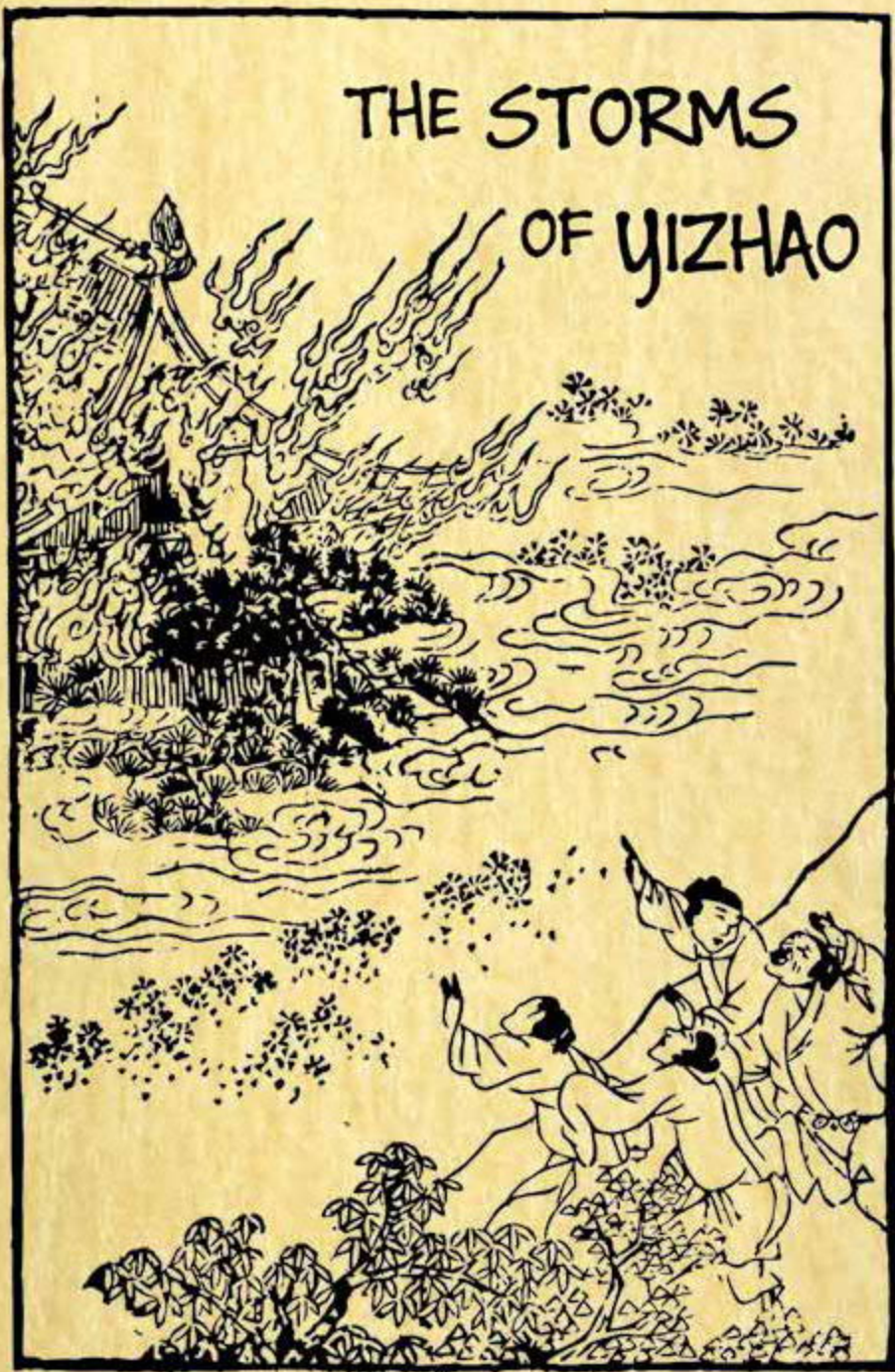


THE STORMS OF YIZHAO



AN ADVENTURE FOR **GODBOUND**

THE STORMS OF YIZHAO



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A SELF-CURSED CITY

For generations the great city of Yizhao has been a bulwark on the northern border of Dulimbai. Its busy forges and skilled craftsmen have supported the endless patrols that hold back the roaming monsters of Raktia's deep forests and guard against intrusions by rapacious Raktian bandits. Yet its importance has always paled against the demands of the western border, where the constant low-level warfare with the Patrian Empire has absorbed so much of Dulimbai's available strength. Yizhao has lived on the iron leavings of greater legions.

Governor Jiang resents his post, embittered that his lifetime of military service should be crowned by relegation to this backwater. The governor strangles Yizhao's trade with his exactions and wrings out the common people with his "emergency impositions", all the better to fund Yizhao's army the way he thinks it should be. And if it impoverishes the people, well, is that not further proof to the Regent's court that help is needed from the south?

Yet the governor's demands are not the only calamities that face the people of Yizhao. For the past year, steadily-growing storms have lashed the roofs of the city, tearing away tiles and smiting wretched unfortunates with bolts of celestial fury. Even a slack-jawed peasant can tell that Heaven is angry with Yizhao, that something terribly immoral and wicked is going on in the city to so invite Heaven's fury.

City gossips whisper that the sin is Governor Jiang's brutal taxation, but old men shake their heads and tell tales of other governors who were worse still without Heaven's rebuke. Grim scholars of the Pattern insist that it is the refusal of the people to cooperate with the governor's lawful demands. And a few mutter of the Black Academies to the north and the vengeance of Raktia's cruel sorcerer-lords.

Few suspect that the evil is buried within the city's temples, that the venerable Shrine of the Blue Goat is a seat of unspeakable wickedness. For the past year Abbot Fu has performed terrible crimes under the veil of the shrine's special virtue, and even now his iniquities go unsuspected and unpunished.

But when the truth comes out, more than Abbot Fu will suffer terribly for his crimes. If the Godbound are to avoid a merciless imposition of the laws of the ancestors, they must stop Fu without allowing his secret to be revealed. And if it does come to pass that the truth escapes, they have little hope of bending Yizhao's customs without seizing control of the ancient Pattern-wards established by the venerable Altar of Heaven. Can they quell the rage of an unthinking Heaven without bringing a rain of tears on earth?

THE SITUATION AT HAND

The heart of the calamity in Yizhao is simple; the corrupt abbot of a venerable ancestor temple has been using female petitioners as unwilling partners in his diabolical life-force experiments, the better to enhance his magical powers by stealing their yin energy. Abbot Fu's victims have said nothing of their abuse, too ashamed to speak or too tightly-bound by the abbot's dark powers.

Heaven is furious over this unspeakable crime against public order. Because of this, the city is racked with terrible storms at ever-decreasing intervals. The storms will continue until Abbot Fu is punished for his sins and the victims who kept silent are banished from the city with their illegitimate offspring. The abbot deserves death for his violation of virtuous women, and his victims deserve exile or slavery for their silence and presentation of false heirs.

Heaven's anger cannot be quelled because "Heaven" is nothing more than an ethical program implemented by the city's ancient Altar of Heaven. This age-old Ren artifact is the linchpin of the city's magical wards and arcane defenses, powered by regular sacrifices performed by a descendant of the Dulimbaian dynasty's founder. Once artifacts of this kind were common throughout the nation, but in the centuries since the Shattering, most have been destroyed or quietly disabled by their keepers. The constant threat of Raktian sorcery from the Black Academies has forced Yizhao to maintain its Altar even though it has grave side effects on the populace.

So long as the Altar is maintained, serious official crimes against the "Pattern" it implements are punished with unnatural disasters and calamitous misfortune levied against the city itself. Abbot Fu is an appointed official of the city bureau of religion, and his acts have been so heinous, and the crimes against truthful lineage so many, that Heaven is currently punishing the city to the absolute maximum of its designed parameters.

Governor Jiang is desperate to fix the situation. The prospect of helpful outside powers like the Godbound will be pounced upon, with Jiang offering his good offices in Dulimbai to the PCs if they can fix his city's troubles. While Yizhao is no plum posting, the governor is still one of the most important men in the Regency, and could give the PCs entree into the southern court itself.

The trick, of course, will be solving the city's problems in a way that doesn't leave the players feeling like they've been party to something horrible. Careless handling of the crisis will result in numerous terrible outcomes for innocent women and their children, and only surpassing cleverness and delicacy of handling will see the pantheon through without regrets.

The basic structure of the adventure is relatively simple; six major NPCs each have a personal interest or problem that the PCs might conceivably solve. Each will present the PCs with their desires, and try to offer such inducement as might convince the heroes to help. As the PCs interact with these problems and goals, they'll collect pieces of information that may eventually lead them to Abbot Fu's vile crimes.

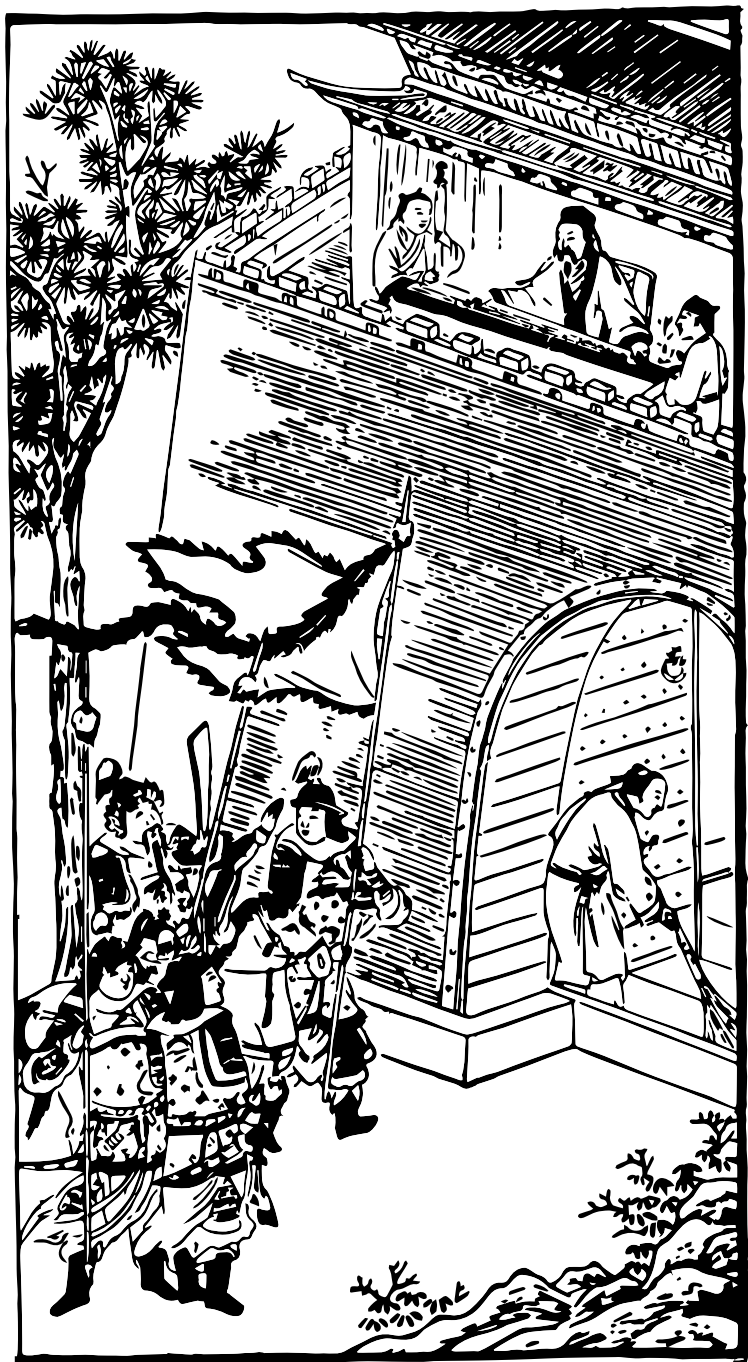
These goals and problems are not presented with assumed solutions. The PCs are Godbound, and they have access to more than enough power to solve the problems in Yizhao in multiple ways. Instead, each situation includes notes on how likely situations might play out and gives tips on handling it.

To run this adventure, you'll need a firm grip on the six important NPCs that control affairs in the city. You'll need to understand the relationships between the six and what each one of them wants out of the present situation. If the adventure bogs down and the players don't seem to know what to do next, make sure one of these NPCs is ready to throw them a request and give them something concrete to respond to.

You'll also need to review the rules for Empyrean and Mundus Wards on page 185 of the rulebook. Yizhao has an unusually powerful level 6 Mundus Ward in effect over it thanks to its ancient Altar of Heaven. This Mundus Ward is going to hamper large-scale Dominion changes, particularly ones that might conveniently change local social attitudes. The Altar and the governor's palace also have an active level 2 Empyrean Ward that will significantly hinder attempts to use divine powers around either of them.

Clever PCs can negate the Wards, either by destroying the Altar of Heaven outright or by becoming attuned to it through conspiring with its keeper, Prince Yan Xiao. The former action would also result in the end of the terrible storms, as Heaven would no longer be overseeing the behavior of Yizhao's inhabitants. By the same token, however, Yizhao would no longer be protected against the dark sorceries of the Black Academies of Raktia, and would be much more vulnerable to large-scale curses and enchantments.

THE STORMS OF YIZHAO is ultimately an adventure about an impossible situation. If the culprit behind the storms is found and revealed, hundreds of innocent women and children will suffer a terrible fate. If the culprit remains hidden, Yizhao will eventually be destroyed by the fury of the storms. The only way to avoid a miserable outcome is for the heroes to break the context of the problem and change the situation to one they can solve humanely. Ruthless players can always simply let the events play out as they will, but most groups will want better justice than the situation will otherwise provide.



THE CITY OF YIZHAO

YIZHAO, (“ee-chow”), is a walled city of roughly 100,000 citizens spanning both the north and south banks of the quick-flowing **DAHUANG** (“da-wong”) river. Several bridges cross the broad river, and the city itself is one of the few good crossing points for miles around. It was originally founded by the Akeh peoples who once ruled in what is now Dulimbai, but when the True King’s conquering armies seized it a thousand years ago its original name and architecture were lost. It remains the strongest bulwark of Dulimbai in the north.

Several low mountains and rolling hills line the southern bank of the river west of Yizhao, and to the east the land climbs sharply toward the **SHOUSHAN** (“shoe-shan”) mountain range. On the north side of the river, the trans-Dahuang plain provide wheat and hemp fiber to Yizhao up to the low hills that mark the edge of Raktian territory, and beyond them Raktia’s grim forests.

The city is divided into several walled districts, each divided by high internal walls and heavy gates. Most districts are dedicated to particular industries or professions, but one, the **MULBERRY DISTRICT**, serves as an open-air asylum for those unfortunates who have been made “Upright” by the effects of the Altar of Heaven. Entry into the Mulberry District is limited to those with a pass from the palace, as the Upright can be dangerous to the careless.

Entering the city itself is not difficult, even for strangers. Foreigners will be given a suspicious eye by the guards, but only blatantly obvious troublemakers will be sent away. PCs who want to enter more discreetly can do so if they can bypass the thirty-foot-high walls. Guards are posted at regular intervals, but a PC could jump or climb over without drawing notice.

GATE GUARD: A Small Mob of AC 7, 12 HD, +2 attack, 1d8 damage, Morale 9, and 15+ saves. They can Overwhelm one target a round for 1d6 damage if a Hardiness save is failed.

Construction in the city is chiefly unfired gray brick roofed with brightly-painted tiles. The governor’s palace is wood, carved and painted in elaborate fashion. Streets are unpaved and often ankle-deep in mud and muck, and all important personages and ladies of quality go about in sedan chairs carried by slaves or hired porters. The city has a distinctly grim, practical character to it, with little of the elaborate decoration found in southern Dulimbaian cities.

Yizhao is a cosmopolitan city of a highly cultured empire, and the locals are not particularly discomfited by magical feats or signs of arcane power. Strange supernatural beings like the PCs are viewed with distinct circumspection, but the locals will not panic the first time a PC displays their power.

Yizhao is ruled by **GOVERNOR WU JIANG**, a veteran general of the Patrian front who ended up posted to this unhappy city four years ago after one of his military plans backfired. Governor Jiang's word is law within Yizhao and the Northern Province. In theory, any death sentences he imposes on a civilian must be approved by the Regent, but the governor's recommendations are almost invariably approved. Punishments short of death can be applied at his discretion.

The city is governed out of the "yamen", a large wooden building adjacent to the governor's palace and also under the protection of its level 2 Emphyrean Ward. The yamen serves as a combination courthouse, guard barracks, and prison, and locals generally dread having to go there for any reason. An assistant magistrate usually presides on behalf of the governor, but Jiang himself sometimes passes judgment on particularly delicate cases.

