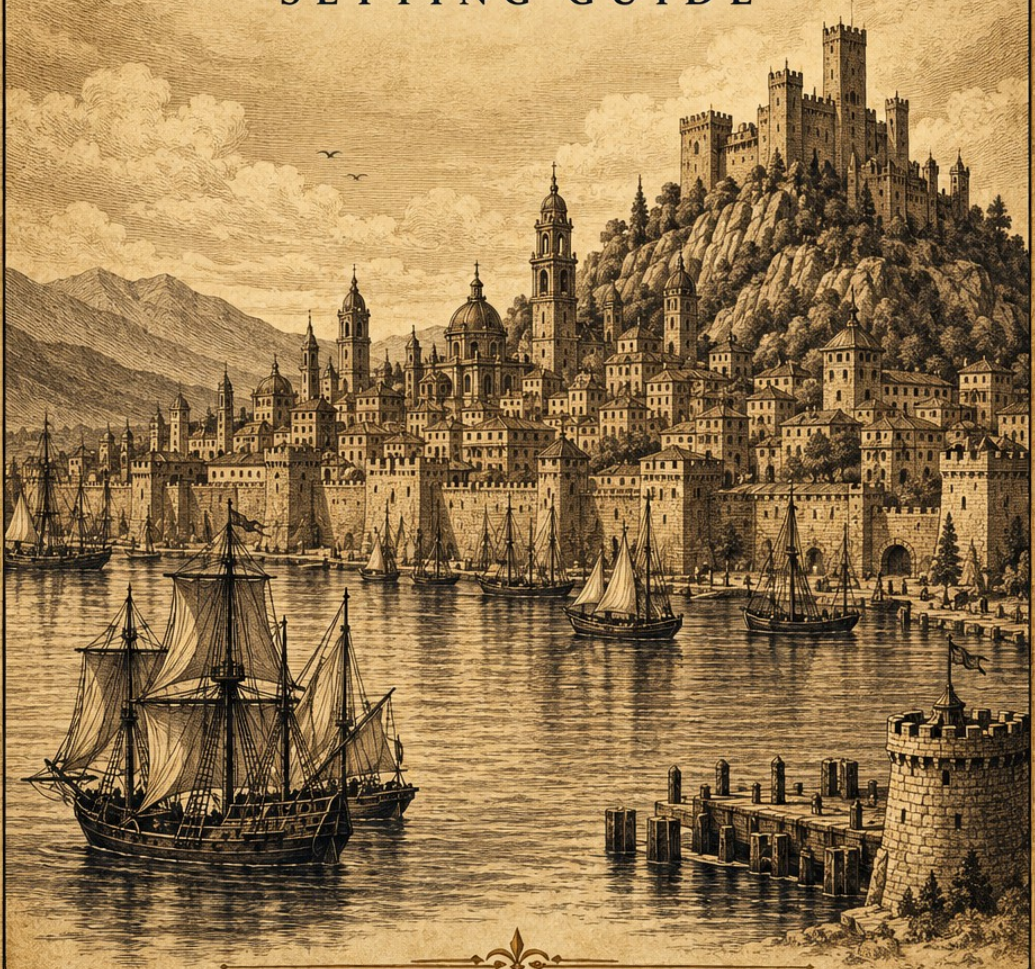
TALES OF

# MAR DE ORO

SETTING GUIDE



SEA, SKY, FAITH, EMPIRE

TALES OF

# MAR DE ORO

## SETTING GUIDE

Sea, Sky, Faith, Empire

WRITING & DESIGN
Johnny Crown

SETTING
Aeon Campaign Setting

ANNO
7202, Post Sundering

EDITION
Community Review Edition, September 2026

This is a work of collaborative fiction. All nations, persons, and events are imaginary.
The Mar de Oro is a Golden Sea.

REFERENCE

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Two Books, One Setting

Use this Setting Guide for world, culture, character, gear, ships, and campaign foundations. Use *Tales of Mar de Oro: Native Rules* for resolution, Risk and Effect, Harm, Fortera mechanics, personal combat, battlefield and vessel procedures, and GM tools. The setting remains system neutral.

PART I

# ENTER THE GOLDEN SEA

## IN THIS PART

*Read for*

Chapter 1, including the World at a Glance.

## USE THIS WHEN

*At the table*

A new player is joining, a campaign needs orientation, or you need the shortest route into the setting.

## TABLE ESSENTIALS

*Carry forward*

Aeon is old. Mar de Oro is contested. The present is moving faster than its institutions.

CHAPTER 1

# WELCOME TO MAR DE ORO

*Walk quietly. Listen well. The signal is older than you and deeper than you.*

This is a book about a world that thinks it lives in an age of faith and sail, and is wrong in a wonderful way. The people of Aeon pray to the All-Father, fear the curse of the moons, bury their dead with candles and song, and ride airships lifted by a substance they call Éterlumin. They believe their miracles are divine, their rites are sacred, and their engines are clever pieces of craft. They are not fools for believing so. They are simply early.

You, the player, begin with a truth most people in the world do not yet possess. Every wonder in Aeon belongs to one underlying order, whether it appears in a chapel, a laboratory, a battlefield, or the lift chamber of an airship. Fortera and Éterlumin are not separate mysteries. They are two faces of the same deep reality. Priests, engineers, scholars, and prodigies have not yet realized they are standing around the same fire.

That is the heart of Tales of Mar de Oro. It is a fantasy world with a science-fiction spine. The wonder never disappears when understanding arrives. It becomes stranger, sadder, more beautiful, and far more dangerous.

This game is about people living at the edge of change. It is about crews, causes, countries, and consciences under pressure. It is about a world of crowns and cathedrals, private wars and port ledgers, reformers and inquisitors, engineers and saints, smugglers and governors, old wounds and new ambitions. It is about what happens when an age built on doctrine and inheritance begins to notice that its miracles may have a physics, and its physics may have a theology.

You may play a Duchy of Heller engineer who trusts brass and figures more than priests. You may play a Valdegracian cleric who still believes the old church can be saved. You may play a broker out of the free ports, a frontier guide from the New World, an Albion surveyor, a cursed privateer, a reformist scholar, or a surgeon with steady hands and a weak conscience. You may even play someone who has survived one impossible event and fears the next one knows their name.

Aeon is not waiting for your characters to begin existing. It has been moving for centuries, and in 7202 it is moving faster. Ships sail. Governors bargain. Synods accuse. Relay towers fail. Deposits are stripped. Smugglers profit. Missionaries preach. Engineers test what they do not understand. A letter carried across the wrong water may alter the fate of nations. In that living world, your characters matter because they choose, risk, suffer, adapt, and earn the right to be taken seriously.

## What kind of stories happen here

Mar de Oro story often begins with something small enough to mistake for routine. A ship arrives one day late. A customs clerk notices the wrong seal. A chapel receives a body with no proper paperwork. A relay tower misses its signal. A governor smiles too quickly. A priest asks a question in a tone that means the answer will already be trouble.

Then the edges widen. What first looked local begins to reveal continental pressure. The missing cargo was not cargo. The dead woman was not meant to die yet. The unmarked crate should not have been light enough for one man to lift. The chart mark in the margin corresponds to no known island, and yet three nations are suddenly willing to kill for it.

This setting is built for intrigue, exploration, discovery, and difficult loyalties. It can sustain privateer campaigns, church investigations, diplomatic dramas, anti-colonial struggle, frontier expeditions, scientific awakenings, and hard-bitten voyages where survival itself becomes political. Whatever the shape of the campaign, the world should feel inhabited, pressured, and alive.

## What you know, and what your character knows

This book is frank with the player. That frankness is not a spoiler. It is the lens that makes the setting itself work. Fortera and Éterlumin belong to one order. The powers of miracle, rite, experiment, resonance, and propulsion are not unrelated arts; they are neighboring methods of touching the same field.

Your character, by contrast, begins within the world's older categories. They may think Fortera is a divine gift, a dangerous force, a property of matter, an occult vibration, a holy trust, a temptation, or simply one more fact of life. They may treat Éterlumin as a rare industrial substance, valuable but morally neutral. They may never have seen an airship. They may serve aboard one. They may distrust the entire age.

The campaign is where those beliefs are tested. Discovery in Mar de Oro is not only intellectual. It is personal, social, theological, political, and often costly.

## If you are new to roleplaying games

A tabletop roleplaying game is simple in structure even when rich in possibility. One person presents the world and portrays its dangers, institutions, and inhabitants. The other players each take the role of one person in that world and decide what they do.

When the outcome is uncertain, your group uses its chosen rules system to determine it. There is no board to master and no single winning state. There is only the shared act of moving through uncertainty and learning what choices cost.

If you are new, begin with this chapter, then read Chapter Four, Chapter Five, Chapter Six, and Chapter Nine. That will give you the world, the archipelago, the faith, the science of wonder, and the tools to build a character who belongs here.

ORIENTATION

# WORLD AT A GLANCE

The world was not made for the comfortable. It was made for the curious.

It is a tale of divine creativity, the struggle for understanding, and the eternal quest for harmony.

Aeon is a world of broad continents, stormy waters, a great inland sea, and an island chain that now matters far more than its size should permit. It is a world of churches and counting-houses, plantations and dockyards, salons and signal towers, shipyards and shrines, archive rooms and jungle roads that become less road with every mile. It is old in memory and immediate in texture.

The people of Aeon do not experience themselves as living in legend. They live in a present shaped by rank, hunger, doctrine, weather, labor, and ambition. Harbor fees still matter. Powder still clumps in damp weather. Sailors still lie about how bad the storm was. Governors still host dinners to conceal extortion. The dead are still washed by hand.

To understand where your character stands, it helps to see the world at two scales at once. There is the intimate scale: a cramped cabin aboard a hired cutter, the steps of a cathedral warmed by afternoon light, the engine room of an airship smelling of heated metal and catalyst, a market square under awnings while rain comes down in silver cords. Then there is the larger scale: crowns, churches, colonial ventures, reform movements, mercantile networks, chartered companies, mission schemes, and centuries of inheritance pressing their weight into the present.

## The shape of the known world

The old continent remains the seat of the major crowns and the long institutions that shaped the age. Here stand Valdegracia, Albion, Stroomdijk, Luminore, Eisenmark, and Volkharov, alongside the Republic of Éirighdún, a mercantile power of the western coast whose formal neutrality in continental conflicts has never quite prevented it from having strong opinions about their outcomes. Their rivalries were old before your character was born. Their habits of prayer, administration, and commercial ambition reach across the sea even where their direct control does not.

Across the ocean lies the New World, and within it the colonial establishments that the continental powers have spent two generations constructing. Albion holds New Avalon, a settlement tightly controlled from home: its governors are capable administrators who exercise real authority, but the shape of that authority, its laws, its loyalties, and its limits, is drawn in Albion and exported wholesale.

Luminore maintains Nouvelle Lumière, a colony whose cultural and commercial ties to the metropolitan capital are intimate and deliberate. Stroomdijk operates Nieuw Waterland, bound to the company boards of the home kingdom by charter, debt, and the shared understanding that the colony exists to serve the counting house. These three are extensions of the continent, not departures from it.

Their loyalty is structural, not chosen.

Then there is the Duchy of Heller. It occupies a different category entirely. The colony is approximately twenty years old, its founders not crown appointees dispatched by ministry but the survivors and settlers of the original Compañero expeditions, men and women who carried a crown blessing into the New World before any formal mandate existed, who built something in that space between sanction and instruction, and who were still building it when the formal machinery of empire finally caught up with them. The Compañeros were never unauthorized, but they were never entirely controlled either, and the difference proved consequential. Valdegracia holds a treaty claim over the Duchy, and the Duchy formally acknowledges it, owing allegiance in time of war.

The Duchy's autonomy is recent, formally acknowledged by Valdegracia less than a year ago after a long negotiation over a settlement already nearly twenty years old. The Dukes of Heller are accomplished political operators, and the autonomy they hold is real, exercised, and watched with no small resentment from the old continent. The Duchy governs itself, sets its own commercial policy, and is building something the existing categories of colonial administration were not designed to contain.

Separate from the colonial holdings of the northern powers, Canula Prime occupies its own position in the New World order. It is a free port under Valdegracian dominion, its governor appointed by the crown and answering directly to it, but its commercial charter grants open access to vessels of all flags. Canula Prime is where the colonial world's commerce meets itself, where the factor for a Stroomdijker house and the agent of a Valdegracian crown ministry sit in the same tavern and discuss arrangements that neither government would sanction openly.

The Archipelago of Mar de Oro lies at the edge of the New World, a scatter of islands roughly the scale of a large island nation, large enough to sustain a dozen competing colonial ambitions and small enough that those ambitions cannot avoid each other.

It is a part of the New World in geography and in the logic of colonial extraction, but it is distinct in character: less settled, more contested, more genuinely dangerous, and correspondingly more interesting to the kinds of people this Setting Guide is written for.

Here the colonial ambitions of the great powers meet and press against each other. Here the Duchy of Heller has found the space to become what the continent would not allow it to be. Here the Colonial Born have built lives that belong to no crown's accounting. Here, in this place where the old world's long reach finally begins to attenuate, the new stories begin.

## The three moons

The three moons rule both the calendar and the imagination of the world. No one in Aeon is indifferent to them.

Umbra, the dark moon, follows a twenty-nine-day cycle. It is associated with concealment, appetite, transformation, violence, and the feared loss of self-governance experienced by some of the Moon-Affected.

Sirulena, the silver moon, follows a thirty-four-day cycle. It is associated with dreams, inwardness, vision, memory, sleepwalking, song, and unusual openness to the feelings or suffering of others.

Veles, the green moon, follows a forty-one-day cycle. It is associated with the body, growth, fever, healing, decay, and the cycles through which living things change.

## The year 7202

It is the year 7202 by the reckoning of the Sundering. That date matters. It reminds the attentive reader that the world still counts from a break so old entire civilizations have risen and failed inside its aftermath. People speak the date casually, but the calendar itself is an artifact of trauma.

This is an age of flintlock and sail giving way, in scattered and uneven places, to the first age of flight. The church remains powerful, wealthy, and divided. Empires are large enough to threaten one another and thin enough to lose control at the edges. Engineers, clerics, scholars, brokers, and military men are all beginning to understand that something underlies the world’s wonders, though no one yet commands the whole picture.

It is, though the common person may not yet feel it clearly, the eve of an enormous change.

SETTING TRUTH

## The age is changing.

The church remains powerful, empires remain dangerous, and people are beginning to realize that the world's wonders may fit together in ways the old categories cannot explain.

PART II

# THE WORLD AND ITS POWERS

## IN THIS PART

*Read for*

Chapters 2–5: history, powers, the Golden Sea, faith, culture, and identity.

## USE THIS WHEN

*At the table*

You need a homeland, institution, political pressure, confession, or the reason two people read the same room differently.

## TABLE ESSENTIALS

*Carry forward*

History is inherited. Authority takes several forms. Distance creates room for change and conflict.

CHAPTER 2

# THE SUNDERING WORLD

Before history there is scripture, and before scripture there is memory trying to survive its own inadequacy. The people of Aeon tell that before time and matter there was only the eternal realm of the All-Father, the Divine Architect, a realm of pure thought and radiance. The All-Father spoke the First Word, and by that utterance the cosmos came into being. That Word, Aeon, became the name of the world itself.

To shape creation, the All-Father called the Elder Spirits. Gaia clothed the world in green. Aquael filled the seas. Auriel set the stars and forged the sun and moons. At the center of all life rose the Tree of Life, and from its bounty came every living thing and, at last, humankind, gifted with reason, speech, longing, and a nearness to the divine that would prove as dangerous as it was glorious.

Then came the Codex. The Codex was not merely scripture. It was law, poetry, political theory, ritual instruction, sacred memory, genealogical claim, moral argument, and civilization's first common language all at once. To possess the Codex was to possess not only belief but legitimacy.

## The fall of Nytharion

Among the Elder Spirits was one who would not remain within his given bounds. Luminor, keeper of balance between day and night, came to believe he could improve upon the order that had been made. Pride became rebellion. Rebellion became war. He was cast down and remade as Nytharion, the Shadowbringer, and from that story the world learned many of its favorite moral warnings: that knowledge without obedience corrupts, that power without restraint twists, and that the appetite to perfect the world may conceal a desire to possess it.

Whatever one believes about the literal truth of this account, it has shaped the imagination of civilizations. Kings invoke it. Priests preach it. Parents teach it. Reformers reinterpret it. Heretics weaponize it. Even skeptics still borrow its grammar when trying to describe ambition gone rotten.

## The long unity and the slow fracture

For a long age the Codex held civilization together. Its Genesis Scrolls gave the world a beginning; its Prophetic Verses gave history direction; its Laws of Virtue ordered public life; its saintly chronicles populated the moral landscape with examples, relics, and places of devotion.

But the very richness of the Codex made unity difficult to preserve. Interpretation became school. School became region. Region became political interest. Political interest demanded doctrine agreeable to itself, and the church, being both sacred and earthly, proved no more immune to ambition than any crown.

## The Sundering

The Sundering was the great schism of faith and authority that shattered the old religious unity and reordered the world. It broke the church into rival denominations, altered the legitimacy of crowns, redrew law, destabilized the old relationship between revelation and rule, and marked history so completely that the calendar itself was reset.

No single cause sufficed. Theology, politics, succession, wealth, literacy, property, local custom, and conflicts over the understanding and use of Fortera all fed the Sundering. So did rulers unwilling to let distant authority remain inconveniently sacred.

What later histories flatten into clean principle was lived as confusion, sorrow, denunciation, opportunism, violence, and exhausted compromise. That matters to the tone of the setting. Aeon's history is not made of abstract "lore beats." It is made of people deciding, often badly, what they can live with and what they cannot.

## The rise of the powers

Out of the Sundering's long aftermath grew the institutions and rival powers that still dominate the age. Valdegracia hardened into the old mother-crown, proud, devout, imperial, and convinced of its continuing right to centrality. Albion grew into its maritime rival, patient, acquisitive, technical, and ruthless in ways polite society describes as practical. Stroomdijk built wealth through trade and quieter commerce that depended on plausible denial. Luminore became an intellectual and reformist counterweight to Valdegracian orthodoxy. Much later, new polities such as the Duchy of Heller emerged inside the pressure created by those older powers, learning to survive through distance, agility, and the dangerous conviction that local competence could become political authority.

## The present crisis

Now, in the year 7202, the great game has found a new center. Rumors of Éterlumin deposits, anomalous devices, and remains older than the accepted histories have made Mar de Oro the focus of every serious power's attention. Diplomats, spies, surveyors, priests, privateers, investors, and scholars are all converging on a region once treated as marginal. This is the world into which your characters step.

ORIENTATION

# THE POWERS AT A GLANCE

Eight crowns, republics, and colonial ventures shape Mar de Oro. These are the powers a character is most likely to inherit, serve, resist, or be caught between.

## Valdegracia

Mother-crown of the Solarian world, governing by patent, precedent, and cathedral corridor.

In 7202

Valdegracia enters 7202 as the largest territorial claimant in Mar de Oro, still formidable but increasingly forced to spend prestige, money, and administrative attention merely to preserve advantages it once assumed. Albion contests it at sea and in information; colonial distance weakens enforcement; Heller's new autonomy proves that Valdegracian dominion can be negotiated rather than simply obeyed.

Valdegracia is the oldest continental power, where crown, church, and noble houses have grown so thoroughly entangled that legitimacy itself has become a family argument carried on in cathedral corridors and cedar-scented archives.

## Albion

Survey the coast, acquire the advantage, deny it to everyone else.

In 7202

Albion enters 7202 with a smaller territorial footprint than Valdegracia but a disciplined naval presence, current charts, and an information network few rivals can match. Its colonial government in New Avalon remains tightly tied to the crown, while the unresolved Marches keep officers aware that even a strong state can inherit a conflict it cannot administratively solve.

Albion is a maritime kingdom of ancient habit and naval genius, built on commercial calculation, quiet intelligence, and the settled confidence of a crown that believes civilization has a shape and Albion lies near its center.

## Stroomdijk

Finance it, move it, own the terms. The flag can stay where it is.

In 7202

Stroomdijk enters 7202 with leverage rather than acreage. Its banks, letters of credit, companies, insurers, and factors reach farther than its flag. The kingdom's central problem is the gap between its self-image as a reliable commercial order and the coercive practices that can hide inside charters, debt, and company jurisdiction.

Stroomdijk is a parliamentary monarchy reborn from commercial revolt, whose real power lives in the Wisselbank, the great chartered companies, and a Directorate so deliberately unreadable that no foreign ambassador can predict its next move.

## Luminore

A republic that argues in print, and expects the argument to be answered in print.

In 7202

Luminore enters 7202 as a small republic with influence out of proportion to its territory. Nouvelle Lumière gives it a formal colonial foothold, while the university, press, physicians, jurists, and books give it a second kind of reach. Its power lies in people across Aeon treating Luminoran training and argument as credible even when they reject Luminoran politics.

Luminore is a Solarian republic that believes faith and reason are the same argument, organized around the continent's oldest university, a protected press, and a civic tradition that treats every question as legitimate if it is examined with rigor.

# THE POWERS AT A GLANCE

## Eisenmark

Examinations, foundries, and promises treated as load-bearing.

In 7202

Eisenmark enters 7202 without a colonial establishment in the Golden Sea. Its influence travels through survey vessels, engineers, physicians, officers, and the prestige of the Imperial Technical Academy. Other powers may distrust its inflexibility, but they repeatedly hire its people when systems must actually work.

Eisenmark is the disciplined state where order is treated as a form of devotion and military, engineering, and theological method share a deep reverence for exactness.

## Volkharov

Counts time in generations, distance in winters, and rarely gives ground back.

In 7202

Volkharov enters 7202 as an overland empire whose direct Golden Sea presence remains rare. Survey vessels, missions, and diplomats appear with narrow mandates and long memories. Oraclean communities abroad give it relationships that can become political without ever looking like colonial administration.

Volkharov is an interior empire defined by *vyderzhka*, the cultivated art of outlasting what breaks other nations, bound to the Oraclean Communion and expanding slowly overland across distances that would exhaust any other power.

## Republic of Éirighdún

Deep harbors, worked Éterlumin, and a memory book for every debt owed.

In 7202

Éirighdún enters 7202 formally neutral and commercially entangled with nearly everyone. Its factor houses and Éterlumin knowledge give it influence without colonies, while Muirthuaidh remains the question neutrality cannot make disappear. The republic claims the Marches; Albion holds them; the Clann keeps the dispute alive.

Éirighdún is a neutral island republic of clans, harbors, and Éterlumin deposits, whose neutrality survives because every major power owes it money and prefers commerce to conquest.

## The Duchy of Heller

Twenty years old, two Dukes, three dragons, and no appetite for being governed from abroad.

In 7202

Heller enters 7202 barely twenty years old and less than a year into formally acknowledged autonomy. It governs itself while owing Valdegracia military allegiance in time of war. Its small size makes competence, trusted networks, and asymmetric naval power more important than grandeur, and every larger state is watching what the new arrangement becomes.

The Duchy of Heller is the autonomous Valdegracian colonial territory, governed by Dux Hernanus Costesius de Heller and Dux Franciscus Perezzi. It owes Valdegracia military allegiance in time of war. In all other matters, it governs itself.

CHARACTER QUESTION Which kind of authority did your character learn to trust first, and what would make them doubt it now?

CHAPTER 3

# THE POWERS OF AEON

*Every flag is a promise and a threat simultaneously.*

The world your character inhabits did not begin with Mar de Oro. The harbors, colonial outposts, counting houses, missions, and naval yards scattered across the Golden Sea are extensions of something older and vaster. They belong to the continental powers: crowns, republics, churchly bodies, and national formations that gave your character their first language, deepest loyalties, and unexamined assumptions. Those assumptions still govern how they move through the world, even an ocean away from home.

One of these nations may be where your character comes from. Your story, however, begins in Mar de Oro. These nations are more than flags on a map or factions to court or avoid. They are atmosphere. They shape how your character reads a room: for spiritual danger, commercial advantage, military weakness, or the hierarchy of precedence at a dinner table.

A Valdegracian character and a Stroomdijker character can stand in the same harbor, look at the same ship, and see entirely different objects. One sees the majesty of a chartered enterprise bearing the crown's patent; the other sees a margin. Both are right. Neither is complete. The divergence between them is formation, not ignorance.

Your character may have been born on the old continent, in one of its colonial extensions, in the Duchy of Heller, or somewhere that belongs to no clean account at all. Whatever the origin, that formation travels with you. Mar de Oro does not erase it. Here, the harbor may belong to another power and the room may have been built around someone else's assumptions. The gap between what you were taught to see and what is actually in front of you becomes something you must reckon with.

What follows is an atlas of character rather than a diplomatic survey or military almanac. It treats the great powers as living inheritances, the deep grammar beneath your character's choices. When you choose a homeland, you choose more than advantages or a coat of arms. You accept a history and its ideas about dignity, danger, trust, and what may be said plainly.

Mar de Oro will test and revise all of that. But it will test it against something real, and that something is where you come from.

# VALDEGRACIA

### Mother-crown of the Solarian world, governing by patent, precedent, and cathedral corridor.

## The Character of the Empire

There is a way of entering a room that Valdegracians do not need to practice. It comes with the milk, as the old saying goes. More accurately, it comes with the catechism, the heraldic primer, and long hours at a tutor's knee learning which courtesies are owed to which grades of nobility. The order of precedence at an Audience of the High Court has not materially changed in four hundred years.

Valdegracia is old, and it has organized itself around that oldness. It made a theology of priority and spent centuries constructing institutions so tightly interlaced that their boundaries blur: crown and church, law and tradition, legitimate governance and the fossilized interests of particular families.

That structure is deliberate, persistent, and occasionally violent. The great noble houses survived by embedding themselves in the administrative fabric of the empire with the patience of roots working through stone. The Solarian Church did more than advise the crown. It consecrated it, complicated it, and made itself necessary to every act of legitimation.

The royal archives, the famed Archivos Reales of Coronaverde, are arguments as much as records. Every genealogy, land grant, and patent of authority stored in those cedar-scented corridors is an ongoing legal case for someone's right to something. The archivists who tend them are, in their quiet way, among the most powerful people in the empire.

## A Brief History of Ascent and Unease

Valdegracia's colonial moment is recent. The New World was unknown to every continental power until roughly fifty years before the present day. The Treaty of Sunhold ended the Forty-Two Years' War in 7151, and Valdegracian ships soon charted the Mar de Oro. That priority was deliberate. The war had strained the treasury and left the crown searching for a new theater for ambition. The Solarian Church supplied spiritual sanction and institutional momentum for what the court framed as a sacred charge. The first expeditions went out under royal patent and ecclesiastical blessing.

The first colonial appointments went to grandees who had earned them through service, debt, or proximity to the throne. Fifty years could not build the settled imperial hierarchy Valdegracia imagined for itself. It could establish its forms:

governors, missionary orders, extraction economies, and the administrative language that accompanies them. Valdegracia arrived certain it already knew how to govern the New World. It has spent fifty years discovering what that certainty costs.

That moment has not entirely passed. But it has been complicated, and those complications are a crucial part of what makes Valdegracia the fascinating, frustrated, occasionally dangerous power it is today. The other continental nations have grown, learned, and in some cases deliberately built themselves to contest Valdegracian dominance. The colonial revenues that once flowed so richly into the royal treasury now arrive more slowly, more irregularly, stripped by distance, by rival interception, and by the quiet erosion of a bureaucracy that has grown fat enough to skim.

The great noble houses, for all their prestige, are better at preserving advantage than at generating it. The Church, that constant companion of the crown, has interests of its own. Those interests do not always align with the speed a changing world demands.

Valdegracia remains the single largest territorial claimant in Mar de Oro. It is still formidable. Its navy matters; its administrative tradition is genuinely impressive; its legal scholars are among the most sophisticated in the Solarian world. Yet its institutions carry the quality of a structure built for a simpler, or at least more amenable, world. Careful observers learn to recognize it. The architecture is magnificent. The foundations shift.

### The Institutions

The empire is governed through a layered system described, variously, as a masterwork of balance and a monument to inertia. At its apex sits the Crown. Its authority is absolute in theory and negotiated daily with three overlapping powers. The Grandee Council represents the heads of the great noble houses. The Ecclesial Consistory is the formal channel for the Holy See's advisory authority over crown policy. The Tribunals are high courts whose accumulated precedent even the monarch cannot easily sweep aside.

Below these apex institutions lies a vast apparatus of viceroys, captains-general, audiencias, and lower courts that extends from the heartland of Valdegracia out into its colonial territories. The system is, in its way, brilliant: it distributes authority in ways that prevent any single subordinate from becoming too powerful, while reserving to the Crown the final say on every significant question.

