possible to approach the Water Shrine, but though the steps are rendered solid, the way remains barred. The pilgrim's own reflection stands before the gate, stepping out from the glass-smooth surface of the waterfall that pours over the shrine's outer pavilion, and will not move aside. In her reflection, the pilgrim faces her own self laid bare, a study in contrast, for at some point in the pilgrim's past, she came to a decision that affected the rest of her life — and in that moment, her reflection made a very different decision.

To pass, the pilgrim must intuit that pivotal moment, be it through conversation, contests, or even battle — for here, on the Water Shrine's steps, her reflection is as real as she is. Many pilgrimages end here, either for the pilgrim's inability to face herself, or because she and her reflection come to blows and, in the struggle, she is slain.

But understanding isn't enough, for the pilgrim must also accept the choice her reflection made, the reality that, had she chosen thus, *she* would be the reflection. When this moment of acceptance dawns — when, like Melilune, the two become one — the reflected self vanishes, and the doors to the Water Shrine open. When the pilgrim returns from within, she casts no reflection, not in the sacred waters of Melilune nor in any other surface.

And what of the other self, the absent reflection of a life not lived? No known sorcery can coax the pilgrim's reflection, identical or otherwise, back into existence, and the weight of

understanding the different decision is bested only by the weight of never knowing what might have been had she made it herself, for the way to Feng-Yi does not open without a question unanswered.

Feng-Yi, the Last City

The journey's end can be seen in the gates of Feng-Yi. A humble city, long uninhabited, it nonetheless possesses a profound serenity in its simple architecture. Here is something ancient and lost, and something that has not yet come. Many have come to Feng-Yi, only to find abandoned buildings overgrown with vines and toppled statues without faces. Only the pilgrim who passes through the five shrines will find what she's seeking here.

The way to Feng-Yi is not a door. The pilgrim understands this, for she's tempered her soul with the trials of her passage through the Caul. The way to Feng-Yi is a road, for Feng-Yi has not yet come. The way to Feng-Yi is a map that shows the path to what once was, for Feng-Yi is unspeakably old. The pilgrim possesses the way to Feng-Yi within her heart, but it's only when she passes through the Last City's gates that the truth becomes clear to her. She walks, calm and sure, through the streets, approaching the tall doors of the Shrine of Feng-Yi, which open at her passage.

In Faxai-on-the-Caul, the earth breaks its long vigil and dances, rolling and shifting like the sea it stands beside. The city on stilts trembles for a moment, tossed like foam on the sea, and the inhabitants are reminded how fragile and ephemeral the world is. They rebuild what has been lost nonetheless.

In Garianghis, all residents fall into a deep sleep that lasts for a full hour, during which they dream of being hunted. When they awaken, five sleepers have vanished without a trace, and five stags lie dead before the Wood Shrine, arranged in a circle and without a mark on their bodies.

In Houshou, fire rains from the sky, but nothing is burned. The flame is cool, slippery to the touch, and doesn't consume itself, but evaporates in the day like water after rain. Relic hunters prize this liquid flame, and it fetches an unheard-of price from sorcerers and the faithful alike.

In Sekima, a terrible gale descends, and those present must take cover against the storm. Then, with equal suddenness, the winds die down, and the air is calm as it never is in the mountain pass. For a heartbeat, as the winds die, the remembered city is real again, in the rush of dust and debris. But only for a heartbeat.

In Melilune, the floodgates open, and the lake is pulled, churning, into the caverns below. It will take a day to fill once more, the water flowing in through the channels and cracks and giving rise to a strange music that many strive to recreate, but never do.

When the pilgrim reemerges, she carries something sacred about her, something that even the casual observer can easily see. Her very person seems inviolable, her voice ringing with the deep mystery of the Caul. Her next child will bear the Dragons' blessing — she knows this as she knows herself, for the way to Feng-Yi has opened within her heart, and she will never again be as she was.