Teams of constables enforce public order, fetch people desired by the yamen, and guard prisoners. As in most Dulimbaian towns, the constables are scum, many of them being former criminals themselves. Their corruption and appetite for petty bribes is notorious, and respectable people have nothing to do with them. Should combat ensue, use the statistics for gate guards on page 4.

Yizhao is a garrison city, and no less than 5,000 soldiers are based in the military Banner District, including 4,000 mixed infantrymen and crossbow archers and 1,000 crack Toban horse archers hired from their clans to the east. A quarter of these cavalry are constantly in the field, running patrols through the farmlands north of the river and watching for Raktian bandits and abominations from the northern forests. Half of the troops are rotated through border forts, maintaining fresh mounts and secure camps for the Toban patrols and providing alerts when dangerous monsters or large bandit groups are spotted.

The army of Yizhao is exceptionally accustomed to dealing with supernatural perils, and most of the troops are hardened against panic at the first signs of eldritch forces. Every Toban patrol goes out with two "heroes" capable of dealing with normal Raktian abominations and enough blessed weaponry to give the patrol a 25% chance of successfully harming a foe immune to non-magical weapons if the Mob makes a successful hit. In an emergency, the entire crew of "heroes" will be dispatched.

YIZHAO PATROL: A Large Mob of AC 7, 24 HD, +2 x2 attacks, 1d8 damage, Morale 10, and 15+ saves. They can Overwhelm one target a round for 1d8 damage if a Hardness save is failed.

Each of the “heroes” of Yizhao can expend Effort to automatically succeed on an otherwise-failed saving throw. Some have gift-like special talents as well, and all use weapons that can harm magical beasts. All are attuned to the city’s Wards and know how they work.

BIG PING, a huge Toban warrior, uses a lama-blessed bow to skewer the creatures of darkness. She drinks, eats, and debauches enough for ten warriors and is something of an embarrassment to her superiors.

YAROSLAV ZHAO, a half-Raktian veteran with a bad temper and considerable skill as a Curse-Eater.

SHINING ZU, a golden exemplar of Ren martial prowess who is keenly aware of that fact. He is obsessed with winning the approval of Beautiful Sage Fei, and will do literally anything she bids him.

ADEPT YE LU, a highly disreputable practitioner of certain left-handed Taoist theurgy techniques. Often drunk, but invariably casts perfectly all the same. He has deep suspicions about Abbot Fu but doesn’t dare speak.

SEAMSTRESS BAO, a remarkably talented assassin employed to deal with targets that are impractical to pursue with massed numbers.

RED TYPHOON, a divinely-touched beast of a man who kills like other men spit. He’s completely insane and kept in a small shrine in the Banner District, where specially-trained “priests” perform the rites to his divinity he demands, bringing him out to fight for “his worshipers” only in great need.

| NAME | HD | ATK | DMG | AC | ML | SAVE |
|----------------|---|-------|--------|----|----|------|
| Big Ping | 6 | +7x2 | 1d8+4 | 4 | 10 | 12+ |
| | Effort 2, has The Seeking Flight (core book p. 34) | | | | | |
| Yaroslav Zhao | 5 | +6x2 | 1d8+2 | 5 | 9 | 13+ |
| | Effort 2, master of the Curse-Eater school (p. 58) | | | | | |
| Shining Zu | 8 | +10x2 | 1d10+5 | 3 | 11 | 11+ |
| | Effort 2, has Unerring Blade (p. 53) | | | | | |
| Adept Ye Lu | 8 | +6 | 1d8 | 5 | 9 | 11+ |
| | Effort 3, Initiate of the Gate, Rain of Lightning (p. 50) | | | | | |
| Seamstress Bao | 5 | +10 | 1d12 | 5 | 11 | 13+ |
| | Effort 3, Veiled Step, Perfect Masquerade (p. 37) | | | | | |
| Red Typhoon | 10 | +10x2 | 1d10+5 | 6 | 12 | 10+ |
| | Effort 4, Shattering Hand, Cutting the Crimson Road (p. 53) | | | | | |

Yizhao is one part military garrison and one part industrial city. Timber for fortifications is floated down the Dahuang from the eastern mountains, and mining villages amid the peaks and hills ship smelted ingots to the city. Coal fuels most of the forges, and a thin patina of soot clings to any surface not regularly washed by slaves or servants.

Most inhabitants of the city are laborers in one of the many workshops and small factories that fill up the Iron District. While the Ren are perfectly aware of the mass production techniques of the Bright Republic, labor is so cheap and plentiful in Dulimbai that proprietors rarely have any reason to invest in complex water-powered equipment or sophisticated hand tools. When a rich merchant needs more work done, he simply throws more “xiaoren” (“sheow-ren”) at the labor.

The xiaoren form the vast bulk of the population, at least 99% of the people within the walls. Soldiers, farmers, peddlers, artisans, even the wealthy merchant bosses are all technically xiaoren, mere commoners to be commanded and disciplined by the “junzi” (“juhn-zih”) scholar-officials.

These junzi form the elite in Yizhao, and in the rest of Dulimbai. They are not an aristocracy of blood, but of learning and culture, each of them a product of a relentless classical education. While a junzi’s daughter might be expected to cultivate learning, only men are permitted to attend one of the annual Great Examinations that confer the status. Many aspiring junzi labor for decades before they finally pass even the lowest-ranking examination.

A family with a single junzi to its credit is easily the most exalted in its home village. One with the pride of a son who has passed the second tier of the Great Examination earns the admiration of their home county, and the handful of glorious jinshi (“jin-shih”) graduates of the third and final tier of the examination have names that resound through all Dulimbai.

Only a junzi is fit for a responsible government office. Xiaoren may be appointed as clerks, constables, secretaries, and other petty assistants, but they have no hope of advancement without the laurel of success at the Great Examination. Men will go mad with their studies and live penurious lives of misery merely to have the hope of attending the next provincial examination. Every non-slave family in Dulimbai dreams of a son clever enough to merit the costly schooling that will give him some chance of eventual success.

This division between the learned and the ignorant is the basic social divide in Yizhao. The junzi and their families are expected to comport themselves with dignity and Pattern-graced virtue, and are instinctively revered by even the roughest xiaoren laborer. The common folk, on the other hand, are expected only to work, obey the officials, and keep the laws of the Regent.

The xiaoren of Dulimbai live in grinding poverty by the standards of most other nations. Every day is a struggle to ensure that there is enough food to feed all the dependents of the house, and children as young as seven are put to work if they are not lucky enough to be allowed to study. Hunger is the constant companion of many within Yizhao, and in a bad harvest season starvation is common among the lowest classes.

A prosperous xiaoren artisan is one whose family can eat their fill at meals, sew new clothes to wear a few times a year, and put by a little something to pay for their daughter's wedding. Such prosperity is fragile, however, and a calamity at work or a sudden sickness can drag them down among the sweating porters and desperate slaves in a matter of days.

Slavery is not uncommon in Yizhao or the rest of Dulimbai. A parent who cannot feed their children may sell them as servants to wealthier families, or a young man or woman of suitable age may contract with a pleasure-house to become a prostitute in exchange for a payment to their family. Such slavery is not heritable and slaves theoretically may not be killed or unnaturally abused, but it is still a wretched and unhappy condition.

Yizhao's merchant bosses are an exception to the poverty of the xiaoren. While theoretically ranking below farmers on the social scale, these rich merchants have so many silver ingots stacked up in their counting-houses that even junzi dare not ignore them entirely. Even so, the political power that merchants have in lands like Vissio or the Bright Republic does not exist in Dulimbai. Every merchant knows that every tael of silver they own can be taken from them in a moment by the governor's command or an edict of the Regent, and there would be nothing they could do about it but turn rebel. The great merchants live lives of fabulous luxury and opulence, but it is a wealth as fragile as the humbler prosperity of their clerks.

A proper junzi is expected to hold wealth in contempt, extolling the virtues of thrift, modesty, and an austere personal life. Some junzi hold firmly to these principles, living off the meager official salary they receive and dignified rents from farm land their family owns.

Most junzi are less scrupulous. Bribery is a way of life in Dulimbaian bureaucracy, and "incense money", "birthday gifts", "felicitation notes", and "ink money" pass regularly through the hands of everyone from clerks to Governor Jiang himself. Some speculators are from poor families that lack the rent income that would make life tolerable. More of them are simply taking what custom and their position allows them to take. A few are actively corrupt in their dealings, accepting not only traditional bribes, but forcing their charges to finance lives of luxury that would put a merchant prince to shame.



Understanding morality in Yizhao is impossible without understanding **LI**, the “Pattern” that was established in ages past by the Made God known as the True King. The basic principles of the Pattern are few and simply put, though there are mountains of commentaries and analyses on those ancient classics that impart the True King’s wisdom.

FILIAL PIETY IS THE SOUL OF VIRTUE. Love of your parents is the pattern for all love and all loyalty. It is the first love that a human feels and the model for all other compassion. One who abandons filial piety deserves death, for they have forsaken the root of all true virtue.

HONOR THE FIVE RELATIONSHIPS. Parent and child, ruler and minister, elder sibling and younger sibling, husband and wife, and senior friend and junior friend are the five models of all relationships. The lesser reveres and serves the greater and the greater guides and nourishes the lesser. One who abandons their duties to a relationship is as bad as any rebel in arms.

SERVE THE ANCESTORS RIGHTLY. They are your parents, and due utmost filiality. Produce sons so that the rites of worship may be continued. Maintain the family line at all costs, for only ancestor priests can sacrifice to ancestors not their own, and their services are costly. At dire need, adopt a son or donate to an ancestor temple in hopes that your spirit may not be forgotten. Do not consign your ancestors to Hell by your neglect.

SERVE YOUR RELATIONS DUTIFULLY. Whether in-law, cousin, uncle, niece, or more distant relation, extend to them the reverence that their age and relation deserve. Honor your elders and nourish your juniors.

ACT AS THE ANCESTORS ACTED. The True King had perfect wisdom and his sages had perfect understanding. The further one goes from their patterns and words, the more imperfect one becomes and the greater the stain on society. Maintain what you have received.

THE RULER RULES BY EXAMPLE. By living a life in accordance with the Pattern, your example becomes irresistibly transformative upon those beneath you. A good ruler makes good subjects even without explicit teaching, for the beneficent radiance of his own virtuous life illuminates and molds his people into shapes pleasing to Heaven.

SEEK LEARNING SO THAT YOU MAY BE PERFECTED. Filial piety is the root of all love, and learning is the frame upon which it grows. All people are good at heart, and only by ignorance and the abuses of the world do they become wicked. Understanding the Pattern will safeguard you from becoming a petty, vile person and make you worthy of power and reverence.

Yizhao is rare among the towns and cities of Dulimbai in that it still maintains a functioning Altar of Heaven in the Mulberry District. This ancient artifact is a relic of the initial Ren invasion of the south, a mighty work of theurgy established by the heroes of the True King when they drove the Akeh people of the Polyarchy of Kham out of their southern lands. Countless Akeh ideotribes were transformed into dutiful Ren commoners by its arcane influence.

The Altar's effects were dramatic. Under the ritual attentions of a minister of the True King, the Altar channeled the beneficent might of that Made God, relentlessly transforming non-Ren in the area into obedient xiaoren, wiping away their former identities and reshaping them into a pattern suitable for receiving the True King's gentle guidance. Not only that, but its rectifying and controlling influence greatly hindered the use of large-scale sorceries against its protected areas.

So powerful was the influence of the Altar that even naturally-born Ren sometimes found their own personalities and preferences effaced by the influence of the artifact. Xiaoren who were a little careless with the Pattern or inattentive to their duties could find themselves slowly transformed into happy, contented, utterly impersonal servants of the True King's Pattern. Taoist adepts and other heterodox servants of the state had means of avoiding this fate, but for most citizens of newly-conquered Dulimbai it was a constant, oppressive worry. It was all well and good to live in a harmonious state, but who wished to become a mere drone to do so?

As a consequence, after the Shattering, the Altars in most regions were quietly retired or "decorated" into uselessness. The Ren preferred to live with the risk of hostile Akeh sorcery and a certain measure of societal dissent rather than subject themselves to the leveling effect of the Altars.

Yizhao has not had that luxury. With the constant threat of the Black Academies of dark sorcerers to the north and the regular incursion of monstrous abominations from the Raktian forests, it was decided some decades ago to bring Yizhao's Altar out of storage and initiate the propitiatory rites once more. After so many centuries of neglect the Altar is not as effective as it once was, but the Wards it projects makes Yizhao exceptionally difficult to affect with unwanted magic. Only those who have been consecrated to the service of the city during a special rite can exert Dominion freely over the city.

Yizhao's effective Mundus Ward is level 6 so long as the Altar remains intact. This is enough to prevent the Eldritch of the Black Academy from effectively cursing the city, and it increases the base difficulty of any Dominion or Influence changes by 6 points.

The use of the Altar has not come without a price. Both Ren and foreigners run the constant risk of being transformed by the Altar's influence. This alteration strikes seemingly at random, though non-Ren and those Ren who fail to scrupulously maintain the Pattern have a significantly greater chance of falling foul of the enchantment. These unfortunates are known as **THE UPRIGHT**, both feared and pitied.

The change only seems to strike those who live within sight of Yizhao's walls. Roughly 5% of the population, or 5,000 citizens, have become Upright over the past few decades. The change cannot affect Godbound, supernatural creatures, or persons deeply educated in the classic texts of the Pattern, but ordinary xiaoren men and women may experience the alteration at any time. Once the change begins, it is unstoppable without a suitable miracle of Command, Fate, or Knowledge to dispel the infectious influence of the True King's rule.

The transformation completes itself at the next change of the seasons. Fleeing from Yizhao will not prevent the change once it begins, but any offspring they have afterwards will be normal Ren boys or girls.

One who becomes Upright gradually loses all desires save to perform their social role correctly. Farmers will be good farmers, artisans will be diligent craftsmen, and merchants will conduct scrupulously fair trade. They will carry out their family responsibilities with utmost punctilio and be models of attentive obedience to their senior relations. They will be perpetually infused with a glow of happiness and contentment, and no sorrow or calamity will grieve them for long.

They will also lose most of the qualities that make them an individual human being. Personal ambitions, habits, or pleasures are lost, unique talents and abilities fade away, and even a non-Ren ethnicity will gradually shift to a face unremarkable in Dulimbaian lands. Foreign names will be forgotten in favor of Ren ones, any memories of lives as something other than what they should be are gradually lost, and the Upright eventually becomes largely indistinguishable from any other Upright.

Such a state would normally make the Upright ideal subjects for a junzi's rule, but the scholar-officials fear them. For all their placid obedience, an Upright who sees a violation of the Pattern will become furiously angry, and only the death or lawful punishment of the malefactor will calm them. Simple human failings or petty corruption are enough to drive them into a rage, and so the Upright must be quarantined in the Mulberry District and any children given to relatives once they're old enough to be culpable of sins that would offend their parents. Entry to the district is by palace order only.

Yizhao and all the land within sight of its walls is under the effect of a **LEVEL 6 MUNDUS WARD**, and the Altar itself and the governor's palace are protected by a **LEVEL 2 EMPYREAN WARD**. This pervasive stifling aura is likely to have a significant effect on the pantheon's powers, and it's important to understand the ways in which it will affect divinity.

The Mundus Ward increases the base difficulty of any Dominion or Influence change by 6 if it includes Yizhao or its protected outskirts. As Yizhao is a city with a Scope of 2, this means the base difficulty for any changes in Yizhao is 8. To make a Plausible change to the city would require 8 points of Dominion or Influence, an Improbable change would take 16 points, and an Impossible change would require 32.

This is assuming that the locals do not fight the change. If the hero Adept Ye Lu is enlisted to fight the change with his theurgic powers, the difficulty increases by a further 2 points to a base difficulty of 10.

What this means to the PCs is that it will probably consume an entire pantheon's effective Influence to impose a minor change on Yizhao, and a major alteration is going to take more Influence than most low-level pantheons will have available. The PCs will be unable to exert their godly influence over Yizhao unless they either destroy the Altar of Heaven or become attuned to it.

The Mundus Ward generally acts to dampen all ongoing divine magics that would substantially change the situation in Yizhao. Knocking down walls might have a significant effect on an immediate location, for example, but it's not going to change the city as a whole. Conjuring a cartload of wheat might feed many people for a long while, but it's not going to impinge on a significant chunk of the city's population.

On the other hand, going about causing earthquakes that make all of Yizhao's walls fall or spending all day conjuring food supplies sufficient to feed the entire city are both actions apt to draw the Ward's attention. The Ward will act to diffuse, dispel, or negate such large-scale, persistent changes, and these responses may seem magical in their own right. Toppled and broken bricks might leap back into place, earthquakes might still despite the best efforts of the Godbound, and freshly-conjured wagons might collapse into evaporating piles of black slime.