Its defect is the same as its virtue. Nothing moves quickly. Everything is appealed. Every appointment creates a rival; every rival creates a petition. Eventually an archivist must find the relevant precedent, often from a year so distant that the archivist's forebears were not yet born.

The Solarian Church is so deeply embedded in Valdegracian institutional life that separating its influence from the crown's is, for practical purposes, impossible. Every significant royal act requires some form of ecclesiastical endorsement. Every significant ecclesiastical act in the colonial territories requires some form of royal permission. Neither side controls the other. Their relationship is one of mutual indispensability, subtler and more durable than direct command.

### Valdegracia in Mar de Oro

In the Golden Sea, Valdegracia appears as it was designed to appear: large, formal, and authorized. Its colonial establishments are the oldest, the most architecturally ambitious, and the most thoroughly documented. The viceroy's palace in a Valdegracian colonial city is built to make visitors feel the weight of legitimate authority. The cathedral beside it makes them feel the weight of divine sanction. Together they say: this place was not taken. It was granted. The Architect made the world; the Crown was entrusted to order it; the Church was entrusted to sanctify that order. You stand inside a system that is larger than you are, and the system has been here longer than you.

Whether anyone in that colonial city fully believes this is another matter. Traders know the viceregal customs officers are manageable. Missionaries know that half their converts recite the liturgy with one set of words and live by another. Garrison officers know that supply ships from the continent run three months late and sometimes do not arrive. But the architecture still stands. The forms are still observed. When a rival vessel enters a Valdegracian harbor under a foreign flag, its captain still feels, however briefly, like the interloper.

### What a Valdegracian Carries

A character formed in the Valdegracian tradition carries a particular gravity and a habitual assumption that form is substance. The performance of legitimate authority helps make authority real. They are accustomed to hierarchy and at ease within it, using formality as both armor and argument. Education in letters, law, or theology is common; Valdegracia treats all three as pillars of a cultivated person. They bring to every situation an instinct for precedent: what has been done before, and where the right of the matter properly rests.

They also carry, if they are honest with themselves, a particular fatigue. Watching the world's premier power become contested is uncomfortable. Many Valdegracians in Mar de Oro are there because home has become insufficient. The problem is rarely material. The vast apparatus of the mother-crown no longer feels as though it has room for genuine ambition, curiosity, or doubt.

There is a word in Valdegracian that has no precise equivalent in other tongues: *añoranza del mando*, the longing for the unquestioned authority the past once seemed to provide. Many Valdegracian characters in the Golden Sea are, beneath everything else, trying to find somewhere that still needs what they were trained to be.

> AT A GLANCE
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> In the Archivos Reales, there is a room called the Sala de los Pendientes, the Room of Pending Matters, in which every unresolved petition, dispute, and claim awaiting royal adjudication is stored. The room is said to contain filings dating back three centuries. The archivists who work there speak of it the way sailors speak of a stretch of reef, respectfully, and with the quiet acceptance that it will outlast them.

## THE HOLY SEE

### The Eternal Seat. The Institution Above Institutions. The Church Made Sovereign.

#### The Nature of the Thing

The Holy See is not a nation in the way Valdegracia is a nation. It has no hereditary nobility, succession by blood, or peasantry beneath its banner. Its authority is stranger and more durable. The claim predates every crown on the continent, survived empires that once sponsored it, and crossed oceans with men in undyed wool who owned nothing. Now it sits in the heart of the most powerful empire in the world, dependent on Valdegracia and indispensable to it.

It is worth saying plainly what the Holy See is, because proximity to Valdegracia can obscure it. The Holy See is the institutional seat of the Solarian Church, the clerical, legal, and doctrinal apex of a confessional community that stretches across most of the known world. Its head is Pontiff Caelus Ignivar, elected for life by the Council of Radiance, a gathering of High Bishops from across all Solarian nations. The office is neither purely spiritual nor purely temporal. It occupies a third category that Solarian tradition has spent centuries refusing to resolve.

The See has its own ambassadors, called Legates, and its own courts, the Tribunals of Conscience. Their jurisdiction over doctrine, marriage, heresy, and clerical conduct reaches territories where no Valdegracian viceroy has authority. The See also has its own treasury, funded by tithes, indulgences, land revenues, and bequests from donors who believe, sometimes correctly, that a gift to the Church outlasts a gift to any crown.

It is housed, physically, within the walls of Coronaverde, in the district called the Sanctum Quarter, which is technically its own jurisdiction, policed by the Custodians of the See and not subject to Valdegracian municipal law. The boundaries between the Sanctum Quarter and the rest of Coronaverde are marked by a single row of white stones set into the pavement. Valdegracian law stops at those stones. Most people who cross them every day do not notice.

### The Entanglement

The relationship between the Holy See and Valdegracia is the oldest sustained diplomatic relationship in the setting. More accurately, it is a condition, like the relationship between a river and the valley it has carved. Neither created the other. Both have shaped the other irrevocably. Neither can operate without the other's cooperation on matters of significance, and neither is entirely at ease with that fact.

The Crown needs the See because legitimate authority, in the Solarian tradition, flows from divine sanction administered through the Church. A king who loses the Church's endorsement suffers more than diplomatic inconvenience. To a significant part of his own population, he becomes something less than a legitimate king. The great revolts of the past century, in Valdegracia and elsewhere, have repeatedly turned on whether a crown retained or forfeited ecclesiastical sanction. The crown cannot afford to forgo it.

The See needs the Crown because the Church is not an army. Its authority runs through conscience, institutional habit, and generations of cooperation. If communities decide their own spiritual arrangements are valid without clerical endorsement, that authority becomes only as strong as the civil power willing to enforce it. The See knows this. Harder-minded officials know it with a precision that would disturb many of the faithful they serve.

The result is an entanglement of extraordinary sophistication. The crown nominates bishops; the See confirms them. The See promulgates doctrine; the crown is expected to enforce it. The See's inquisitorial courts have jurisdiction over doctrine; the crown's secular courts have jurisdiction over execution of sentence. On every significant question, both parties must cooperate. On every significant question, both parties are also competing, for precedence, for revenue, for the loyalty of the educated class, for the framing of events as primarily spiritual or primarily political. The competition is usually conducted with exquisite courtesy. It is not always resolved peacefully.

### The Inquisition

No account of the Holy See is complete without its two great instruments of order. The Offices of Inquiry are the institutional body that investigates, adjudicates, and when necessary prosecutes deviations from orthodox Solarian doctrine. The Legio

Solaris is the sacred military arm that protects holy persons and places, enforces sacred order, responds to crises, and, crucially, watches for corruption inside the Church itself, including among Inquisitors. The two bodies are distinct: an Inquisitor investigates; a Solaris enforces and watches. A Solaris may be assigned to serve and protect an Inquisitor, but a Solaris's deeper oath is to the Church's integrity, not to any individual Churchman.

The oath is specific on this point, and it binds in ways the Solarian tradition describes as more than institutional. The Offices describe themselves as diagnostic rather than punitive. Their founding charter, issued three centuries ago, defines their purpose as identifying belief, correcting it where possible, and deciding what the community requires when correction fails.

In practice, the Offices of Inquiry are among the most feared institutions in the Solarian world. They are feared less for uniform brutality, though they can be brutal, than for reach and opacity. Their jurisdiction is almost unlimited. Their processes are confidential, their informants invisible, and their determinations difficult to contest. A character who has been the subject of an Offices inquiry, even one that ended in their favor, carries the memory like a brand that did not quite take. The impression remains. It never entirely washes out.

The Offices have a significant presence in Mar de Oro, particularly in the larger Valdegracian colonial establishments. They are interested in the syncretism that emerges when Solarian mission work encounters other spiritual traditions. They are interested in the reformist literature that circulates, often in disguised or fragmentary form, through the colonial ports. They are interested, above all, in whether the colonial church is maintaining doctrinal discipline in conditions that make discipline difficult to maintain, which is to say, in the precise conditions that Mar de Oro provides.

### The Holy See in Mar de Oro

The See's presence in the Golden Sea is institutional rather than territorial. It does not govern colonies; it governs the clergy of the colonies, which is a more extensive form of governance than it might initially appear. Every baptism recorded, every marriage blessed, every bequest made to a colonial church, all of these flow, in some administrative sense, back through the See's networks. Its Legates appear in colonial cities unannounced and leave without explaining what they found. Its missionary orders, technically under the See's direct authority rather than any bishop's, operate in the interior territories where no viceroy has ever set foot.

For a character from the See's orbit, whether cleric, canon lawyer, Offices notary, or Legate's translator or secretary, Mar de Oro means watching a vast, confident institution encounter conditions it was never designed for. The colonial church is

strange. The converts are stranger. The distance from Coronaverde is more than geographical. Out here, institutional certainties that seemed solid at home erode with unsettling speed.

### What a Character from the Holy See's Orbit Carries

The character formed in the See's institutional culture carries doctrinal fluency: ease with sacred authority, an instinct for official pronouncement, and habitual attention to what is said and what is carefully omitted. They understand bureaucracies the way sailors understand weather. These are environments with patterns and pressures, navigable if you know how to read them.

They carry, too, a private knowledge that is not common in the wider Solarian world, the knowledge of how often certainty is managed rather than possessed. The institutional face of the Church is confidence: this is doctrine, this is truth, this has been determined by those with the authority to determine it. The private face, visible to anyone who has worked within the See's offices at any level, is something more like a very sophisticated ongoing negotiation between what the tradition requires and what the evidence of the world provides.

The character from this world has seen both faces. They have learned to wear the first while remembering the second. This is useful. It is not entirely comfortable.

> AT A GLANCE
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> The See maintains a record, in a section of the Sanctum Quarter archives called the Register of Private Communications, of every letter exchanged between the Pontifex Solaris and the Valdegracian crown in the last three centuries. The letters are sealed. Officially, they do not exist. The archivists are sworn to silence and, by convention, drawn from a single religious house in the city's eastern quarter. The senior archivist is eighty-three and has worked in the Register for sixty years. She is said to know things about both crown and See that could rearrange the Solarian landscape of power. She has not disclosed them. She will not. The institution is larger than its contents. Its current head is Pontiff Caelus Ignivar, elected by the Council of Radiance. Those who have attended his formal audiences describe a man who understands exactly what the weight of an office means and has chosen to carry it fully.

# ALBION

*Survey the coast, acquire the advantage, deny it to everyone else.*

## The Character of the Nation

Albion is old in the way crowns are old: as an institution and a habit of mind. The kingdom has endured for so long that its people carry continuity as ballast. The crown is real. The law is real. The hierarchy of obligation between subject and sovereign is a given of the world rather than a negotiated arrangement. Albionis is an older form of Albion, still encountered in historical texts and formal usage.

This does not make Albionites rigid. It makes them confident, not in themselves necessarily, but in the structure that produced them. They assume civilization has a shape and that Albion sits somewhere near its center. Other nations find this quality admirable and quietly maddening.

Albion is a maritime kingdom whose national genius was forged over two centuries around a simple belief: the world's decisive contests are won through commercial advantage, technical superiority, and information. Hull design, artillery casting, ledgers, and intelligence all belong to the same calculation. This is intellectual pride rather than cynicism. Albionites value careful thought, precise measurement, and action at the moment of maximum effect. They regard Valdegracian ceremony, Hellerite pride in struggle, and Eisenmarkian procedural order with mild, not unkind bemusement. All of that, they privately believe, is what people do when they have not done the calculation.

## A History Built on the Water

Albion is an island kingdom, or more accurately a cluster of islands and a long peninsula at the northwestern edge of the continental world. A narrow channel separates it from the nearest major landmass. The channel's storms have historically served it better than any fleet. Several powers have nearly crossed it in force. None made the same error twice.

The kingdom's expansion into the wider world followed the logic of the crown rather than the counting house. Where Stroomdijk sends a company, Albion sends a flag. Where Stroomdijk issues a charter, Albion issues a commission. The colonial establishment at New Avalon is administered in the crown's name, by officials who answer to the crown, under laws that derive from the crown's authority. This is not merely symbolic. It means that Albion's colonial project is coherent in a way that company-governed territories are not: the governor of New Avalon knows who he serves, what he is authorized to do, and what the crown expects of him. The crown, for its part, knows what it has.

In the decades since Albion followed Valdegracia into Mar de Oro, this approach has made it one of the decisive powers in the region. Its territorial footprint is smaller than Valdegracia's, but its information network reaches farther than its possessions suggest. Agents in colonial ports, captains who double as intelligence officers, and commercial factors whose accounts conceal reports to a quiet office in the capital together produce charts and reports with a systematic reach that rival governments study closely. The network is extensive, disciplined, and still incomplete.

### The Institutions

The kingdom is governed through the crown and three principal institutions. The Admiralty is among the most powerful governmental bodies in the known world. The Colonial Office administers New Avalon and the crown's other overseas holdings. Parliament represents landed nobility, clergy, and major property-holders; the crown needs its cooperation for taxation. Over generations Parliament has accumulated considerable practical authority, exercised with great care not to appear to exercise it.

The relationship between crown and parliament in Albion is not a clean division of powers. It is a long-running negotiation between two parties who have found it mutually convenient never to force a final reckoning on who is ultimately in charge.

The kingdom also maintains the Royal Hydrographic Survey, which is technically a scientific institution and practically a national intelligence asset of the first order. Every chart produced by Survey captains becomes a crown property. Every coast they have mapped is a coast Albion can navigate with confidence and rivals cannot. In Mar de Oro, the Survey's charts are among the most current and systematically maintained in circulation. That advantage is deliberate.

### Muirthuaidh and the Marches

Albion treats Muirthuaidh as territory acquired under the settlement that ended the Forty-Two Years' War and therefore, in law, as part of the kingdom. That position is not maintained by law alone. Fellowship communities in the Marches often favor continued union with Albion, trade has grown around Albionite ports and roads, and families on both sides of the question have built lives under the present border. To the government in Albion, abandoning the territory under pressure would mean abandoning those people as well as conceding that a treaty settlement can be overturned by sustained irregular action.

That does not make the Marches easy to govern. Officers posted to Béal na Móna quickly learn that loyalties do not divide neatly by household or occupation. One family may include a merchant dependent on Albion, a relative carrying messages for

the Clann, and people who want only to be left out of the struggle. An arrest that removes one operative may create three sympathizers. A patrol that treats every household as hostile can do more for the Clann than a month of recruitment.

Albionite officials therefore disagree about what the problem actually is. Some regard the Clann as an insurgent network sustained by Éirighdúnari sympathy and protected by deliberate ambiguity from Dúncairn. Others argue, usually more quietly, that heavy-handed security measures and the unresolved status of the territory keep producing the resistance they are intended to suppress. Almost all agree on one point: a major Clann attack, an Éirighdúnari intervention, or a panicked Albionite response could turn a contained frontier conflict back into interstate war.

### Albion in Mar de Oro

In the Golden Sea, Albion presents itself on two levels. The visible level is the crown. Royal Navy vessels patrol sea lanes somewhere between presence and occupation. A Colonial Office mission in Boca Serena manages New Avalon's relationship with the government that appointed its governors. Official representatives move with the settled authority of a state that considers its legitimacy self-evident. The authority they represent is constitutional, not commercial.

The less visible level is the Bureau of Correspondent Affairs, which is the name Albion gives to its foreign intelligence service, and which has been operating in Mar de Oro since the first Albionite ships arrived. The Bureau does not advertise its presence. Its agents are factors, ships' physicians, harbor pilots, cartographers, the kind of people who move through a port without attracting notice and who have professional reasons to know things. The harbor pilot who knows every shoal in the approach is Albionite. The factor who can provide letters of credit drawn on Albionite banks is sitting in an office overlooking the main quay and has, somewhere in a locked drawer, a correspondence cipher and a standing brief.

An Albionite naval captain operating in Mar de Oro typically carries two sets of orders: the official commission, which he will show if asked, and the Bureau instructions, which he will not. The two are not always pointing in the same direction. Managing that gap is considered part of the posting.

### What an Albionite Carries

The character formed in Albion carries a settled relationship to hierarchy and institution. Structure is real; its obligations bind. Fulfilling them earns a dignity no amount of wealth or cleverness can substitute for. This is not servility. Albionites push back against authority they consider illegitimate, but they do so through

petition, Parliament, the courts, and the long processes of legitimate grievance. Simply ignoring an obligation because it is inconvenient strikes most Albionites as the kind of thing other nations do.

They also carry a habit of observation that is easy to miss. Albion produces people who are very good at reading rooms, tracking relationships, noticing what is absent from a conversation, and filing those observations somewhere useful. Other nations find their numbers mildly alarming once they notice. This is a cultural trait, not specifically a Bureau one.

Albionite education, from the naval academies to the colonial service training, treats the accurate assessment of a situation as a foundational skill, and the people who come through it carry that assessment instinct into whatever they do next. An Albionite character who has never worked for the Bureau still notices things. The ones who have worked for the Bureau have learned what to do with what they notice.

They carry a comfort with the sea that is unsentimental and proprietary. Their kingdom has historically owned the ocean in practice, if not in law. They move across it with a confidence others find inspiring or insufferable, depending on how recently Albion has done something they resent.

> AT A GLANCE
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> Albionite officers of any service, naval, colonial, or diplomatic, carry a small leather-bound journal called a *duty book*. In it they record, in their own hand, every significant decision made in the execution of a commission and the reasons for it. The practice is not officially required. It is culturally mandatory. An officer who cannot account for a decision has failed at something more fundamental than the decision itself. The books accumulate over careers and are sometimes, after death, presented to the service archives. The archives are not public. The practice is known to exist. Everyone behaves accordingly.

## STROOMDIJK

### Finance it, move it, own the terms. The flag can stay where it is.

### The Character of the Kingdom

Stroomdijk is a parliamentary monarchy that has bent kingship toward commercial governance. The hereditary crown serves chiefly as the constitutional anchor of an elaborate charter arrangement. It signs company charters, ratifies the great trade agreements, and provides the legal fiction holding together a polity whose real decisions are made elsewhere.

At the apex of that decision-making sits the Directorate, a parliamentary assembly representing the major commercial cities, merchant families, craft guilds, and shipping consortia. Its procedures are so arcane and internally contested that foreign ambassadors regularly despair of understanding them. The complexity is the point. A system no outsider can fully read is a system no outsider can fully predict.

The kingdom was born from revolt: a cold, determined, extremely well-financed separation from a suzerain that taxed Stroomdijk's commerce without, in merchant eyes, providing proportionate value. The wars of independence lasted thirty years. Stroomdijk's trading houses financed much of them after calculating the long-term economics of subordination against sovereign commercial policy. Their answer made the political question nearly academic.

Stroomdijk won because it could afford to keep fighting longer than anyone expected. By the end, every other major power had found a reason to prefer a commercially useful Stroomdijk to a subordinated one. Its soldiers were no cowards, but bravery was not the decisive resource.

### The Commercial Machinery

Stroomdijk's wealth is not based on territory. It is based on position. It sits at the intersection of several major sea lanes, possesses the finest natural harbor on the continent's northern coast, and has spent a century and a half building a financial architecture the rest of the world depends on, willingly or otherwise.

The Wisselbank, the Exchange Bank of Stroomdijk, is one of the central financial institutions of the known world. It processes letters of credit, manages currency exchange, underwrites commercial insurance, and provides the clearing services through which a significant fraction of inter-state commerce is settled. The interest rates it sets are not merely Stroomdijk's interest rates; they are effectively the world's baseline cost of capital. When the Wisselbank changes its lending terms, merchants in Valdegracian colonial ports feel it three months later in the price of credit. This is not an accident of geography. It was built to work this way.

Alongside the Wisselbank, the great trading companies, the Generale Compagnie, the Oost-Marinen Consortium, and the Saffraanhandel, operate as semi-sovereign entities. They maintain their own legal systems, armed vessels, treaties with non-aligned polities, and territories. Those territories are governed under company charters and Stroomdijker commercial law without being formal colonies. The distinction between company territory and colony is largely paperwork. The crown authorizes; the company executes; the Directorate debates the returns. Labor conditions, extraction quotas, and enforcement mechanisms are formally company matters. The distance between company and crown responsibility is where much of

the kingdom's wealth quietly lives. Parliamentary committees reviewing company accounts are staffed by men who hold shares in the companies they review. This is considered experience, not a conflict of interest.

### The Gray Practices

Stroomdijk's public face is one of commercial reliability and contractual integrity. These qualities are real. They are also, occasionally, a cover for practices that the kingdom finds more convenient not to examine in direct light.

The carrying trade between other nations' colonial ports does not always inquire too closely into the provenance of its cargo. Stroomdijker banks offer smaller powers terms that are scrupulously documented and legally unassailable. Over a prolonged commercial crisis, those terms can place a borrowing state's most productive assets effectively under Stroomdijker management. Company charters describe local labor systems as contracted service arrangements. Workers describe them differently, when they are in a position to describe them at all.

Stroomdijk does not need to use violence as often as other powers. This is partly because it is genuinely humane by the standards of its age. It is partly because commercial dependency is more durable than military occupation, and does not require the expense of a garrison.

### Stroomdijk in Mar de Oro

Stroomdijk's presence in Mar de Oro is like weather: rarely dramatic, simply there. A Stroomdijker factor operates in almost every harbor large enough to matter. A Stroomdijker letter of credit is available, for a price, for almost any commercial transaction. Company vessels fly the Generale Compagnie's red-and-gold cipher. Those flags are respected because attacking a Stroomdijker commercial vessel means attacking an institution with credit instruments lodged in major banks across the world, including the attacker's.

This is the Stroomdijker genius: the conversion of commercial exposure into diplomatic immunity. By making itself indispensable to the global financial architecture, Stroomdijk has made aggression against its interests impractical for anyone who wants to continue participating in that architecture. This, too, was built deliberately.

### What a Stroomdijker Carries

The character formed in Stroomdijker culture carries a particular relationship to value: an instinct for assessment, real cost, and the gap between what something is officially worth and what it actually produces. They are comfortable with contracts and suspicious of handshakes. Valdegracian ceremony feels faintly inefficient;

Hellerite pride in demonstrated struggle feels unnecessary. They have a facility with languages, as the carrying trade requires. Their social adaptability is sometimes mistaken for rootlessness. More accurately, it is the practical flexibility of a culture that has always needed to do business with people unlike itself.

They also carry a commercial conscience: a sense of fair dealing and a private discomfort with practices that do not always meet that standard. Not every Stroomdijker character is comfortable with what the Generale Compagnie does in its territories. Not every factor is at peace with the terms their bank extends to clients who cannot refuse. The kingdom's self-image and conduct do not always match, and a thoughtful Stroomdijker knows it.

> AT A GLANCE
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> The factor houses in Stroomdijk's major commercial cities maintain a practice called the *avondrekening*, the evening reckoning, in which all the day's transactions are reviewed before close of business, every contract confirmed, every discrepancy noted. The practice is said to derive from the early years of independence, when a trading house's survival depended on never sleeping with an unresolved account. In the great houses, it is still done in person, with the senior factor present, and it is not considered complete until every number has been spoken aloud and confirmed. There is something almost liturgical about it. The Stroomdijkers, if you pointed this out, would be briefly amused and then change the subject.

## LUMINORE

### A republic that argues in print, and expects the argument to be answered in print.

#### The Character of the Republic

Luminore is a Solarian republic whose intellectual and cultural influence far exceeds its territory. Outsiders sometimes imagine a great imperial capital. Instead, they find a nation that has spent two centuries organizing civic life around one proposition: republic and faith are, properly understood, expressions of the same underlying order. The university, press, elected assembly, and bounded relationship between church and state all follow from that premise.

Luminore is thoroughly Solarian. Its cathedral is the second oldest on the continent, its feast days are public occasions, and its clergy are visibly present in civic life without dominating it. The difference from Valdegracia lies in the relationship between faith and state. In Valdegracia, church and crown are so thoroughly entangled that separating them is practically impossible.

In Luminore, the relationship is constitutionally bounded. Church and republic each have a sphere. The boundary has been argued over, drawn, and redrawn for two centuries. Luminoran civic tradition treats that continuing argument as a sign of health.

The republic governs through an elected assembly, the Conseil Civique, whose members are drawn from the city's commercial, academic, and professional classes. The Solarian bishop of Luminore sits on the Conseil as an advisor without a vote. This arrangement, which was hard-won after a century of negotiation, is presented by Luminoran civic theorists as the ideal relationship between spiritual and temporal authority. The Holy See regards it with the careful neutrality of an institution that has not yet decided whether to be offended.

### The University and the Press

Luminore's university is the oldest continuously operating institution of secular learning on the continent, predating the republic's current constitutional form by nearly a century. It produces scholars of natural philosophy, law, medicine, and theology. Faculty group logic, rhetoric, and formal argument under the rational arts. These are taught as foundational skills applicable to any domain, including religious inquiry.

The university is Solarian in its constitution, its chapel, and the formal confessional requirements for its senior faculty. It is Luminoran in everything else, which is to say that it treats the honest examination of any question as a legitimate and even sacred activity, provided the examination is conducted with rigor.

Mechanical printing arrived in Luminore roughly seventy years before the present day. The republic deliberately protected printers and the arguments they printed, and a supporting world of booksellers, bookbinders, paper merchants, jurists, and scholars grew around the university.

Luminore remains one of the continent's major centers of scholarship, print, law, medicine, and theological argument. Its influence comes less from territorial scale than from the number of people across Aeon who have studied there, published there, or learned to treat a written argument as something that must answer evidence.

### Luminore in Mar de Oro

In the Golden Sea, Luminore appears through Nouvelle Lumière, its formal colonial establishment, and through a wider network of scholars, physicians, jurists, printers, and diplomats whose methods are distinctly, recognizably Luminoran. Nouvelle Lumière is closely tied to the metropolitan republic by cultural and commercial bonds, but Luminoran influence reaches well beyond its borders because educated people across the colonial world seek its books, training, and expertise.

A Luminoran jurist consulted on a commercial dispute will apply the same analytical method to a case involving a Valdegracian grandee and a Hellerite dockworker. This universalism is not naivety. It is a considered position, and it is the reason Luminoran expertise is sought by parties who have no other reason to agree on anything.

### What a Luminoran Carries

The character formed in Luminore carries a deep civic conviction: the republic is real, its institutions have genuine authority, and the rights and obligations of citizenship are morally substantial. This is practical, not abstract. It shapes how Luminorans enter rooms, address strangers, and respond to demands for deference from people whose only claim is rank. They respect genuine authority and resist authority that cannot give an account of itself.

They carry a print culture and a habitual relationship with books, records, and written argument. Their instinct is to verify, document, and establish what was actually said before deciding what should be done. They also carry a genuine Solarian faith expressed through public feast days, community observance, and the conviction that the Architect's design and the republic's design are both expressions of a rational order that honest minds can read.

> AT A GLANCE
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> The great hall of Luminore's university, the Aula Principalis, bears in its interior frieze a sentence in archaic Solarian, large enough to read from the floor below: *The argument that cannot withstand examination was not an argument; it was a wish.* No one is entirely certain when the carving was added or by whose authority. The faculty treat its presence as self-explanatory. The university's Solarian chaplain has cited it in at least two recorded sermons. The Holy See has never officially commented. This is generally taken as the correct response.

# THE DUCHY OF HELLER

Twenty years old, two Dukes, three dragons, and no appetite for being governed from abroad.

## The Character of the Duchy

The Duchy of Heller is not old. Its formal autonomy within Valdegracian dominion was acknowledged less than a year ago; settlement is barely twenty years old. By conventional measures of statecraft, it should not yet have a character. Yet it does. That character formed under New World pressures: distance from metropolitan authority, necessity, and the decisions of three men in the colony's early years.

The Duchy is Solarian in faith. Its founders carried the faith across the sea with them, and it remains the official and genuinely practiced confession of the community. But the Duchy is also young and practical enough to understand that a colony in the New World cannot afford the luxury of confessional purity. Fellowship sailors, Oraclean merchants, the faithfully uncommitted: all are present in Hellerite harbors, and none are turned away. The Duchy does not advertise this. It simply does not expend the administrative energy required to prevent it.

The Duchy advertises something else through the conduct of its institutions and the reputation of its people: a community built on demonstrated loyalty, practical capability, and the solidarity of people who crossed an ocean without guarantees and made something work.

## The Three Founders

Three men stand at the origin of the Duchy, and their presence continues to shape it.