To make these kind of changes stick, the Ward must be overcome with Influence or Dominion, and if Influence is used the changes will revert as soon as the PCs aren't around to maintain them in their off-hours. If the PCs try to beat the Ward with Influence, it means they're spending their off-screen hours constantly exerting their own powers and overwhelming the Ward with the sheer profusion of divine magic. Without sufficient Influence, it means they just can't put out enough miraculousness to swamp the Ward's effects.

One point where this is likely to make a lot of difference is in conjuring wealth. Many of the problems in Yizhao revolve around money; Governor Jiang needs it to maintain the military, Mother Fu Han wants to keep it, Royal Censor Liang wants to carry it off, and Noyan Tomor needs it to fund a raid. In some cases only portable silver or valuables will do, while other needs might be fulfilled by conjuring horses, weapons, and food.

Only so much of this can be done before the Wards start to fight back. Wealth for personal use by the pantheon will never incur a reaction, but the Wards will start destroying created goods or silver beyond what's necessary to satisfy at most one of the desires above. If you have a Godbound of Wealth or Artifice, make it clear to them that they get one free shot to simply conjure a monetary solution. Anything beyond that, they'll need to use Influence or Dominion to maintain.

Conjuring goods or creating effects beyond the Ward's range is a possibility, but as soon as those goods or effects impinge on the Ward's area, they're going to be subject to dissolution.

The Emyrean Ward covers a much smaller region of the city, but it has an even more pronounced effect. Any Godbound or other supernatural creature must commit 2 points of Effort towards overcoming the Ward before they can Commit Effort for any other purpose, including auto-saves. They can take back this committed Effort whenever they wish, but any ongoing effects they created with committed Effort there then cease immediately. Constant gifts function normally, though if they have a bonus effect that can be triggered with Effort, it too must overcome the Ward.

Thus, to sneak into the governor's palace with the Veiled Step gift would require the PC to Commit two points of Effort to overcoming the Emyrean Ward, and then Commit a further point to activate Veiled Step. If she took back the Committed Effort then Veiled Step would immediately end.

This Effort surcharge is going to leave most low-level Godbound with very little free Effort inside the governor's palace or near the Altar of Heaven. They'll be forced to fall back on their Constant gifts or innate talents in such areas, with maybe enough spare Effort for a single miracle or gift use.

Attunement to the Wards requires a ten-minute ritual performed at the Altar of Heaven under the leadership of Prince Xiao and eliminates the Ward effects on the attuned entity. Attunement cannot be removed once granted. Naturally, attuning to the Wards is permitted only with Governor Jiang's direct assent, and the governor won't grant it unless he's absolutely convinced that it's worth the tremendous blowback he'd suffer for granting the keys to Yizhao to unreliable foreign divinities.



Aside from the creation of the Upright, the Altar has another awkward quality that has bedeviled the rulers of Yizhao for generations. While it does not transform learned junzi into Upright, it punishes the great evils of the city's officials with natural disasters and tragic misfortunes. The more dramatic the crimes of the city's officials against the Pattern, the more drastic the unfortunate consequences.

This automatic legal enforcement is neither fine-tuned nor all-encompassing. The ordinary corruption and day-to-day peculations of the yamen staff and local junzis incur only a tolerable degree of bad luck, just another small factor in making Yizhao the hard-bitten town it is. Truly dramatic crimes bring more drastic punishments from Heaven until the culprit is dead, punished, or departed outside the Altar's range.

The storms that rack Yizhao began a year ago. Initially, they were random, unsettlingly fierce storms that could perhaps be explained by chance or season. Then three months ago they started to become blatantly supernatural in their force, becoming more frequent and now appearing every seven days. They rake the city with such savagery that it's worth a man's life to be caught outside during one of them.

Everyone knows that such a terrible scourge from Heaven must indicate some awful crime among their rulers and officials. Only the strict application of the Pattern and the law can calm Heaven's fury, but the people are not sure what crime could have brought such anger on them. Governor Jiang is desperate to get to the bottom of this before his city is blasted down around him.

The storms strike at noon on every seventh day. Within minutes, the sky blacks over with churning clouds and a savage, pelting rain of mixed hail and water deluges the city. Lightning bolts hammer the buildings and gouge the muddy streets. The storms last for three interminable hours before they grudgingly fade away. They affect only places within sight of Yizhao's city walls.

Anyone caught outside when one of the storms begins has less than two minutes to get under sturdy cover. By that time, killing hail and murderous lightning will be raking the streets and inflicting 1d10 damage on any living creature not protected by a good roof.

A miracle of the Sky or the Windsinger gift can dispel a storm, but only the destruction of the Altar of Heaven or the punishment of Abbot Fu and the "faithless wives" he abused can permanently stop the storms. The governor will be most grateful for temporary help, but he needs a permanent solution.

Yizhao is divided up into several walled districts, each one dominated by a different general activity. Residential housing is spread throughout the city, with workers usually living in close proximity to their workplaces. Each district has several gates in their high stone walls, but only entrances to the Mulberry District are guarded. In times of war the internal walls are meant to provide additional defensive fortifications against besiegers, though no army has attacked Yizhao for a thousand years.

THE BANNER DISTRICT is the barracks district for Yizhao's military forces. Troops are kept penned inside the district unless they have leave passes, as they tend to be a rowdy, undisciplined lot when around civilians. The governor's palace, Noyan Tomor's house, and the city yamen are in the Banner District, adjacent to the gates that lead to the Silver District.

THE INCENSE DISTRICT is the smallest neighborhood, largely dominated by ancestor temples, Taoist shrines, foreign houses of worship, and a teeming clutter of charlatans, hedge wizards, seers, and other street arcanists. The Shrine of the Blue Goat occupies a choice spot near the outer wall.

THE SILVER DISTRICT holds the main markets of Yizhao, nestled up by the docks to take on shipments of goods from elsewhere on the river and send off travelers and wealth to parts west. Mother Fu Han's gaudy home looms up over the docks, and half the families here are in her debt.

THE FLOWER DISTRICT is unusually large for a city Yizhao's size, but the regular patronage of the soldiers in the adjacent Banner District keep the brothels, tea houses, theaters, and entertainment venues here in business. The trade is loud, coarse, and inelegant, particularly compared to the more refined mores of the southern cities. The tea houses make a good place for private conversations, however, and Beautiful Sage Fei will meet the PCs in one of the most respectable ones, and Royal Censor Liang in one of the quieter ones.

THE MULBERRY DISTRICT is the quarantine zone for the unfortunate Upright. Goods and raw materials are taken in by specially-trained workers and finished wares are brought out. The gate guards allow no one in without a pass from the governor, and generally require that all travel take place in covered palanquins. The Upright are very sensitive to improper behavior, and once they're set off nothing but stern punishment of the guilty can calm them.

THE IRON DISTRICT is the largest in Yizhao, and in it is much of the city's large-scale ironwork, timber finishing, and cloth weaving takes place. The smoke and soot from the coal-fired works smear all of Yizhao, and the laborers here must struggle to earn their daily rice and pickled vegetables.

The following are a few street encounters you can use to add local color to the PCs' activity in Yizhao.

1. A brocaded palanquin and its escort of bearers and servants fills the street. It is Ge Qin, daughter-in-law of Assistant Magistrate Ge Bao, off to the Shrine of the Blue Goat to pray for children. The servants will toss a few copper cash to beggars and the PCs in desultory generosity. She will run away three nights later, unable to tell her husband of the abuse she will experience there.
2. A hysterical shoe merchant is lamenting the governor's taxes and weeping over his inability to afford his son's further education. Some ruffianly constables are approaching to drag him off to the yamen to fine him for disturbing the peace with his complaints. Bystanders dare not interfere, but seem sympathetic to the man.
3. A trio of Toban riders are trotting down the street, knocking the xiaoren out of the way and laughing at their complaints. They seem to think the PCs are a good bet to push around. One of them is Noyan Tomor's son Burzig, who will feign hearty good nature if the PCs shame him but will then seek to get the PCs killed or put in impossible situations to avenge his pride.
4. A hangdog young man, Bo Fu, stands with a heavy wooden cangue bolted around his neck, an aging, smug-looking woman beside him feeding him out of a bowl of rice porridge. Ren writing on the paper that hangs from the wide wooden collar reads "I did not obey my mother." If questioned, he will dutifully explain that his wonderfully thoughtful mother requested that the yamen put him in the cangue for a week after he failed to dissociate himself from the harlot Plum-And-A-Half as she had instructed him. The bystanders clearly think it was entirely reasonable of the mother to do so.
5. Five clay tiles slide from a nearby building, plunging down to strike five luckless bystanders on the head, leaving them all dead or critically injured. Bystanders will make some vague gestures of assistance, but everyone thinks it's just one more sign of Heaven's anger.
6. Seven black birds descend on a nearby rooftop and begin to dance, whirling and hopping in perfect synchronization. A wave of curdled qi expands from their unholy prancing to spoil every edible and rot every woven cloth or leather to mere scraps within half a city block. If disturbed in their dance, the culprit is struck by a bolt of lightning for 2d6 damage, but the wave peters out without completing its destruction of the nearby goods. The locals consider it yet another evidence of Heavenly fury, if they stop to talk while desperately looking for something to protect their modesty.

Every GM is going to need a few local citizens from time to time. The characters below can fill in when you need a quick NPC for a scene.

BOYAR RADETZ: A mustachioed Raktian petty noble, quietly dying of stomach cancer, who has come to Yizhao to find his runaway serf Pyotr. He curses the lad's name constantly and claims he "has something of mine". Pyotr does; the young man is his illegitimate son.

PLUM-AND-A-HALF: A remarkably voluptuous harlot in a too-small robe. She has a fervent desire to be a singer, despite her complete tone-deafness. If she discovers the PCs are supernatural beings, she will constantly try to compel them to grant her wish via useless "god-ruling invocations" involving chicken blood, leek shoes, and dancing.

CLOTHMERCHANT BU: Contrary to his name, lugubrious Bu sells cabbages. He has been trying to move into selling hemp tabby cloth for years, but Mother Han's demands for "guild fees" are utterly beyond his means.

PRIVATE LI: A grizzled garrison soldier who's been serving in Yizhao for fort-two years, Li knows every nook and cranny of the city and will present himself as an infallible guide to foreign strangers. If he doesn't have an answer to a question, he will promptly and believably lie about it.

LITTLE BO: An orphan of a dead soldier and a wife who expired soon after, Bo's kept alive by the charity of his father's squadmates. His burning desire is to be a mighty warrior, and he'll pester martial PCs to share their "secret techniques" with him. He knows several secret ways into the various districts, including a hidden tunnel onto the grounds of the Altar of Heaven.

JIN SEVEN: Hulking dock porter who works as muscle for the Red Pillar Tong to fund his son's education. He'll try to sell his pretty teenaged daughter Min to the PCs if they show any signs of money, both to pay his son's tuition and get his daughter out of Yizhao. The PCs can't be any worse than living in a Heaven-cursed city, after all, and they can probably feed her.

AUNTIE SONG: Purveyor of the finest fish soup in the city, having served it to the Regent himself when he came to Yizhao on an inspection tour. The note of approval he wrote regarding it has its own little altar in her shop.

LADY WANG: Ice-cold wife of a junzi who is deeply intimidated by her. Absolutely calm manner no matter how chaotic her surroundings. Actually desperately lonely; feels inferior to her husband's family and so masks it with relentlessly precise propriety they don't dare try to pierce. No children, yet.

FU THE CRIPPLE: Dirty, drunken beggar who was formerly a master of the Lesser Strife of the Bitter Rival, until he made trouble for the Red Pillar Tong and got his legs smashed. Sees and hears much, but wants revenge.

Getting the PCs started with the adventure in Yizhao will depend on what they've lately been doing. If they've already run through the adventure presented in *TEN BURIED BLADES*, they might be directed to Yizhao by grateful allies who believe that such mighty heroes might be able to do something to help the beleaguered provincial capital.

If the PCs have recently accomplished some other considerable feat of daring, Governor Jiang might think to send them a plea for help, as they're some of the few supernatural powers in the region that may possibly be willing to aid his city. The governor is more than a little desperate at this stage and he's willing to gamble on outsiders who might be able to crack open the crime where his people have failed.

If you're starting a Godbound campaign from scratch with heroes that have yet to accomplish anything that might mark them out as persons of import, then you can credit Adept Ye Lu's theurgy with sniffing out their supernatural might and bringing it to the attention of the governor. The recent spiritual upheaval that accompanied their awakening as Godbound left sufficient evidence for the somewhat-unreliable theurge to track them down and present the governor's request.

If you'd like to transplant *THE STORMS OF YIZHAO* to your own campaign setting or to a different part of Arcem, you'll need to make a few adjustments. The adventure revolves very closely around Dulimbaian culture and mores but you can sidestep that issue with a few tweaks.

Treat Yizhao as an ancient but peculiar city that has had its Altar of Heaven for centuries, the legacy of a philosopher-theurge who once tried to make it the seat of a new empire. The Pattern and the Upright are remnants of that quest. The city is in subjection to the nearest major polity, sending it tax tribute and obeying its orders in exchange for protection or economic benefits. Royal Censor Liang is an investigator from that government, and Governor Jiang is simply the latest appointee from their distant overlords.

The Raktian threat is replaced by assorted hostile neighboring cities, who still remember that philosopher-theurge and his decidedly unwelcome plans for them. These neighbors detest the people of Yizhao, and have enough magical inheritors from the ancient mage's rivals that they're able to regularly send magical blights against the city, ones diffused by the Altar's wards.

So long as you replicate the basic thrusts of the problems and motivations described in the adventure, you can set it almost anywhere. The troubles that the people of Yizhao face are those that come from being entwined with a tradition that both sustains and exacts, sometimes in ways that seem gravely unjust. Keep that dynamic and the adventure will work almost anywhere.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

There are six major NPCs in Yizhao, men and women of sufficient power, wealth, or social importance to influence the fate of the city. While you may need to enlist additional NPCs for bit parts and local color, these six people and their relationships need to be understood if you are going to have an easy time running **THE STORMS OF YIZHAO**.

For simplicity, each of the six grandees has a person they especially like, one they especially resent, and a goal for the situation in Yizhao. They may have secondary sentiments, but you'll need to understand who hates who, who trusts who, and what each of them want in order to play out the adventure.

These NPCs will seek out the pantheon as an obvious group of powerful, useful, disposable agents in Yizhao. There are several suggestions for framing the PCs' entrance into Yizhao in the prior section, but you should go out of your way to make sure the PCs know that these people want to talk to them.

Each of these six people will have their own request for the pantheon, detailed in the **BIG TROUBLE IN YIZHAO** section that follows. None of them will be coy about what they want the PCs to do; make sure to get these requests in front of the players rapidly, so the pantheon has some suggestions for what to do in Yizhao. It's probable that the PCs won't decide to fulfill every request, and some requests may not even be possible to reconcile.

As the PCs deal with these requests, they're going to pick up clues to the real problem in Yizhao, the depredations of Abbot Fu and the victimization of his petitioners at the Shrine of the Blue Goat. Some groups may need more clues than others, but if they work out enough of the problems the NPCs bring to them, they're going to find sufficient evidence to aim just about any group at the corrupted shrine.

Most of the NPCs presented here are fundamentally normal human beings. Royal Censor Liang has supernatural powers of glibness and Beautiful Sage Fei is partially transformed by her superlative devotion to the Pattern, but the rest of them have no special defenses against divine powers, aside from the level 2 Empyrean Ward at the governor's palace.

Simply brain-bending or killing these NPCs is always possible, but Dulimbaians are not ignorant of the existence of dominating magics or the possibility that their leaders may be suborned by supernaturally-powerful strangers. Obviously-subverted persons will be ignored by their underlings and pacified as best they can while word is sent to the capital for help. It will be some time before this help arrives, but the NPC is unlikely to be useful in the meanwhile.

IMPORTANT PERSONAGES OF YIZHAO

GOVERNOR WU JIANG, viceroy of the city of Yizhao

- LIKES** Noyan Tomor, a bluff soldier he can understand
- DISLIKES** The Censor and the investigations that threaten his life
- WANTS** To stop the storms before he or his city face ruin

NOYAN TOMOR, leader of the Toban mercenary horse archers

- LIKES** Jiang, since the governor supports the military so well
- DISLIKES** Mother Han, since the merchants resent his men's pay
- WANTS** To raid Raktia and clear out bandits and monsters

ROYAL CENSOR LIANG, official investigator of corruption in Yizhao

- LIKES** Mother Han, since she's paying him to ruin Jiang
- DISLIKES** The Beautiful Sage Fei, since she's so incorruptible
- WANTS** To solve the storms in a way that pays him well

BEAUTIFUL SAGE FEI, stern paragon of the Pattern and its virtues

- LIKES** The Censor, since he seems so devoted to the Pattern
- DISLIKES** The Prince, because he's a detestable innovator of morals
- WANTS** To ruthlessly impose the Pattern on the city

PRINCE YAN XIAO, lame reformist keeper of the Altar of Heaven

- LIKES** Mother Han, because she shares his mistrust of the Altar
- DISLIKES** The Governor, as Jiang considers him a parasite
- WANTS** To destroy the Altar of Heaven without bloodshed

MOTHER FU HAN, matriarch and richest merchant boss in the city

- LIKES** Censor Liang, since he'll get rid of the governor
- DISLIKES** The governor, for he squeezes the merchants brutally
- WANTS** Get rid of the governor, or at least his emergency taxes



GOVERNOR WU JIANG is viceroy over both the city of Yizhao and the Northern Province marchlands beyond the Dahuang river. Once a famed general on the Patrian front, he is a relatively recent occupant of the post, having been “promoted” to it four years ago after a military gambit he backed failed dramatically. Jiang is under no illusions about his lack of favor with the Regency’s officials; while he has passed the highest tier of the Great Examination his military background is distasteful to high-ranking officials at the court.