Generalis Melenko Costilas was the military mind of the founding Compañero expeditions. He planned the early settlements, organized their defense, negotiated with other powers from strength built out of materials that should not have been sufficient, and created the military culture the Duchy still runs on. The Holy See's Offices of Inquiry denounced him on the mainland, citing early colonial conduct the Inquisition regards as heretical in method if not in confession. The Valdegracian crown proclaimed him a traitor after he chose the colony over a direct order to dissolve it and return the settlers to metropolitan authority. He is presumed dead. No confirmed account of his end exists, and the Duchy does not press the question. Had he lived, he would have been the third Duke, the silver dragon alongside the two gold ones. Instead he is honored on the flag in that form: the silver dragon, distinct from the gold, marking the place where the third founder would have stood. The Duchy does not eulogize him at length. It keeps his place on the flag. That is considered sufficient.

The governing authority rests with two Dukes. Dux Hernanus Costesius de Heller, whose gold dragon appears on the Duchy's flag, is one of the founding three and governs the Duchy's civil and commercial affairs. Dux Franciscus Perezzi, whose gold dragon also appears on the flag alongside Costesius's, holds joint ducal authority. The dual-Duke structure was not inherited from any continental model.

It was a practical arrangement made by the founders at the moment of formal self-organization: two governing voices, each with real authority, neither able to act unilaterally on matters of consequence. It has produced, so far, the kind of productive tension that prevents either Duke from becoming an autocrat and requires them to negotiate everything that matters.

Together, Costilas the denounced, Costesius the governor, and Perezzi the partner represent what the Duchy actually is. Specific people with specific histories made specific decisions in a place the official Valdegracian model of colonial governance was never designed to accommodate.

### A History of Beginning

The Compañero expeditions that produced the Duchy's founders were not unauthorized ventures. They carried crown sanction, a blessing from the Solarian hierarchy, and the formal patents that made them legal under Valdegracian colonial law. What they did not carry was the expectation, on the part of any metropolitan authority, that the expedition survivors would stay, build, and refuse to come home.

That is what happened. The first settlements were established before any formal colonial administration existed to receive them. The founders built harbors, roads, and defenses because the alternative was a colony that did not survive. By the time Valdegracian administrators arrived to organize what should have been crown territory, they found a community already organized, with its own hierarchy and a clear sense of what it was and whom it owed.

The negotiation that followed was long, contested, and, on Valdegracia's side, conducted under a frustration that the diplomatic record sanitizes but does not conceal. The Duchy's autonomy, formally acknowledged within Valdegracian dominion only within the last year, is the outcome of that negotiation: real self-governance in exchange for a formal acknowledgement of Valdegracian suzerainty and a commitment to military allegiance in time of war. Valdegracia accepted these terms. It has not stopped resenting having accepted them.

### The Duchy of Heller and the Idea of Beginning Again

In the Golden Sea, the Duchy's existence reads as a particular kind of message. It proves that a community can organize itself, maintain itself against institutional pressure, and eventually force that institution to acknowledge what already exists. For

settlers, sailors, and people of every background who have found the older colonial arrangements inhospitable, the Duchy is evidence that the alternative is possible. This is not, in itself, the Duchy's intention. The Dukes govern a colony, not a symbol. But the symbol has formed around them regardless, and they are not unaware of its usefulness.

The Duchy's colonial presence in Mar de Oro is modest in territory and significant in reputation. Its governors implement what they announce. Its military, shaped by Costilas's institutional culture, is smaller than most powers' equivalents and considerably more effective per person than most. Its harbors are open to anyone prepared to deal honestly. The flag, with its three dragons, two gold and one silver, is recognized across the archipelago as a mark of competence administered without the performance of grandeur that other powers cannot seem to avoid.

### What a Hellerite Carries

The character formed in Hellerite culture carries the solidarity of people who crossed an ocean together without guarantees. Not sentiment about it, not nostalgia, but the functional version: a strong instinct for who is reliable, a quick read on who delivers, and impatience with social performances that establish trustworthiness without demonstrating it.

They carry a relationship to authority that was built by the founders' example. Authority in the Duchy is earned through demonstrated competence and maintained through continued performance. It is not inherited, not granted by metropolitan appointment, and not secured by confessional alignment. A Hellerite character who meets someone of high rank will, instinctively and without rudeness, be asking the same question they ask of everyone: can you actually do the thing?

They carry the Solarian faith as a genuine, practiced commitment, and they carry alongside it the practical tolerance of a community that has needed every willing person and could not afford to turn away good ones on confessional grounds. These two things coexist without particular tension in Hellerite culture. The faith is real. The pragmatism is also real. Neither cancels the other.

> AT A GLANCE
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> The Duchy's flag carries three dragons, the silver dragon of Generalis Emeritus Costilas and the two gold dragons of Dux Costesius and Dux Perezzi. In Hellerite ports, the flag is flown without rank distinction between the three charges, all three visible, all three equal in placement. The silver is not subordinate to the gold, and the gold does not outrank the silver. This is not accidental. The founders designed the flag together, and the arrangement was the point.

# EISENMARK

Examinations, foundries, and promises treated as load-bearing.

## The Character of the Kingdom

One philosophy runs through Eisenmark's institutions like a structural load through masonry: hidden, but present in every joint. Order is useful, and more than useful; it is good. A correctly ordered system, whether battalion, university, forge, theological argument, or province, participates in the same principle the Architect expressed when Fortera was made. Disorder is more than inefficiency. It is an offense against the structure of things.

In theology, this is the Eisenmarkian Solarian view. It would be only a national peculiarity if Eisenmark lacked the capacity to produce order at scale. It does not. Its military trains to a professional standard that other powers study closely. Its bureaucracy is documented with unusual consistency. Its universities produce graduates in theology, engineering, and natural philosophy who move between disciplines without finding the movement strange. To an Eisenmarkian scholar, fortification mechanics and theological method are applications of the same discipline: examine a system carefully, understand its logic, and make it work better.

## History and Formation

Eisenmark's current form emerged from a long consolidation rather than a single founding moment. Over two centuries, related principalities gathered under Elector-Dukes who combined military competence with administrative talent. The process ended roughly a century ago under Elector-Duke Albrecht IV. Eisenmark remembers him less for significant military victories than for what followed: standardized weights and measures, a professional civil service examined by written test, a unified criminal and commercial code, and the Imperial Technical Academy, still the foremost engineering institution in the known world.

The tradition predates Eisenmark's consolidation by a century. It is often traced to Velas, a theologian whose full name has been lost, who spent forty years in an eastern highland monastery reconciling Solarian theology with new discoveries in natural philosophy. His central argument was simple. Physical law and divine intention are compatible fields of study. The Architect made the world according to a design and left that design readable in the world itself. A scholar who reads it honestly and rigorously performs an act of devotion as serious as any liturgical rite.

The result is reverent exactness, a refusal to settle for imprecise formulations even in matters of faith, and it has shaped Eisenmarkian intellectual culture at every level.

### Institutional Culture

Eisenmark's institutions are built on examination and documentation. Every significant civil-service appointment requires demonstrated competence. Every significant administrative decision is documented, filed, and cross-referenced. The result can be exasperatingly slow because nothing is final until it has been checked against regulations, precedent, and technical specification. Once Eisenmark commits to an action, however, it is remarkably reliable.

An Eisenmarkian treaty commitment is considered as close to absolute as continental diplomacy produces. The reputation comes from systems, not superior honor. Eisenmarkian institutions treat a commitment as a load-bearing element in a structure. Removing one without proper engineering assessment is simply not how things are done.

Eisenmark offers all three confessions formal legal protection, institutional access, and scrupulous non-interference from the crown. The Solarian church has the largest popular following, especially in the agricultural west. The Fellowship is strongest in university cities, where its reasoning methods and Eisenmarkian natural theology have long influenced each other. Oraclean communities are concentrated in eastern borderlands where Volkharovi cultural influence predates the current kingdom. The Elector-Duke's court navigates all three with practiced neutrality. That tradition helped make the pluralist settlement possible and remains an Eisenmarkian contribution that leaves every other confession simultaneously grateful and uneasy.

### Eisenmark in Mar de Oro

In the Golden Sea, Eisenmark's presence has a distinctive quality: it is more interested in understanding the theater than in controlling it. Eisenmarkian survey vessels, run by the Imperial Technical Academy rather than any commercial company, appear in Mar de Oro to chart, measure, and document. Their captains produce treatises on tidal patterns, coastal geology, the properties of tropical timber, and the technical characteristics of local ship designs. These treatises are published, distributed throughout the Academy's network, and eventually find their way into the hands of every power that can read.

Eisenmark has no colonial establishment in the Golden Sea. Its presence is exploratory rather than territorial. Imperial Technical Academy survey vessels chart, measure, and document the region, while Eisenmarkian engineers, scholars, physicians, and officers appear individually throughout the archipelago. Foreign captains and harbor officials sometimes find them maddeningly inflexible: an Eisenmarkian officer faced with a request outside clearly authorized parameters will defer rather than improvise. Eisenmarkians regard this as a safeguard against the slow distortions that destroy other people's systems.

### What an Eisenmarkian Carries

The character formed in Eisenmark carries order as a first principle: the achieved order of the engineer, built by understanding a system and acting within its logic. Their tolerance for hierarchy comes from a belief that well-constructed hierarchies produce better outcomes than ad hoc arrangements. The key word is well-constructed. Eisenmarkians are often privately critical of hierarchies they consider badly designed, including their own.

They carry a technical vocabulary that is precise even when unspecialized. An Eisenmarkian tends to use words that mean exactly what they say and notices when others do not. What outsiders read as coldness or pedantry is often respect for the difference between a thing and its description. Eisenmarkians usually care more about how something works than who is supposed to be in charge of it. This makes them excellent collaborators on practical problems and frustrating participants in political negotiations.

> AT A GLANCE
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> The Imperial Technical Academy maintains a collection in its main library called the *Fehlerregister*, the Register of Errors. It is a continuously updated catalog of engineering and administrative failures, organized by error, root cause, and what a correct approach would have looked like. No names appear; it is a learning instrument, not a disciplinary record. Graduates are examined on it and senior fellows are expected to contribute. The underlying conviction is that failure is valuable educational material, and the only unacceptable failure is one left unexamined and therefore free to recur.

## VOLKHAROV

Counts time in generations, distance in winters, and rarely gives ground back.

### The Character of the Realm

There is a Volkharovi word every outside observer translates imperfectly: *vyderzhka*. Continental equivalents such as "endurance" or "staying power" miss its weight. Vyderzhka is active. It is the cultivated capacity to outlast and to maintain organized collective will under conditions other cultures would regard as the end of organized life.

Ice. Distance. Invasion. Fire. The collapse of supply lines. The death of leaders in succession. The corruption of a harvest for three years running. These are not, in Volkharovi understanding, catastrophes that end history. They are tests that history requires, and the nation that passes them earns something that nations which have not been tested simply do not have.

This understanding shapes everything. Volkharovi hierarchy comes from accumulated experience: the worst outcomes arrive when organization fails. It also shapes religious life. Oraclean practice is a serious institutional commitment to the idea that communal discernment, expressed through proper rite and legitimate sacramental authority, is the mechanism by which Fortera speaks in human time.

It shapes expansion as well. Volkharov extends itself geographically through a slow, relentless overland movement into a continent that is both extraordinarily inhospitable and extraordinarily productive.

### History and Expansion

Volkharov's origins are ancient and disputed, including by the Volkharovi. Its current form dates to roughly three centuries ago and the First Sovereign Ilya, remembered as the Great Consolidator. He welded regional polities with shared cultural, linguistic, and religious ties into one administered entity with a central court, common legal code, and unified church structure.

The Oraclean church helped make the founding possible. Ilya's authority was legitimized through the Archpatriarch of the Oraclean Communion. The great anointing, liturgical proclamation, and conciliar endorsement were the mechanism by which the new realm was made, not symbolic decoration.

The relationship between the Volkharovi state and the Oraclean Communion has changed little since Ilya's anointing. The church is a state church in all but formal constitution. The sovereign appoints the Archpatriarch through a conciliar election reliably shaped by court influence. The church blesses military campaigns, administers large parts of the agricultural interior through monastic networks, and provides communication across a realm too large for any purely secular system. The Archpatriarch's authority is real. So is the sovereign's. Over three centuries they have built a mode of co-governance neither side wants to define too precisely. Clarity would force a concession neither intends to make.

### The Oraclean Tradition in Volkharov

The Oraclean Communion is the most ancient of the three major confessional traditions, and Volkharov practices it with unusual intensity and institutional seriousness. Its liturgy is elaborate, lengthy, and conducted in a language distinct

from the vernacular. Oraclean theologians call the resulting sacramental weight *the membrane of the eternal*: the sense that liturgical space stands actually adjacent to the realm of sacred order, rather than merely symbolizing it.

The great Volkharovi cathedral in Zarovsk is the largest building in the realm and the site of every significant act of state. Coronations, funerals, the investiture of military commanders, the solemn reception of ambassadors, all take place within it, under the accumulated weight of centuries of sanctified governance.

The Oraclean tradition emphasizes communal discernment: Fortera is revealed primarily to communities properly constituted through sacramental life. This separates it from Solarian institutional hierarchy and Luminary emphasis on individual conscience. In Volkharov, communal discernment appears in church councils, village assemblies, and the deep cultural instinct that serious decisions should carry the weight of the community.

This instinct coexists, not without tension, with the hierarchical authority of both the state and the church. The Volkharovi have lived with this tension for centuries. They regard it as a normal condition of serious communal life.

### Expansion and Overland Reach

Volkharov expands overland rather than through harbor stations or distant colonial flags. Its reach crosses the enormous interior to the east and south. Other powers have not penetrated those territories systematically. They lack either the organizational capacity to maintain coherent structure across such distances or a supply chain capable of sustaining it.

Volkharov sustains that reach through monastic networks, tributary arrangements with interior peoples, and fortified way stations that become towns over time. The process is slow and rarely reverses. A polity that enters Volkharovi tributary arrangements usually remains there. Not always willingly. Not always comfortably. But with a permanence the Volkharovi regard as natural and their subjects often regard as inevitable.

In Mar de Oro, Volkharov appears rarely and consequentially. Its presence is purposeful rather than commercial or administrative. A survey vessel is interested in geography, the strategic disposition of other powers, and the spiritual state of Oraclean communities in the colonial diaspora. A religious mission is a diplomatic act whether the missionaries acknowledge it or not. Their presence, rites, sacraments, and scrupulous observance under difficult conditions become a political statement about what Volkharov considers permanent.

### What a Volkharovi Carries

The character formed in Volkharovi culture carries *vyderzhka* as a bodily fact rather than a philosophy. What others read as impassivity is often the reserve of someone who has not yet reached their limit and knows from experience that the limit lies farther out than most people think.

They were raised in a tradition where the communal and the individual are intertwined. Who they are is substantially shaped by who they are with. They carry their communities with them in a way that is ontological rather than sentimental.

They carry the Oraclean rite in their bones, even when they are no longer active practitioners. Liturgical forms have marked the year and its significant moments since infancy. A lapsed Volkharovi still tends to find comfort in liturgical time, communal ritual, and the idea that some things require proper form to be properly done.

They understand authority from the inside, as something that functions within communities. Authority imposed without genuine embeddedness in the people it claims to govern immediately arouses suspicion.

> AT A GLANCE
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> Every significant Volkharovi military unit carries a portable icon, often depicting the Intercessor or one of the great saints of the Oraclean calendar. The icon is the unit's sacred object and travels on every campaign. In Oraclean understanding it is a point of contact between the unit, the community it serves, and the greater order in which both participate. Before battle it is brought forward and venerated. After battle, whatever the outcome, it is venerated again. If a unit is destroyed and the icon recovered, it is carried to the nearest monastery and installed in the chapel. The monks pray for the dead of that unit on the anniversary of its destruction for as long as the monastery stands. Some houses have maintained the practice for more than two hundred years.

## Republic of Éirighdún

### Deep harbors, worked Éterlumin, and a memory book for every debt owed.

### The Character of the Republic

Éirighdún is an island republic off the western edge of the old continent. A stretch of water narrow enough to cross on a clear morning, together with three centuries of formal neutrality, has kept its core islands out of most continental land wars without

keeping their consequences away. The Forty-Two Years' War ended with Albion annexing Muirthuaidh, territory Éirighdún still claims. It faces the ocean in every direction. This is not metaphor. The sea is the first fact of Éirighdúnari life. So is a character that is canny, clannish, fiercely attached to its own arrangements, and publicly neutral while privately opinionated about almost everything.

The island has something else. Beneath its western highlands lie significant Éterlumin deposits, worked carefully and without advertisement for longer than the republic's formal governing structure has existed. Those deposits are one of the more persuasive reasons other powers trade with Éirighdún instead of absorbing it. A neutral island with deep harbors and reliable credit is useful. Add practical experience with Éterlumin and it becomes something major powers have learned to leave intact.

The republic is governed through an elected High Council of Clanns, whose seats are dominated by the clan-linked trading families. The great houses conduct their internal politics with a ferocity hidden by the republic's external neutrality. There is no hereditary monarch, coercive state church, or tradition of land conquest. There are harbors, ships, Éterlumin, credit, and the respectability of a neutrality everyone has reason to preserve. Everyone has debts there. No one wants to be the power that forces the island to choose a side.

### History and Position

The republic's formal neutrality is three centuries old, but its habit of surviving between larger powers is much older. Éirighdún's clans were navigating continental rivalries before those powers had their current forms. They offered harbors, provisioned fleets, and maintained the careful non-alignment that let the island remain itself while the continent reshuffled around it.

Three centuries ago that habit became a governing principle. Trading families whose fathers had lost fortunes to forced conscription convened the founding council and wrote a simple rule into the charter: Éirighdún does not take sides. It sells to both. Enforcing that rule requires discipline at home and persuasion abroad. Individual houses must resist short-term advantage, while every major power must believe a reliably neutral commercial hub is worth more intact than absorbed.

They managed both. Their descendants are still managing both.

The exception that strains the republic's neutrality doctrine is Muirthuaidh, the northeastern region the rest of the world calls the Marches. The republic asserts sovereign authority there; Albion maintains a permanent military and administrative presence under the peace settlement that ended the Forty-Two Years' War. Today Éirighdún is governed through an elected High Council of Clanns,

defended by a modest disciplined force alongside citizen militias, and underwritten by treaty guarantees from Luminore and Valdegracia. None of those arrangements has produced an answer to the Marches.

### Muirthuaidh, the Marches

At the end of the Forty-Two Years' War, Albion annexed Muirthuaidh as part of the peace settlement. Its population was then, and remains, overwhelmingly Éirighdúnian in heritage. The republic never accepted the transfer as final; Albion has never agreed to leave. Between those positions lies an inhabited territory of upland farms, river towns, peat country, shipping quays, and roads local people know better than the garrison does. Its regional capital is Béal na Móna, where an Albion administration issues permits, collects duties, keeps registers, and quarters soldiers.

The Marches are divided, but not along a single line. Solarian communities generally favor reunification with Éirighdún. Luminary Fellowship communities more often support continued union with Albion, partly from confession and partly because Albionite markets, credit, and licences have shaped livelihoods for a generation. Neither confession is a monolith. Mixed households, merchants dependent on Albionite shipping, families with cousins in Dúncairn, and people who simply want the roads open all live inside the same dispute. Éirighdún wants the Marches back and says so openly. It also understands that the surest way to lose them permanently is a war it starts.

### Clann na Saoirse

Clann na Saoirse, usually shortened abroad to the Clann, is the movement that refuses to let the annexation become a settled fact. It is rooted in the Marches rather than organized like a conventional army: kinship, guarded hospitality, close communities, watched roads, and knowledge passed in speech rather than written down. That does not mean the whole population belongs to it. Unionist families, commercial interests, and people exhausted by the conflict share the same territory, and the Clann can assume nothing about a household it does not already know.

Dúncairn keeps deliberate distance. The republic sympathizes openly with the goal and insists Muirthuaidh is its own, but it does not dictate when, where, or how the Clann acts. That autonomy is useful and dangerous. One badly judged operation could force Éirighdún either to disown people fighting for territory it claims or to mobilize for the war it has spent years preventing.

The Clann's reach into the Golden Sea grew through older human ties. Among the early Compañero expeditions were Éirighdúnari guns for hire, sailors, and veterans of the struggle that followed Albion's seizure of Muirthuaidh. Some had fought there; others simply had reason to put Albion and the Marches behind them. A number

survived the expeditions and settled in Heller. Over the following decades their families formed friendships, marriages, debts, and obligations with communities throughout the Golden Sea. When Clann na Saoirse later emerged as an organized movement, those Hellerite families offered an existing network of safe houses, old comrades, and introductions.

The Clann therefore does not possess inherited knowledge of the Golden Sea itself. It inherits access to people who do. Routes, graves, watched places, and Source sites are shared selectively through trust and obligation, and much of that knowledge is never written down. When conduct earns trust, the Clann can offer safe passage through its own network, a guide, access to knowledge entrusted to it, or an introduction to the people whose permission actually matters. Publishing maps, bringing soldiers onto protected ground, mistreating graves, or treating a Source as property can end that trust quickly.

### Éirighdún in Mar de Oro

In the Golden Sea, Éirighdún appears as factors, ship brokers, insurers, and the occasional Éterlumin assessor whose presence in a particular harbor is never entirely accidental. The republic does not maintain colonies. It maintains relationships. There is an Éirighdúnari factor house in Boca Serena whose formal neutrality is recognized by every power operating in the archipelago, which means that documents lodged there are considered, by convention, protected from seizure under any flag. This convention is maintained by collective interest rather than treaty. Its practical effect is that the factor house serves as an informal clearing ground for commercial negotiations that the parties involved prefer not to be seen conducting directly.

Éirighdúnari captains are widely regarded as among the finest navigators in the known world. Three centuries of moving goods through contested waters without being boarded by either side has taught them well. Their flag is respected because disrespect has repeatedly proved more expensive. Éterlumin assessors sometimes travel with trading missions under other titles: factor, scholar, physician. Everyone in Mar de Oro who deals with Éirighdúnari merchants at a certain level knows what this means. No one says it aloud.

### What an Éirighdúnari Carries

The character formed in Éirighdún carries two things in productive tension: the public flexibility of the republic's diplomacy and the private ferocity of its clans. To outsiders, an Éirighdúnari is adaptable, commercially acute, and politically literate in the specific sense of knowing who owes what to whom and where the real pressure points lie. They can appear committed to nothing except the flow of commerce.

This is accurate as far as it goes. What it misses is the clan underneath. Éirighdúnari loyalty, when it is given, is given completely and remembered permanently. The offense against a family member is an offense against the family. The debt owed to a house is a debt the house will collect, in its own time, at a moment of its choosing.

They carry a practical relationship to Éterlumin that most other peoples lack. They grew up where deposits are worked, assessors are real, and the material is understood in practical as well as theological terms. Their engagement with it is correspondingly grounded. They do not mysticize it. They have seen it.

They also carry a particular relationship to religious identity. Éirighdún maintains tolerance as a commercial and political necessity, making confession personal rather than civic. Most Éirighdúnari were not raised to treat religion as the primary marker of social belonging. Their relationship to confessional identity is often detached and observational. Muirthuaidh and its neighboring districts are the exception; there, contested history has turned confession into political position for some families.

> AT A GLANCE
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> Every Éirighdúnari factor house of standing maintains a *cuimhne*, a memory book in which significant commercial relationships, debts, favors, and grievances are recorded by hand. The cuimhne has no official standing in court. It records what actually happened, who did what, and what was said, distinct from contracts and official correspondence. Senior factors pass their cuimhne to successors rather than heirs. The books accumulate. The oldest, preserved in great-house archives, reach back seven generations and contain a commercial history considerably less flattering than the official one.

The three great confessional traditions of the Solarian world are living institutions as well as theological categories. Each has its own hierarchy, culture, diplomatic network, and claims on the loyalty of people raised in a world shaped by faith. Their intersections with the continental powers form an invisible architecture of allegiance and enmity beneath almost every transaction in Mar de Oro.

### The Solarian Communion and Its Powers

The Solarian Communion is the largest and most broadly distributed of the three traditions. It traces authority through what it describes as an unbroken line of institutional succession from the earliest organized church. The Holy See is its apex institution and Valdegracia its most powerful secular ally. Their interests are so intertwined that separating them requires care. A Valdegracian colonial policy may be substantially ecclesiastical; a spiritual pronouncement from the See may carry major political consequences for the Crown.

The Solarian tradition is not monolithic. Its internal debates divide contemplative and active orders, scholastic theologians and pastoral clergy, and those who see Eisenmark's emphasis on natural philosophy as productive development from those who see a slow-moving heresy. These tensions matter. They still occur within a shared institutional framework that gives the Solarian world a coherence the other traditions lack.

A Solarian character, whether Valdegracian, Luminoran, Hellerite, or colonial, shares a liturgical language, a canon law, and a chain of institutional authority with every other Solarian in the known world. This is not nothing. In Mar de Oro, where other certainties dissolve, the Church's institutional presence is often the last continuous connection to the world the character left behind.

Eisenmark is the most confessionally open polity on the continent. It has no state church. All three major traditions, Solarian, Fellowship, and Oraclean, operate legally within its borders, maintain institutions, staff clergy, and observe their rites without interference from the crown. This is not an accident of history or a temporary compromise. It is policy, deliberate and maintained. The Elector-Duke's court has Solarian advisors, Fellowship-trained scholars, and an Oraclean liturgical calendar on the wall of the great library, and none of this is considered remarkable by the people who work there.

Eisenmark's experience is that a kingdom which makes confessional loyalty a condition of civic participation spends a great deal of energy enforcing that condition and a correspondingly smaller amount of energy on everything else. It has chosen differently.

### The Luminary Fellowship and Its Powers

The Fellowship is the newest of the three traditions. Within living memory it began as an internal Solarian reform debate and ended, through institutional intransigence and mechanical printing, as a separate confession. It has no single apex like the See. National synods govern it, supported by an informal but influential network of learned scholars centered on Luminore's university. Its theology emphasizes conscience, scripture, and the community of believers over institutional hierarchy and sacerdotal transmission.

Its primary secular patrons are Albion and Stroomdijk, with Fellowship clergy and communities also present in the Duchy of Heller and throughout colonial Mar de Oro. Luminore is a Solarian republic and plays no institutional role in Fellowship governance. Albion has genuine theological sympathy for the Fellowship while insisting that the state keep its own counsel on religious questions. It does not permit Fellowship synods the jurisdictional authority their theologians consider proper. The result is an ongoing negotiation.

Stroomdijk's relationship to the Fellowship is more pragmatic. Crown and Directorate are formally Fellowship-aligned, giving the church official standing. The commercial class treats confession as a background fact of civic life rather than a burning personal commitment.

The Duchy of Heller is formally Solarian. Its founders carried the Solarian faith with them on the Compañero expeditions, and the Duchy's official ecclesiastical life remains within the Solarian communion. But the Duchy is also young, small, and built by people who needed every willing hand, which has produced a practical tolerance that its more established Solarian neighbors find somewhat irregular. A Fellowship congregation meeting in a Hellerite harbor town is not suppressed.

An Oraclean sailor observing his rites is not interfered with. The Duchy does not officially sanction this pluralism; it simply does not expend the administrative energy required to prevent it. The Offices of Inquiry have noted this. The Duchy's response, when pressed, is that the frontier creates conditions that the institutional church has not yet fully addressed, and that the Duchy remains entirely orthodox in its own observance.

In Mar de Oro, the Fellowship's presence is proportionately smaller than the Solarian church's but growing. Its clergy are found mostly in Albionite and Hellerite colonial establishments and aboard commercial vessels of those nations. Its most consequential influence, however, is in the circulation of its printed materials, pamphlets, catechisms, and translated texts, which move through the Golden Sea with the same commercial currents that carry everything else.

### The Oraclean Communion and Its Powers

The Oraclean Communion is the oldest of the three in its origins and the most geographically concentrated in its present expression. It is the state faith of Volkharov and is practiced, in varying degrees of institutional robustness, by communities scattered across the eastern margins of the continental world and, in diaspora, wherever Volkharovi merchants and missionaries have traveled. It lacks the continental breadth of the Solarian church and the intellectual mobility of the Luminary Fellowship; what it has is depth, rootedness, and the extraordinary institutional resilience of a tradition that has survived several centuries of extraordinary pressure without losing its essential character.

The Oraclean tradition makes no universal claim like the Solarian one. It seeks to preserve the integrity of its communion and extend it, through proper formation, to communities that come voluntarily. This reflects a theological conviction rather than modesty. The sacramental community is a living form of ordered life rooted in particular places and histories, and it participates in the eternal order through that particularity.

An Oraclean community that has maintained its liturgical life intact through persecution, dispossession, or exile is, in this understanding, not diminished by those experiences; it has demonstrated the depth of what it carries.

In Mar de Oro, the Oraclean presence is the smallest and most self-contained of the three. Volkharovi missions look first for Oraclean communities already present: in diaspora, along commercial networks, or in settlements whose own development has produced similar practice. Their task is to keep those communities properly constituted. That means ordained clergy, correctly administered rites, and a maintained connection to Archpatriarchal authority in Volkharov. Quiet pastoral work of this kind is worth watching. Communities fully drawn into Oraclean institutional life tend, over time, to develop other Volkharovi connections as well.