Jiang now spends his days at the **GOVERNOR’S PALACE**, a rambling wooden structure in the Banner District placed to take advantage of the geomantic shadow of the Altar of Heaven, granting it a **LEVEL 2 EMPYREAN WARD** against the exertion of divine power. The palace is thickly crusted with anti-magical charms that render low magic use within its walls entirely impossible. A Large Mob of trained soldiers is on guard duty at all times, and one of Yizhao’s heroes is always within shouting distance.

Jiang is a bitter man, resentful of his position. He was too great a general to simply dismiss from office, but he knows perfectly well that the court considers Yizhao a backwater of no military importance. They believe the Raktian monsters and the dark sorceries of the Eldritch of the Black Academies are unworthy of serious concern, with the former being mere odd-looking animals and the latter helpless against the Altar’s protective wards. As its governor, the court feels he should merely concentrate on funneling Yizhao’s industrial products to the Patrian front.

Jiang chafes at this caretaker role, and takes the Raktian threat much more seriously than the southern court does. He has been ruthlessly taxing the people of Yizhao to fund military security for the province while still providing his quota of military supplies for the Patrian front. The trans-Dahuang villages love him for it, but the people inside the city walls resent it mightily.

NOYAN TOMOR is his best friend in the city, both being veteran soldiers with little patience for the impracticality of civil officials. Many nights find the governor and the noyan both drinking late into the evening, bemoaning the folly of civilians.

ROYAL CENSOR LIANG is hated and feared by the governor. Jiang is convinced that Liang is going to fabricate some blame against him for the Heaven-sent disaster of the storms. If the censor reports against him, he’s certain to be dismissed in disgrace, if not executed outright.

GOVERNOR JIANG: AC 9, 4 HD, +4 attacks, 1d6 damage, Morale 10, and 14+ save. He is a skilled warrior and a brilliant strategist, if not much of a politician. The charms he carries allow him to roll saves twice versus mind-affecting magics.



NOYAN TOMOR is the noyan of the thousand-strong Toban detachment posted to Yizhao, their leader and undisputed commander. Somewhat stout from good living in Yizhao, he is still a peerless horseman and a nigh-supernaturally talented archer. He wears robes in the fashion of a Dulimbaian official when out in public, but in private he prefers the hides and trousers of his Toban kinsmen.

Tomor's men are technically mercenaries, ones funded by Governor Jiang's taxes on Yizhao's merchant bosses. The ancient friendship between the Tobans and the Dulimbaians is improved by regular payments of silver to the horsemen, and while they'll fight fiercely and loyally for the Regent, they won't fight without pay and supplies.

Tomor likes his post almost as little as Governor Jiang does. His men ride regular patrols through the trans-Dahuang villages, but they are constantly forced to merely respond to monster incursions and bandit raids rather than taking the battle to the Raktian source. Tomor yearns to send his riders plunging north, far past the border, and harry Raktia up to the very eaves of the forest. Not only would the fighting be entertaining, it might win him a little of the glory he can't hope to get playing nursemaid to Dulimbaian peasants.

Jiang sympathizes with this urge, but a raid on that scale would be both expensive and politically dangerous. Success might be forgiven by the southern court, but failure would bring stern consequences for them both. Tomor has been trying to talk Jiang into backing it for some months now, insisting that the money could be had easily enough if those soft-arsed merchants were made to pay their fair dues to the state.

GOVERNOR JIANG is a good friend to Tomor, both of them having a keen appreciation for a strong military force on the Raktian border. Perhaps more significantly, Jiang is the only one who can get Tomor the money and permission he needs to make a good, solid raid on Raktia, and Tomor has confidence he can bring the old general around soon.

MOTHER FU HAN is a constant thorn to the Toban. He's convinced, quite correctly, that her clan commands enough silver to fund the raid on its own. Of course, seizing that much in "emergency taxes" might ruin them, but shouldn't civilians be ready to sacrifice for the state? Tomor's confident that if someone forces Mother Han out of her position, he'd be able to press Jiang into levying the necessary taxes on her weaker-willed successor.

NOYAN TOMOR: AC 7, 6 HD, +7x2 attacks, 1d8+3 damage, Morale 10, and 12+ save. He can use the Bolt of Invincible Skill (p. 34) and has 3 Effort. He is more likely to be found without his shoes than without his lama-blessed bow.



ROYAL CENSOR LIANG is a roly-poly fellow with a beaky nose, a cherubic smile, and a mind like a curare-smearred bear trap. As a royal censor, he is one of the handful of men in the Regency with the right to investigate even the highest levels of officialdom for corruption, inefficiency, and incompetence. While he cannot impose punishments on major officials personally, his recommendations are almost invariably accepted by the throne.

Liang is a bureaucratic bastard of a man, utterly indifferent to anything beyond his own personal advancement in office. He is also a genius of the first order, quite capable of rationalizing his every corrupt act and sordid ambition as nothing less than the purest expression of Patterned virtue. So supernaturally persuasive are his explanations that listeners find themselves unable to dispute the censor's reasoning even when they see him commit a vile act right in front of their faces.

Liang is enjoying his present position in Yizhao, having been dispatched there to investigate the local officials once the Heaven-sent rebuke of the storms was clear. He's planning on making his investigations very profitable to himself thanks to Mother Han's "contributions", but he's concerned with actually finding the source of the sin as well. If he pins the crime on some suitable victim and the storms still do not cease, he'll threaten his own future prospects of advancement.

As a consequence, Liang is currently vigorously investigating the locals for any crime serious enough to have incurred this dramatic punishment from Heaven. He's keen to get assistants and helpers, particularly if they can approach the major figures in Yizhao without obviously being his agents. Once he has all the facts, he'll compose a frame job, hang it on Governor Jiang, collect the rest of his payment from Mother Han, and head back to the capital in fine spirits. If he can ruin Sage Fei too, it will be sweeter still.

MOTHER HAN is his closest ally in the city. She's been "contributing to the investigation" for very large sums. Governor Jiang knows she's trying to convince Liang to frame him, but there's nothing the old general can do to stop Mother Han from "helping" this way.

BEAUTIFUL SAGE FEI has earned Liang's personal enmity, though she is unaware of it. Her flawless devotion to the Pattern has left her immune to his powers, and he is afraid she will discover how "morally flexible" he really is.

CENSOR LIANG: AC 9, 4 HD, No real attacks, Morale 8, and 14+ save. He has Effort 3 and can persuade listeners as if he could perform miracles of the Deception Word. These blandishments don't make sense to people who aren't adherents of the Pattern, but believers get no saving throw unless they're supernatural creatures. He can spend Effort to auto-save.



BEAUTIFUL SAGE FEI is an anomaly in Dulimbai; a woman with a superlative mastery of the classics. The young second daughter of a middle-ranking junzi official at the governor's palace, she exhibited such a tremendous talent for scholarship that her father arranged for private tutors. It was out of the question, of course, for her to be sent to the academies with her brothers, but in the end, Fei's natural talents were so imposing that she became universally acknowledged as the most Pattern-wise and virtuous personage in all Yizhao. Even her parents are in awe of her erudition, and do not dare to try to direct her.

Fei is utterly obsessed with the purity and beauty of the Pattern. The Upright are models of all that Dulimbai's xiaoren should be, and if every commoner were so transformed the state would progress with happiness and majesty to the ultimate civilization of the rest of Arcem. All hearts can be awoken to their innate goodness, all errors can be washed out by the Pattern's enlightenment, and anyone who opposes righteous culture is an enemy of all mankind.

While the subordinate role of women in Dulimbaian society is something Fei is aware of, her own rectitude and propriety is so intense that those around her simply do not dare to object to what she does. If the Beautiful Sage Fei is doing it, the reasoning goes, it must be in line with the Pattern. Fei is aware of this, and will not hesitate to take otherwise unseemly actions if she is convinced they are needed for the Pattern's advancement in Arcem.

Fei is enraged at the evidence of Heaven's anger against Yizhao, and is convinced that it stems from the laxity of the common people and their conspiracy with corrupt officials to ease their lives. She desires to use her powers to amplify the Altar of Heaven's effect, transforming a great number of Yizhao's citizens into the Upright. Prince Yan Xiao is an obstacle to this desire, however, and she desires that he be persuaded to see wisdom.

ROYAL CENSOR LIANG is presently a distraction to the Beautiful Sage, who finds herself bewitched by all the censor represents; purity, probity, and the maintenance of the Pattern in the face of corruption. She is girlishly smitten with him.

PRINCE YAN XIAO is her nemesis. The keeper of the Altar of Heaven is singularly unenthusiastic about increasing its influence over the common folk, and fails to appreciate the purity of the Pattern as Fei does. She is too upright to want him dead, but she does want him out of the way.

BEAUTIFUL SAGE FEI: AC 9, 10 HD, No real attacks, Morale 12, and 10+ save. She has Effort 5 and can perform wonders equivalent to binding the Command and Passion Words, though she will only ever use the latter to produce calm and a love of the Pattern. She can spend Effort to auto-save.



PRINCE YAN XIAO is a younger brother of the current Regent of Dulimbai, one of several such siblings. As is the custom in Dulimbai, those royal sons who do not become Regent are packed away to remote postings of the utmost honor and absolutely no political influence. The prince receives golden missives of felicitation from his elder brother every New Year, deep obeisances from every junzi in Yizhao, and has precisely twelve household servants who actually obey him... assuming they don't think the governor would object. All told, Prince Xiao has barely enough influence to reliably control his dinner menu.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Prince Xiao is not a wholehearted enthusiast towards Dulimbaian culture and customs. While he maintains the outward comportment expected of a man of his lineage, he privately is much more in favor of individual freedom and lives lived for their own sake, and not out of duty to others or the state. His dearest, most secret desire is to run away to the Bright Republic and become a movie star, but he does not seriously imagine it would be possible. The Bright Republic would be reluctant to involve itself in Dulimbaian court matters by accepting a refugee prince, and Xiao would be the first to admit that he doesn't know exactly how one becomes a movie star in the first place. Anyone who could help fulfill even part of his dream would have a friend for life.

Prince Xiao is highly unlikely to be leaving Yizhao any time soon, however. The Regent's court is "deeply interested in the security of his noble person" and any departure from Yizhao would grievously disturb their serenity. Aside from this, he is needed to maintain the Altar of Heaven and conduct the necessary rituals for its operation. Only an heir of the ruling dynasty is able to lead these rituals, so Prince Xiao or one of his close relations must be the one to conduct the rites.

MOTHER FU HAN is one of Prince Xiao's few friends, though the affection is mostly one-sided. Xiao appreciates Mother Han's forward-looking mindset and refusal to be bound by custom and practice. He considers her to be a fellow believer in the power of the individual and a potential driver of social change in Yizhao.

GOVERNOR JIANG is a thorn in Prince Xiao's side. The governor views him as nothing more than an expensive parasite and has been known to loudly wish for a cheaper prince to maintain the Altar. Jiang considers Xiao to be completely pathetic, and bullies him almost reflexively. Xiao may not be able to take it much longer.

PRINCE YAN XIAO: AC 9, 1 HD, No real attacks, Morale 10, and 15+ save. Xiao is brave, but he's never been in anything remotely resembling a fight and will attempt various flashy and utterly impractical maneuvers he picked up from Republic kung-fu action movies.



MOTHER FU HAN is decidedly young to be the matriarch of the most powerful merchant clan in Yizhao, but her domineering will, low cunning, and cold-blooded ruthlessness have made her the most powerful merchant in the city. She considers that achievement nothing more than her rightful due, and it is unhealthy to suggest otherwise.

Fu Han was raised a minor iron-merchant's daughter, one renowned for her sharp wits and less-than-virtuous life. Despite the shame of becoming a concubine, it was still considered a step upward for her when she blandished the head of the powerful Lu family into taking her on as a secondary wife. Within six months, the cowed merchant prince had sent away every other woman in his household and dutifully promoted Fu Han to primacy. Her unfaithfulness to him with a series of handsome and disposable servants is passed over in silence by the beaten man, as the last time he hinted his disapproval she made him spend the night kneeling at her bedside with her chamber pot on his head.

Fu Han has spent the past five years transforming the Lu family into a ruthless, extremely profitable enterprise that has fingers in almost every business in Yizhao. Her husband lives in terror of her and her stepchildren burn incense regularly in prayers that she bears no children of her own.

Fu Han wants money, power, and respect, and is endlessly frustrated by the fact that the means she uses to gain the first two prevent her from ever receiving the third. She is feared, but not admired; obeyed, but not esteemed. She responds to disrespect with threats, hired bullies, and savagely abusive language, measures that may win compliance but place her further beyond the pale of Pattern-guided society. She is deeply unhappy.

ROYAL CENSOR LIANG is the one bright spot in Fu Han's life of late. The censor is wily enough to treat her as a true matriarch of her family, and she has been passing the censor considerable "contributions" toward his investigation. Liang knows that she really wants to governor deposed and his emergency taxes ended, but no one can complain about Mother Han's "generous civic spirit" even if a great many people suspect it's an outright bribe.

GOVERNOR JIANG has infuriated Mother Han with his military taxes. He'd probably have beggared the Lu family by now if he didn't fear she's held enough silver back to bribe his enemies at the Regent's court into censuring him if he did. Mother Han is convinced that either Jiang goes or her family will end up impoverished.

MOTHER FU HAN: AC 9, 1 HD, No real attacks, Morale 8, and 15+ save. Mother Han is a survivor, and will do or offer whatever she must to preserve her life and her money, in that order. Afterwards, of course, she will do whatever she can to murderously avenge any insult.

BIG TROUBLE IN YIZHAO

This section details the particular problems and tasks that the major NPCs will put before the pantheon. It's unlikely that the PCs will agree to all of them, and some of them may not even be possible to reconcile without significant divine creativity. As PCs deal with these requests or investigate the situation independently, they'll come across the clues they need to piece together the true state of affairs in Yizhao and identify the real culprit behind the Heavenly anger.

Many of these situations will involve negotiations between the PCs and the NPCs, either to get them to change their terms, sweeten the agreements, or be more candid about their real ambitions. Handling this kind of negotiation can be awkward for some GMs, especially with several players involved in them, some of whom might have the power to influence minds. For those in need of a little extra guidance, here's one way to structure these negotiation scenes.

Start with a thumbnail description of the NPC, the surroundings, and any nearby courtiers. In many cases, the NPC will want to have these conversations in private, away from their minions.

Provide some brief small-talk, where the NPC comments on things they might have heard about the pantheon, asks polite questions, and makes observations about Yizhao. Use this intro as a chance to characterize the NPC; make them say things that reveal their public face and apparent personality. If you need to fill in the PCs about the Pattern or local Dulimbaian facts, you can use this small talk as a way to wedge in a small info-dump, but don't drag it out too long.

Next, have the NPC put their request to the pantheon. Make it clear to the players and be ready to answer questions about the task. The NPC wants the job done, and they're not going to play coy about the information the pantheon needs to accomplish the work.

At this point, you can expect the players to wonder what's in it for them. Some PCs might be motivated by some greater purpose to do this sort of thing gratis, but most will want a reason to help the NPC. You're going to have to play this by ear, since each group tends to have its own goals and interests. Try to think of some way the NPC could be helpful to the pantheon and make a point of offering that assistance. Piles of silver liang are unlikely to impress demigods, so think instead of favors, permissions, and alliances. Each problem section includes certain rewards the NPC could offer to the PCs.

Once the NPC has made their pitch and offered their reward, you can expect the PCs to either ask for a better deal or require some persuasion to take the job at all.

It's all right if the PCs eventually decide to decline the job outright. The NPC won't be happy, but they won't try to muscle the pantheon into agreeing or coerce them into doing the job. The NPCs may not fully understand what a Godbound is or the true scope of the pantheon's power, but they're not dumb enough to pick fights with supernatural heroes. Even if the PCs decline all six requests for assistance, simply knowing about what the NPCs all want should be enough to direct their own course of action.