The three communions do not regularly achieve coordination. They share, across their considerable differences, a common theological heritage, the belief that the Fortera is real, that it is knowable in some fashion, and that human life is enriched by organized attention to its character. But the forms of that organization are so different, and the institutional interests arrayed behind each form so substantial, that the convergence of theological premise has never produced political alignment.

Characters navigating the confessional landscape of Mar de Oro will find, as their counterparts on the continent have found for two centuries, that the deepest divisions in the world are not between nations that believe entirely different things, but between nations that believe nearly the same things and cannot agree on who has the right to say so.

AT THE TABLE

### Make power personal.

When a power matters in play, show it through a person, a rule, a price, a favor, a ritual, or a habit. Let the reader meet institutions through consequences rather than another block of exposition.

CHAPTER 4

# THE GOLDEN SEA




*Principal islands, powers, and routes of the Golden Sea.*

Original cartography from *Continents and Archipelagos of the Herran Sea* by Kirdissir, relabelled for Mar de Oro. Changes are limited to names and labels. No endorsement by Kirdissir or Inkarnate is implied.

Interactive map and full attribution: www.mar-de-oro.com/#world-overview

THE SEA DOES NOT CARE WHO CLAIMS IT.

### Archipelagos of the Mar de Oro

Mar de Oro is a scatter of islands, but "scatter" understates the complexity. It is a web of routes, anchorages, reefs, plantations, coves, signal heights, mission stations, customs houses, taverns, shrines, hidden inlets, jungle interiors, and settlements that can become strategic overnight when rumor changes direction.

It matters because of position, access, and possibility. Whoever controls its routes can influence continental movement across a wide swath of sea. Whoever learns what lies beneath its hills, shoals, caverns, and older ruins may acquire leverage beyond any single island's apparent worth.

## The Flags in the Archipelago

Every major continental power has a presence in Mar de Oro. This section is a plain orientation: who is here, what they hold, and what kind of presence they maintain. Chapter Three covers each power in full.

Valdegracia is the oldest and largest colonial presence in the archipelago. Its viceroys, missions, and garrison commanders have been here since the first decade after the New World's discovery. Its establishments are the most architecturally permanent and the most thoroughly administered. Valdegracia considers Mar de Oro, in some fundamental sense, its rightful inheritance.

New Avalon is Albion's colonial establishment, tightly administered under a crown-appointed governor and backed by a Royal Navy presence in adjacent waters. The Bureau of Correspondent Affairs maintains an unofficial presence that is widely understood.

Nouvelle Lumière is Luminore's colonial establishment, closely tied to the metropolitan republic by cultural and commercial bonds. Formal, rationalist, and attentive to record.

Nieuw Waterland is Stroomdijk's colonial holding, run by the chartered companies under concession: extraction quotas, contracted service articles, company stores, company courts, and company men armed to protect concession property. It exists to generate returns and is governed accordingly.

The Duchy of Heller is the autonomous Valdegracian colonial territory, governed by Dux Hernanus Costesius de Heller and Dux Franciscus Perezzi. Its flag carries two gold dragons and the silver dragon of the presumed-dead Generalis Costilas. The Duchy owes Valdegracia military allegiance in time of war. In all other matters, it governs itself.

Canula Prime is a free port under Valdegracian dominion, its governor directly answerable to the crown. Ships of every flag dock there, goods of every provenance pass through it, and the customs officers have learned to ask fewer questions than the regulations technically require.

Éirighdún holds no colonial territory. Its factor houses are present in almost every harbor of consequence. The Éirighdúnari factor house in Boca Serena is the closest thing the archipelago has to neutral ground.

Volkharov has no colonial establishment. When it appears in Mar de Oro, it does so purposefully: survey vessels, religious missions, diplomats whose mandates are not fully explained. It is watching.

Eisenmark has no colonial establishment. Its people appear as individuals, engineers, scholars, mercenary officers, ships' physicians, sought after for their competence and uninvested in the political dynamics that exhaust the colonial powers.

## Canula Prime

Canula Prime is the archipelago's cosmopolitan heart, a free-trading hub where delegations from every power gather and where formal diplomacy and private intrigue are separated mostly by tablecloth quality. Its streets are crowded with agents, clerks, sailors, priests, investors, thieves, surveyors, translators, informants, and respectable men whose respectability depends on who is asking.

The city runs on layers. Public negotiations happen in one building while the real ones happen two streets away. Warehouses change hands on paper while keeping the same guards. Cargoes are inspected, misinspected, blessed, taxed, stolen, reflagged, and quietly returned. It is one of the best possible starting places for a campaign because it

teaches the setting's core lesson quickly: nothing in Mar de Oro stays local for long.

## Valldeila

Valldeila, capital of the Duchy of Heller, is more rooted than Canula Prime and no less alive. It is a working harbor city of stone docks, shipyards, counting-houses, churches, taverns, military offices, and practical ambition. Airships rise from its piers. Officials walk its quays. Merchants count carefully. Laborers curse honestly. The city feels built not by inherited grandeur but by effort remembered in living memory.

To walk Valldeila is to understand why the Duchy of Heller matters. It believes in itself without yet having the luxury of complacency.

## Peoples of the Golden Sea

The Golden Sea was inhabited before continental charts began giving its islands new names. Its indigenous communities are not one people and do not share a single politics, faith, or relationship with the colonial powers. Harbor pilots, fishing

families, interior communities, guides, interpreters, traders, and keepers of local rites may live only a few days' travel apart and still understand land, water, ancestry, and obligation differently.

What many of these communities share is knowledge that official maps do not contain. A pilot may know a reef by the way water changes color over it. A guide may navigate by trees, stone, insect song, or flood marks that no surveyor thought worth recording. Graves, old sites, Source locations, seasonal routes, and safe water can be held in memory rather than in a colonial archive. Access to that knowledge is a relationship, not a resource waiting to be collected.

### The Oruvai of the Lower Estuary

The Oruvai are a network of indigenous river-mouth communities whose settlements predate the colonial ports built around the Estuary. They are not a centralized state. Each settlement governs its own landings, fisheries, family obligations, and local disputes; matters affecting shared channels, seasonal movement, or agreements with outsiders are taken to an estuary council hosted in rotation.

In 7202, the Oruvai's most immediate political struggle is over access. Continental companies want deeper channels, survey rights, freshwater sites, and reliable routes inland. Oruvai councils negotiate some of those requests and refuse others. A pilot's contract does not grant a surveyor the right to mark burial ground. A trading agreement does not make a spawning channel company property. Different Oruvai settlements disagree about how much commerce is worth the pressure it brings, which means outsiders cannot treat one agreement as permission everywhere.

An Oruvai character might be a pilot, fisher, interpreter, factor, healer, surveyor, clerk, or someone educated in a mission or colonial school who returned with skills their community needs. Ask which settlement recognizes them, who there can call on them, what agreement with outsiders they believe has been broken, and what they want the Estuary to look like when the current scramble for the Golden Sea is over.

For play, do not treat a local guide as a portable map or an indigenous community as scenery around a colonial problem. Ask who holds authority here, what outsiders have already promised or taken, what permission is required, and what would make trust possible. Anti-colonial struggle in Mar de Oro begins with people who have their own interests before a crew arrives and will still have them after the crew leaves.

## Ports of the Wider Sea

### Boca Serena

Boca Serena is one of the few ports where several kinds of authority overlap without fully controlling one another. Albion's Colonial Office maintains a mission there, while the Éirighdúnari factor house is treated by convention as neutral ground for documents and negotiations. That combination makes the port valuable to diplomats, brokers, couriers, and anyone who needs two hostile parties to occupy the same room without admitting that they arranged it.

### Port Aurum

Port Aurum sits far enough from the centers of continental administration that old obligations can arrive late. Debts, warrants, family names, and reputations still matter, but the people responsible for enforcing them may be weeks away. For some arrivals that delay is opportunity. For others it is only the interval before the old world catches up.

### Portaverde

Portaverde is a mixed harbor where ships, accents, faiths, and family histories cross constantly. It is the kind of place that produces people who cannot be summarized by one continental flag: children of sailors and settlers, mission-educated clerks, local pilots, merchants with several commercial languages, and households whose loyalties do not fit the boxes on a customs form.

### The Estuary Settlements

The Estuary settlements sit at the edge of reliable metropolitan memory. News travels, but not evenly; records exist, but do not always arrive before the people they describe. The settlements are therefore places where a person may gain room to begin again, and where the gap between official geography and lived geography becomes especially wide.

## The wider islands

Beyond the great hubs lie the islands that make the archipelago more than a political abstraction. Fishing villages live by tide and rumor. Plantation estates hide brutality behind export figures. Interior tracks vanish under growth. Free ports cultivate selective law. Mission stations ring bells into country that does not much care for bells.

Some islands are well charted. Others are well known only to smugglers, local pilots, fishing families, or those who inherited stories the central powers dismissed as superstition until profit gave them reason to listen. Good Mar de Oro play often lives in the gap between official geography and lived geography.



CHAPTER 5

# FAITH, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Faith is not an optional backdrop in Aeon. It is the grammar of public life. The Codex shapes law, festival, burial, kingship, conscience, rhetoric, marriage, and the ordinary expectations by which communities measure one another.

Even those who reject religious authority tend to speak its inherited language. One may despise bishops and still think in terms of sin, grace, mercy, corruption, witness, and judgment because the culture has been built in that grammar for centuries.

## The three voices of the church

Since the Sundering, the faith speaks through three primary denominations.

The Solarian Church is hierarchical, ceremonial, traditional, and politically entangled with old powers, especially Valdegracia. It values continuity, clerical interpretation, visible authority, and the beauty of order.

The Luminary Fellowship is reformist, text-centered, and more openly committed to personal conscience and direct reading of the Codex. It distrusts excessive hierarchy and tends to produce both the noblest reformers and the most exhausting arguers in the setting.

The Oraclean Communion is liturgical, mystical, and communal in its approach to truth. It values rite, sacrament, counsel, song, symbol, and the slow discernment of meanings no single authoritative voice should claim too quickly.

## The Solarian imagination

The Solarian Church is large, powerful, ornate, and serious about itself. At its best, it offers structure, charity, beauty, liturgical gravity, and the comfort of continuity in a dangerous world. At its worst, it becomes sanctified bureaucracy armed with wealth, status, and enough confidence to mistake preservation for righteousness.

Both sides matter. A Solarian priest in play may be a sincere shepherd, a political animal, a fearful administrator, a hidden reformer, or a man who has spent so long protecting the institution that he can no longer tell whether he still serves its God.

## The Luminary conscience

The Fellowship carries the moral energy of reform and the instability that often accompanies reform once it learns how many things require reforming. It values reading, conscience, and personal encounter with the Codex. Its communities often feel more immediate, more textually alive, and more internally argumentative than Solarian structures.

That argumentativeness is not a flaw accidentally attached to the Fellowship. It is one of its natural products. People taught to read scripture personally are not easily persuaded to become silent in other areas of life.

## The Oraclean mystery

The Oraclean Communion preserves a sacramental imagination the other two traditions often misunderstand. It is precise, ritualistic, and more comfortable with mystery than either hierarchy or reform usually permits. It understands that not every truth is best handled by immediate simplification.

That does not make it vague. On the contrary, good ritual is often stricter than administration. Oraclean characters are especially rich for play because they live where symbol and discipline meet.

## Death and the ordered passage of the soul

Death in Aeon is attended by rite. Bodies are washed, anointed, clothed, prayed over, and committed to consecrated ground with light, song, and witness. The faithful hold that the virtuous pass toward Celestia, the realm of radiance and living nearness to the All-Father, while the corrupt descend toward Umbra, the abyss associated with Nytharion.

Yet even here the religious imagination is not without mercy. Repentance, intercession, grace, and last-minute rescue all remain imaginable within the world's theology. That is why the setting's funerary tone is grave rather than merely bleak.

PART III

# A WORLD CHANGING

## IN THIS PART

*Read for*

Chapters 6–8: Fortera, Éterlumin, the Powered Arts, moons, anomalies, and change.

## USE THIS WHEN

*At the table*

A character encounters a working, an engine, a strange phenomenon, or a belief the world cannot yet reconcile.

## TABLE ESSENTIALS

*Carry forward*

Fortera and Éterlumin belong to one physical order. Traditions describe approaches, not separate realities.

CHAPTER 6

# FORTERA & ÉTERLUMIN

*It is neither wind, nor flame, nor the pull of the earth, yet it may alter the motion, heat, or other properties of matter.*

Here is the engine of every wonder in Aeon, shown to you with the curtain raised. The world names two mysteries: Fortera, the subtle influence behind rites, engines, gifts, and strange workings; and Éterlumin, the rare substance upon which aerial navigation depends. The world has not yet understood that it has been studying one thing through two vocabularies.

## The accepted laws of Fortera

The learned world knows several principles already. Fortera is present in all places. It may be drawn by certain instruments, engines, rites, or natural prodigies. Within prudent use it recovers readily. If pressed past local replenishment it weakens, at times fading altogether for a period. If mishandled in haste or violence it may create instability that hinders other uses nearby.

This knowledge is enough to support entire traditions of practice. It is enough for miracle-workers to seem miraculous, engineers to seem ingenious, and common people to remain productively uncertain about where holiness ends and technique begins.

## The accepted laws of Éterlumin

Éterlumin is taught as a rare gaseous substance of great practical importance in aerial travel. In its active state it is lighter than air and dangerously flammable. In its inert state it is heavier and comparatively safe for storage. Between them lies the unstable semi-state, a condition associated with strange resonance, unusual buoyancy, and a level of hazard that makes competent engineers quiet and incompetent ones dead.

Every shipwright, dock engineer, and serious aerial crew knows that Éterlumin is not forgiving. It rewards discipline and punishes carelessness with a speed that removes debate from the matter.

## One field, two faces

The world's greatest error is to treat Fortera and Éterlumin as unrelated. They are not. Fortera is a universal field permeating matter and space. Éterlumin is its physical carrier in forms the present age can exploit most directly. Every blessing, engine, ritual, tuned device, and airship drive belongs to the same order.

That is why this setting feels the way it does. Priests and engineers are not opposites. Scholars and miracle-workers are not different species. The age has split one reality into several professions and called the division wisdom. Those misunderstandings are among the richest sources of drama in the game.

## The three states of Éterlumin

Éterlumin matters because it can exist in three practically important states.

- Inert: stable, dense, and comparatively safe in storage.
- Semi-state: unstable, resonant, amplifying, and dangerous.
- Active: light, volatile, and indispensable for aerial lift.

These are not merely technical categories. In play they shape atmosphere, labor, danger, and culture. A captain speaks differently when the hold carries inert gas than when the chamber is active and every careless spark becomes theology in motion.



## Fortera at the Table

Fortera should usually appear first as an effect with a method. A prayer changes the behavior of heat. A tuned frame alters motion. A resonant phrase makes a suspended instrument answer from across a room. The same field sits beneath each event, but characters encounter instruments, traditions, habits, and consequences before they encounter a complete theory.

Reliable use has boundaries. Local depletion, interference, bad calibration, damaged equipment, exhaustion, and overconfidence can all turn a controlled working into a problem. The important question is rarely whether Fortera is magic. The people of

Aeon do not possess that category. The question is who understands enough of the phenomenon to act safely, and what their institution believes that understanding means.

## Working with Éterlumin

Éterlumin is matter before it is mystery. Inert stores are dense and comparatively stable. The semi-state is the dangerous transition: resonant, difficult to predict, and capable of making instruments behave in ways their operators did not intend. Active Éterlumin supplies lift and demands continuous attention to pressure, heat, containment, and trim.

On an airship, this makes engineering culture immediate. Gauges are watched. Chambers are isolated when something feels wrong. A sudden change in trim is information. A hiss, vibration, temperature shift, or unexpected resonance can matter more than a shouted order. The technology works, but it works because crews treat it as hazardous machinery rather than as a miracle that cannot fail.

CHAPTER 7

# THE POWERED ARTS

Those who shape Fortera deliberately are called many things: priests, scholars, witches, singers, blessed, dangerous, touched, gifted, or cursed depending on who is watching. The world sorts them into traditions and then mistakes those traditions for separate realities. They are not separate realities. They are separate cultures built atop one reality.

## Arcane scientists

These practitioners approach Fortera as a thing to be measured, diagrammed, tested, and repeated. They write notebooks, tune apparatus, make and ruin prototypes, and believe that reality may eventually be persuaded into legibility if one is patient enough and not too sentimental about explosions.

## Resonant artists

For others, rhythm, chant, song, poetics, and performed pattern are not ornament but method. They discover that the field answers not only to instrument and formula but to breath, cadence, harmony, and emotion shaped with precision. Their work often appears uncanny to stricter minds because beauty is easier to dismiss than brass until the beautiful thing actually works.

## Ritual scholars

Clerical and liturgical practitioners do not merely imitate science in sacred dress. They carry their own disciplines, lineages, and methods of attention. Relics, sanctified geometries, prayers, oils, postures, incense, saintly invocations, and doctrinal frames all become means by which the same reality is approached under a sacred grammar.

## Living experimenters

Those who work through season, tide, animal pattern, weather, fertility, decay, and landscape understand Fortera through the life of the world itself. Their arts often appear oldest because they refuse the urban separation between nature and knowledge.

## Forbidden and innate paths

Some relations to power are inherited, bargained, accidental, or traumatic. These paths are often feared because they seem less governable by institution. Yet the world would be easier and less interesting if reality confined itself to approved channels.

SETTING TRUTH

## Different traditions. One world.

Arcane science, resonance, ritual practice, living experimentation, and forbidden or innate paths are cultural approaches to forces the age does not yet fully understand.

## Different Methods, Shared Physics

The five Powered Arts are not five power sources. They are learned interfaces with one field. Two practitioners may produce similar effects while disagreeing completely about what happened: a cleric names a rite, an engineer names a controlled interaction, a resonant artist names a pattern, and all three may be describing the same physical event through different training.

That distinction matters socially. Institutions license methods, distrust rival vocabularies, and decide which practices count as medicine, engineering, devotion, art, or heresy. A character's method therefore changes more than aesthetics. It changes who will teach them, who will fund them, who will believe their explanation, and who may decide that the explanation itself is dangerous.

CHAPTER 8

# MOONS, ANOMALIES AND CHANGE

The curse of the moons is among the most feared conditions in Aeon. Though popular imagination attaches it most strongly to Umbra and to moral corruption, lived experience teaches that the curse is also physical, cyclical, hereditary in some cases, and socially ruinous in ways theology alone does not explain.

Families hide it. Priests condemn it, manage it, or exploit it. Physicians attempt to classify it. Neighbors whisper. Some communities develop practical kindness. Others develop only fear refined into procedure.

In play, the curse matters not only because transformation is frightening. It matters because secrecy, stigma, desperate care, false cures, mercenary doctrine, and the price of being known as altered are all powerful human problems. To seek a cure is to move through science, faith, politics, and shame at once.



## The Three Lunar Rhythms

Umbra completes its cycle in twenty-nine days, Sirulena in thirty-four, and Veles in forty-one. Their cycles do not align neatly with one another or with civil time. Almanacs track all three because sailors, physicians, clergy, families of the Moon-Affected, and anyone planning a long voyage may care which influences are waxing together and which are moving apart.

People attach different meanings to those rhythms. Umbra is associated with concealment, appetite, transformation, violence, and feared loss of self-governance. Sirulena carries associations of dream, memory, inwardness, song, and unusual sensitivity. Veles is tied to body, growth, healing, fever, decay, and the cycles of living things. These associations are cultural observations, not a complete scientific account.

## Anomalies Are Physical

Mar de Oro's strangest phenomena belong to the same world as weather, disease, metallurgy, and Éterlumin. They may be poorly understood, rare, dangerous, and capable of producing creatures or events that feel impossible, but they do not require another plane or a separate supernatural realm. The mystery comes from incomplete knowledge, not from a second physics.

When an anomaly appears in play, give it evidence before explanation: altered material, impossible residue, a repeating signal, a pattern in injuries, a change in local Fortera behavior, an instrument that behaves correctly everywhere except here. Let characters investigate a phenomenon with consequences rather than merely encounter a label.

PART IV

# YOUR CHARACTER

## IN THIS PART

*Read for*

Chapters 9-12, plus the two-page character map immediately ahead.

## USE THIS WHEN

*At the table*

Character creation, session zero, a replacement character, or finding a stronger personal hook.

## TABLE ESSENTIALS

*Carry forward*

Place. Formation. Calling. Bond. Burden. Purpose. Specific answers create playable pressure.

CHARACTER CREATION

# CHARACTER CREATION MAP

**1 PLACE** — **Where did you become who you are?**

Nation, colony, port, village, ship, district, frontier, or somewhere between categories.

**2 FORMATION** — **What taught you how the world works?**

Faith, class, family, institution, trade, service, community, or a life lived against them.

**3 CALLING** — **What are you trained to do?**

The work that shaped your instincts and tells strangers why you are here.

**4 BOND** — **Who or what can still make a claim on you?**

A person, crew, place, institution, oath, cause, or relationship worth paying a cost for.

**5 BURDEN** — **What follows you?**

A debt, duty, failure, reputation, secret, obligation, wound, or unfinished consequence.

**6 PURPOSE** — **Why are you here now?**

A person, proof, place, answer, fortune, cause, escape, or a chance to become someone else.

Do not optimize the fiction. Choose answers that give the table handles: obligations, competencies, loyalties, and pressure. The rules can be chosen after the person is clear.

CHARACTER CREATION

# FROM SETTING TO NATIVE RULES

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PLACE + FORMATION | Background and starting Skills | Where you learned to function and what your prior life made ordinary. |
| SETTING CALLING | Ready-made Calling or custom build | Choose a starting focus, not a class. Change it later as the fiction supports. |
| TRAINING | Skills and Strengths | Skills say what you can do. Strengths mark mastery and can add the Specialist Die. |
| EXCEPTIONAL EDGE | Techniques | Techniques grant unusual permissions, procedures, or signature approaches. |
| BOND | Bond | The person, cause, crew, place, or institution worth paying a cost for. |
| BURDEN | Burden | The obligation, consequence, wound, reputation, or unfinished past that can return. |
| FORTERA RELATIONSHIP | Fortera Practice, if relevant | Only characters who actually practise Fortera need its specialist rules. |
| CURRENT MISSION | Equipment and Load | Take what your work, status, preparation, and immediate situation justify. |

## READY-MADE NATIVE RULES CALLINGS

Soldier · Officer · Diplomat · Scout · Field Investigator · Operative · Engineer · Physician

A Calling is a starting focus, not a class. Any character may learn any Technique when the fiction supports it. A physician or surgeon maps directly to the Physician Calling even when the Setting Guide describes their social role under another fiction-facing calling.

## SYSTEM-NEUTRAL STOPPING POINT

If you are using another rules engine, Place + Formation + Setting Calling + Bond + Burden + Purpose already gives you a complete fiction-first character foundation.

CHAPTER 9

# WHO ARE YOU?

THE FIVE QUESTIONS

1. Where Are You From?
2. What Do You Believe?
3. Who Do You Owe?
4. What Have You Already Done?
5. What Are You Looking For?

Before you play, you build a person. Not a set of numbers, but a person. Someone who grew up somewhere, believes something, wants something, and has already made at least one choice they cannot entirely take back. The questions in this chapter are not character sheet prompts. They are the questions you ask when you want to know who someone actually is.

A character in the world of Aeon is not assembled from parts. They are not a collection of competencies waiting to be applied to problems. They are the product of a place, a specific port city or inland village or colonial settlement, and a faith that was handed to them before they were old enough to question it, and a class position that determined what doors opened for them and which ones were already locked by the time they arrived. The work of character creation is the work of understanding how those forces shaped someone, and what that person decided to do in spite of them, or because of them.

Identity in this world is layered, and the layers do not always agree with one another. A Valdegracian merchant's daughter raised in the Solarian Church and apprenticed to a chandler's guild carries three separate formations at once: the Valdegracian assumption that hierarchy is natural and necessary, the Solarian doctrine that the Fortera flows through sanctioned channels and that deviation from those channels is treated as a wound in the order of things, and the guild ethic that a contract freely entered is the closest thing to sacred law that ordinary people ever touch.

She may hold all three of these formations simultaneously without contradiction, or she may have reached a place where they pull against each other, and that friction is where her character actually lives. The point is that no one arrives in the world with a blank slate. Someone handed you your assumptions. Understanding who handed them to you, and whether you've examined the gift, is the beginning of making a real person.

This chapter is organized around five questions. Each is deceptively simple. Each opens, when you press on it, into a country of detail that will surprise you if you let it. You do not have to answer every part of every question before your first session. Some answers will come in play, will arrive uninvited in the middle of a scene you didn't expect. But the more you think through these questions now, the more your character will feel like someone who existed before the story began, and that quality, that sense of prior existence, is what makes a character feel real.

### Where Are You From?

Geography is the first fact about a person, but it is never only geography. Where you are from is a climate, a cuisine, a set of buildings, a way of speaking that you may have spent years trying to soften or that you have kept sharp by choice. It is the smell of the harbor in the morning or the sound of temple bells or the particular quality of summer heat in a landlocked provincial town.

But beneath the sensory detail, where you are from is also a set of structures, economic, religious, social, that shaped what you were taught to want and what you were taught to fear, and both of those lessons leave marks that follow you regardless of how far you travel.

Begin with the nation, but do not stop there. The nations of Aeon are large enough and internally various enough that saying you are from Stroomdijk tells us very little until we also know whether you are from a northern canal city with its merchant councils and its dense, pragmatic civic culture, or from a coastal fishing settlement where the Luminary Fellowship has deep roots and the rhythms of worship and work have been wound around each other for generations.

Saying you are from Valdegracia tells us something about imperial formation, about the particular grandeur-tinged melancholy of a continental power that knows it is no longer quite at the height of its reach, but it tells us nothing about whether you were shaped by the imperial court culture of the interior, the rough frontier pragmatism of the Mar de Oro colonies, or the old blood-and-stone nobility of the mountain provinces that still largely govern themselves.

Then there is class, which in this world is not merely a matter of wealth but of access, expectation, and education. A minor noble's second son from Valdegracia has been trained to expect deference, to move through institutions with the ease of someone for whom institutions were partly built, and to read the unspoken rules of formal social settings as naturally as he reads a map. He may be penniless, second sons frequently are, but he carries an orientation toward the world that money did not give him and poverty has not fully taken away.

Contrast him with a dockworker's child from a Stroomdijker port, who has grown up in the practical, physical economy of the waterfront, who knows the difference between the holds of a grain transport and a spice merchantman by smell, who understands informal hierarchy and labor solidarity in ways the noble's son has no framework for. Both of them can end up on the same crew. They will not see the same things when they look at the world.

And then there is the particular complication of colonial birth, for those who were not born in any continental homeland at all, but in Mar de Oro itself, in the ports and settlements and plantations and frontier communities that the continental powers have established on the far side of the Golden Sea. To be born in the colonies is to grow up in a place that the maps still label as an extension of somewhere else, a province of a distant metropole that you have perhaps never seen and that perhaps would not fully recognize you as its own.

Colonial-born characters carry a doubled consciousness, fluent in the language and forms of the parent culture, shaped by a geography and an economy and a set of daily violences that the parent culture does not understand and has largely declined to ask about. What it means to be from Mar de Oro, rather than merely stationed there, is one of the defining questions of Anno 7202, and a character who has grown up breathing that question is a particular kind of person.

Ask yourself not just where you were born, but where you became who you are. Sometimes those are the same place. Often they are not.

### What Do You Believe?

In the world of Aeon, faith is not a private ornament you may choose to wear or set aside. It is a formation, a structure of perception, a way of understanding what is real and what matters and who has the right to say so. Even a character who has lapsed from active practice, who has not entered a temple or said a prayer of form in years, is still working within or against the categories that their denomination gave them. You do not stop being shaped by Solarian doctrine simply by ceasing to believe it. The questions it asked you are still the questions you reach for when something is wrong.

The Solarian Church is the largest and most institutionally powerful of the three major denominations. It is hierarchical, liturgically elaborate, and deeply invested in the idea that Fortera is a divine order approached through sanctioned forms, trained clergy, and inherited authority. To be Solarian-formed is to have a deep instinct for proper office and proper form, along with the knowledge that the institution has sometimes enforced its understanding of order by means that do not bear examination in daylight.

The Luminary Fellowship is the newest of the three traditions, more text-centered and more focused on the individual's responsibility to read, judge, and answer conscience directly. Fellowship writers often describe Fortera as the light or order underlying creation, but Éterlumin remains the physical gas used in aerial technology. To be Fellowship-formed is to carry a stronger habit of personal discernment and a greater willingness to dispute inherited authority, with the accompanying danger of mistaking private certainty for truth.

The Oraclean Communion is the oldest in its roots and the most communal in its account of revelation. Oraclean practice holds that Fortera is discerned through communities properly constituted by rite, sacrament, counsel, and shared attention. Individuals may experience visions, impulses, or moments of unusual clarity, but no private experience becomes authoritative merely because one person claims it. Oraclean-formed characters are taught that discernment is a communal discipline and that certainty without testing can be its own kind of error.

Think about your character's current relationship to the faith they were raised in. This is not a simple question of belief or disbelief. There are Solarian characters who follow every form and genuinely feel nothing when they do, who have separated the social performance of faith from whatever private life the soul leads. There are lapsed Fellowship members who think about Fortera constantly, cannot stop thinking about it, whose lapsing was not the product of indifference but of an encounter with something that didn't fit any category the Fellowship gave them.

There are Oraclean characters who are waiting, who have been waiting for years, for a moment of discernment that has not come and are not sure whether that silence is a test or an answer. Where your character stands in relation to their formation tells you something essential about how they process doubt, how they respond to authority, and what it would actually take to change their mind.

Ask yourself also: what is the one thing you believe that you cannot prove? This is not a theological exercise, it is a character question. The gap between what you know and what you believe is where conscience lives, and it is very often where the most interesting choices come from. A character who believes, without evidence, that someone they wronged has forgiven them will make different decisions than one who believes, without evidence, that they have not been forgiven and never will be. Find the belief that lives in that gap, and hold onto it.

### Who Do You Owe?

Debt is the connective tissue of human life, and in a world of colonial economies, institutional faiths, and rigid social hierarchy, it takes forms that compound interest cannot capture. You owe someone. Probably more than one someone. The question is not whether, but who, and in what currency, and whether you have been honest with yourself about the nature of the obligation.

Begin with the people who helped you become who you are. A mentor, a parent, a patron, an older shipmate who taught you something crucial at a moment when you were about to learn the hard way. The debt to these figures is real even when it is not legible as debt, even when the person who helped you would refuse the word, would say they only did what was right.

The refusal does not cancel the obligation. It changes its shape. You may owe them not repayment but continuation, a commitment to carry something forward that they gave you. You may owe them an accounting of what you did with what they gave you. Think about what it would mean to pay this debt, and whether you actually want to.

Then there are the debts that come from what you did to others, or failed to do. These are more uncomfortable to examine, which is precisely why they are worth examining. A character who holds a position of command and made a decision that got someone killed is carrying a debt to the dead and to whoever loved them. A character who accepted a commission from an institution they later came to distrust, and carried it out, is carrying a debt to the people that commission affected.

A character who took something, a reputation, a livelihood, a sense of safety, from someone who could not afford to lose it carries that weight whether or not there was a law against what they did. These debts are not meant to be punishing. They are meant to be real. A character who has done things in the world has affected the world, and the world has not forgotten even if the character has.

Consider also institutional debt, obligations that arise not from personal relationship but from membership. A character who was educated at a Fellowship school and received that education free of charge, in exchange for a promise of future service that they have not yet rendered. A character who holds a commission from a continental power and has not resigned it, regardless of how loosely they currently interpret their obligations.

A character who is the last surviving member of a guild chapter and holds its charter and its small accumulated treasury in trust for members who no longer exist. These are not dramatic debts in the ordinary sense, and no one may be actively pursuing collection, but they sit in the character's history and shape their sense of what they are and are not free to do.

Name the person, or the institution, or the memory. Give the debt a face. That is the version of it that will matter in play.

### What Have You Already Done?

You are not new. This is perhaps the most important single fact about character creation in this world. You have already been somewhere. You have already held a position, made a choice, participated in something that had consequences. The first session of your story is not the first morning of your life. It is the morning after whatever it is that got you here, after the campaign, the voyage, the trial, the appointment, the disaster, the thing you are still not sure how to talk about.

Think about the shape of your prior life in terms of the world's major structures: military service, maritime work, religious vocation or training, trade and commerce, political service, criminal enterprise, scholarly or technical work. Most characters in Mar de Oro have touched more than one of these, as the colonial theater tends to produce people of mixed history, people who started as one thing and became another because the world required it. A former

Valdegracian infantry officer who found himself quartermastering a colonial supply depot who found himself navigating the informal economy of the depot's black market is not three different people. He is one person who has been in three different situations and learned from each of them. The accumulation of those experiences is not his backstory, it is him.

Focus particularly on the last significant thing you did before arriving at the beginning of your story. Not your entire life, but the chapter immediately preceding this one. What position did you hold? Who did you hold it with? Why did it end, because these things end, and the how and why of the ending matters. A soldier who mustered out honorably at the end of a campaign and a soldier who deserted in the final weeks are both veterans, but they are carrying different things.

A merchant sailor who lost a ship to storm and a merchant sailor who lost a ship to a decision she made in the moment, those two outcomes are the same external fact with very different internal weight.

There is also the category of things done that you would prefer not to explain. This is not a trap, and it is not an invitation to invention for its own sake. It is an acknowledgment that real people who have lived real lives in difficult circumstances

have done things that are complicated, that they are not sure how to feel about, that they would not choose as their first piece of self-introduction. Think about what that thing is for your character. Not to expose it, not now, perhaps not ever, but to know it is there. A character who knows their own difficult history has a foundation that a character without one does not.

What you have already done is also the source of whatever reputation you have. Reputation in Aeon is fragile and durable at the same time, it travels slowly in some directions and very fast in others, is almost impossible to correct once established, and can be both a door that opens and a door that closes depending entirely on who is watching. What does your name mean to the people who know it? Is that what you want it to mean?

### What Are You Looking For?

Every person in motion is looking for something. The looking is what makes the motion voluntary rather than merely reactive. A character who is simply responding to circumstances is a passenger in their own life. A character who is looking for something, who has decided that there is a specific thing worth finding, and that finding it is worth the cost, is moving through the world on their own terms, even when the world is pushing back hard.

This question asks you to be specific. Not treasure in the abstract, as most people who end up in Mar de Oro are looking, in some sense, for fortune, but a particular thing with a particular history that your particular character is the one looking for. A person. A document or text whose contents would change something important. A place that exists in accounts and rumors but that no colonial expedition has yet confirmed. Proof of something that you believe and cannot demonstrate.

Vindication for yourself or for someone else. An answer to a question that was handed to you by someone who didn't live long enough to find it themselves. The specificity matters because specificity is what turns a motivation into a driving force, it is what keeps you in motion when the easier answer is to stop, to take a berth on a merchant vessel, to find a quiet room in a port city and let the searching go.

Think about where this search came from. Most searches have an origin, a moment when something happened that created the need to find the thing. A death that raised a question. A discovery that opened a door that couldn't be closed again. A promise made under circumstances that felt, at the time, like the end of the world. A revelation, from a person, from a text, from something that might have been an Oraclean vision and might have been a fever dream and that you are not entirely sure it is wise to have built your life around, but you have, and here you are. The origin of the

search is often more interesting than the search itself, and knowing it will help you understand what it would mean to find what you are looking for, and whether finding it would be good.

Consider also what the search costs you. Nothing worth looking for is free, and a character who is genuinely looking for something will, over time, have to choose between the search and other things that also matter. Relationships. Safety. Comfort. Principles. The question is not whether these costs will appear, they will, but what your character's relationship to paying them actually is. Are you someone who accepts the cost clearly, eyes open, as the price of what you're after?

Are you someone who tells yourself the cost isn't that high and is wrong about that? Are you someone who has already paid a cost you didn't expect to pay and is still working out what you think of the transaction? All of these are real, and all of them produce real characters.

It is worth noting that not every search is for a thing. Some characters are not looking for an object or a person or a proof, but for a condition: a place or situation in which they are someone different than they were. This is a search for permission to begin again, to be known only by what they do from this point forward. If what you are actually looking for is a new start, then Mar de Oro and the Duchy of Heller specifically are worth understanding as destinations rather than merely as theaters of action. The Golden Sea lies far enough from the continental world that old reputations travel slowly, arriving late and often garbled, and in the interval a person has room to become something the news, when it finally crosses the water, no longer describes.

The Duchy of Heller in particular is a polity built, deliberately and within living memory, by people who refused to accept that their situation of origin defined their horizon. That logic is not merely a founding myth; it is an active principle, one the city extends, with varying degrees of grace, to the people it takes in. To arrive in the Duchy of Heller without a prior name is not a deficit. It is an opportunity the city recognizes.

The tension in this is real, and it would be dishonest to omit it. The past does not disappear when you sail far enough. Mar de Oro is full of people who discovered that the thing they were running from had followed them, changed its clothes, and was waiting in the next port. The search for a new start is real and worth pursuing; it simply requires honesty about what you are actually looking for.

One last thing: the search is not a guarantee. What you are looking for may not exist in the form you have imagined. It may exist and be unfindable. It may be findable and, when found, cost more than you thought. The character who is looking for

something has to hold the search as a real possibility without holding it as a certainty, and that tension, between the necessity of the search and the uncertainty of the outcome, is, in many ways, the deepest thing this question asks about who you are.

## Formation: Nation, Faith, and Class

A character is not the sum of their answers to the five questions. They are also the product of three intersecting formations, national, religious, and class-based, that shaped the assumptions they arrived at the world with before they ever made a choice. Understanding these formations is not an exercise in determinism. People exceed their formations constantly. But exceeding a formation requires knowing it is there, and a character who does not know what their default assumptions are is a character who will be surprised when those assumptions produce results they did not intend.

National formation is the broadest and in some ways the subtlest. It is the set of things you were taught to take for granted, what a legitimate authority looks like, how strangers should be treated, what counts as a fair transaction, and how much you should explain yourself to someone who asks.

Valdegracian formation produces, among other things, a strong instinct for hierarchy, an expectation that institutions are legitimate unless proven otherwise, and a particular melancholy that comes from growing up in a culture that knows it has inherited a great tradition under pressure. Stroomdijker formation produces contractual pragmatism, comfort with negotiated authority, and a habit of asking where cost, leverage, and obligation actually sit. Albionite formation produces confidence in durable institutions, maritime competence, careful observation, and an acute sensitivity to being condescended to. Luminoran formation carries civic confidence, print culture, and the expectation that claims should survive examination.

Hellerite formation is practical, young, and built around demonstrated loyalty and capability rather than inherited grandeur. Eisenmarkian formation carries the systematic quality of a people who treat administration, engineering, and examination as forms of order that must earn their authority by working. Volkharovi formation is steeped in catastrophic loss, communal endurance, and the conviction that organized life can survive conditions other cultures would treat as final.

Religious formation operates at a different register, not the what-is-legitimate-authority question but the what-is-real-and-what-matters question. Solarian formation gives you, first and most powerfully, a sense that the sacred is mediated, that there is a correct channel through which the divine reaches the world, and that

going around that channel is not merely irregular but dangerous. It gives you a strong instinct for liturgical form, a sensitivity to transgression, and a set of ethical categories that are both precise and conservative.

Fellowship formation gives you a different tool: the habit of discernment, the expectation that conscience is the final arbiter, the comfort with open questions that the Solarian tradition views with deep suspicion. Oraclean formation gives you a relationship to time that is slightly different from either, a practiced attentiveness to the present moment, a habit of treating unexpected events as potentially significant, and a tolerance for ambiguity that can shade, under pressure, into an uncomfortable passivity.

Class formation is perhaps the most taken-for-granted of the three, because it is the one that most deeply shapes what you think is normal. A character from the gentry or minor nobility has been trained to expect social deference without having been trained to notice that they expect it. A character from the merchant class has been trained to see the world in terms of transaction and leverage, which is both an asset and a limitation.

A character from the laboring classes knows that institutions are not reliably on their side and has learned, accordingly, to navigate around them, a skill that turns out to be extraordinarily useful in the colonial theater, where institutions are frequently at war with each other and the space between them is where most of the actual work gets done.

Colonial characters occupy a peculiar position in all three of these formations. They are typically carrying a national identity handed to them by parents or colonial culture, Valdegracian, Albionite, Stroomdijker, but they have grown up in a place that the parent culture neither fully understands nor entirely values. Their faith formation is often slightly irregular: the denominations that operate in Mar de Oro do so at some distance from metropolitan headquarters, and the varieties of practice that have developed in the colonial ports and settlements often reflect local pressures and compromises that would make metropolitan authorities uncomfortable.

Their class position is frequently scrambled by the colonial context, as families that were minor gentry at home become significant landholders in the colonies, and families that were comfortable merchants become frontier survival cases in a generation. A colonial-born character carries the knowledge that the world their parents' culture described is not the

world they actually live in, and that gap, between the map and the territory, between the official story and the lived experience, is one of the defining conditions of their existence.

## The Person Before the Crew

You were someone before you met these people. You had a history, a formation, a name that meant something to at least some small portion of the world. The moment you found yourself among this particular group, by design or chance or desperation or some combination of all three, you did not stop being that person. But something shifted. Something was added, or something that had been holding a specific shape was pressed into a slightly different form.

Think about what you brought with you. The habits of the former life, the military officer's instinct to account for the people under his command even when he is no longer anyone's commanding officer; the merchant sailor's practice of watching the horizon even in a room with no windows; the former seminarian's habit of reaching for theological categories when the world presents ethical confusion. These habits are not weaknesses. They are often the most useful thing about you. They are the shape your competence takes. But they also carry the assumptions of where they came from, and those assumptions will sometimes be wrong in ways that matter.

Think also about what you left behind, or tried to. A relationship you walked away from and are not sure was done walking away from you. A reputation that you hoped would not follow you to a new theater and that has, in fact, followed you. A version of yourself that you maintained for years in a particular context and that you have been trying to shed since that context ended, and you are not entirely sure, when you examine yourself honestly, whether you have actually shed it or merely put it away temporarily.

The person before the crew is still present. The question is whether you are carrying them deliberately or unconsciously, and what the difference would look like in practice.

The crew does not ask you to be someone new. What the crew provides, what any genuine company of people provides, is a new set of witnesses to who you already are. What you find out about yourself in the company of these particular people, in these particular circumstances, is not invention. It is discovery. You were always going to be this person. You are only now finding out what they do when it actually matters.

The five questions do not close. They continue to open as you play. Return to them.



CHAPTER 10

# HOMELAND AND IDENTITY

A homeland is not merely the place where you were born. It is the architecture of assumption that grew up around you before you had the words to name it, the way your household understood debt and obligation, the posture you learned for speaking to a priest, the distance you kept from strangers on a road, the first thing you noticed when something went wrong. By the time you are old enough to leave a place, it has already left its mark on you.

You may spend the rest of your life on the water, in foreign ports, among people who do not share your instincts, and still find that certain things come reflexively: a particular wariness in negotiation, a habit of looking toward the church tower when you enter a new settlement, an impulse to introduce yourself by your trade before your name, or your name before your trade. These are the residue of formation, not choice. They are neither weakness nor virtue. They are where you began.

This chapter is concerned with that formation. The continental powers, their politics, their histories, their ambitions in Mar de Oro, are treated elsewhere, as the forces they are on the world's stage. Here, those same powers are examined from the inside, from the level of the individual life shaped by them. What did it mean to grow up under the shadow of the Solarian Church?

What did the counting-houses of Stroomdijk make of the children raised near them? What does a Volkharovi from the high forests carry in their bones that a Luminoran from a print-town does not? These are the questions this chapter answers, not comprehensively, because no chapter can, but honestly enough to be useful.

There is one more origin that belongs here, and it does not map to any continental flag. Some who sail Mar de Oro were born into it, in a colonial port of raw timber and ambition, in a frontier mission town, aboard a vessel that became the only home they knew. Their formation is not Valdegracian or Albionite or anything else with a clean name.

It is layered, hybrid, improvised, and in its own way more complete than any single tradition. They belong to the last entry in this chapter, and they will recognize themselves there, or they will recognize the specific shape of not quite belonging anywhere, which amounts, after a while, to the same thing.

# VALDEGRACIA

### The weight of heaven, distributed through proper channels.

Valdegracia is old in a way that is not simply a matter of years. It is old in its bones, old in its certainties, old in the patient, unhurried confidence with which it has always assumed that the proper order of things is the order it embodies. The Church, the Solarian Church at its most elaborate and its most demanding, is woven into every Valdegracian institution, every calendar, every form of address. To grow up in Valdegracia is to grow up inside a cosmology that has already answered the most important questions. The task is not to find meaning but to live in correct relation to the meaning that already exists.

What the homeland made you is, before anything else, a person with an instinct for the vertical. Hierarchy in Valdegracia is not merely political; it is theological. Those above you are above you in the order of creation, and to acknowledge that correctly, through the right forms of address, the right deference in posture, the right silence at the right moments, is not submission.

It is participation in something larger than personality. This shapes even those Valdegracians who have shed their faith, or who wear it loosely. They still notice when hierarchy is being ignored, when deference is absent, when someone speaks to their better as an equal. It may not trouble them. But they notice.

Decorum is the social language. Not warmth, warmth comes later, inside relationships already established, but the formal exterior that says: I know how to conduct myself, and I expect you to know how to conduct yourself, and together we can proceed without embarrassing anyone. This can read as coldness to those who come from places where openness is the opening move. It is not coldness. It is the assumption that trust is earned through correct behavior over time, not offered freely at introduction.

Class in Valdegracia is ancient and legible. The great noble families carry the marks of their station in their names and their bearing and the way rooms rearrange themselves when they enter. A person of elevated birth named, say, Rodrigo Mirall de Casaverde knows that the second and third elements of that name do work in every room he enters on the continent. The de and the suffix and the lineage they carry are not ornament, they are a map of obligation and expectation running in both directions.

Those of common birth know their names are simpler, Alonso, Inés, Marisela, Catalina, and understand what that simplicity signals without needing to be told. Middling birth is its own particular tension in Valdegracia: prosperous enough to

aspire, undistinguished enough to be reminded of the ceiling. Merchant wealth is respected but not quite socially equivalent to land. This is a distinction that creates a great many restless second sons.

What a Valdegracian carries out into the world is a specific relationship to ceremony. They are rarely flustered by ritual, by the formality of a court, the protocol of a religious procession, the careful choreography of a negotiation conducted through proper intermediaries. They have been trained since childhood to read these structures and move within them. And they carry, almost always, some version of the phrase that translates roughly as things have their due order, not spoken aloud, but present as a measuring instrument against which other people's chaos is quietly assessed.

## ALBION

### We do not say what we mean. We mean what we do not say.

Albion produces a particular kind of person: one who has learned that directness is a form of vulnerability, and that the most serious things are best communicated sideways. The nation is maritime to its core, wind-shaped, island-minded, facing outward from necessity, and its culture bears the marks of a people who have always had to trade with strangers while maintaining some essential reserve that strangers could not touch. The result is a civilization that excels at understatement, prizes competence above almost everything, and will compliment you on your good seamanship at the moment when someone from elsewhere would embrace you like a brother.

What the homeland made you is careful. Albionite formation instills a deep suspicion of excess, excess emotion, excess claim, excess certainty. The person who declares themselves certain, who speaks too loudly of their own virtue, who weeps openly at an introduction, is someone to watch carefully. Not because feeling is wrong, but because displayed feeling is a kind of nakedness that Albionite culture considers undignified. What you feel is your own business. What you do in the face of what you feel is the only thing others can fairly judge.

This produces people of extraordinary practical intelligence, often underestimated until it is too late to profit from the estimate. An Albionite person at sea or at a table or in a crisis is typically processing the situation faster and more accurately than their measured exterior suggests. They ask good questions. They do not fill silences with noise. They remember what you said three months ago and will notice if you contradict it now, though they will not say so immediately.

Intellectually, Albion prizes the well-reasoned argument and is comfortable with doubt, which is partly why its relationship with the Solarian Church has always been polite and slightly cool, and why the Luminary Fellowship found real purchase there in the reform years.

Class in Albion is complicated by the sea. The great maritime fortunes scrambled the old landed order two centuries before the present day, and while the aristocracy remains powerful, there is a parallel prestige attached to naval command and maritime mercantile success that does not exist in quite the same way elsewhere. A family name like Greaves or Whithorn or Saltwood signals something different from Harwick or Crispin or Elspeth, the former carry place and sometimes old land, the latter carry common stock, trades, specific harbors.

But a common-born ship's captain with thirty years of experience will be treated with a deference in Albion that would confuse a Valdegracian observer. Middling Albionite families, the merchants, the lesser navigators, the doctors, the clerks, inhabit a world of careful self-improvement and quiet anxiety about station, expressed through the careful maintenance of the right accents and the right pastimes.

What an Albionite person carries is the pause. Before speaking in any charged situation, there is a breath, sometimes two, in which something is assessed and some portion of the true response is withheld for later, or forever. New acquaintances often read this as coldness. Old friends know it as the opposite, as the space in which something real is being formed. They also carry a specific relationship to the sea itself: not romantic, never romantic, but intimate, the way a person is intimate with something that could kill them and often has tried.

## STROOMDIJK

### Everything can be arranged. Everything has a price. Neither statement is cynical.

Stroomdijk is not subtle about what it values. Wealth, not inherited wealth, not blessed wealth, but earned wealth, demonstrated wealth, wealth that moves and multiplies through the application of intelligence and effort, is the primary idiom in which the culture speaks. This is not vulgarity. It is a philosophy, or near enough: the idea that prosperity is evidence of practical virtue, that a person who can calculate what something is actually worth and act on that calculation is a person who has understood something real about the world. Sentimentality, by contrast, is suspect, not because feeling is wrong, but because sentimentality makes bad decisions and other people pay for them.

What the homeland made you is practical in a specific, relational way. Stroomdijk people are often multilingual by necessity, the nation's trading empire requires it, and the docks of Harenstede or Vlissmeer will have six languages running simultaneously on a busy morning. This creates a particular flexibility of mind: the ability to hold multiple framings of a situation, to find the overlap between your interests and the other party's interests and work from there rather than from principle alone. This is not dishonesty. It is the natural result of a culture that has always understood negotiation as a collaborative act rather than a contest.

Trust in Stroomdijk is real and is taken seriously, which is why its breach is taken more seriously here than almost anywhere else. The handshake that closes a deal in a Stroomdijk counting-house is as binding as any church oath in Valdegracia, and the social consequences of breaking it are proportionally severe. A person who cheats their partner does not merely lose a partner; they lose the entire network that partner inhabits, and in Stroomdijk networks are everything.

Names in Stroomdijk reflect the nation's commercial and cartographic obsession. Family names are typically constructed as van followed by a place, van Dokkum, van den Bree, or de followed by an occupation or descriptor: de Vries, de Waal, de Klerk. Given names are sturdy, affectionate in their plainness: Anneliese and Wouter and Saskia and Gerrit and Lieselotte are names from a culture that does not adorn unnecessarily. They name children for grandparents, for old business partners, for harbors where things went well.

Class in Stroomdijk is theoretically permeable, which means it is practically more rigid than it appears. The great merchant families have been great for four and five generations, and their wealth has converted itself into the kind of social infrastructure, the academies, the guildhalls, the philanthropic endowments, that looks like merit but functions like inheritance. Common-born Stroomdijkers can and do rise through the trading companies, and this is genuinely true, genuinely celebrated, and slightly less common than the myth suggests.

What a Stroomdijker carries is the habit of assessing. Walking into a room, meeting a new person, arriving in a new port, the first seconds are always a calculation, not hostile, not cold, simply accurate. They are doing what they were trained to do: reading the situation for its actual structure, not its presented one. They are also, though they rarely announce it, the most likely of any continental nationality to be carrying at least two spoken languages and the rough vocabulary of a third.

# LUMINORE

### The republic is the faith. The faith is the republic. This is not a confusion.

Luminore is a Solarian republic, and it has organized its entire civic life around a proposition that the continental powers find either admirable or unsettling depending on how much they need the Church: that the republic and the faith are not competing claims but expressions of the same underlying order. The Solarian Communion in Luminore is genuine and practiced. Its feast days are public occasions. Its cathedral is among the oldest on the continent. What distinguishes Luminore from Valdegracia is not the presence of the faith but the relationship between faith and state, constitutionally bounded, mutually respectful, and never permitted to fully merge.

The result is a culture that takes both civic and religious life seriously as parallel obligations. The Conseil Civique, the elected assembly, is where secular matters are resolved. The cathedral is where sacred ones are. A Luminoran is expected to be competent in both registers, which produces a particular kind of formation: a person who understands institutions as genuine things, who knows the difference between what a law says and what it means, who treats both spiritual and civic claims as worthy of honest examination rather than reflexive deference.

To grow up in Luminore is to grow up in a culture that treats intellectual life as a common inheritance, not the privilege of clergy or nobility. Literacy is a civic virtue. The press is a civic institution. The university is where questions that cannot be resolved in the assembly are examined by the methods the assembly respects: evidence, argument, honest conclusion. This produces a particular kind of person: one who believes that disagreement, honestly conducted, is not a failure of community but its highest expression.

What the homeland made you is comfortable with argument in a way that people from other nations often find alarming. When a Luminoran disagrees with you, they say so, explain why, and expect you to explain why you think you are right. The conversation that follows is not a conflict. It is the whole point. Théodore, Camille, Lorenzo, Adèle, Renaud: the names Luminore favors have a civic clarity to them, and family names are often occupational or scholarly in derivation, the Lectiers and Forgiers and Moulinards, names that remember a craft or a practice. There is no shame in a name that remembers work.

Class in Luminore is real but subject to interrogation, which means the interrogation never quite resolves it. The old aristocracy exists and holds land and title, but the educated middling class, lawyers, physicians, printers, jurists, natural philosophers, has been mounting a slow, document-by-document argument against the assumed

superiority of birth for a century and a half, and has achieved a kind of parallel prestige that makes the two systems coexist in permanent productive friction. Common birth is not destiny in Luminore, provided you are literate; literacy is considered a moral as much as a practical matter, and the philanthropic academies that offer it to the poor are among the most honored institutions in the republic.

What a Luminoran carries is the citation. In conversation, when they make a claim, they are mentally noting the sources that support it, and if you ask them where they heard that, they will tell you precisely and will want to know your source in return. They carry a Solarian faith that is genuine and civic in its expression, observed through public feast days and community rite rather than personal mysticism, and a deep conviction that the Architect's design and the republic's design are, properly understood, the same argument.

They also carry a specific relationship to silence: it makes them anxious. Silence in a Luminore household means something has gone wrong. Argument means everything is fine.

## THE DUCHY OF HELLER

### What we built, we built ourselves. The papers came later.

The Duchy of Heller is not old. It is twenty years old, and its autonomy within Valdegracian dominion was acknowledged less than a year ago. It has no ancient highland tradition, no centuries of accumulated proverb. What it has is the memory of the crossing, the Compañero expeditions that brought the founders to the New World before any crown had organized a mandate to follow them, and the twenty years of deliberate, practical construction that turned a settlement into something that could not be ignored.

Its founders were Valdegracian in origin, Solarian in faith, and Compañero in loyalty, which is to say, bound to one another by the specific oath of sworn crew solidarity that the expeditions formalized and that the Duchy still honors as the closest thing it has to a founding covenant. The names the Duchy carries are Valdegracian in register: Hernán, Francisca, Cosme, Lucía, Rodrigo, Esperanza, names from the same tradition as the old continent's Solarian world, carried across the sea and planted in New World soil.

Family names follow Valdegracian patterns, de Heller now common as a territorial marker alongside the old patronymic and place-based forms. There is no shame in a name that arrives from elsewhere. In the Duchy, every name arrived from elsewhere.

Faith is Solarian, genuinely so, and carried with the particular quality of people who practiced it far from any ecclesiastical hierarchy that could oversee it. The priest in a Hellerite settlement is trusted because the community knows their work, not because a distant hierarchy appointed them. The feast days are kept. The sacraments are observed. The relationship to the institutional Church is respectful, somewhat wary, and shaped by the fact that the Offices of Inquiry denounced Generalis Costilas on the mainland, which is a fact the Duchy has not forgotten and does not discuss with people it does not trust.

What the homeland made you is direct in the way of people who had too much actual work to do for elaborate courtesy. If something is wrong, you say so, because pretending otherwise is a disrespect. If something is good, you say that too, once, and once from a Hellerite is understood to be worth considerably more than ten compliments from someone for whom praise costs nothing.

Class in the Duchy is felt but largely unspoken. There is a governing structure: the two Dukes, the officers, the civil administrators that the founding generation built from competence rather than inheritance. What is not admired is the person who arrived with a title and expected it to do work for them. The Duchy's social question is always the same: can you do the thing? The answer to that question ranks you, and no other ranking carries the same weight.