Godbound with words like Command, Passion, or Knowledge are likely to want to make use of them during the negotiation. You should be careful to warn them that obvious manipulations of an NPC's mind or attitude are likely to be noticed by their associates, and that the Dulimbaians are not strangers to mind-influencing magic.

Royal Censor Liang and Beautiful Sage Fei are both supernaturally-gifted enough to Commit Effort to auto-save against hostile effects, and Governor Jiang's official seals give him two saving throws against mind-affecting effects instead of just one. Attempting to bewitch them and failing will anger the NPCs, but won't necessarily end the interview. The NPCs will not try to use violence against the pantheon unless their lives are at stake; they will much prefer to flee and seek help from the armed forces and heroes if they must.

More subtle influence or more plausible mind-bending may well pass unnoticed by the target's associates, however. You should warn players if their desires are too blatantly implausible for the target, though careful application of gradually-developed control could convince others that the victim simply has had a change of heart after due consideration.

Knowledge gifts and other scrying powers are likely to be extremely powerful in this situation, revealing much of the truth about what's going on. The fact of the abbot's massive crime is considered a secret for Knowledge gift purposes, but careful questioning might get around that. If a PC in the group is bound to the right Words and uses them carefully, they might be able to discover the abbot's crimes very early on.

If they do so, or if the players manage to uncover the true crime early, then let them do so. The real crisis then becomes how the players are to resolve the problem without bringing shame and ruin on the hundreds of innocent victims of the abbot's evil. With the Altar of Heaven both causing the storms and hindering any simple divine resolution for the problem, the players are going to have to be creative to figure out a humane solution.

GOVERNOR JIANG: END THE STORMS

Governor Wu Jiang is likely the first of Yizhao's grandees to buttonhole the PCs. His minions are all well-aware of the governor's keen interest in ending the storms and will be quick to identify the pantheon as potentially useful tools for that end. Any hint of supernatural prowess or prior great deeds will be enough to bring their attention, so unless the PCs are entering Yizhao in disguise they'll be quickly "invited" to the palace in terms that don't suggest much choice. Sharp and forceful refusals will be accepted, however, for now.

Governor Jiang will be waiting in his private audience chamber and will be confident enough to dismiss his attendants. A Small Mob of soldiers are always within shouting distance, as well as Big Ping of the city's heroes. Jiang will lay out the situation to the players, making clear the following points:

THE CITY IS BEING FLAYED BY A SUPERNATURAL STORM that forms every seven days. The storm is clearly evidence of Heaven's anger, which means that some official of the city has committed an unspeakably grave crime. The storms began a year ago, but started to get much worse and much more regular three months ago.

THE ALTAR OF HEAVEN IS THE SOURCE of Yizhao's magical protection and the source of the storms. It passes harsh and impartial judgment on grave crimes against the Pattern committed by city officials and it cannot be pacified until the crime is punished or the involved criminals are expelled from the city. Jiang knows that disabling the Altar will also end the storms, but he will not bring up the possibility. Destroying the Altar is unthinkable; it's a precious relic of the True King and the keystone of the city's magical defenses.

THE COURT OF THE REGENT IS EXTREMELY UPSET about this blatant declaration of official malfeasance. The governor needs to solve this problem quickly, or he can expect to be demoted or worse.

ROYAL CENSOR LIANG HAS BEEN DISPATCHED by the Regent's court to investigate the local officials for malfeasance. Jiang will not speak his opinion of Liang outright, but he will commend the censor's "unstinting zeal" and mention a situation in the capital the censor resolved. Liang's clever investigation did not only result in the unearthing of a corrupt chamberlain's embezzlements, but resulted in the implication and ruin of the Feng family, whom no one possibly suspected of being involved in such things. The Feng family, Jiang will note absently, was an old rival of Liang's clan, but of course the censor impartially did what justice required. If further hints are needed, Jiang will note that Liang does not seem to like the governor much.

THE GOVERNOR TAXES THE CITY HARSHLY in order to fund the military buildup he thinks is necessary. Jiang may not put it so baldly, but he will explain that he is not a popular man in the city due to the taxes he exacts, especially on the rich merchants. He will name Mother Fu Han as the chief of the merchants and the focus of commoner resistance to his “just taxes”. He suspects that she or someone else might be intentionally provoking some awful crime in a lesser official to discredit his leadership of the city. He would not have to tax the city so harshly if he didn't have to both send supplies west to the Patrian front and keep the trans-Dahuang villages safe from Raktian incursions.

THERE ARE FIVE OTHER PERSONS OF IMPORT IN YIZHAO, or at least five others who the governor thinks might know something about the situation. Noyan Tomor's riders might have spotted something near the city. Beautiful Sage Fei is the greatest sage of the classics in the city and may be able to discern what kind of crime Heaven is punishing. Prince Yan Xiao is largely useless, but he does keep the Altar and might know something about it. Mother Fu Han is the leader of the merchants, and due careful investigation on that count. And Royal Censor Liang may have learned something about the nature of the crime in his last month's investigation.

JIANG WILL GIVE CREDENTIALS TO INVESTIGATORS allowing them to get meetings with people of interest and get the nominal cooperation of the yamen constables. These credentials are not *carte blanche* and won't allow the PCs to break the law or do violence to anyone important, but they will make most locals at least grudgingly cooperative.

When the PCs reasonably wonder why they should want to get involved with the situation, Jiang will make it clear that he can offer them the kind of inducements that only a major Dulimbaian official can grant. Money is unlikely to appeal, but other choices exist.

The governor can issue licenses to establish religions and build temples in the Northern Province. Up to one Scope 2 or four Scope 1 cults can be established without disturbing native ancestor worshipers, and believers can be acquired by relatively simple divine efforts.

The governor can establish PCs as assistant magistrates or provincial censors, giving them legal impunity in the Northern Province as long as they stay in his good books and don't touch royal officials.

The governor can be an ally to them in Dulimbai's court, getting them entrance into the royal court to the south and potentially an audience with the Regent himself. Other political favors can also be extended to friends.



NOYAN TOMOR: SCOUT FOR A RAKTIAN RAID

Noyan Tomor is with his Toban horse archers in the Banner District, lodging in one of the peeling brick barracks provided to the horsemen. If the PCs don't come to him after their interview with Jiang, he'll eventually send a Toban messenger to ask them to come drink with him.

Tomor's chambers are much more casual than anything in the governor's palace, with trophies hanging carelessly on the wall and horse-hide cushions for sitting. Fermented mare's milk is offered; those who can bear to drink the stuff earn Tomor's appreciation, but he won't begrudge those who would rather have rice beer. Tomor is a bluff, direct man, though he is not entirely without guile. He has several things to lay out before the PCs.

RAKTIA THREATENS THE LANDS NORTH OF THE RIVER with its beasts and bandit raids. While no one seriously believes the Raktians could unify, or that they would be fool enough to invade if they did, the constant depredations make life tenuous in the trans-Dahuang region. It's not so bad now that Jiang's money has hired twice as many Toban riders as are usually posted here, but it would get much worse if the military support lessened.

TOMOR WANTS TO RAID INTO RAKTIA in order to intimidate the thieving serfs there and clean out some of the monsters. He would not lead his riders into the dangerous Raktian forest, but there is a wide band of gently-rolling hill country south of the forest eaves that shelters many bandit groups. Dulimbai's border theoretically stops at the south edge of those hills.

GOVERNOR JIANG IS AGAINST THE RAID for two reasons. First, it would cost a substantial amount to supply the Tobans with spare horses needed for an extended raid north and pay for the inevitable losses incurred against monsters there. Second, a violation of Raktia's borders without royal permission would earn him a great deal of heat from the southern court. A successful raid might be passed off as hot pursuit of bandits, but one that cost too many Toban lives would be sure to singe the governor.

TOMOR WANTS THE PCs TO SCOUT INTO RAKTIA along a proposed path, identifying any large bandit groups or particularly dangerous beasts. Particularly terrible monsters they may kill if they wish, but they are explicitly not to kill bandits or petty foes, as Tomor wants the sport for his men. If they bring back a good report showing a modest level of risk, Tomor thinks he can convince Jiang to approve a raid.

TOMOR KNOWS NOTHING ABOUT THE STORM or what might be causing it. He's no sage, he admits, but he's done nothing to earn Heaven's fury like this.

On good horses, which Tomor will provide, the scouting can be done in three days. PCs with the right Words might be able to trivialize the job. Prudent use of the Beast, Knowledge, Sun, or Sky Words might be able to survey the terrain in minutes or hours. Tomor will be somewhat suspicious of such magical means and will take a day to send riders to check certain critical points, but if they bear out he will accept the results.

PCs who clear out the minor foes and human bandits they encounter on the route will not please Tomor. He wants those for practice and entertainment for his men, and if his scouting riders find signs of recent battle and dead reavers, Tomor will accuse the PCs of breaking the agreement. The death of major supernatural creatures will be passed over gracefully, as Tomor has no desire to face such dire foes even with his riders at his back.

Tomor can offer several rewards to PCs who get him what he wants. He has little in the way of money to reward successful scouts, but he can give useful information and access to Toban horse archers for those who serve his purposes well.

Tomor doesn't know anything about the storm or the crime that might have caused it, but he does know that Mother Han is plotting something with Royal Censor Liang. Some off-duty Tobans were hired to guard a silver shipment sent from Han to Liang's servants in a village outside the city, explaining it only as a "contribution to the investigation". While there's nothing technically illegal about donating money to a state investigation, it's also a traditional means of bribery. When Tomor and Jiang confronted Liang about it, the censor rattled off some head-spinning explanation involving two classics, three historical allusions, and an invocation of Tomor's ancestors. Jiang seemed to buy the explanation, almost like he was bewitched, but it all sounded like nonsense to Tomor. The veteran warrior suspects Liang has uncanny powers, but none of the Dulimbaians around here believe him.

In truth, Tomor is immune to Liang's persuasive powers because he is a Toban and a follower of their lama-faith rather than a Pattern believer.

Aside from this information, Tomor is also willing to put in a good word for the pantheon with his kinsmen back home. They'll be willing to hire out their expert horse archers to the PCs, provided they aren't made to fight against Dulimbai or for Patria. This willingness to hire out can be used as part of a Dominion or Influence change exerted by the PCs, or as justification toward adding a new Feature to a faction the PCs control. If paying raw Wealth, up to a thousand archers can be hired for a season for 5 Wealth, or a year for 6.

The intended scouting path leads the group through low hills with small patches of scrub forest. It's rocky, unwelcoming land that's so worthless that the Dulimbaian haven't bothered to claim it and the Raktians would rather not try to live on it. If the PCs make a thorough investigation of the proposed raid path, they're going to have several encounters with the locals, likely in the order given below.

A SMALL MOB OF BANDITS WILL BE FOUND camping in the hills, preparing to make a smash-and-grab raid on the nearest Dulimbaian village to the south. Tomor would not want these small fry killed, but if battle breaks out, use the stats for gate guards on page 4. All of the bandits are tattooed with the mark of a broken shackle, and are runaway serfs who based out of the village of Volkany below. They're all devout cultists of the Parasite God there, the "Breaker of Chains", and will praise his glories to any who'll listen.

A WHISPERING MOOSE WILL STALK THE GROUP shortly after they deal with the bandits. This Misbegotten ungulate emits a bewitching murmur from its palmate antlers, promising the "wisdom of the forest" to those who approach. Lesser foes are drawn helplessly to the beast, whereupon the antlers splinter into a dozen jagged, flailing spikes of bone that stretch thirty feet from the creature's head and perforate the luckless victim. The moose is a great deal more than Noyan Tomor's men would care to face, and he will in no way object to its extermination. The creature is blood-mad and cannot be reasoned with rationally.

WHISPERING MOOSE: AC 7, 15 HD, +10x2 attacks, 1d6 straight damage, Morale 12, and 8+ save. It has Effort 4 and two actions per round. While immune to non-magic weapons, it cannot spend Effort auto-save. The inviting murmurs it emits would bewitch lesser foes but will have no power over PCs.

A CRUCIFIED SERF IS MOUNTED ON A HILLTOP visible from a mile around. Closer inspection will reveal a ragged sheet of birch bark nailed to his groin, painted with words in dried blood: "Whore of the Nobles". If some means is found to communicate with the corpse, he'll blame his death on the Breaker of Chains, who ordered him executed for supposed sympathy to the noble lords of Raktia. The man insists that all he meant was that the lords should get a decent Unitary burial after their inevitable slaughter.

THE RAGGED HAMLET OF VOLKANY stands last on the scouting patrol, a recent addition not found on Dulimbaian maps.

Volkany was founded only six months ago, on a site where a young runaway serf by the name of Istvaan had a holy vision. Young Istvaan saw an image of holy Saint Marta come to him, telling him that this hill was forever more free land where serfdom was not to be allowed. Furthermore, she would give him her special blessing to free all the serfs in Raktia from their cruel noble masters and bring righteous punishment to all the wicked lords of that unhappy land. Other serfs first mocked Istvaan's vision, but when the young man slaughtered a voivode's hunting party single-handedly they started to listen.

Now Istvaan has accumulated a considerable following in the make-shift village that he's established. The locals are trying to scratch out a crop from the unwelcoming earth, but right now they're forced to raid to get enough to eat. Out of prudence, most of the raids are directed south into Dulimbai; Istvaan does not feel ready yet to draw the full attention of the local nobles, who might fear him enough to make a bargain with an Eldritch of the Black Academies.

Unfortunately, Istvaan is a larval parasite god.

He is effectively bound to the Word of Freedom described on page 72, but his initial high-minded goals are being progressively derailed by his desire to whip up the fervor of his followers. He tells himself that his fellows must have great heart to face their former masters, and that he is the one who can inspire them, but more and more of his time is spent encouraging them to idolize him as their leader. Recently, he has had every person in the village get a tattoo of a broken chain link, the new symbol of holy Istvaan, the Breaker of Chains.

ISTVAAN: AC 5, 15 HD, +10x2 attacks, 1d8 straight damage, Morale 10, and 10+ save. He has Effort 5 and powers equivalent to binding the Word of Freedom. He can act twice per round.

Istvaan is restricted to a mile of Volkany. He can go further for brief periods, but anything more than 48 hours of separation from the source of his power will sicken him to helplessness, and 72 hours will kill him. He is not consciously aware of this limit, but merely feels a deep desire to be near the holy land blessed by Saint Marta.

The runaway serfs in the village amount to a Large Mob of Furious Peasants. Smaller groups of more capable bandits are sent out to collect necessary supplies, but if the entire village is under attack, those present can be treated as a peasant mob. They will scatter instantly if Istvaan is killed.

Istvaan is presently a somewhat over-zealous, occasionally cruel young man with an honest desire to free his oppressed brethren and break the rule of nobility over Raktia. He is merciless toward anyone he even vaguely suspects of noble sympathies, but is not naturally bloodthirsty or irrational... yet.

Istvaan will treat the PCs with distinct wariness but neither he nor the serfs at Volkany will start any fighting. He will come out to meet the PCs with his wife Lan, a remarkably beautiful young Ren woman who wears the finely-brocaded robes of a rich man's daughter and cradles a young infant in her arms; she is blatantly out of place among the muddy, callused peasants of the village.

Istvaan mostly wants to know what the PCs want, though he will take the chance to explain his Creator-given mission of liberation.

If the Tobans come through this area, Istvaan will fight them. He dismisses the idea of leaving Volkany out of hand; it is holy ground, after all. The Tobans might be able to be persuaded to ride south of the village instead, but Noyan Tomor will not agree to this unless given a good reason, and sparing the feelings of a bunch of Raktian bandits does not qualify.

The PCs may come to realize that Istvaan is a parasite god. The young man himself will believe nothing of such talk, convinced that he is a servant of God. Right now, Istvaan is nothing more than a somewhat excitable crusader for his cause. It may be years before he becomes a serious danger to his servants, but like all parasite gods, sooner or later he will succumb to the craving for more worship and bloodier devotions. If the PCs leave him alone, nothing awful will happen in the near future, but there will be eventual consequences.

LAN IS THE KEY PERSON IN THIS ENCOUNTER. If anyone asks about her, Istvaan will glance to her and let her do the talking. She will explain that an ancestor priest assaulted her a year ago in Yizhao and left her with a child. Her husband suspected nothing, but she could not bear the disgrace and could not bring herself to tell him, and fled the city three months ago after her son was born. She thought they would both die in the hills, but Istvaan found them and saved her and her son. She clings to the young man like a shipwreck victim to a floating plank.

Lan was a victim of Abbot Fu at the Shrine of the Blue Goat, with the Abbot using his Command powers to ensure she could not speak. Istvaan's Word of Freedom broke the compulsion. While Lan knows she was assaulted during the night she was praying for a child, she thinks the culprit was just one of the serving priests; she cannot imagine the abbot himself being guilty of such an awful act. She will give the place of her assault if pressed, but thinks her inability to tell her husband was simply due to her own natural shame. She will not return to her husband willingly, lest he discover her disgrace.