What a Hellerite carries is the specific solidarity of the crossing: the knowledge that the community they belong to was built by people who bet everything on a place that did not yet exist and then made it exist. This is not nostalgia. It is a structural fact about what the Duchy is, and it produces a particular relationship to loyalty, to the people you are responsible for, and to the idea that what you build with your own hands is the only thing that is genuinely yours.

They also carry the Compañero instinct, a deep alertness to whether the people around you will hold when things get difficult, because in the Duchy's founding generation, that was the question everything else depended on.

## EISENMARK

### The machine works because every part knows its place. So does the city. So does the man.

Eisenmark is not the oldest of the continental powers but it is in many ways the most legible: a nation whose virtues are so clearly organized, so visibly expressed in its institutions, that a visitor can read its values in the geometry of its cities before they have spoken to a single citizen. Order is not a means to an end in Eisenmark. It is the

end. The regulated street, the clock tower that keeps the same time as the clock tower in the next district, the army that drills in the rain because the rain is not a reason, these are not impositions on Eisenmark life.

They are its expression. The nation believes, with a theological conviction that it would not necessarily call theological, that the disciplined arrangement of human effort produces outcomes that no other arrangement can, and that this belief is not merely practical wisdom but something close to righteousness.

Eisenmarkian Solarian thought emphasizes divine providence as expressed through orderly human institutions, and its influence is felt in the culture's conviction that to do your duty, precisely and without complaint, is a form of worship. This is not the faith of mystics or philosophers. It is the faith of administrators and engineers, and it produces administrators and engineers of remarkable quality.

What the homeland made you is capable of functioning inside structures in a way that other nationalities sometimes cannot. Where a Luminoran chafes at authority without justification, an Eisenmark-raised person understands that the structure itself has a value independent of any particular authority who inhabits it. The question is not whether you agree with the person above you. The question is whether the chain of obligation is clear and correct, and whether you are holding up your portion of it.

Friedrich, Hannelore, Dietrich, Sofie, Rüdiger, the names Eisenmark favors are clean in their consonants, without unnecessary ornamentation, and family names are typically occupational in derivation, Schreiber, Zimmermann, Schneider, or compound constructions that denote a specific function: Langstraße, Neufeld, Kleinhans. The names remember what your family did, what place they came from, what role they occupied.

Class in Eisenmark is expressed through function. The aristocracy exists but governs primarily through military and administrative rank, and the two overlap so thoroughly that it becomes difficult to say where one ends and the other begins. A common-born person who demonstrates the specific qualities Eisenmark prizes, precision, reliability, technical mastery, can rise through the military or the great administrative bureaus to a place of considerable standing. This is genuinely true, not merely aspirational. Eisenmark promotes on demonstrated capacity with a consistency that is the envy of less organized nations.

What an Eisenmarkian carries is the schedule, or the mental equivalent of one. They are the most likely of all continental nationalities to be punctual, to resent the absence of punctuality in others, and to experience a disproportionate satisfaction when a complex operation, a voyage, a negotiation, a campaign, completes on time. They also carry a quality of correctness in physical bearing that is nearly impossible to

entirely shed, even after years in the colonial ports: the straight spine, the measured step, the way they stand in a room that tells you, if you know the language, exactly where they were trained.

## VOLKHAROV

*The land is older than any name we have put on it. We are learning patience.*

Volkharov is vast in a way that its inhabitants carry as a kind of interior weather. The nation extends further east and north than any other continental power, into territories that shade from productive steppe to boreal forest to something approaching the edge of the habitable world, and to grow up there is to grow up with scale as a companion, the kind of scale that makes human ambition seem briefly, instructively small. This does not produce passivity. It produces endurance, which is a different and more useful thing.

The Oraclean Communion is the faith of Volkharov, and its influence runs deep, not in the administrative, institutional way that the Solarian Church runs through Valdegracia, but in the texture of feeling, the way people relate to the sacred as something vast and older than names, something the Oracles saw and recorded but did not create or control.

The religious sensibility of Volkharov is communal rather than hierarchical: the congregation carries the faith, not the institution, and the priest or reader is a servant of the congregation's understanding, not its authority. This produces a specific relationship to spiritual life, interior, serious, reluctant to display, deeply felt in silence in a way that no ceremony can fully contain.

What the homeland made you is patient in the specific way of a people who have learned that winter will end, but not on a schedule you set. Volkharov people absorb hardship without collapse; they absorb it and continue, and this capacity is so deeply embedded that it often does not look like anything from the outside. They simply do not stop. This can be mistaken for stubbornness, or for a lack of imagination about alternatives. It is neither. It is the knowledge that endurance is its own strategy, and one of the more reliable ones.

Community is the organizing principle. Ilya, Nadia, Vasily, Svetlana, Dmitri, the names are worn easily, used without the social loading that some nations apply to given names; in Volkharov you are addressed by the familiar form of your name by people who have shared your fire, and the distinction between those who have and those who have not is one of the culture's primary social coordinates. Family names are patronymic in the most common tradition, endings of -ov and -ev for men, -ova

and -eva for women, naming you as the child of your father's line, though place-based names are common too among families with deep roots in a particular valley or river-bend.

You are the child of the land or the child of the man who tended it; either way, you are a child of continuity.

Class in Volkharov is present but expressed less through the visual apparatus of status, the title, the address form, the architectural statement, than through network and obligation. The great families are great because everyone in a hundred-mile radius knows whom you can call on in a crisis and who will call on you. This web of mutual obligation is the actual fabric of Volkharovi society, and navigating it well is the primary social skill.

What a Volkharovi carries is the silence that does not need to be filled. In company, they can be still in a way that disconcerts people from more voluble nations, and in that stillness they are not absent, they are fully present, processing, present in the way that only someone accustomed to long dark winters has learned to be present. They also carry, usually, some form of the Oraclean practice of remembering, the habit of marking significant moments privately, in the interior, as a kind of internal record that the world does not need to see.

## Mar de Oro, Colonial Born

### You are from everywhere. You are from here. Those are the same thing now.

There is no continental flag that covers the person who was born in Portaverde when three ships from different nations were anchored in the harbor, whose mother was Valdegracian and whose father died at sea before they were old enough to remember his accent, who learned to read from a mission brother who was himself born an ocean away from the mission in question. There is no single formation that applies. And yet formation happened, it always happens, and the formation of the colonial-born is, in its own way, as thorough and as specific as any the continent produces.

What the colonial port makes you is a reader of people in the most technical sense. When your world is composed of Albionite merchants, Stroomdijk factors, Valdegracian clergy, Duchy of Heller craftsmen, and the indigenous harbor pilots whose knowledge of the local currents is worth more than all of their cargo put together, you learn early that every person is operating from a system of assumption that is not yours and not universal.

This is not theoretical knowledge. It is survival knowledge. The colonial-born child who cannot read which register to use with the customs officer and which with the dockhand is a child who will have a harder life than necessary. By adulthood, this skill is so automatic it does not feel like skill anymore. It feels like breathing.

Names in Mar de Oro are an archaeology. A colonial-born person might carry a saint's name from the Solarian calendar, Sebastião, Annunciata, Lourdes, alongside a family name from a homeland their parent only half-remembered, alongside a nickname that stuck from childhood and that the harbor pilot who coined it is long dead. The name is not a unity. It is a history. This is not felt as a lack. It is felt, when it is felt at all, as an accurate description of what a person is: layered, assembled over time, not made in one place.

There is no single faith among the colonial-born, which means there is also no automatic community of faith, no congregation that claims you by origin. Some follow the denomination of a parent. Some have assembled a practice from multiple traditions. Some have, with the pragmatism the colonial world encourages, adopted whatever faith is most useful in whatever port they are working, which is not cynicism but a form of spiritual adaptability that the continent finds disquieting for reasons that say more about the continent than about the colonial-born.

Class in Mar de Oro is determined by two things: what you can do and who knows you. Continental birth-class does not translate cleanly to the colonial context, where a minor noble without connections will eat worse than a common-born quartermaster with thirty years of local knowledge. Reputation in a specific network of ports is the primary currency, and it is built over time, in the same way trust is built everywhere, by doing what you said you would do until enough people have seen you do it.

What the colonial-born carry is a specific relationship to belonging, or rather, to the absence of it. You have never fully belonged to any single place, and you have learned, by necessity, to need it less than people raised on continental soil think they need it. This can look like rootlessness, and sometimes it is. But at its best it is something else: a freedom of self-definition that the homeland-bound cannot easily access, a capacity for becoming that does not require permission from a tradition. You are from Mar de Oro. You made yourself in the only place available. That place was the crossing, the water between, and you have been crossing ever since.

Mar de Oro is far enough from the continent that the institutional memories of the great powers attenuate here. This is what the colonial world represents to people who arrive from elsewhere, not freedom, exactly, but distance, and

in distance, the possibility of delay. The debt you owe in Coronaverde may not have a collector in Port Aurum. The reputation that made you unemployable in Stroomdijk may not have preceded you to the Estuary settlements. The name that closed doors in the old world may mean nothing to a harbormaster who has never heard of the family that ruined it. The powers are present here too, of course, their agents and their records and their long memories reaching across the water, but the crossing takes time, and in that time, people rebuild. The colonial-born have grown up watching this happen, watching people arrive with closed faces and open futures, watching the slow work of becoming someone new in a place that does not yet know who you were.

They understand, better than almost anyone, both the genuine possibility of reinvention and the specific ways it tends to fail: the past that catches up, the habit that reasserts itself, the letter that arrives three seasons late and finds you anyway. The colonial-born character who stays in Mar de Oro is often, consciously or not, holding the door open for the next person who needs what this place once offered someone else.

CHARACTER QUESTION

## Names at the Table

Names follow culture more often than borders. Use these as quick starting points, then adjust for class, family history, migration, or a mixed household. Clergy of the Holy See keep the naming tradition of their homeland; office and order titles are added rather than replacing the name.

| Culture | Quick names | How surnames work |
|---|---|---|
| Valdegracia | Mateo, Tomás, Rafael, Alonso, Gabriel; Inés, Catalina, Lucía, Beatriz, Marisol | Family names often combine houses, places, or two parental lines. Noble styles may add de plus an estate or jurisdiction. |
| Albion | Nathaniel, Edward, Thomas, William, Edmund; Helena, Margaret, Anne, Eleanor, Catherine | Surnames commonly come from places, occupations, older family estates, or inherited house names. |
| Stroomdijk | Pieter, Willem, Hendrik, Jan, Cornelis; Anika, Marit, Lotte, Saskia, Willemijn | van, van der, and de forms are common. Merchant houses may be known by a family name long after ownership spreads. |
| Luminore | Étienne, Lucien, Matthieu, Adrien, Pascal; Claire, Élodie, Margot, Céleste, Sabine | Civic records favor stable family names. Scholars and printers sometimes become better known by a shortened professional form. |
| Duchy of Heller | Hernán, Francisco, Mateo, Elias, Tomás; Elena, Sofía, Marta, Isabel, Lucía | There is no separate Hellerite naming language yet. Families retain old-country forms, while titles and official records often preserve older formal spellings. |
| Eisenmark | Albrecht, Konrad, Matthias, Lukas, Dieter; Greta, Elise, Marta, Klara, Johanna | Family names are stable and heavily documented. Place names, trades, and military family names are common. |

| Culture | Quick names | How surnames work |
|---|---|---|
| Volkharov | Ilya, Mikhail, Sergei, Anton, Nikolai; Irina, Katya, Vera, Nadya, Yelena | Given name plus family name is standard in formal use. Patronymic forms appear in ceremonial, legal, and family contexts. |
| Éirighdún | Ciarán, Eamon, Fintan, Lorcan, Ruairí; Niamh, Maeve, Aisling, Orla, Siobhán | Clan identity matters. Ó, Mac, and related forms sit beside house and clan names, especially in formal introductions. |
| Colonial Born | Any of the above, often mixed across generations | Double surnames, adopted port names, nicknames, translated names, and shortened forms are common where crews and families cross national lines. |

A name should locate a character without imprisoning them. A Stroomdijker may carry a Valdegracian grandmother's name. A Hellerite may use the formal spelling on a commission and a shorter one at home. A colonial-born character may have three versions of the same name depending on who is asking.

## Where did you become who you are?

Birthplace is only the beginning. Think about the place, class, faith, work, and people that taught your character what the world expects of them.

CHAPTER 11

# CALLING AND CREW

There is a question that follows you through every port in Mar de Oro, asked in a dozen languages by customs officials, tavern keepers, ship captains, and suspicious strangers with their hands near their weapons: What are you? Not your name. Not your nation. Not even your faith, though that will come second. What are you, what is your calling, the thing that explains your presence in this place, the framework that makes you legible to whoever is asking?

A calling is not a skill. Skills can be learned piecemeal; a calling is a full inhabitation. It is the sum of your training and your habits, the shape that years of particular work have pressed into you. It is the vocabulary that surfaces when you are startled, the instinct that operates before you have time to think, the lens through which you read a room before anyone in it has spoken. The ship's surgeon walks into a tavern and reads the room the way a surgeon reads a body: where is the structural weakness, where is the thing that has not yet declared itself dangerous, what is being suppressed here that will eventually demand to be dealt with?

The military officer reads the same room as ground: choke points, fields of fire, who controls the high point of the stair. Neither of them is performing this. It is simply the thing their training made them.

A calling is also a social contract. When another person recognizes what you are, they bring assumptions, some accurate, most partial, a few so wrong they will cause genuine trouble. You will spend much of your life managing those assumptions, correcting the most dangerous ones and strategically tolerating the rest. This is not dishonesty; it is how calling-recognition works in a world that sorts people quickly because it must.

The colonial theater is full of strangers. A framework for understanding a stranger fast is worth something real, even when the framework is wrong. What follows are the callings most commonly found among those who venture into the Golden Sea, with their textures and their costs, their internal logics, and the places where the world's understanding of them falls short of the truth.

## The Callings

### The Soldier / Officer

There is a particular way that military men and women move through rooms that has nothing to do with bravado. It is quieter than that: a positioning of the body so that no wall is directly behind them and no door is directly in front, an automatic cataloguing of exits, a stillness that is not ease but the disciplined suppression of alertness. The soldier has been trained to apply organized violence with precision, not passion, not fury, but precision, and that training leaves traces in the body that do not disappear when the uniform is removed.

Officers carry it differently than rankers: officers carry it in their posture, in the expectation of compliance, in the very specific social calibration that comes from needing men to obey you in chaos and needing those same men to believe that you will spend their lives only for something that matters. Rankers carry it in their hands, in the way they occupy a chair, in the speed with which they become very still when an argument is about to become a fight.

What the military calling produces is a vocabulary of command and a body of practical knowledge that extends well beyond violence. A soldier knows terrain, not academically, but as a felt thing. They know what ground favors a defender and what ground invites encirclement. They know how men behave under sustained fear, how exhaustion degrades judgment at a specific and predictable rate, how the interval between orders and action opens when the situation diverges from the plan.

They know logistics in the way that only people who have watched campaigns fail for want of it truly know logistics, as the iron necessity beneath every plan, the thing that makes all the rest possible or impossible. An officer knows, in addition, how institutions work: how orders are processed, how credit is assigned and blame deflected, how a formal structure can be navigated, resisted, and used.

What the world assumes about soldiers is that they are simple: loyal, effective, possibly dangerous, probably not subtle. This is wrong in ways that have gotten people killed who were depending on the assumption. A soldier who has survived long enough to have strong opinions has survived precisely because they were observant and adaptable. The officer who came up through actual engagement, rather than through connected patronage, is often among the most analytically capable people in any room they enter; they simply do not advertise this, because advertising capability is a luxury of people who are not regularly tested on it.

What people miss is the exhaustion behind the bearing. The calling costs a very specific thing: it makes you watch people die for objectives that turned out to be wrong, and it makes you do this as part of a structure that requires you to maintain,

publicly, that the objectives were right enough. The gap between what was said at the command level and what was true in the field, that gap lives in the soldier's body. Some of them never find a language for it. Others spend the rest of their lives trying.

In Anno 7202, the soldier must also navigate the particular complication of professional military service in the colonial theater, where regimental traditions from the mainland collide with the operational realities of a coastline that does not care what doctrine says. Valdegracian line regiments find that drill written for open continental ground needs adaptation in jungle, marsh, broken coast, and island fighting. Albion's naval discipline, immaculate in practice, makes no provision for every engagement in fog-choked channels far from the nearest dry dock. The soldier who adapts survives; the one who insists on doctrine after the ground has disproved it often does not. A veteran of the Golden Sea campaigns is someone who has been wrong about something important and adjusted.

### The Mariner

The sea is not romantic. This is the first thing that becomes obvious about mariners when you speak with them for more than a few minutes: they regard the ocean the way a craftsperson regards the material they work with, which is to say: with deep respect for its properties, with no illusions about its interest in your survival, and with the professional's particular mix of affection and frustration.

A mariner has a relationship with the sea that is continuous and contractual. It is their employer, their residence, their object of study, and the thing most likely to kill them. They are not sentimental about this arrangement. They have seen what the sea does to sentiment.

What the calling produces is an extraordinarily dense body of practical knowledge that almost no landlocked person understands correctly. Navigation is the most visible part: the reading of charts and stars, the calculation of current and leeway, the dead reckoning that keeps a ship on track across a featureless expanse. But navigation is downstream of a hundred other things, including the reading of weather in the color of the horizon and the behavior of birds, the understanding of how a particular ship handles in a particular wind, the knowledge of what sails to carry and when to shorten them and when to take them down entirely and run bare-poled before something terrible.

Add to this the comprehensive technical knowledge of the vessel itself: every line and its function, every fitting and its failure mode, the thousand small repairs that keep a wooden ship from becoming a slowly assembling wreck. A mariner is an engineer, a meteorologist, a geographer, and a social creature all at once, because the other thing

the calling produces is an intimate knowledge of how the lower deck works, its hierarchies, its loyalties, its codes of conduct, its specific and non-negotiable sense of what is fair.

The world assumes that mariners are rough, simple, probably drunk when not aboard, and willing to work for any captain who offers a berth. Parts of this are occasionally accurate. The professional mariner is not rough in the way the assumption suggests. They are precise, because imprecision kills, and they are observant, because the sea rewards observation and punishes inattention. What they are is direct.

There is a professional culture in the lower deck and the quarterdeck both that has no patience for the social circumlocutions of landward life; if something needs to be said, it is said, because there will be a moment when the storm is rising and there is no time for careful phrasing. This directness is often misread as crudeness. It is not. It is efficiency.

The calling costs mariners time ashore, and with it, the continuous relationships that people in fixed places accumulate over a life. The mariner's social world is the ship's company, rotating and replaceable, and the scatter of people across a dozen ports who constitute a kind of distributed kin-network. They are people who have strong opinions about captains, specifically about which ones can be trusted to keep the ship in one piece, which ones sacrifice crew for cargo, and which ones have the particular quality that turns a frightened lower deck into a cohesive working force under fire.

Mariners follow good captains; they abandon bad ones at the first legal opportunity, and sometimes before that. This is not disloyalty. It is a rational calculation about survival, refined across generations.

### The Factor / Merchant

The factor for a trading house, or the independent merchant who has managed to remain independent across a career in a world of consolidation, thinks in a way that is structurally different from most other callings. They think in relationships, specifically in the structure of obligation, information, and leverage that connects people across commercial space. They carry, at any given moment, a mental map of who owes what to whom across a dozen ports, which debts are being honored and which are under pressure, what discount Valdegracian debt paper is trading at in Canula Prime against Eisenmarkian silver, and what that difference signals about the movement of capital that official dispatches will not mention for another three months.

This is not calculation so much as a kind of social topology, the shape of the commercial world rendered as a living diagram that updates constantly as new information arrives.

What the calling produces is multilingualism, because trade requires communication across the language barriers that every colonial theater creates, and also a specific kind of multilingualism that goes beyond vocabulary into the social codes that accompany different commercial traditions. A factor who has worked the Golden Sea for a decade speaks at minimum three languages and reads two more; more usefully, they know that Valdegracian merchants conduct negotiations through a ritual of hospitality that must not be skipped without giving offense, that Eisenmarkian factors regard a certain kind of careful record-keeping as a moral virtue and not merely an administrative convenience, and that the independent traders of the Oraclean ports have a specific system of informal surety that operates outside all written contracts and is considered more binding than any document.

They know how information moves through commercial networks before it reaches official channels, because in trade, being second with good information is often as bad as being wrong.

What the world assumes about merchants is that they are venal and primarily motivated by profit, which is true enough in aggregate and wrong enough in particular to be useless as a guide. The factor who has built a reputation across twenty years of trading in a theater where contracts are enforced primarily by the memory of the community has done so through something more complex than venality, namely a finely developed sense of what the long-term structure of reputation is worth, which means that they often act in ways that look, in the short term, like something other than self-interest.

They extend credit that looks imprudent. They honor agreements that have become disadvantageous. They tell truths that would have been commercially convenient to leave vague. This is not virtue; it is a specific and sophisticated calculation about what kind of reputation is worth having and what one would sacrifice to preserve it.

The calling costs factors the thing that commercial life at the intersection of multiple communities always costs: they belong entirely to none of them. They are useful to the Valdegracian trading house as a factor who understands the Oraclean networks; they are useful to the Oraclean networks as someone who can translate the intentions of the Valdegracian houses. They are, by virtue of being useful at this intersection, always slightly suspect to both.

In Mar de Oro, in Anno 7202, the factor operates in a world that is actively consolidating, with the great trading houses extending their reach and the independent merchants finding the space for independence contracting, and the question of whose loyalties you can afford to hold, and for how long, is not abstract.

### The Cleric / Church Servant

The institutional church is not one thing. This is the first truth that the calling of church servant forces upon anyone who holds it long enough. There is the church of the bishops and the synods, managing property and doctrine and the complex politics of appointment in an institution that spans half the known world and has been accumulating organizational complexity for three hundred years. There is the church of the parish and the mission, existing at the contact point between doctrine and the actual lives of actual people, improvising constantly. There is the church of the canon lawyers, whose relationship to faith is mediated entirely through procedure.

There is the church of the inquisition, not the dramatic theological violence of a century ago, but the ongoing, grinding bureaucratic business of maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy in a world where two major schisms have left the definition of orthodoxy genuinely contested. And there is, in each of these institutions and often running counter to all of them, the church of the genuinely devout: people for whom this is not bureaucracy or career but a live question about the nature of things.

The calling produces, at minimum, literacy and a specific kind of rhetorical training. Clerics argue, formally and informally; they are trained in the structure of a claim and its defeaters, in the hierarchy of authorities, in the art of making a difficult position sound reasonable to a hostile audience. They know ceremony, the precise forms of liturgy, the significance of what is done in what order, the way that ritual creates and maintains community. They often know medicine in some degree, because the church has been the primary institution of care in many places for centuries.

They know land, church lands in particular, their management, their legal standing, their contested ownership in a colonial theater where the church's claims sometimes predate the colonial powers' maps. And they know confession, in the sense that they have listened to the interior lives of more people than almost any other calling encounters, which gives them a particular depth of understanding of what people are actually like when the social performance is stripped away.

The world assumes that clerics are either sincere believers navigating institutional constraints or cynical careerists using the church as a vehicle. Both types exist; the more common type is neither. The more common type is someone who entered the calling with genuine faith, encountered the institution in all its complexity and

occasional hypocrisy, and has arrived at some working arrangement between their private convictions and their public role that is neither whole belief nor whole cynicism but something more painful and more durable.

The gap between what the church says it is and what it demonstrably does in specific situations is something every church servant knows in detail; what they do with that knowledge is one of the more interesting questions you can ask about them.

In the colonial theater of Mar de Oro, the church servant navigates an additional complication: Valdegracian Solarian missions, Oraclean congregations, Fellowship communities, and Solarian scholars trained in Eisenmarkian natural philosophy often occupy the same ports while disagreeing about authority, method, and proper practice. The calling requires taking a position on these disputes, even if that position is studied neutrality, and studied neutrality has political implications of its own.

Some church servants also hold a working relationship with the Fortera. The Oraclean sacramental tradition integrates it into liturgical practice in ways that make it genuinely difficult, from outside, to tell where ceremony ends and actual efficacy begins, which may be the point. The Solarian church's official position in Anno 7202 is a contested but formally maintained distinction between licit and illicit applications of what Eisenmarkian theologians call *naturalis potestas*, a legal framework that does not map cleanly onto what practitioners actually do. The church servant who works within this dimension of their calling has learned to navigate that gap with care, because the gap is precisely

where the Offices of Inquiry tends to look.

### The Scholar / Natural Philosopher

The scholar's relationship to evidence is the thing that makes them strange in most social contexts they inhabit. They have been trained, or have trained themselves, to follow an argument wherever it leads, to hold a conclusion lightly until the weight of evidence makes it something you can set weight on, and to treat being wrong not as a failure but as a data point.

This is not how most people operate. Most people operate from conviction, updating reluctantly, and the scholar who approaches a disputed question with genuine open-handedness is often mistaken for weakness or lack of commitment. It is neither. It is the thing that makes them, in the long run, more reliable than someone whose conclusions were formed before the inquiry began.

What the calling produces is a specific relationship to texts. The scholar has read extensively, and more importantly, they have learned to read critically, to locate a source in its context, to ask what the author had to gain from the claim they were making, to notice when a widely-repeated fact has a single original source that turns

out, on examination, to be less reliable than its reputation. This makes them very useful for investigating things and occasionally difficult as companions, because the habit of critical reading does not turn off at the dinner table.

They also carry the social habits of institutions of learning, universities, academies, the great libraries and theological foundations of Eisenmark, which means they know how to navigate scholarly hierarchy, how to present an argument to a skeptical audience, and how to lose a debate gracefully (and how to win one without making enemies they cannot afford).

The world assumes that scholars are impractical, which is partly true. The natural philosopher who has spent a career studying the flora of the Aeon interior may be genuinely helpless when the rope breaks; knowledge and competence are different things, and the scholar does not necessarily convert one into the other. What the world misses is the specific practical utility of the scholar's skills in situations that require investigation: tracking a chain of cause and effect through incomplete evidence, reconstructing what must have happened from what remains, knowing enough about multiple domains to recognize when something doesn't fit.

The physician who is also a natural philosopher diagnoses differently than the physician who is only a practitioner. The cartographer who reads the geological record in the shape of the land draws better maps.

The calling costs scholars the comforting certainty that most other callings rest on, or at least the ability to perform it convincingly. Having been wrong about something important, and the serious scholar has always been wrong about something important because that is what serious inquiry eventually produces, leaves a specific mark. They know the feeling of a conclusion that felt solid give way, and they know that the feeling of solidity was not a reliable indicator.

This makes them cautious in ways that can look, from outside, like timidity. It is not timidity. It is the epistemological scar tissue of someone who has learned, at some cost, to respect the gap between what they believe and what they can demonstrate.

A scholar who has turned serious attention to Fortera occupies a particular position within this calling. Eisenmarkian Solarian thought understands Fortera as a universal property of Aeon, present in creation rather than produced by the Sundering. Its theologians have long argued that crises surrounding humanity's understanding and use of Fortera helped precipitate the Sundering. Scholars working in this tradition approach Fortera through frameworks that look, from outside, like rigorous natural philosophy with unusual subject matter. These scholars are not mystics by self-description. They treat Fortera as a phenomenon susceptible to inquiry and bring to it the same discipline they would bring to any other domain. Institutional responses are

inconsistent: the work may be celebrated, treated as the edge of acceptable inquiry, or both at once. Careful notes and provisional conclusions protect the work as much as they express good method.

### The Engineer / Artificer

The engineer has been trained to a particular relationship with the physical world that is, in its way, as complete a worldview as any religion: things work the way they work, for reasons that can be understood, and when they fail, they fail for reasons that can also be understood, and understanding those reasons is both possible and obligatory. The engineer in Anno 7202 is trained most often in the Eisenmarkian tradition, which has elevated technical education to something approaching civic virtue, or trained by someone who was.

Albion's naval engineers are among the best in the known world; Eisenmarkian military engineers have won sieges that should by rights have taken three times as long; and Valdegracian houses, for all their wealth and reach, have been hiring Eisenmarkian artificers for a generation because the alternative is falling behind.

What the calling produces is a specific kind of analysis. The engineer sees a structure, a fortification, a ship's hull, a bridge, a mechanism, and immediately and involuntarily begins calculating its failure modes. Where is the load path? Where is the weak joint? What happens when the storm is worse than the design specification? This is not pessimism; it is professional attention.

The engineer who does not think about failure modes builds things that fail. The engineer who does thinks this way all the time, and after a while it extends beyond structures to plans, organizations, and arguments: where is the load path, where is the weak joint, what happens when the pressure exceeds the specification?