ROYAL CENSOR LIANG: STEAL A DOCUMENT

Royal Censor Liang will wait to make his move on the pantheon until after they've had a chance to talk to Governor Jiang, and possibly some of the other interested parties. He's currently lodging at the governor's palace in a scrupulously-maintained suite that's as far from the governor's chambers as it's physically possible to get, but will seek to meet at a Flower District tea house.

Liang is a friendly, tolerant, jolly fellow to the pantheon, even if they demonstrate considerable bad manners. He has a use for them, and he has no intention of their own barbarian crudity getting in the way of their proper employment. After a brief bit of small talk regarding their prior mighty deeds, he'll move the conversation to several points of importance, impressing each on the pantheon.

LIANG IS A ROYAL CENSOR, which means that he is personally commissioned by the Regent to seek out and report on official malfeasance, corruption, and incompetence. While he cannot personally punish major officials, the Regent trusts his reports implicitly.

LIANG NEEDS TO FIND THE SOURCE OF THE STORMS or else he will be in very bad odor with the Regent, a fate which would be terminal for his future hopes of advancement. A crime so huge as to merit such fury from Heaven certainly shouldn't be possible to conceal from an investigator of his stature.

LIANG HAS NO IMMEDIATE SUSPECT IN MIND though it doesn't take much of a political genius to see that he has his suspicions. He won't explicitly blame anyone, in part because he's uncertain of the true culprit, and in part because he wants to stay free to frame whoever is most profitable to finger for it.

LIANG WANTS A PALACE DOCUMENT from the governor's private files. While he could demand it personally, "someone" might alter it before it was given to him, and he can't afford that. He wants the pantheon to sneak into the archival wing of the palace, steal the document, and get out without being detected. This is, of course, entirely illegal and he will disavow any association with the group should they be so reckless as to be caught.

LIANG CLAIMS THE DOCUMENT IS POTENTIAL PROOF of a corrupt financial relationship between parties who might be involved in the current calamities that are facing Yizhao. He will resolutely decline to mention which parties they might actually be.

LIANG CAN GIVE THEM EXACT DETAILS FOR THE HEIST, including the best path to the desired document. He won't interfere with the guards or make any other active move to assist in the theft, but he will give any information he has.

In reality, Liang wants the document as material for his eventual frame job. He's seen the paper before while going through the materials under the hawk-sharp eye of Jiang's head clerk, and it had just the right amount of blank space and just the right topic to allow for the creative addition of a few new lines about payments made and received. Once he gets it, he plans to hold on to it until he makes his final accusation. At that point, he'll go to the archive with witnesses, get out the stack of documents the paper belongs with, and slip the altered document into place as he's working with them. As far as onlookers can tell, the document will never have left its proper place, and any excessively-truthful PCs will have to explain how they stole a paper that appears to have never been touched in the first place.

Liang is currently set on ruining Governor Jiang because Mother Han is paying him very well to do so. While Liang has no special love for money comparable to his insatiable thirst for power, he recognizes the value of a cartload of silver liang, and he intends to give good value to Mother Han for her "contributions to the investigation". He could be persuaded or counter-bribed to leave Jiang alone if it were worth his good offices. If necessary, he will content himself with simply solving the crime rather than risk a frame job that looks likely to backfire on him.

Liang has a strong distaste for Beautiful Sage Fei as well, but it is more fear than anything else. He suspects she may be able to see his immoral qualities if she gets a close look at him, but he also knows she's smitten with his seeming probity. He'll use that to his advantage if asking her for an innocent "favor" would help his cause.

Liang understands that the PCs can hardly be expected to go along with this out of the goodness of their hearts, so he offers to share his investigative results with the PCs in exchange for their cooperation. Liang is quite willing for them to discover the source of the crime if they can; he's confident in his ability to decorate the situation profitably once he has the real facts.

The most critical fact that Liang can impart to the PCs is that none of the other NPCs seems to have done anything that would justify such fury from Heaven. All of them seem to be unrelated to the true crime. Liang presents this as proof of a very cunning facade.

Liang is also confident that whatever the crime is, it's directly involving at least a hundred people. Heavenly anger on this scale is more than any single man's corruption could inspire. He admits bafflement at how so many persons could be involved yet leave no apparent trace of wrongdoing.

The difficulty of the heist will depend a great deal on the kind of Godbound the pantheon has available. For a Godbound built around stealth and infiltration, it's likely to be trivially easy, even with the palace Empyrean Ward hindering Effort use. For a pantheon notably devoid of anyone with a sneaky streak, it may not be so simple.

To get the document, the infiltrating PC needs to get over a 20-foot exterior wall, cross forty feet of open space, climb up a thirty-foot wooden wall, and get through an unbarred window into the archive room at the top. Once inside, they'll need to go to a particular document box and lift out the fifth paper from the top. If performed at night, it will be a moonless night outside and the archive will be completely unlit, so navigation may be difficult. The entire area is under a level 2 Empyrean Ward, so two points of Effort have to be Committed to overcoming the Ward before any further Effort can be used.

There are ordinary soldiers guarding the top of the wall and a Small Mob of them patrolling the open space at regular intervals. There is no one in the archive room after sundown. Any ruckus will bring a Large Mob of trained soldiers to action in 1d4+4 rounds, plus two heroes of Yizhao. Liang will be extremely unhappy if the pantheon leaves evidence of the theft behind.

Godbound have a nigh-limitless number of ways to overcome the difficulties of this heist, so you'll simply have to put the situation before them and see how they decide to solve it. If the PCs have enough Effort, they may be able to simply overwhelm the Ward and use their powers to trivialize the heist. Other PCs may resort to more mundane efforts, probably involving Dex checks for sneaking and Dex or Strength checks for climbing. This should not necessarily be a significant challenge for pantheons with PCs who have the appropriate skill set.

The document itself is a recent record listing the appointment of Abbot Fu to the headship of the Shrine of the Blue Goat a year ago by order of the governor, along with a nominal appointment to the city bureau of religion as a directing officer.

Liang plans to forge evidence of a substantial payment from Fu to Jiang on the document, proof that the governor is selling sinecure official posts and control over city shrines. As Liang suspects, this actually happened, but Jiang wasn't fool enough to leave a receipt lying around for it. Such sales are considered tacitly acceptable among high officials so long as no proof of them is left to be found. Liang has no idea that Abbot Fu actually is involved with the crime, and thinks his ruin in the ensuing investigation will merely be an unfortunate bit of collateral damage.



BEAUTIFUL SAGE FEI: EMPOWER THE ALTAR

Beautiful Sage Fei has some qualms about employing supernatural entities that are unlikely to show much interest in the Pattern, but she feels compelled to act to save her beloved city and advance the interests of culture and civilization. These strange half-divinities may not be the most pleasant tools to use, but they will serve her ends.

The invitation to call on Beautiful Sage Fei will name a respectable teahouse nor far from her parents' home, where she will be waiting with an elderly aunt as chaperon. The aunt, like everyone else in Yizhao, is in awe of Fei's absolute mastery of the classics of the Pattern and will position herself far enough away from the young woman to be present without overhearing the talk.

Fei is patronizing, smug, and absolutely self-confident. She will be annoyed at any disrespect to the Pattern, but she expects nothing better from barbarians. All that is necessary is that the pantheon help her save Yizhao. In the conversation that follows, she will make the following points.

BEAUTIFUL SAGE FEI HAS NO OFFICIAL POSITION in Yizhao, as that is out of the question for a woman. Being a perfect servant of the Pattern, she has no desire for such a post. The acts she takes to support and sustain her community are merely those of a pious young woman of modest talents.

THE UPRIGHT ARE IDEAL CITIZENS as she will explain, detailing their righteous natures and purified hearts. She will dwell a great deal on their happiness and love of justice. The personality bleaching that occurs as part of the process will not be mentioned, as it honestly seems utterly irrelevant to Fei.

SHE CAN EMPOWER THE ALTAR TO MAKE MORE UPRIGHT with the help of a "River Chart" she obtained through her scholarly contacts. All that is required is that someone place the chart in contact with the Altar of Heaven. The chart will burn away in a moment, empowering the Altar to instantly transform at least two-thirds of the citizens of Yizhao into Upright. These Upright will doubtless be able to force out the evil that Heaven so hates, as there will be too many of them for the evil to hide among.

PRINCE YAN XIAO WOULD NEVER ALLOW THIS, despite his supposed duties to maintain and sustain the Altar's virtues. She knows that Prince Xiao is a deplorable innovator and of dubious loyalty to the Pattern. The Upright that guard the Altar would never allow the River Chart to be applied without his permission, and she can imagine no way to obtain it. She does not want Prince Xiao harmed, but she also does not want him to stand in the way of a step so obviously necessary for the health of the city.

Beautiful Sage Fei is being completely sincere and straightforward, at least as she understands it. She honestly cannot imagine why anyone would want to avoid becoming Upright; not only is their happiness assured, but they will become dauntless defenders of the Pattern and incorruptible servants of the state. They may not be capable of becoming officials any more due to their obsession with performing their humble roles, but there will be more than enough unaltered citizens left to fill those posts of service. If she could impart this blessing to all Arcem, she would do so without hesitation.

The River Chart she presents is a single sheet of paper inscribed with an eye-wateringly complex pattern of characters and symbols that look vaguely like Classical Ren script but are actually indecipherable. It is a potent relic of the True King, originally intended as an emergency repair tool for the maintenance of damaged Altars. The chart's magical upkeep will tremendously improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Altar; while it will not change the Altar's Ward ratings, it will transform between 66% to 75% of Yizhao's citizenry into Upright in a single convulsive moment of change.

Any Godbound who handles the chart will realize that it can be folded into a usable **CELESTIAL SHARD**, one suitable for making artifacts or imposing Impossible changes through Dominion.

Beautiful Sage Fei understands that barbarians are unlikely to do her work without reason, and she has several potential motivations to offer the pantheon in order to convince them to assist her.

First, transforming that many citizens into Upright will surely make it impossible for the evil official behind this catastrophe to hide. The nets of malfeasance and the webs of dark dealings that doubtless lie behind his wickedness can't be maintained when some considerable number of his conspirators suddenly become Upright. Performing the alteration should reveal the evildoer almost instantly.

Second, Beautiful Sage Fei can put the pantheon into contact with a number of very important Dulimbaian sages and scholars, exerting her influence on the pantheon's behalf. With her help, the group could likely get access to at least a half-dozen theurgic incantations of the Gate, one or two of the Way, and the sagely knowledge of some of the wisest men in the Regency.

Third, if the PCs still balk, Beautiful Sage Fei will offer her hand in marriage to a pantheon-member, satisfying her secret wish to make a grand gesture of self-sacrifice suitable for a lady such as she. Fei is a powerful wielder of arcana but would be a dutiful and obedient wife. She truly wishes to be a mother and a good wife at last, and envies the seemingly-simple lives of her wedded peers.

For an overview of the Altar's defenses and the Upright guards around it you can check the following section on Prince Xiao's request for the group. There are several ways the PCs could get access to the Altar, either through independent sneaking or by cooperating with Prince Xiao long enough to get to the Altar and place the River Chart on it.

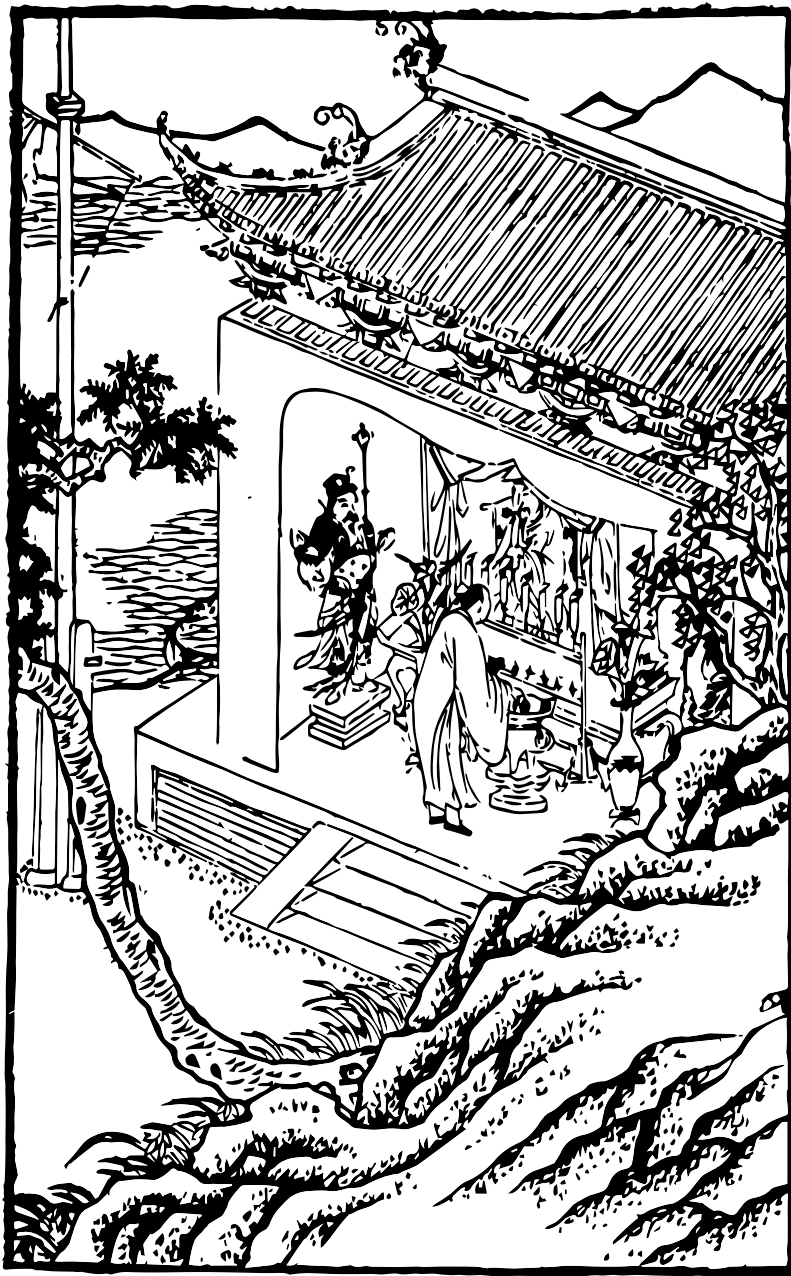
It may even be that the PCs will seek to perform both Fei's request and Xiao's request, applying the River Chart to the Altar just before they complete the disabling ceremony that will destroy it. The Upright will remain transformed, but no further xiaoren will be affected by the alteration. The PCs might be able to convince Fei that it was the chart itself which destroyed the Altar in an unexpected outcome, leaving her guilt-stricken and filled with self-doubt over her own wisdom.

If the majority of xiaoren in Yizhao are transformed into Upright, the city will be convulsed by civil disturbances for weeks until the remaining non-Upright quarantine themselves in the Banner District, with the exception of those few sweaty-nervous junzi officials who must go out into the rest of the city to direct the Upright commoners. The relentless purity and propriety of the Upright make them utterly intolerable neighbors to normal men and women. The daily sins and petty failings of their normal neighbors are more than the Upright can tolerate, and the local magistrates will wear out their rods in beating offenders lest the Upright riot against their "corrupt laxity". Only by separating the normals and the Upright can the city survive.

Its productivity in taxes and industry will also jump threefold, drawing considerable interest from the Regent's court. While such unauthorized tampering with an Altar of Heaven would normally be a capital offense, the felicitous outcome will make the Regent very lax about punishing those responsible for the act, and possibly encourage some officials to seek further experimentation on these lines.

The local citizens of Yizhao will have no such clemency, and will be ready to lynch whoever they think was responsible for transforming their relatives and shattering the peace of their city.

Fei's assumption that the transformation would reveal the true villain behind the crimes is correct. Within twenty-four hours after the transformation, a newly-Upright priest from the Shrine of the Blue Goat will confess his suspicions, by chance doing so where the PCs can overhear his words. Abbot Fu will be forced to flee and the "guilty" women and their children, Upright and normal, will be forced into slavery or exile. Only divine involvement can avert their tremendous suffering.



PRINCE YAN XIAO: DESTROY THE ALTAR

Prince Xiao is desperate to do something to save Yizhao, and in the pantheon he thinks he's found the perfect tools. These outsiders can't be expected to revere the Pattern the way the locals do, and with luck, he might be able to convince them to solve the burden of the Altar once and for all.

Prince Xiao will have his servants invite the PCs to come watch movies with him at his house in the Mulberry District. Covered palanquins will be provided for the trip, along with a carefully-trained guard escort who will bring the PCs from the district gate to Xiao's house. Any contact with the Upright will be prohibited, as it takes very little to set them off, and then only a beating or worse of the culprit can calm them down again.

Xiao himself will cheerily greet the PCs and invite them into his movie viewing room, complete with an extremely expensive tech-hardened Bright Republic movie projector and an extensive library of the latest products of Republic action cinematography. His servants will leave Xiao and the PCs alone to enjoy the thrilling exploits of Rock Hardmore in "Iron Wind Fist Hero IV: Thunder Dragon Reloaded". Xiao will exhibit a compendious knowledge of Hardmore's career, along with comments on a half-dozen other recent releases.

After the movie, however, Xiao will get down to business, drawing out a few significant points to the PCs.

REPUBLIC ACTION CINEMA EXALTS INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENT, the way it rightfully should. Dulimbai is obsessed with an orderly society, where individuals fulfill their proper role regardless of personal cost in order to benefit the state. What benefits the state very often does little to benefit individual people.

THE ALTAR OF HEAVEN IMPOSES THE PATTERN, punishing the city when officials stray from it. While punishing corruption is good, Heaven's storms are tormenting the common people and making the city intolerable to them, while the supposed corrupt official is nowhere to be found.

THE ALTAR SHOULD BE DESTROYED despite the loss of its protective Wards. It has been forty years since Raktia broke free of its conquerors and there is no chance that the weakened state can seriously threaten Dulimbai. The Altar is destroying the city in its mindless anger and warps luckless xiaoren into Upright drones. It is a curse rather than a blessing.

PRINCE XIAO KNOWS HOW TO DESTROY THE ALTAR by means of a particular rite that takes ten minutes to perform. He would be certain to be prevented by the guards if he tried to perform it alone, but with the pantheon's help, he might be able to get to the Altar and enact the rite before he can be stopped.

Xiao admits that the course of action would be extremely dangerous and would likely expose all of them to the wrath of the Regency. It might be possible to shift the blame to some other actor, however, if the pantheon can get to the Altar quietly enough and help him enact the rite without others witnessing it. The Upright who guard the Altar are incorruptible and ever-vigilant, but they are only normal men and women, even if changed greatly by the powers of the Altar.

Xiao would also explain that the rite is the only reliable way to destroy the Altar. As an ancient artifact of the True King built to cement his control over unstable territories, it's almost impossible to destroy by ordinary means. A Godbound of Might might be able to shatter it with a miracle, or one of Artifice to disassemble it with a similar act of divine prowess, but no violence short of an appropriate divine assault can damage it.

Only Xiao can perform the necessary ritual, as the Altar will respond only to the blood of the Yan dynasty. Even so, a Godbound of Deception might be able to trick the Altar with a miracle, and the ritual itself is not too complicated for the prince to teach to someone in an hour or two. More exotic use of the Words is also possible, such as a Godbound of Fertility masking their bloodline.

The most significant reward for working with Xiao is that it will solve the problem of the storms. While Abbot Fu will remain unpunished and his victims will be bereft of justice, the destruction of the Altar would eliminate the judgment of Heaven over Yizhao. In addition, no further Upright would be created in the city, though existing Upright would remain altered.

Xiao is also willing to share information about the crime that he has been able to discern through careful observation of the Altar. He will at first try to use this information as a bargaining chip with the pantheon, but if they resolutely refuse to help him in his plan, he will give it over regardless in hopes that it might help them find the culprit.

According to Xiao's observations, the sin that is enraging Heaven has something to do with lust and betrayal. Prince Xiao has a hard time imagining what such a crime could be, as no single act of carnal avarice could possibly incur such fury from Heaven. Treachery on the part of a high official might at least theoretically earn punishment on this scale, but it would have to be something truly heinous, such as direct cooperation with the Patrians or a bargain sealed with Uncreated Night. If that were the case, he would have expected some visible act of betrayal since the omens began a year ago.

The Altar rests in the heart of the Mulberry District at the center of a meticulously-designed square park roughly four hundred feet on a side. Geomantically-significant stones and plants are arranged around the Altar, which rests atop three concentric circular platforms, each nine feet tall and approached by smooth ramps at each cardinal direction. The Altar itself is a perfectly round disc of luminous white jade nine feet wide and high as a man's waist. The top level of the altar mound is twenty-seven feet high and visible from every point in the park.

A perpetual honor guard of Upright soldiers maintains a watch over the altar, which illumines the park with its own soft light both day and night. The guards remain outside the park unless they detect intruders, upon which they raise an alarm and attack the culprits. The guards on duty qualify as a Large Mob of Elite Warriors, while an alarm will bring a Vast Mob of Upright equivalent to trained soldiers within 1d4+4 minutes. Conventional Yizhao forces are unlikely to be able to reach the park in time to make a difference unless the intruders linger there.

The Altar and its environs have an effective level 2 Emphyrean Ward in effect, hampering the free use of Effort. Xiao can attune the PCs to the Wards if somehow convinced to do so, but it takes a ten-minute ritual at the stone. Due to the superb acoustic qualities of the platforms, the smallest sound atop the dais echoes throughout the park.

If the Altar is destroyed the storms will immediately cease and the Emphyrean and Mundus Wards in the city will collapse instantly. The Upright will remain as they are, but no additional people will be so transformed. Amid the wreckage, two glowing jade **CELESTIAL SHARDS** will be visible to any Godbound in the area, and may be seized to forge artifacts or enact changes.

The political consequences of destroying the Altar will be dramatic. The governor will be enraged, as allowing such a calamitous defilement of a sacred relic of the True King ensures he will be dismissed in disgrace. Beautiful Sage Fei will vow to see the culprit brought to justice and Royal Censor Liang will try to think of some way to gracefully exculpate himself from any involvement. The Upright will die to the last commoner to avenge the ruin of the Altar, but the common people will be notably muted in their condemnations.

The consequences to the pantheon depend on how well they concealed their involvement. It's possible that clever use of Words or cunning planning could leave them unsuspected, or veil them so thoroughly that no one in Yizhao could hope to identify them. While magical investigators from the southern court will be dispatched in due time, even these grandees are unlikely to pierce the deceptions of a divine Word if the PCs give them no fresh evidence.



MOTHER FU HAN: STEAL A TAX SHIPMENT

Mother Fu Han is confident that Royal Censor Liang will eventually unearth the source of Heaven's anger, but she retains some concern that he'll do so without somehow pinning it on Governor Jiang. While Mother Han doesn't seriously believe that the governor has anything to do with the crime, she has no intention of wasting the opportunity to get rid of a governor who seems to think the merchants of Yizhao are a bottomless silver mine.

Mother Han will send some scruffy xiaoren laborers to ask the pleasure of the pantheon's company at her house in the Iron District. Gaudy, opulent, and sublimely lacking in refined Dulimbaian taste, the house of her husband Lu Ban is a testament to Mother Han's wealth and vulgarity. Brocaded images of the matriarch adorn half the walls, the servants explaining them as signs of her husband's abiding love for his brilliant bride. Lu Ban himself is a terrified mouse of a man, a once-masterful iron merchant utterly broken by his wife's savage tongue and emotional abusiveness. He will be present only long enough to greet the pantheon before retreating to his library.

Mother Han will comport herself in a manner equal parts market fish-wife and cynical plotter. She is petty, vicious, and utterly dedicated to the advancement of the Lu clan. In the course of her conversation, she will bring up several points.

GOVERNOR JIANG LEVIES EXTORTIONATE TAXES ON THE CITY of Yizhao, particularly its wealthy merchants. While he claims to use the money to pay for his military toys, Mother Han claims to believe he really spends it on unspeakable private vices. In truth, she knows the governor is no more corrupt than most men in his position, but she has no compunction about lying.

THE COMMON PEOPLE ARE DRIVEN TO BEGGARY BY THE TAXES, and even now many small traders of her acquaintance are being forced into penury or made to sell their children as slaves. She can name several sad cases of this, even if a closer investigation will reveal that most of the instances involved financial problems that were only partially related to the tax burden. In a few cases, the unfortunate families were driven into poverty by the Lu clan's own ruthless dealings.

A TAX SHIPMENT SHOULD BE RETURNED TO THE PEOPLE, and she knows of one that even now is being prepared for its journey west to the Patrian front. If someone were to intercept the shipment and place it in Mother Han's hands, she could see to it that the silver is returned to its rightful owners, and a few more merchants might be able to keep their daughters from the brothels.

Mother Han's real intention is to get her own hands on the silver, which she'll then pass over to Royal Censor Liang. If Liang can acquire it, he'll frame the situation up as one where Jiang stole his own tax shipment, one that was heroically rescued from the governor's bandits by his own intrepid friends among Yizhao's righteous common folk. The "recovered" silver will be yet another exhibition to ensure the governor's recall and likely execution.

Mother Han is a shrewd judge of character, and she'll be watching the pantheon's reaction as she spins her tale. If they seem a cynical or hard-bitten lot that are unlikely to be moved by the sorrow of the common people, she'll claim respect for their "practicality" and explain how the governor certainly doesn't need the silver and she most certainly does. If the pantheon helps her get it, they can expect to be rewarded in the sort of coin they can use.

Mother Han offers information as a reward as well as more practical favors to those who win her cooperation.

By way of information, she'll tell cooperative PCs that she seriously suspects the governor of being behind a recent wave of runaway wives. Dozens of women both well-born and common have been fleeing their husbands over the past six months. A runaway bride now and then is nothing uncommon, but to have so many flee is inexplicable, particularly since the women were generally not mistreated and would give no explanation for their flight in the cases where they were found and recovered. As an afterthought, Mother Han comments that it was even stranger given that they were all pregnant. Birthing a son would have raised their status considerably and made their mothers-in-law much more tolerable. For the benefit of foreigners, she'd explain that everyone knows that it isn't husbands who make a young bride's life miserable, but mothers-in-law, who usually treat a new daughter-in-law worse than a household slave.

In more tangible rewards, she's willing to assign enough Lu family servants and client families to create two Scope 1 cults for any Godbound who want some worshipers. These enlisted believers are unlikely to be enthusiastic, but any demonstration of genuine divine power to them will win their earnest faith. Of course, such cults would be quite illegal without the governor's permission, so the PCs would have to keep their worship secretive.

She is also willing to cut favorable business deals and make economic agreements with Factions backed by the PCs. While this has no effect in of itself, it may make certain Influence and Dominion changes more plausible, or allow the purchase of new Features related to strong economic ties with Yizhao's merchant clans.

The silver shipment is considerable, consisting of the past season's cash taxes collected from the people of Yizhao. A vastly greater amount of wealth flows west in the form of iron goods, clothing, food, and other military necessities, but this silver shipment is meant to help pay the soldiers on the Patrian front.

The convoy consists of four light covered wagons, a hundred veteran Toban horsemen, and the hero Shining Zu as per page 7. It moves fast, relying on royal wayposts for food and a walled campsite for the wagons. If the Godbound want to hit the convoy away from these defensible structures, they'll have to make their move during the day.

The first and fourth wagons are decoys and spare transport space. The silver is in the second wagon, in four locked coffers full of silver liang ingots, each too heavy to be carried off by less than four men of normal strength. The wagon is pulled by a team of four horses and cannot travel off-road without some kind of magical augmentation.

But it the third wagon that the hero and all the horsemen are watching with constant nervous glances. At the last moment, an oracle cast by Adept Ye Lu suggested that the silver shipment would face great danger, and the Governor ordered that the half-mad Red Typhoon should be sent with the convoy. Four sweating priests are constantly trading off prayer duties, worshiping the crazed hero in droning chants in order to keep him calm. If the convoy is attacked, he will explode from the wagon to hurl himself on the most obvious foe.

Note that if any of the Godbound involved have the Word of Time bound, Adept Ye Lu will be unable to foresee the impending peril, and Red Typhoon will still be back in Yizhao receiving the reverence of his "clergy".

If the convoy is attacked on the road, the guards will fight back ferociously until their cause is clearly lost. If assaulted while it's camped for the night, it will take 2 rounds for the Mob to form up, but there will be two effective Mobs instead of one, including the waypost's guards and other soldiers present.

Direct brigandage is not necessarily the only way to proceed. Stealth or gifts of Deception might be able to spirit the coffers out from under their guardians' noses, and efforts to baffle or confuse the guards might last long enough to steal the cargo. The chief difficulty for most groups is going to be the sheer weight of the silver, but a Godbound of Might could shoulder all four coffers without being slowed.

Governor Jiang will be predictably infuriated if the silver is stolen. Any suspected culprits will be pursued with all the forces at his command.

SILVER CONVOY GUARD:
A Large Mob of AC 5, 28 HD, +3x2 attacks, 1d8 damage, Morale 10, and 14+ saves. They can Overwhelm one target a round for 1d10 damage if a Hardiness save is failed.



ABBOT FU AND THE SHRINE OF THE BLUE GOAT

All of the important figures in Yizhao have their own desires and purposes, but the real source of the trouble in the city is the work of the repugnant Abbot Fu, the leader of the Shrine of the Blue Goat in the Incense District of the city. His arrival in the city a year ago began a series of events that has blossomed into one of the most heinous crimes in the history of Yizhao.

Abbot Fu is a frustrated sorcerer. Despite his youthful success at mastering the rites and rituals of the Ren ancestor faith, he never had the natural brilliance required to master truly potent magics. His efforts at theurgy were an embarrassing failure, the prospect of pacting with Uncreated frightened him, and the voluminous books of Taoist sorcery made claims upon his time that he could not reconcile with the rites an ancestor priest must perform. Up until a few years ago, he had resigned himself to being a mere mid-level functionary in the Dulimbaian ancestor faith, abbot over some respectable but wholly unimportant temple in some provincial market town.

Two years ago, however, he laid hands on a forbidden commentary to the “Preface to the Secret Art of the Bedchamber” scribed by the sorcerous sage Ge Hong. The commentary provided a secret key to unlocking the deeper mysteries of the ancient book, instructing Fu in certain vampiric rites by which he could enhance his own magical powers by feeding off the yin energy of female sexual partners. The commentary noted, however, that it was necessary to change partners constantly, as the rituals would not be beneficial if performed twice with the same partner.

Fu hesitated for almost a year before the death of the former abbot of the Shrine of the Blue Goat gave him an irresistible opportunity. He arranged to make a secret but generous donation to the oblivious Governor Jiang’s military efforts and was granted headship of the shrine in return.

The Shrine of the Blue Goat had some local fame not only as an ancestor temple where the wealthy or desperate could make arrangements for sacrifices after their death, but also a place where childless women could come to pray for offspring. The priests of the shrine were said to be remarkably well-versed in drugs and diets that improved female fertility, and after a night spent in dormition in the locked cells that lined the temple hall it was thought to be almost certain that the unfortunate woman would then conceive with her husband.

Abbot Fu has grotesquely corrupted the shrine. He enters the cells via secret passageways and assaults the women within, using his arts to ensure that his secret remains hidden. None suspect the awful truth behind the shrine’s blessings.

Abbot Fu is an ancestor priest, an expert spiritual technician trained in the complex rites of ancestor worship that ensure the peaceful repose of the Dulimbaiian dead. Most men can only effectively aid their own ancestors; praying and sacrificing to someone not your own ancestor is both useless and presumptuous in the eyes of the Ren. Ancestor priests are an exception to this, for their own careful rituals and spiritual dedication allow them to provide assistance to the souls of those who lack male relatives to aid them. The True King permitted this exception to the principle of filial devotion out of mercy to those who are bereft of heirs, and even women are permitted to take up the role. Such a life as an “ancestor nun” is not uncommon for the spare daughters of the well-to-do.

Ancestor priests traditionally divide their time between commissioned sacrifices for wealthy but childless patrons and more general rites to ease the suffering of the nameless dead who have perished with no male offspring to care for their souls. These compassionate rites are said to protect those who devoutly served their own ancestors in life, but most people prefer the surety that comes from having their own sons and grandsons lead the family rites to honor them. Sages are confident that the charitable rituals do work, however, as most unfortunate believers who die without issue still manage to find repose in the grave and safety from Hell. Hired rites from the priests do seem to improve the odds for them, however.

It is said that ancestors that are truly well-served and remembered retain a kind of awareness in the grave, a serene and happy life in a shadow-world like this one. Particularly impressive or powerful ancestors can lend aid to their heirs, conferring subtle spiritual blessings and mundane good luck on those sons and daughters who keep to their ancestors’ virtues. The effect of the Altar in Yizhao dampens such things, however, as it is the will of Heaven that the dead do not commingle with the living. Elsewhere in Dulimbai the shades of the honored dead are sometimes more active in their involvement.

Ancestor priests do not normally have any special magical powers, certainly not compared to the Taoist adepts who follow a more heterodox path of self-development and personal enlightenment. Yet as is the nature of things in Dulimbai, it is not uncommon for a priest to study Taoist grimoires or practice esoteric arts picked up from other creeds and traditions. Serving the ancestors does not require exclusivity, only that the priest conduct the rituals correctly and at the proper times.

Ancestor priests are respected in Dulimbai, but they have no special political influence, and temples that grow too wealthy are tax-sheared by the Regent. They are technicians of the soul rather than moral exemplars or leaders.