The world assumes that engineers are specialists in a narrow technical sense and not interesting outside their domain. This is wrong in two ways. The first: engineering in this era is not narrow. An engineer who designs fortifications must understand artillery, geology, water management, supply logistics, and human behavior under siege. A naval engineer must understand materials science, fluid dynamics, sail theory, and the specific ways that tropical climates degrade wood, rope, and metal in patterns different from the continental theaters they were trained on.

They are, by necessity, comprehensivists. The second: the ethical dimension of the engineer's calling is not separable from its technical dimension. Structural integrity is a moral issue, as anyone trained in the Eisenmarkian tradition will tell you with some feeling, because a bridge that fails kills people who trusted the person who built it, and the engineer knew or should have known that it would fail. This moral weight is not optional. It comes with the calling.

The cost the calling takes is a difficulty with the imperfect solution. A campaign cannot wait for the ideal fortification design; a ship must sail with the materials that are available, not the materials that are theoretically correct; a mechanism must work with the tolerances that the available craftspeople can achieve, not the tolerances the blueprint requires. The engineer who cannot make peace with this will be paralyzed. The engineer who makes too much peace with it starts building bridges that fail.

The Luminary Fellowship, newer and explicitly text-centered, approaches Fortera through scripture, conscience, disciplined interpretation, and communities of believers rather than through Eisenmarkian Solarian natural theology. Engineers who work closely with Fellowship practitioners sometimes discover that the disagreement is less about whether observation matters than about who is authorized to interpret what observation means.

### The Agent / Intelligence Operative

There are people in the world who are professionally unclear about what they are. Not dishonest, exactly, as the agent often has a very precise private accounting of their actual loyalties, but strategically opaque. They present different faces to different audiences, not out of pathology but out of professional necessity; the courier who is known to be a crown intelligence asset is a courier whose usefulness expires immediately. The fixer who has introduced too many parties to each other becomes the common factor in a set of problems that someone will eventually solve by removing the common factor. Clarity, in the intelligence calling, is a liability.

What the calling produces is a specific and sophisticated ability to read context. The agent lives at the intersection of information and loyalty, which means they are always, simultaneously, assessing what they know, who wants it, what it is worth, and who is watching them conduct this assessment. This produces an almost involuntary social analysis that runs continuously: what does this person want, what do they think they want, what are they actually telling me with the thing they are choosing not to say, and how does this particular piece of information fit into the larger structure of what I am trying to understand?

The agent does not think of this as paranoia. It is a professional skill. The world is full of information, and most of it is not labeled.

The world assumes that agents are unreliable, which is true in a specific way. An agent who is working for a crown and a trading house simultaneously and occasionally performing small services for an Oraclean intelligence network is not reliable to any one of those employers in the way that the employers, if asked, would say they want. They are, however, often reliable in ways those employers fail to account for, reliable to the network, to the information itself, to the ongoing maintenance of the situation that makes their work possible.

The agent who burns all their relationships simultaneously destroys their own utility; it is in their interest to maintain a certain kind of reliability even when delivering information that is uncomfortable to the recipient. This is not loyalty in any simple sense. It is a specific and self-interested form of professional integrity.

The cost is isolation. The agent is, professionally, not fully present to anyone they know. The persona they present to any given audience is accurate enough to function but incomplete enough to protect; the complete version of themselves exists, if at all, only in private. After years of this, the boundary between the performed self and the actual self can become, genuinely, unclear. This is not always distressing. Some agents become comfortable with the flexibility. What it costs is the specific relief of being entirely known by another person, which is a form of connection that is, at some level, what most people are trying to find.

### The Frontier Hand

The maps of Mar de Oro have edges. Not geographic edges, as the coastline is fairly well documented by Anno 7202 after decades of increasingly systematic naval survey, but edges of the known, boundaries past which official cartography becomes speculative and continental categories for landscape, people, and resource begin to fail. The frontier hand is the person who goes to those edges. The colonist who is not in the town but ahead of it. The surveyor mapping ground no continental survey has mapped. The wilderness guide who knows how to keep a party alive in terrain that the party's commanding officer has never seen.

What the calling produces is pragmatism of a very specific kind, not the pragmatism of the merchant, which is the pragmatism of negotiation, but the pragmatism of survival in an indifferent environment. The frontier hand knows that the plan is always the first casualty of contact with actual conditions. They have learned to read the specific signs of the land they work in: the weather that means pack now and move, the water that is safe and the water that is not, the behavioral signs in the people they encounter that indicate whether conversation or withdrawal is the appropriate response.

They are generalists by necessity, because they cannot afford to be expert in only one thing when the thing that is killing them right now might be anything.

The world assumes that the frontier hand is simply a rougher version of the soldier, which misses something important. The soldier is trained for organized violence and works within a command structure; the frontier hand is often working alone or in small groups with minimal oversight, making decisions that no officer will review for weeks or months, if ever. This produces a different kind of character: more self-reliant, more accustomed to improvisation, significantly less patient with hierarchical procedure that exists for reasons that made sense somewhere else.

The frontier hand is not insubordinate, exactly. They have simply learned that the hierarchy is often working from information that is months old by the time it reaches them, and that acting on that information as though it were current is one of the reliable ways to get killed.

The calling's cost is the cost that the colonial project always eventually asks of its agents at the edges: the frontier hand knows the land they are helping to extend continental reach into in a way that the trading house directors and military governors do not, and what they know does not always support the clean narrative of civilization carrying light into darkness. The frontier hand has seen what that land was before and what the process of bringing it into the colonial map does to the people already living in it.

Some of them have made their peace with this. Some of them have not, and the ones who haven't carry a specific weight that doesn't have a name in any of the languages of the colonial powers.

### The Criminal / Independent Operator

The word criminal requires some unpacking in the colonial theater of Mar de Oro, where the laws in question are the laws of colonial powers who have declared ownership of coastlines, waterways, and trade routes through a process that the people living there before the declaration did not necessarily ratify, and where the enforcement of those laws is primarily the concern of the institutions that benefit from them.

This is not to say that crime is a noble calling, as the smuggler and the fence and the confidence artist are not, in aggregate, oppressed innocents, but the moral geography of who is operating outside what legal structure, and why, and with what justification, is considerably more complex than the official version of events.

The independent operator is the person who has found a way to function in the interstices of the official commercial and legal world. The smuggler knows the customs apparatus well enough to route around it efficiently. The privateer operates with a letter of marque when one is available and without one when the letter-of-marque issuing party has become inconvenient, which is a position that requires a certain flexibility about the distinction between privateering and piracy. The fence lives at the intersection of the official commercial world and the world of things that have changed hands in ways that the official world has not recorded; this requires an extensive social network, a good sense of material value, and a very reliable reputation in a community that cannot enforce agreements through the courts.

The confidence artist is, depending on your view, either a predator or a satirist of the commercial world's inherent credulity, someone who demonstrates, repeatedly and expensively for their marks, that the world runs on trust, and that trust is exploitable.

What the world assumes is that these people lack morality, which is wrong. They lack deference to the specific moral authority of colonial commercial law and the institutions enforcing it, which is different. The smuggler who will not sell information to the Valdegracian intelligence apparatus about the routes of people fleeing religious persecution is making a moral decision. The privateer who maintains a code of conduct about what can be taken from a prize and what cannot is operating inside a moral framework; the framework just isn't the official one.

The criminal calling, at its best, has a very honest relationship to the distinction between law and justice, honest precisely because it cannot afford to confuse the two, having long since lost the luxury of assuming they are the same.

The cost is the cost of operating without official standing. The independent operator cannot call the watch. They cannot take a dispute to a magistrate. They cannot rely on commercial law to enforce contracts, because their contracts are the kind that commercial law does not recognize. What they rely on instead is reputation, the specific and fragile currency of trustworthiness in a community where trust cannot be formalized, and the network of mutual obligation that constitutes the social infrastructure of the unofficial world.

This network is real, and it is valuable, and it is extremely vulnerable to the specific things that can destroy it: betrayal, exposure, the pressure of an institutional crackdown, and the simple attrition of time in a calling that tends to shorten lives.

CHARACTER QUESTION

### What does your calling make you notice first?

A calling is more than a job. It is the lens your training puts between you and a room, a crisis, a stranger, or a piece of work.

CHAPTER 12

# BONDS, BURDENS AND REASONS TO SAIL

A motivation is an idea. I seek justice is an idea. I want to restore my family's honor is an idea. Ideas are weightless; they can be stated in a sentence and filed away and retrieved intact whenever the plot requires them, unchanged by what happened in the interim. A bond is different. A bond is a person, a specific person with a face and a history and a particular way of sitting at a table, whose claim on you is not abstract.

You do not owe justice in general; you owe it to Marta, who was there when the verdict came down, who looked at you in the specific way she looked at you, and whose expression you have not been able to stop seeing. The difference between a motivation and a bond is the difference between an argument and a wound.

This is why bonds matter more than motivations for understanding who your character actually is. Motivations explain what you're after. Bonds explain why you can't stop. A character in motion because of an idea will pause when circumstances change and the idea becomes achievable through a different route. A character in motion because of a person, a debt owed, a loyalty carried, a wound that hasn't closed, keeps moving because the person is still there. The bond is not inside you, safely contained; the bond is a living thing in the world, and the world keeps putting it in front of you.

Burdens work differently from bonds, though they often involve them. A burden is the past made present, not a memory but a consequence, something that happened that is still happening in the specific sense that its effects are still in the world. You cannot revisit it and decide differently. You cannot quarantine it. The thing you did is done; the thing done to you is now part of you whether you sanctioned the addition or not. The unfinished matter is unfinished and will remain so until you finish it. Burdens are not the backstory. They are the mechanism by which the backstory refuses to stay in the past where it belongs.

Together, bonds and burdens are the evidence of a life already lived. They establish that the world existed before the story began, that other people in it have their own continuity and their own claims, and that you are not a capability-set who happened to arrive in Mar de Oro with no prior attachment to anything. They make the character embedded rather than visiting. They give the world purchase on you, and you on it. What follows is a framework for understanding the varieties of each.

## Bonds

The essential quality of a bond is that it is specific and it is living. A bond to a dead person is still specific and still, in its way, living, as the dead have a remarkable persistence in the inner lives of people who cared about them. A bond to an institution or a cause is slightly different in character, as we will see, but it retains the quality of specificity: this cause, not causes in general; this community, not community in the abstract.

A vague bond is not a bond. I care about my people is a sentiment. I am responsible for what happens to my niece, who is eleven years old and knows I am somewhere in the Golden Sea and is counting on me to come back is a bond.

The bond imposes cost. This is the other quality that distinguishes a real bond from a stated motivation: a bond can be called against you. The person you are bonded to can be threatened, can make demands, can disappoint you, can need things you don't want to give, can put you in a position where honoring the bond means betraying something else you value. A motivation never does this. A bond does this routinely, because bonds are relationships and relationships are complicated. If your bond has never cost you anything, it hasn't been tested yet.

A third quality: bonds are mutual even when the mutuality is asymmetrical. The person you owe exists in the world independently and has their own view of the relationship, which may differ significantly from yours. The institution you are loyal to is making decisions without consulting you about whether those decisions are the ones you would sanction. The wound has a source, a person who inflicted it, perhaps without meaning to, and that source still exists. Bonds point in two directions. That is what makes them hold.

### Kinds of Bond

#### A Debt You Owe

Not abstractly, not in the sense that you owe everyone who has ever done something kind, but specifically, concretely, this one person who at a specific moment did a specific thing that cost them something real. They gave you passage on a ship they could not afford to fill. They lied under examination to cover something you had done.

They spent political capital they had accumulated over years to get you out of a situation you had put yourself into, and afterward they didn't speak of it, which was worse in some ways than if they had. The debt is not acknowledged out loud between you, maybe. But it sits in the room every time you are together.

The person you owe does not need to be living for the debt to persist. The peculiar thing about this kind of bond is that death does not resolve it, it only removes the possibility of resolution. You cannot pay back the person who died before you had the chance or the means. The debt is now owed to their memory, to their family, to their cause, to the world in some abstract and unsatisfying sense. The dead creditor is sometimes more demanding than the living one, because the living one might eventually accept what you can offer, and the dead one is no longer in a position to accept anything at all.

What this bond produces is not guilt, exactly, as guilt is the feeling associated with having done wrong, and what you feel about the person you owe may be something more like an uncomfortable awareness of imbalance, a low-frequency attentiveness to any situation in which the debt might be partly paid. It makes you generous in specific directions. It makes you attentive to the wellbeing of people adjacent to the one you owe. It keeps a name near the surface of your thinking, a name that appears when you are making decisions that have costs.

### A Debt Owed to You

The reverse relationship, and in some ways the more complicated one. You invested in someone. You gave them something, money, time, advocacy, the sacrifice of your own opportunity, the extension of trust when trust was not

particularly warranted, and they received it, and whether or not they know the full extent of what it cost you, the investment is now in them. You carry it as something between hope and entitlement, and the specific ratio changes depending on whether they are, in fact, honoring what was given.

The person who owes you may not know they owe you. This is common and creates a specific kind of tension: they are living their life with a debt they have not been told they are carrying, and you are watching them live it with a complicated cocktail of feelings that includes protectiveness, proprietariness, and, if they are going in directions that seem like a waste of what you gave, something that sits uncomfortably close to resentment.

The parent who sacrificed for a child that grew up differently than expected knows this. The teacher whose student went on to work for the wrong institution knows this. The patron who funded a talent that is now deploying itself in ways the patron finds inexplicable knows this.

If they do know, the dynamic is different and not necessarily simpler. Gratitude is a complicated emotion to carry for an extended period; it has a weight to it that many people eventually try to shed by minimizing the original gift, by establishing their own achievement as independently earned, or by manufacturing resentment toward

the donor as a way of escaping the obligation. You may have done this yourself at some point in your life, with someone who did something significant for you. This is human. But it means that the person who owes you is not necessarily an ally, and your bond to them is not necessarily comfortable.

### A Loyalty

Something larger than a single person, an institution, a cause, a flag, a community, a faith, a ship, to which you have given a portion of yourself. The loyalty is different from the personal bonds in that it is not individual: the institution does not know your name the way a person does, the cause does not remember the specific sacrifice you made the way a person would remember it, the community holds you as one of many rather than as the specific you that exists in a personal bond.

This is both its limitation and its peculiar power. The loyalty can ask more of you than a person could, because it speaks with a kind of impersonal authority that personal relationships cannot summon.

The loyalty has probably asked more of you than you expected when you gave it. Most serious loyalties do. The regimental loyalty that asks you to defend a position the army has already written off. The church loyalty that asks you to maintain silence about something you know to be wrong because speaking would do institutional damage. The ship loyalty, the bond to the crew, to the vessel, to the life they constitute together, that asks you to stay when you could go, to share what you would rather keep, to subordinate the personal to the collective in the specific way that collective life demands.

The interesting question about the loyalty is what happens when it and the personal bonds conflict, when the cause requires you to do something that the person you owe would oppose, when the flag points in a direction that the person who owes you cannot follow. This is not a hypothetical in the colonial theater of Mar de Oro. The colony is a place of competing institutional loyalties operating in close proximity, and the pressure to choose between them is constant and rarely comes with enough time to deliberate.

### A Wound

A relationship that damaged you. Not necessarily a villain, as the wound does not require malice, only damage. Sometimes the source was someone who loved you, who made decisions that they believed were right and that cost you something you have not finished paying. Sometimes the source was simply circumstance, and a specific person happened to be the instrument of an outcome that would have found you one way or another. Sometimes, honestly, it was a villain: someone who took something from you deliberately, who understood what they were taking and took it anyway.

The wound is distinguished from the burden called the thing done to you by its relational character, as it is specifically a wound in a relationship, a damage to the particular fabric of connection between you and another person. The other person may not know the extent of it. The other person may have died. The other person may be, in other respects, someone you love or respect or are still in contact with, and the coexistence of the wound with whatever else the relationship contains is its own complication.

What the wound does is install an area of sensitivity that is not labeled from the outside. You will move through situations that do not look, to observers, like they have anything to do with the wound, and find yourself unexpectedly unable to be easy about it. The wound's shadow falls across particular configurations, a particular quality of authority, a particular kind of vulnerability, a particular dynamic between people in a room, and when you are standing in that shadow, you are not entirely in the present. This is not weakness. It is the normal consequence of having been significantly damaged by someone whose damage you did not deserve. It is worth knowing about yourself.

### An Unexpected Bond

You did not come to Mar de Oro looking for this. You came for the contract, or the commission, or the debt to be collected, or the person who told you there was money here and you believed them. You were not looking to be changed by anyone you met. And then, in a particular port, in a particular situation, in circumstances that you did not choose and would not have chosen, there was a person, and the person was not like other people in the specific way that you recognize when you encounter it and cannot fully explain afterward.

The unexpected bond is the one that resists the analysis you would apply to the others. You can trace the logic of the debt you owe; you can describe the sequence by which the loyalty was given. The unexpected bond does not trace cleanly. You look for the explanation and find only the fact: this person, for some reason that is either very complicated or very simple, is the one you would actually risk something real for. Not for the idea of them. For them.

This bond is the most interesting one to carry in the colonial theater because Mar de Oro is specifically a place that mixes people who would not mix in the more stratified world they came from. The unexpected bond very often crosses the lines, of class, of nation, of faith, of what was supposed to be a temporary professional arrangement, that were supposed to prevent it. The world has opinions about some of these crossings. You will have to decide how much those opinions cost you against how much the bond is worth.

## Burdens

A burden is not a personality trait. It is not cynicism or distrust or a tendency toward recklessness. Those may be consequences of a burden, but the burden itself is prior: it is the specific event, the particular thing that happened, that produced these effects. The burden is historical. It is the mechanism by which history maintains its grip on the present, which it does with considerable persistence in anyone who has lived long enough to have something in their past worth carrying.

The distinction between a burden and a flaw is useful. A flaw is a failure of character, a quality that generates bad outcomes by operating as it normally operates. Greed, impulsiveness, cruelty, cowardice: these are flaws that express themselves through the normal functioning of the personality. A burden is different. It is an event that has been partially metabolized and that continues to produce effects in areas that have no obvious connection to it. The burden is not a flaw in your character. It is evidence of damage to it, damage that may have healed around the edges but has not healed through.

The burden also has an important social dimension: other people often cannot see it from the outside. This is partly because people who carry burdens have usually learned to manage their presentation around them, and partly because the effects of a burden express themselves as behavior that has other plausible explanations. The person who is very controlling about information may simply be private; the burden might be that they once gave the wrong information to someone who needed it and the consequences were final.

The person who cannot be still in a room with blocked exits may simply be anxious; the burden might be a specific incarceration that they have not told anyone about. The burden is real, and its effects are real, even when the origin is not legible.

### Kinds of Burden

#### The Thing You Did

An action in your past that cannot be undone. Not necessarily criminal, not necessarily witnessed by anyone other than you, not necessarily legible as wrong to anyone with incomplete information, but you have the complete information, and you know what it was and what it cost. The order you gave that was obeyed, and the obedience had consequences you did not adequately anticipate.

The testimony you gave that was technically accurate and practically devastating. The moment when you could have acted and calculated, quickly and not incorrectly, that action would cost too much, and were not wrong about the cost, but were wrong to let the calculation resolve that way, and knew it before the moment was over.

The thing you did is not, in most cases, a secret you are protecting. It may be something no one else could know to ask you about. The weight of it is not the fear of exposure; it is the simple fact of carrying an accurate account of yourself that includes a specific debit that has not been balanced. Some people spend considerable energy constructing a version of the story that reclassifies the debit: circumstances were impossible, information was incomplete, anyone in that situation would have done the same.

This is sometimes accurate and always necessary, to a degree. The problem is when the reclassification goes too far and the accurate account gets lost, because the accurate account, unpleasant as it is, is also the starting point for doing better.

The thing you did may have consequences that are still visible in the world, people living with what it produced, a situation that is still unresolved, a wrong that has not been righted. In that case, the burden carries the additional weight of the ongoing consequence, which will occasionally present itself in your path whether you are looking for it or not. The world has a way of bringing the past forward.

### The Thing Done to You

You did not choose this. Someone, a person, an institution, a set of circumstances that organized themselves into an outcome, did something to you that you would not have sanctioned, and you carry the mark of it. Loss is the most common species: a family taken by violence, a community destroyed by colonial order, a future foreclosed by a decision made above you that you had no voice in.

Humiliation is another: the specific, embodied experience of being reduced, of having your standing and your dignity stripped away in front of witnesses, of learning that the protections you believed you had are conditional on others finding it convenient to honor them. Violence, betrayal, exposure: these are the common forms.

What is important about the thing done to you is that it is not your fault, and yet you carry it, which creates a specific and uncomfortable asymmetry. You are not responsible for what happened. You are responsible for what you do with it, which is a burden of a different kind but still a burden. The thing done to you does not disappear when you decide to move forward; it becomes, instead, the thing you are moving forward while carrying.

Some people find, eventually, that the carrying has built something in them, a quality of resilience or empathy or hard-earned wisdom that they would not have without the weight. This does not mean the weight was worth it. The calculation of whether

a thing is worth its cost does not change the cost.

In the colonial theater of Mar de Oro, the thing done to you is often institutional in character: colonial policy, commercial exploitation, the casual violence of a system that regards certain people as instrumental rather than final. The personal and the structural are not separable here. What was done to you was done by a person, often, but the person was operating inside a structure that made what they did possible, legible, and in some cases rewarded. Understanding both the personal and the structural is part of understanding the burden.

### The Unfinished Matter

Something left incomplete. A task that was abandoned mid-execution when the situation changed and didn't permit return. A promise made to someone who needed it, who organized their subsequent life around the assumption that the promise would be kept, who is still waiting. A question, about what happened to a specific person, about who gave a specific order, about whether what you believe about your own past is actually what occurred, that has not been answered and that you cannot stop needing to answer. The account that will not close.

The unfinished matter is sometimes called a quest, in the older stories, and that word is not entirely wrong, but it misses something about the specific quality of obligation. A quest is undertaken. An unfinished matter persists whether or not you are attending to it. It is there when you are doing something else; it is there when you are at rest; it is there in the specific way that a thing you haven't done sits differently than a thing you've decided not to do.

You cannot achieve the closure that would come from choosing to abandon it, because the choice is not genuinely available. Circumstances, or conscience, or the person who is waiting, or your own intolerance for open accounts, something keeps the matter from closing.

The unfinished matter is also, usefully, the burden most likely to provide forward motion. The thing you did and the thing done to you are burdens that press down; the unfinished matter is a burden that pulls forward. It is tethered to a specific outcome that exists in the future, the moment when the account closes, when the question is answered, when the promise is kept, and the character carrying it is oriented toward that future in a way that the other burdens do not always provide.

### The Identity Burden

Before you open your mouth, the world has already decided several things about you. Your face and your dress and the way you carry yourself communicate national origin, class, faith, and a dozen other identity markers that the world of Mar de Oro reads automatically and responds to before you have said or done anything. Some of those readings are favorable. Others are not.

The identity burden is the weight of living in a world that has a fixed opinion about some category you belong to, an opinion that applied to you before it had any specific evidence about you, that is impervious to specific evidence because it was never based on specific evidence, and that you must navigate in every room you enter.

The Valdegracian merchant in an Oraclean port carries the weight of being a Valdegracian merchant in an Oraclean port, carrying the accumulated history of what Valdegracian interests have done in that region, present in the room as a predisposition before he has introduced himself. The Solarian trained in Eisenmarkian natural philosophy in a Valdegracian colonial settlement carries the history of internal Solarian argument every time they speak to anyone familiar with those debates.

A person recognizably descended from one of the Golden Sea's indigenous communities, standing in a room dominated by continental colonists, carries the entire structure of the colonial project as context for everything they say. Class works similarly: the person who is visibly from the lower colonial orders knows that certain rooms will have decided on their expendability before the discussion begins.

The identity burden does not belong to the person carrying it. It belongs to the world, which has placed it there. But the person carries it regardless. This is the central injustice of the identity burden: it is not a consequence of anything you did, and it is yours to manage. The management strategies are as various as the people who practice them. Some people correct the assumption directly, which works with people who are capable of revision.

Some people work around it, using the identity to their advantage in contexts where the associated assumptions are useful, and managing around it in contexts where they are not. Some people carry it with a controlled fury that is always visible just below the professional surface, because that is what it produces, and the pretense of equanimity would require a performance whose cost is too high.

## Reasons to Adventure

The question that matters, practically, is not who you are in the abstract but what keeps you moving. Mar de Oro is not a place that anyone arrives in by accident; it is far from every center of civilized power, reachable only by long and expensive ocean passage, inhabited by dangers that the travel narratives describe in terms designed to attract a specific kind of person while deterring everyone else.

The people who come here have reasons. Those reasons are not always the ones stated on arrival. But they are real, and they drive behavior, and understanding your own reasons, not the official version but the actual engine, is the beginning of self-knowledge in a place that will test it continuously.

The reasons below are not exhaustive. They are the patterns that recur most often among the people who find themselves, in Anno 7202, operating in the Golden Sea theater. They are given not as choices from a list but as recognizable shapes that a genuine reason might take, useful not for selecting a motivation but for recognizing the one you already have.

### Vindication

You need to prove something to someone specific. Not to the world in general, not to yourself, but to a person whose opinion has an outstanding claim on you, a parent who declared you unlikely to come to anything, a commanding officer who dismissed you at a critical moment and whose dismissal you cannot stop hearing, a court that recorded a verdict you know was wrong.

Vindication is not vanity. It is the refusal to accept an assessment that you know, with the certainty that comes from being the subject rather than the observer, to be inaccurate. You have evidence the court did not have. You know things about that situation that the commanding officer never acknowledged. Vindication is the project of making the correct record exist.

The danger of vindication is that the person you need to convince may not be reachable. They may be dead. They may be unreachable by any evidence you could produce. The project may be structurally impossible, which does not stop the engine from running. The person driven by vindication is sometimes driving toward a destination that doesn't exist on any map, which is among the things that Mar de Oro will eventually make clear.

### Recovery

Something was taken. Not metaphorically, but specifically taken, by specific people, in a specific sequence of events that you can describe in detail and have described in detail to a number of audiences who failed to be as outraged as the situation warranted. What was taken might be property, might be a person, might be a right, might be a name. The recovery project is the work of getting it back. This is, in many cases, what brings people to the colonial theater: the thing that was taken was taken here, or taken by people who are here, or its recovery requires resources that can only be assembled here.

The person in recovery mode has a very specific relationship to obstacles: they are problems that delay the recovery, not reasons to stop. The plan changes but the direction doesn't. This is both a strength and a vulnerability, as the willingness to keep moving regardless of cost is effective, but costs that are not counted eventually accumulate past the point of sustainable.

### Knowledge

There is something you need to understand before you can stop. Not want to understand, but need to, in the sense that the not-knowing is a kind of ongoing injury, a gap in the structure of what you can make sense of. What happened to the expedition. What is actually in the interior beyond the eastern range. What the Oraclean sacramental tradition actually does with the Fortera, as opposed to what its critics claim. Why cartographic surveys made since the Sundering have documented uneven patterns of Fortera presence, and what those patterns imply about the nature of the world.

Knowledge as a reason to adventure is sometimes mistaken for curiosity, which makes it sound pleasant and optional. It is not always pleasant and it is not optional to the person who has it. The scholar who cannot close the question follows it the way a wound follows the body, not by choice, but by necessity.

### Obligation

You promised someone. They are counting on you. The promise was made in good faith and the circumstances have since become significantly more complicated than they were when you made it, but the person who is counting on you has not been informed of the complications, or cannot release you from the promise, or you are not willing to present the complications as a reason to be released because the promise was the thing they were depending on and you will not take that from them.

Obligation is the reason that keeps the most people moving when every other reason has run down. It is external, living in the needs of another person rather than in your own desire or project, which makes it in some ways more durable than internally generated reasons, and in some ways more exhausting. The purely obligated adventurer is doing this for someone else, which is noble and real and, sustained over a long period without any admixture of self-interest, eventually unsustainable.

### Survival

The simpler and more honest version of several other reasons: stopping would be more dangerous than continuing. The situation that brought you to Mar de Oro has not resolved into a safe alternative. The people who are looking for you are still looking. The debt you owe to someone dangerous has not been discharged. The thing you witnessed has not been sufficiently forgotten by the people who would prefer it forgotten. You are moving because the alternative is being still, and being still would give the world time to catch up.

Survival is not a shameful reason. The world contains many people trying to kill other people, and the people trying to avoid being killed are engaged in a perfectly legitimate enterprise. The person moving for survival has usually developed a very

practical relationship to questions of moral complexity, such that they do not have the luxury of extended deliberation about the right thing to do, which can make them more decisive and less scrupulous than other types. This is worth knowing about yourself.