If the PCs are going to deal with the evil at the Shrine of the Blue Goat they're going to need to discover certain critical facts. Some groups will be able to hunt down the truth with just one or two of these leads, while others will need more. You should be vigilant for chances to give the PCs this information. If they use informative Words, or interrogate people, or pursue a near line of investigation, let them find these things out.

THE SHRINE IS FAMED FOR ITS FERTILITY TREATMENTS. Women who sleep there overnight and follow the dietary instructions of the priests at home will soon conceive with their husbands. Rigidly proper people look askance at the thought of a woman sleeping alone in a strange place, but all of the dormition cells at the shrine are windowless and barred shut from the inside, so few imagine that any mischief is possible.

ABBOT FU IS THE MASTER OF THE SHRINE, having been appointed there by the governor a year ago. If the PCs think to compare, they will find the storms began a week after he was installed. While most people will not volunteer the observation, many know that Abbot Fu has recently been hinting at magical powers far beyond those he held in his old post.

WIVES HAVE BEEN RUNNING AWAY IN YIZHAO LATELY, far more than usual. Those who were found and brought back would not explain why they fled, or gave transparently false excuses. All spent some time at the shrine in the months before running away. Some are too ashamed to speak, their reticence having been foreseen by the abbot's Time powers, while others have been made to keep silent by arcane Command.

WIVES WHO BEAR ILLEGITIMATE OFFSPRING ARE DETESTABLE by Dulimbaian standards. Those who were magically compelled to keep silent may be grudgingly excused, but women who were assaulted and did not tell their husbands are treated as simple adulterers. Because their children are not his own, their sacrificial rites can do their father no good, and a man risks falling into Hell unawares because his supposed son was not his own. However it may anguish their husbands, the law demands such adulterers and their children be exiled or sold as slaves.

It is crucial that the players understand this social value before they try to resolve the situation. They need to realize that Dulimbaian law and custom will punish the abbot's victims harshly if they are revealed, and Heaven will not cease to scourge Yizhao until that punishment is delivered. Much of the tension of the climax of this adventure revolves around how the players mean to avenge the crime without causing terrible suffering to innocent victims.



The shrine itself is a long, rectangular structure near the wall of the Incense District, its grayish clay bricks painted with illustrious images of former worthies of Yizhao. Much of its interior is timber work, with a wooden parquet floor in the main hall that leads up to a wooden altar before the gilded image that is allowed to represent whatever patron is being honored by the current ancestral rites.

The front of the shrine is open to the public, and many come to sit and pray for their own ancestors as the priests go about their rituals. The rites are conducted constantly, and there are always at least three or four priests or devotees present in the main hall.

Dormition cells line the left and right walls of the shrine, each one a small brick cell with a bed, a simple altar, and a chamberpot. The doors to each are imposingly thick and have interior bars.

Women who desire children give offerings at the smaller altars on either side of the hall. Well-born women are invariably accompanied by their husbands and a number of servants, and these small bands usually camp out in the hall while the woman is sleeping in one of the dormition cells. Servants go out for food as needed, and the priests consider it only normal that they would not wish to leave the wife alone at the temple. Entrance into the dormition cells is strictly forbidden after the women have barred themselves in for the night, however.

Behind the altar and the gilded icon, there are a number of rooms dedicated to the priests in service at the shrine, several storage rooms for necessity, and a small private courtyard adorned with a lapis-lazuli relief of the blue goat that is the namesake of the temple. Legend claims that it appeared in a dream to the original founder of the shrine, promising abundant offspring to him if he were to build a shrine of the ancestors here. Particularly esteemed visitors are sometimes brought back to the courtyard by the abbot for tea and talk.

Unbeknownst to the priests who serve in the temple, however, there is a hidden trap door beneath the abbot's bed in his modest but well-appointed private chambers. This trap door leads to a branching series of narrow tunnels that emerge upward into the cells, the Fertility-shaped woodwork so perfect that only determined searching could reveal the wooden hatches in the floor.

Abbot Fu uses his powers of Time-graced foresight to identify those women who will be too ashamed or frightened to speak of their abuse. Occasionally, a woman too lovely and yet too outspoken to safely take comes to the shrine, in which case he uses his powers of Command to force her silence. None of the priests know what is really going on, but a few privately wonder why the abbot is sometimes missing from his bedchamber at night.

Abbot Fu is not a fool, and while he is possessed of mighty arcane powers thanks to his wicked yin-vampirism he knows he is no warrior. His first objective in any confrontation will be getting the group away from witnesses so he can speak openly with his accusers. The private courtyard in the back of the temple is the ideal place for him, but he will speak openly in front of others if that's the only way to delay combat. He will intend to use his powers to mimic the gift of Reweave Time (core book p. 54) in order to "write out" any distressed bystanders once he has settled matters with the PCs.

The first thing Abbot Fu will do is try to identify why the PCs are confronting him. Are they doing so merely to gain favor with the governor? Are they genuinely outraged at the violation of the Pattern? Or are they simply sympathetic to his victims? He will not pretend to be innocent; at some level he always knew he would be found out in time.

If the PCs are acting out of self-interest, he'll offer to give them a written confession of his crimes if they let him go and tell the governor that he used his supernatural powers to escape. In addition, he'll give them a list of women he violated that they can use as blackmail fodder.

If the PCs are outraged on behalf of the women he harmed, he'll cold-bloodedly threaten to "take back" the gift he granted them, using his powers of Fertility to mimic the Sever the Line (p. 40) gift and kill the hundreds of children he begot upon his victims. Aside from the death of the children, this would clearly mark their mothers as adulterers in the eyes of the Dulimbaians. The children will live, he allows, if the PCs let him flee.

PCs with the right Words might be able to offensively dispel the effect as the abbot tries to invoke it, and you should be ready to remind the players of this option if they forget about offensive dispelling.

The abbot will not try to fight unless he's entirely trapped. He does not believe he has any real chance against a pantheon of hardened supernatural killers, and his only concern will be escape from the trap he's in. He knows that he is a dead man if the people of Yizhao ever realize what he has done, so his plan is to use his powers to get clear of the city and run for Raktia. He hopes that the knowledge he brings will be enough to buy him protection from one of the Black Academies, because he's quite certain that his crimes will earn him very particular attention from the Regency.

Abbot Fu is fundamentally a petty mediocrity of a man who has created a situation that has gotten beyond his control. He's no sneering villain or megalomaniacal preener, but merely a rat-souled bureaucrat who will do or say absolutely anything to save his own wretched skin.

IN COMBAT Fu's only real concern will be getting away. While he might threaten to use his Fertility powers to murder ever one of his offspring with the abused women, he won't actually waste Effort doing it unless he's so convinced he's doomed that a last spiteful blow is all he can manage.

He will begin by mimicking Guards! Seize Him! (p. 35) to instantly summon his servitor priests, who will fight as if a Small Mob equivalent to the gate guards on page 4. He'll use the mob as a screen as he tries to get to his bedroom, which will take one round of action. While Fu gets two combat actions per round, he's out of shape, and can't actually run more than once per round. Once he's in the bedroom, he can get the floor hatch open with one round worth of action and run into the tunnels with the second.

If the PCs confront him in the entrance hall around witnesses, he'll instead reverse the process, diving for the tunnels and trying to come up in his bedroom, where he can use a back entrance behind the private courtyard to get out onto an alleyway.

Inside the tunnels, he'll mimic Fertility's Touch of Green Restraint (p. 40) to fill the narrow passages with choking vines which cannot be passed without some kind of supernatural strength, clearing blast of divine power, or other steps to open the way. He, of course, is not hindered. With the second action he gets that round, he'll pop up into a random dormition cell, throw open the door, and make it to the entrance to the temple.

Assuming there is no PC in the entrance hall, he'll get away into the street outside. If hotly pursued, he'll mimic the Thrall-Making Shout (p. 35) for two Effort to cause a Large Mob of bystanders in the street to try to impede the Godbound and stop them from following.

Use of a Second Spring (p. 40) for two Effort can heal the abbot's entire lost hit dice total, as well as heal 1d6+10 hit points for allied Mobs.

If he can get away from immediate divine pursuit, he'll mimic Prophetic Insight (p. 54) for two Effort to prophesy his successful escape from the city into the northern hills. His Time gifts will be sufficient to forewarn him of the likely paths of pursuit any mortal pursuers who chase him, and his Fertility gifts can trap and destroy small bands of horsemen. He may yet be brought down, but it will take the PCs to execute a successful pursuit before Abbot Fu reaches the Raktian forests and can offer a deal to the Eldritch.

ABBOT FU: AC 3, 10 HD, No real attacks, Morale 8, and 12+ saves. Fu has Effort 9, two actions per round, and counts as a major supernatural foe. He has powers equivalent to binding the Command, Time, and Fertility Words.

Whether or not the PCs directly fight Abbot Fu, they're likely going to want to produce some kind of just resolution to the situation in Yizhao. The basic challenges the PCs will have to overcome are twofold.

THE LOCAL MORES MUST BE CHANGED if the citizens are not to despise and reject the women victimized by Fu. Those who were sorcerously compelled to obey and keep silent can be grudgingly forgiven, but women who chose to silently present their husbands with false heirs are socially dead to the mass of Yizhao's people.

On one hand, the PCs could simply lie about it. If they were to claim that all of Abbot Fu's victims were bewitched, it might be the sort of lie that the citizens of Yizhao would rather believe, especially if Fu demonstrated mind-bending abilities in a confrontation with the PCs.

On the other hand, the PCs could try to impose a new moral value on Yizhao, one where the victims are not disgraced and their children are not banished from the family. If the PCs are heroes to the people of Yizhao or have otherwise won the favor of the locals, this would be a Plausible change as described on page 129 of the core book. If the locals have no reason to look to the heroes as exemplars, then it would be an Improbable change. So long as the Altar of Heaven is operating, the total cost would be either 8 points of Influence or Dominion for a Plausible change or 16 for an Improbable one. PCs who make the change with Influence must remain around Yizhao regularly in order to keep "reformers" from "correcting" the deviation.

Naturally, any exertion of Influence or Dominion would have to be justified by an appropriate Word or Fact, though PCs without such justifications can still help by assisting their more apt comrades.

PCs might also seek to simply take charge of the exiled victims themselves. While adulterers like them are technically subject to slavery, the governor would be willing to turn over the women and their children to the PCs, so long as they're taken away from Yizhao and never return. The victims would be enough for a Scope 1 cult dedicated to one of the PCs, though practical matters of feeding, sheltering, and giving a meaningful life to them after they've lost everything they had might be difficult for some pantheons.

Most husbands would be heartbroken at the fates of their wives. Not all would accept their wives back even if custom allowed it, but many would be willing to blame it all on Fu's dark sorceries and would formally adopt their "heirs". While such adoption is not optimal from a cultural perspective, it is an accepted way for a childless couple to acquire a son who can carry out their ancestor rites when they die.

THE ALTAR OF HEAVEN MUST BE NEUTRALIZED if the storms are to end, or else both Fu and his victims must leave the city forever. So long as they remain in Yizhao, the blind rage of the programmed artifact will continue to hammer the city with weekly storms, rendering it uninhabitable in a few more months.

The PCs might somehow convince the governor to deactivate the Altar peacefully, returning it to storage. They would have to present some alternate means of protecting the city from Raktian sorcery, however, and do so convincingly enough that the governor feels capable of standing up to the inevitable backlash from the regent's court.

The PCs could go to Prince Yan Xiao and agree to help him destroy the altar. Indeed, Abbot Fu himself might suggest that the whole problem would go away if the Altar of Heaven were destroyed and he were to vanish from the city. Fu would be willing to help the PCs get to the Altar and shatter it, though his own safety and escape would be foremost to him at all times.

Especially gifted Godbound of Command, Artifice, Fate, or Deception might be able to adjust the Altar to overlook this crime. Doing so would require at least one celestial shard in order to make the adjustment, and either an undisturbed ten minutes of work or the governor's cooperation in allowing it. Jiang might be willing to let the PCs try if they can make sure Royal Censor Liang is no longer around to use the action as further proof of Jiang's folly.

The PCs might choose to enact a Dominion change to eliminate Heaven's power over Yizhao while retaining the artifact's protective function. Such a change would be Improbable and require 16 Dominion to enact, though clever wording or reshaping of Heaven's mandate as an adjustment rather than a negation might bring it down to an 8-point Plausible change.

Particularly vast and clever miracles could also solve the issue by changing the nature of the situation. A Godbound of Fertility might be able to work a miracle such that all the children born to the women actually became the biological children of their lawful husbands. Players are notoriously creative types, and you should be willing to give their ideas scope to play.

If the PCs manage to resolve the adventure in a way that gives them their most important wishes for the situation, give each of them 3 XP and 2 Dominion points. If they tried, but failed to bring about a resolution which satisfied them, give them 2 XP and 1 Dominion each. If the adventure runs over multiple sessions, give them 2 or 3 XP and 1 Dominion for each intermediate session, depending on the speed of advancement you wish to have at the table.

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THE WORD OF FREEDOM

The divine Word of Freedom encompasses liberty of mind and body and the unshackled exertion of the human will. It can erase compulsions, break contracts, open shackles, and dissolve binding relationships. Such liberation happens without immediate negative consequences; dissolved contracts do not count as broken deals, for example, nor do ended bonds incur spite. It is possible for a divinity of Freedom to enforce this liberty even on unwilling subjects, compelling them to embrace their own choices whether they want to or not.

A Godbound of Freedom has an invincible defense against any mind-controlling or influencing effect, whether a magical affliction or mortal addiction.

LESSER GIFTS

BURN THE BARGAIN

ACTION

Commit Effort for the day while indicating a particular explicit bargain or agreement between two people. The bargain immediately becomes unenforceable, with all parties realizing it. No court will accept it, no magical effect dependent on it will persist, and no lesser foe will respect its existence. Worthy foes may save versus Spirit to continue to try to enforce it, but they must do so on their own, without societal approval. Magical pacts such as those with the Uncreated are broken instantly with no harmful effect on the pactmaker.

LIBERATOR'S CRY

ACTION

Commit Effort for the scene. With a shout or exertion of will, all desired targets within 300 feet become free of any mental compulsion or physical bindings. Those imprisoned in mundane cells have all locked portals in their path opened instantly. These subjects have an invincible defense against mental influence or physical binding for the rest of the scene.

THE PATH TO FREEDOM

ACTION

Commit Effort for the scene. For the rest of the scene, the Godbound creates a clear path behind himself and cannot be barred by any mundane obstacle. Stone walls, sheer cliffs, blazing lava pools, or even a path directly into the air may be navigated. The Godbound's steps leave a safe, passable opening through all such physical barriers that remains open for the rest of the scene.

SHED THE NEED

CONSTANT

The Godbound becomes free of human needs for food, water, sleep, or air. As an action, they can cure any visible target of mental illnesses or any mental or physical addictions.

TO BREAK THE MIGHTY

ON TURN

Commit Effort for the scene and target a being who has at least one person in subjection. This subjection must be more than mere employment, but must be like that of a lord over a vassal or an abuser over a victim of abuse. For the rest of the scene, that target has AC 9 versus the Godbound's attacks.

UNSHACKLED STEP

CONSTANT

The Godbound has an invulnerable defense against being grappled, bound, or paralyzed. Mundane locks in their path open before them, and magical wards can be opened by Committing Effort for the day. The Godbound must pass through portals so unbarred; they can't simply unlock them and depart.

GREATER GIFTS

ONE LONE FIRE

ACTION

The Godbound must identify a particular relationship or employment, such as "Guardsmen to Duke Lao", "Su Qin's husband", or "Enforcer to the Red Pillar Tong" before Committing Effort for the day. All chosen targets within 300 feet immediately lose that relationship. They no longer consider themselves connected to the former relationship, will ignore its demands on them, and will not again create that relationship unless given wholly new incentives to do so. Worthy foes can save versus Spirit to resist this enforced resignation.

THE SLAVE REPAYS

ON TURN

The Godbound must have at some point been a servant of the target of this gift, obeying at least one unwanted instruction and subordinating their will to the target's. The Godbound may voluntarily choose to be so, but this gift does not apply if the purpose they serve pleases the Godbound or directly furthers their own interests. When this gift is applied against such a former master and Effort is Committed for the day, it leaves the target unable to spend Effort to auto-save against the Godbound's powers, and the Godbound's normal attacks against them will always hit and inflict maximum damage.

WITH YOU IN DARKNESS

ACTION

The Godbound must know the name of a particular prisoner. As an action, they may Commit Effort for the day to appear with their companions next to that prisoner, regardless of distance or the magical wards that might bar them. The Godbound cannot use this gift again until the prisoner is either dead or free. This gift can carry a Godbound even to the side of a soul imprisoned in Hell, though they can only make that step if they are already standing on a Night Road. Such a soul-prisoner must be freed from Hell to use this gift again, as they cannot die. This gift cannot be used as a miracle.

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