### Service

Something larger than yourself needs you, and you know it does. The cause is real, not performed, not a vehicle for self-interest, but genuinely larger than your individual stake in the outcome. The community that sent you here because you were the one they could spare who had the skills the mission required. The institution that is actually trying to do something good in a theater where good is difficult to achieve and badly needs the specific thing you can do. The people, a people, a community, a dispersed network of individuals with a common stake, who have a legitimate claim on someone with your capabilities and your access to the situation.

Service is not the same as loyalty, though it often produces it. Loyalty is given to what exists. Service is given to what is needed. The person acting from service has calculated, honestly, that the situation requires what they can offer, and has chosen to offer it. This is neither self-abnegation nor self-congratulation. It is a clear-eyed assessment of where one's effort matters most.

### Greed

The honest reason that many people decline to name as such. There is something specific you want, not glory in the abstract, but the thing that a certain quantity of money, or a certain acquisition, would produce in your life. The house. The ship of your own. The ability to send the money home that your family has been waiting for with a patience they have not complained about and that you are aware is not infinite.

The stake in the trading house that would change your position in the commercial world from dependent to sovereign. The specific object, the chart, the manuscript, the artifact, that would complete the collection and resolve the question and make the next twenty years of your working life mean something.

Greed is not the same as acquisitiveness or mere avarice. It is goal-directed. The greedy person in Mar de Oro knows exactly what they want and is willing to be honest with themselves about wanting it, which is a form of self-knowledge that more elevated-sounding reasons sometimes obscure. The greed is not inexhaustible; there is a specific satisfaction it points toward. That makes it, in practical terms, more manageable than the reasons that have no natural terminus.

### Atonement

There is a debt that cannot be paid in money, and you know it, and you are paying it in the only currencies that remain available: time, risk, effort, the willingness to put yourself in situations where what you did might be partially balanced by what you do. This is not the legal calculation of a fine paid and an account cleared. Atonement is the ongoing work of a person who knows that the account cannot be fully cleared and who is doing the work anyway, because the alternative, the life in which the debt is ignored and the damage is not partially offset, is not something they can inhabit with any integrity.

The person walking toward atonement is not flagellating themselves. They have usually moved past the self-punishment phase, which is unproductive and is, when examined honestly, still primarily about the self, about managing the internal experience of guilt rather than addressing the external consequence of what was done. Atonement, as a reason to adventure, is outward-directed. The debt was owed to someone or something in the world, and the payment goes back into the world, in whatever denominations are available.

## Closing

The bonds, burdens, and reasons you bring to Mar de Oro are the first draft of a story. They are the version you wrote before the world had a chance to respond. They are accurate, as far as they go, but they go only as far as what you have already experienced, and what you have already experienced is, as it turns out, a limited sample of what the world contains.

The crew will revise it. Mar de Oro will revise it further. The unexpected bond will form and change the topology of everything. The thing you were certain you wanted will be delivered in a form you did not anticipate. The reason you thought was driving you will turn out to have been covering for the reason you hadn't yet found a language for. The burden you have been carrying will present its resolution in circumstances that bear no resemblance to anything you planned. None of this is failure. This is how a person who is genuinely present to their own experience in a living world gets revised.

What remains after all that revision, the thing that proved durable under the pressure of actual events, actual people, actual consequence, is the person you actually are. Not the person you arrived as, but the person who was in the person you arrived as, waiting for the world to find them.



PART V

# LIFE IN THE AGE OF SAIL AND FLIGHT

## IN THIS PART

*Read for*

Chapters 13–16: war, arms, dress, equipment, ships, trade, communication, travel, and the hard country.

## USE THIS WHEN

*At the table*

The campaign turns to battle, equipment, movement, logistics, sea or air travel, or what a character can plausibly carry and do.

## TABLE ESSENTIALS

*Carry forward*

Technology changes pressure before it changes society. Gear and vessels are social signals as well as tools.

CHAPTER 13

# WAR IN THE EARLY AGE OF FLIGHT

*War is a conversation conducted at range.*

Aeon lives at the seam between two ages. Sail still governs most travel and war. Flintlock firearms remain powerful, smoky, temperamental, and slow enough that courage and timing still matter between volleys. Steel remains close and personal. Powder must be kept dry. Weather remains a military actor.

Flight has arrived, but not comfortably. Airships are expensive, prestigious, and faintly miraculous even to those accustomed to seeing them. They promise speed, surveillance, status, and altered strategy. They also carry a kind of danger no sea-vessel does: the volatile marriage of lift, heat, pressure, discipline, and catastrophic consequence.

## The Weapon and the Hand That Carries It

A flintlock pistol in Anno 7202 is not an equalizer in the sense that later ages will produce. It fires once. The reload is measured in seconds that combat does not always provide. Wet weather degrades it. Poorly cured powder misfires with a frequency that every soldier knows personally. And yet it changes everything it touches, because a weapon that kills at distance changes what courage means, what a duel means, what a mob can threaten, and what a single trained soldier can accomplish against an untrained one. The sword remains at the hip of anyone who expects close quarters. The knife is on everyone else.

In Mar de Oro, the colonial theater has produced its own weapons culture. The jungle punishes the long musket of continental campaigns; shorter arms, faster to bring to bear in confined undergrowth, are common among sailors, militia, and the guides who know the interior. Naval combat at close range produces a chaos of boarding, smoke, and overlapping fire in which the ability to reload while moving is a genuine skill distinction. The weapons officers aboard the major powers' vessels are not simply armory administrators; they are discipline specialists, because a broadside that goes wrong in timing is a broadside that kills its own crew as readily as the enemy.

## Fleet Doctrine: What the Powers Believe About War at Sea and Sky

The great powers do not agree on what naval power is for, and the disagreement is not merely theoretical. It is built into the hulls of their vessels.

Valdegracia operates under the motto *Compostura. Conflagración.* Composure. Conflagration. The Armada de Dominio, whose Mar de Oro formation is the Escuadra del Mar de Oro and its elite División del Dragón, is built on the belief that the side with greater structural mass and disciplined fire wins when both sides are willing to press the engagement. Hold the line, absorb damage, and let the accumulated weight of a sustained broadside do what maneuvering cannot. Valdegracian vessels are bulkier than their counterparts, with internal Éterlumin systems

integrated into the hull and armor plating that lighter designs cannot match. The Justicar-class ship of the line is the fullest expression of this doctrine: a vessel so structurally formidable that its presence at a strategic harbor is a political fact before it fires a single shot. Its broadside suppresses everything within the line of fire, not merely the target, pressing all enemies in its path to seek cover or hold position under fire. A Justicar on station is there to be seen, to anchor the presence of empire, and to be the thing every other vessel must calculate against when planning anything in the surrounding waters.

The Cruzado frigate carries this logic at smaller scale. Its hull construction and disciplined damage-control drills allow it to absorb an incoming broadside unusually well, but the same structural mass costs it turning radius. Changing course requires time that a faster opponent can exploit. Valdegracian captains know this and plan for it. The Cruzado is not meant to chase or evade; it is meant to be where it needs to be before the engagement begins and to hold that position until the engagement is decided.

What defines Valdegracian doctrine is not individual vessel performance but formation integrity. The Justicar-class anchors every allied vessel within its immediate formation, stiffening the line as a whole, and the doctrine is built around maintaining that formation under fire long enough for the cumulative weight of disciplined broadsides to break the enemy's ability to sustain their own. A Valdegracian admiral who loses formation cohesion has lost the engagement on doctrinal terms before the damage tallies are even read.

Albion operates under the doctrine *Silence before the storm*, and the Royal Fleet Command's Mar de Oro formation, the Expeditionary Flotilla's 13th Engagement Group known informally as the Ghost Squadron, is built around the assumption that the engagement is already lost if it begins as the enemy intended. Where Valdegracian vessels are built to absorb punishment through mass and armor, Albion vessels are built lighter and faster, carrying firepower that punches well above what their size and construction would suggest.

The design philosophy accepts that a single sustained broadside from a Valdegracian opponent could do serious damage, and answers that risk by ensuring the Albion vessel fires first, repositions before the return volley arrives, and engages on its own terms or not at all.

The Banshee-class battle cruiser is the command and coordination platform of Ghost Squadron operations. It is the heaviest vessel in the Albion Mar de Oro formation and, unlike the frigates that operate alongside it, is built to absorb fire while maintaining the coordination role. It carries an integrated reconnaissance network that feeds its captain situational awareness ahead of any engagement, which means the Banshee almost always acts before the opposing vessel has finished reading the situation.

It is designed to operate in coordination with the Bureau of Correspondent Affairs' Obsidian-class, a vessel that does not appear in the official fleet registry, such that the Bureau's advance positioning determines when and how the Banshee commits. When an Albion captain takes an incoming broadside, the Banshee can immediately return fire rather than waiting for the next volley rotation, a capability that changes how opposing captains calculate the cost of engaging it directly.

The Spectre frigate is a disruption platform built on the same light-hull, heavy-gun philosophy. Its guns are loaded with a rotating charge configuration that pierces the defensive reinforcement making Valdegracian vessels difficult to damage at range, bypassing the armor that would otherwise absorb a standard broadside. After firing, it can ignite a burst from its drive system that both accelerates the vessel and lays a dense smoke trail behind it, repositioning under cover in a way that makes the return volley difficult to place.

The Wright frigate is the formation's alpha striker: it can bring both broadsides to bear in a single committed exchange, delivering weight of fire far beyond what its hull size suggests. The maneuver leaves its gun crews occupied with a prolonged reload and makes the ship vulnerable if the strike fails to decide the moment.

The Wight skirmisher operates at the edges of any engagement, using storm cloud and coastal mist to approach without being seen and moving fast enough that engaging it directly is rarely worth the cost. It does not need to destroy a target; it needs only to make the target less effective, and sustained harassment from a Wight can degrade the accuracy and coordination of heavier vessels over a long engagement.

> CLASS NAMES
>
> Wright and Wight are separate Albion classes. Veloz-class is likewise a class designation, while *La Estrella Veloz* is the name of a specific Hellerite vessel.

The Duchy of Heller operates no ships of the line and does not pretend to. What the Duchy has built over two decades in the archipelago is a force whose individual vessels are designed to complement each other in the same way that a much larger fleet would, at a scale the Duchy's resources can actually sustain. The Cazador frigate is the interceptor: its drive system reaches operational output faster than comparable vessels, its guns are tuned for precision fire against rigging and propulsion rather than for battering hulls, and it is fast enough to dictate engagement range rather than accept the range an opponent prefers.

The Santo-class sloop provides patrol and escort at speeds that heavier vessels cannot match, and can push its drive system into a short burst of exceptional speed, making it genuinely difficult to run down in the inter-island passages the Duchy knows better than any outside power.

The Aurora Ventus heavy command frigate extends what the Duchy's smaller vessels can do. It can deliver a burst of speed through its drive configuration that allows it to close range or break away at a moment other ships cannot anticipate, and its Éterlumin field management stiffens allied vessels within its immediate formation, achieving through coordinated field output what Valdegracian admirals seek through structural mass. La Estrella Veloz is the Duchy's pursuit weapon: it can push its drive to a speed that makes escape from a fleeing target genuinely difficult, exploit vessels committed to a course, and reposition laterally after firing without presenting the stationary profile that invites an accurate return broadside.

The Helios tender makes all of these vessels more sustainable than their individual specifications suggest. It can conduct field repairs, transfer stores, service damaged systems, and replenish Éterlumin reserves without forcing the formation to return to port, which lets the Duchy's small force operate at a tempo its size would not normally permit.

The Duchy's doctrinal assumption is that it cannot win a sustained attrition engagement against either Valdegracia or Albion, and does not try to. What it can do is make engagement costly, arrive unexpectedly through its knowledge of the archipelago's inter-island passages, and sustain operations at a pace its size would not normally permit. Albion captains engaging Duchy formations have learned to identify the Helios tender as the primary target, because they understand better than Valdegracian commanders that the tender is the formation's operational multiplier. The Duchy reads this tactical recognition as confirmation that the design works.

## How Ships Break

A vessel under fire does not fail all at once. It degrades through its subsystems, and understanding this degradation is as tactically important as knowing a vessel's peak capability, because engagements are rarely decided at full strength on either side.

A Valdegracian vessel begins to show strain at the rigging: speed drops, maneuver becomes labored. At heavier damage the weapon decks lose efficiency as gun crews are displaced and the broadside rhythm falters. Deeper damage takes the steering and lift, and the vessel that was a formation anchor becomes a liability to its own line. Valdegracian ships are built to absorb punishment before any of this cascades, which is their doctrinal advantage; the question in any engagement against a Justicar-class is whether sufficient damage can be inflicted fast enough to reach those thresholds before its guns reduce the attacker's capacity to press. At the point where critical hull damage is

accumulating, a Valdegracian vessel becomes actively dangerous to the surrounding water: the chance of catastrophic structural failure rises as the damage accumulates.

Albion vessels strain earlier and more acutely. Propulsion is the first system to degrade, and propulsion is what Albion doctrine depends on; a Spectre or Wright that has lost speed has also lost the initiative that justified its lighter construction. Weapon system degradation follows rigging failure, and by that stage the vessel is fighting on terms that favor the heavier opponent. Albion doctrine treats disengagement at that point not as retreat but as tactical reset, and the drive systems are built partly with the capability to accelerate out of an engaged position even under fire.

The cultural resistance to this logic within Royal Fleet Command, which from outside looks like flexible good sense and from inside sometimes looks like abandonment, is a permanent tension that the Ghost Squadron manages by making the decision criteria explicit before any engagement begins rather than during it.

## What Combat Looks Like

Naval combat in Mar de Oro is loud, chemically dense, and structurally punishing in ways that accumulate over the course of an engagement. A broadside at range produces a wall of sound that interferes with command communication for minutes afterward. Smoke from black powder discharges is not immediately dispersed at low altitude and in humid conditions; it sits over the engagement, reducing visibility and complicating ranging for subsequent volleys.

The airship engagement is faster and more immediately consequential. At altitude, the exchange of fire between airships produces a different acoustic landscape: the guns are the same, but the structural creaking of the hull under pressure, the sound of

containment systems responding to proximity damage, and the specific quality of wind noise at operating altitude all change how the crew experiences what is happening. An airship that begins to lose containment integrity announces it through sound and motion before the crew can see the damage: a low frequency vibration in the deck plates, a change in the trim of the vessel, a report from the engineering section that is slightly too calm to be reassuring.

The crews trained to recognize these signals have an advantage measured in the seconds available to respond before the situation becomes irretrievable.

## Why Soldiers Still March in Lines

To a modern eye, line infantry can look absurd: men standing shoulder to shoulder while guns fire at them. In Aeon, it is not absurd. It is the answer to the limits of the age.

A smoothbore musket is powerful, but inaccurate at distance, slow to reload, and difficult to use well under fear. One soldier firing alone may miss. A formed line firing together turns many uncertain shots into one disciplined volley. The line is not there to make each soldier safe. It is there to make the unit effective.

Formation also keeps men under command. Battlefields are filled with smoke, shouting, drums, screaming animals, broken ground, and officers trying to be heard over cannon. A scattered crowd is harder to direct, harder to rally, and easier to panic. A line can see its officers, hear its drums, dress its ranks, reload together, and fire when ordered.

Cavalry is another reason. Loose infantry caught in the open can be ridden down. Formed infantry can become a square, presenting bayonets in every direction. That square is vulnerable to artillery, but against horsemen it can mean survival.

This is the brutal logic of the age: dense formations are dangerous, but disorder is often worse. Armies march in lines because the alternative is not modern cover-and-fire tactics. The alternative is smoke, fear, confusion, cavalry, and men becoming a mob before the enemy breaks.

## Formations in Play

| Formation | Why soldiers use it | What characters should understand |
|---|---|---|
| Line | To deliver volley fire and hold a front. | The unit is ready to shoot, but exposed to artillery, flanking, and morale shock. |
| Column | To move, assault, and keep control while advancing. | The unit is pushing forward, but becomes a dangerous target if caught by guns. |
| Square | To survive cavalry. | Horsemen are near or expected. The formation resists a charge, but cannon can punish it terribly. |
| Skirmish order | To scout, screen, harass, and use cover. | These troops are flexible and hard to pin down, but fragile if isolated or ridden down. |

Formations are not decorative battlefield shapes. They are the technology of command before radios, the psychology of courage before modern training, and the reason a frightened crowd can still act like an army.

## The Guns and the Horse

Battles in this age are not won simply by killing more men. They are won by making the enemy stop acting as a formed body. A line that cannot hear orders, a column that loses direction, a square that begins to open, or a battery abandoned by its escort may be beaten before it is destroyed.

Infantry holds ground and delivers the decisive volleys. Artillery shapes the field before infantry closes, breaking confidence, disordering ranks, and making certain approaches too costly. Cavalry threatens the spaces between formations. It scouts, screens, pursues, and waits for the moment when order fails.

No arm should fight alone for long. Infantry without support can be flanked or ridden down. Cavalry thrown against steady bayonets can be ruined. Artillery without escort can be captured. A good commander uses each arm to create the opening another arm needs.

The arrival of breech-loading guns and Heller-pattern cased shells does not make line-and-battery warfare vanish overnight. It changes the cost of old habits. Troops still need line, column, square, and skirmish order, but they must spend less time exposed. They must use terrain, smoke, timing, and speed more carefully. Improved artillery does not replace doctrine at once. It punishes commanders who fail to adapt.

VISUAL PLATE

# DUCHY OF HELLER INFANTRY FORMATIONS

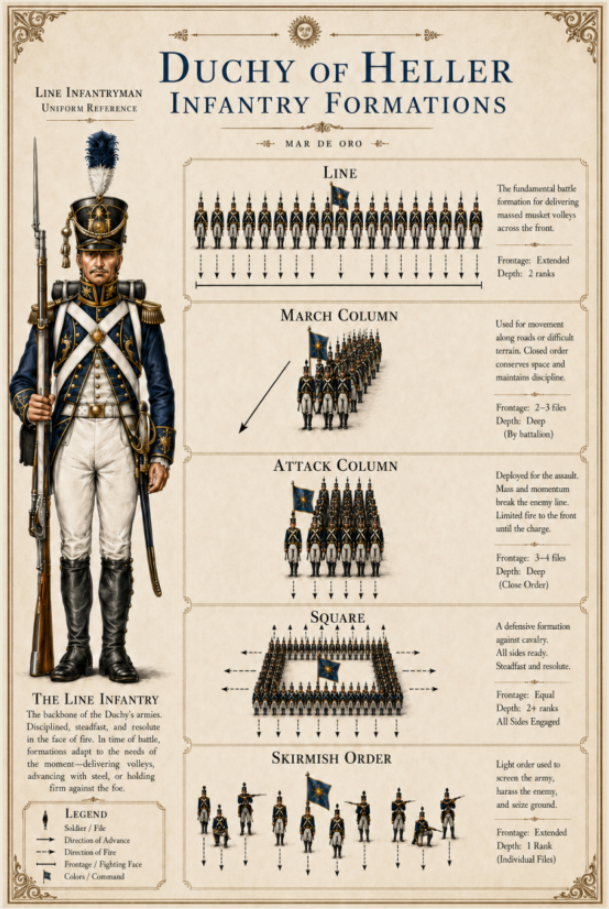



*Plate: Duchy of Heller infantry formations, showing line, march column, attack column, square, and skirmish order.*

Airships do not make old warfare disappear. They make its dangers arrive from above.

A field army can hide behind ridges, walls, hedges, batteries, and careful lines of approach. An airship changes that calculation. It can see over ground that would conceal a marching column. It can carry guns to angles no ground battery can reach. It can threaten roads, bridges, camps, magazines, harbors, and retreat routes without first fighting through the army that protects them.

This is why airships are terrifying. They do not only kill. They make commanders feel that the battlefield has lost its edges.

An airship above a battlefield can observe formations, signal their movement, direct friendly artillery, drop fire onto troops who thought themselves safe behind terrain, rake a road column from above, or force infantry to scatter. Scattering may save men from one danger, but it makes them weaker against another. A unit that breaks formation under airship fire may survive the blast only to become vulnerable to cavalry, infantry assault, or panic.

Against ships and harbors, the effect is worse. A sea vessel is built to fight across water, through broadside, angle, wind, and approach. An airship can choose a different plane of attack. It can fire down into decks, masts, rigging, magazines, and exposed crews. It can threaten anchored ships that cannot maneuver freely. It can turn a harbor from a refuge into a trap.

But airships are not invincible. They are expensive, maintenance-hungry, weather-sensitive, and dependent on skilled crews. Their Éterlumin systems are powerful, but dangerous. A damaged lift chamber, ruptured tank, burning line, broken stabilizer, or panicked engine crew can turn victory into catastrophe. An airship does not simply sink. It falls.

That is the horror and prestige of the early age of flight. An airship is not just another weapon. It is a moving high ground, a signal tower, a battery, a terror symbol, and a disaster waiting for one mistake.

When one appears, everyone reacts. Officers look up. Signalmen panic. Infantry search for cover. Cavalry lose freedom of movement. Gunners try to find elevation. Every commander suddenly understands that the battle now has a ceiling.

## Fog of War

Battles in Aeon are not seen clearly while they are happening.

This is partly because of fear, distance, weather, and confusion. It is also because of the weapons themselves. Muskets and cannon use black powder, and black powder makes smoke. A single musket shot produces a cloud. A volley from a line produces a wall. A

battery firing again and again can turn a field into a grey curtain. On a damp day, smoke hangs low. In still air, it drifts slowly and hides whole formations. In wind, it tears open for a moment, then closes again somewhere else.

Black powder also fouls weapons, burns hands, stings eyes, catches in the throat, and leaves men half-deaf after sustained fire. Soldiers do not stand on a clean field calmly observing events. They cough, blink, reload by touch, listen for drums, search for flags, and try to decide whether the shape in the smoke is their own line, the enemy, or a broken unit running the wrong way.

A commander may have a map, a plan, a staff, signal flags, drums, runners, scouts, and an excellent view from a hill or quarterdeck, and still be wrong about what is happening two fields away. Smoke hides formations. Cannon fire drowns orders. Dust, rain, fog, cloud, sailcloth, jungle, walls, hedges, and broken ground all distort the truth. Men move late, misunderstand commands, follow old orders after the situation has changed, or obey the nearest officer because the correct one is dead.

This is the fog of war: not only literal fog, but uncertainty.

On land, a line may vanish behind powder smoke after its first volley. A column may be mistaken for a larger force because only its front is visible. A square may look steady from a distance while panic opens gaps inside it. A battery may seem silent because it has been destroyed, or because it is waiting for canister range. A messenger may carry an order that was sensible ten minutes ago and fatal now.

At sea, fog of war is distance, weather, sail, smoke, and angle. A captain may misread a flag, mistake a damaged ship for a retreating one, lose sight of a hidden sloop, or fail to realize that the wind has given the enemy the next move. Cannon smoke can turn a clean broadside into a blind exchange. A ship may appear beaten until it clears the smoke with guns still loaded.

In the sky, fog of war becomes stranger. Cloud banks hide ships completely. Altitude changes distance and scale. A vessel above cloud may see the battle but not the ground beneath it. A vessel below cloud may hear engines and guns without knowing where the threat is. Signals may be blocked, delayed, or misunderstood. Airships promise vision, but they also create a new battlefield where danger can vanish into weather and return from an angle no one expected.

Fog of war matters because it makes courage and discipline more important than perfect information. Soldiers hold because they trust their officers, their formation, their flags, and the men beside them. Captains act because waiting for certainty may lose the moment. Scouts, signal officers, runners, engineers, and lookouts become vital because the side that understands the battle sooner often acts first.

Fog of war does not exist to confuse players unfairly. It exists to create decisions under pressure. Characters may know what they can see, hear, smell, infer, or learn from a panicked messenger. They may be sent to discover whether a flank has collapsed, whether a battery still fires, whether smoke hides retreat or ambush, whether the airship above the clouds is friendly, damaged, or hunting them.

Good play comes from partial information, urgent choices, and the terrible realization that doing nothing is also a choice.

## What This Means at the Table

When characters see a formation, they are seeing intent, but not certainty.

> A line says: we are ready to fire.
>
> A column says: we are moving or about to attack.
>
> A square says: we fear cavalry.
>
> Skirmishers say: the real body is behind us, and we are buying it time.
>
> A battery without support says: strike now, or suffer later.
>
> Smoke, cloud, distance, and fear say: you may be wrong.

Characters do not need to command whole armies for this to matter. They may carry an order through smoke, rally men around a fallen flag, silence a gun crew, cut a limber team loose, guide cavalry through dead ground, pull a wounded officer from the front, spot the shadow of an airship above cloud, or realize that an enemy square has just become a perfect artillery target.

This is where equipment enters play. A musket matters because volley fire matters. A bayonet matters because smoke and fear eventually close the distance. A cuirass matters because cavalry lives in the moment when order breaks. A uniform matters because it tells others who owns your violence, who may command you, and who may shoot you first. A boarding harness, pressure key, engineer's satchel, or naval coat is never only decoration. It is a sign of role, risk, access, and burden.

## Movement and Army Fighting at the Table

Large battles in Mar de Oro should not usually be played as full army simulations. The table does not need to move every battalion, battery, horse troop, and skirmish screen across a measured battlefield. The important question is simpler: where are the characters, what can they see, what is moving toward them, and what will change if they act now?

Treat the army battle as a living hazard. Formations move, smoke spreads, guns reload, officers fall, drums beat, cavalry appears where the line has opened, and airships shift the meaning of cover from moment to moment. The characters act inside that pressure.

A battlefield scene works best when it has three scales at once.

| Scale | What it means at the table |
|---|---|
| Field scale | What the army is doing: the main line advances, the enemy battery changes target, cavalry waits behind a ridge, or an airship descends through cloud. |
| Scene scale | What matters immediately: the bridge, gun pit, broken wall, signal mast, wounded officer, trapped squad, courtyard, road bend, or ship deck. |
| Character scale | What the players can do now: run, crawl, command, shoot, drag someone to cover, read a flag, repair a valve, steady a frightened soldier, or decide that the order they carry is already wrong. |

Do not ask players to solve the entire battle unless the campaign is about command. Ask them to solve the part of the battle they can reach.

## Battlefield Movement

Movement on a battlefield is rarely clean. Open ground is fast but exposed. Roads are faster but watched. Woods, jungle, ruins, ditches, walls, ship decks, trenches, and broken streets slow movement but provide concealment or cover. Smoke can hide a movement, but it can also hide the danger being moved toward.

| Zone | Use at the table |
|---|---|
| Rear | Command posts, reserves, surgeons, signals, baggage. Safer, but not safe from airships or deep guns. |
| Approach | Roads, fields, docks, beaches, alleys, or slopes leading toward danger. Movement is possible, but watched. |
| Fire Zone | Ground covered by muskets, artillery, sharpshooters, ship guns, or airship fire. Crossing it requires timing, cover, or courage. |
| Decision Point | The bridge, breach, battery, signal tower, gate, deck, ridge, or road bend where the scene can turn. |
| Collapse Zone | Broken formations, panicked horses, burning wagons, falling rigging, ruptured machinery. Dangerous because order has failed. |

Use zones when the fight is larger than a skirmish. Each round, exchange, or dramatic beat, ask what changes nearby: a battery fires, smoke thickens, cavalry appears, a friendly line wavers, a runner falls, or the airship above the cloud is suddenly visible.

## Army Fighting Without Moving Armies

When armies clash, resolve the larger battle through tracks, clocks, or narrative pressure rather than by rolling for every unit. The characters should feel the battle moving around them, but their choices should still matter.

| Track | What it measures | How characters change it |
|---|---|---|
| Cohesion | Whether a formation can still receive orders, hold shape, and act as a unit. | Rally troops, protect officers, carry orders, recover colors, or restore a signal. |
| Pressure | How much fire, fear, confusion, and danger is building against one side. | Silence a gun, create smoke, break a charge, disable a ship weapon, or force the enemy to redeploy. |
| Position | Who holds the useful ground: bridge, ridge, harbor, breach, road, battery, signal point, or cloud angle. | Take the gate, seize the tower, guide skirmishers through cover, hold the deck, or spot the hidden airship. |

This is the central battlefield rule of the setting: battles are won when the enemy stops acting as an organized body. Killing random enemies may matter less than breaking a formation's ability to receive orders, hold its shape, or keep moving.

## Fog of War at the Table

Fog of war should change how information reaches the characters. It should not remove player agency. The GM should describe what the characters can perceive, what they can reasonably guess, and what remains uncertain.

| Information | What it means | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Certain | The characters can directly see, hear, smell, or touch it. | The battery ahead has fired. You see the smoke and the gun crew reloading. |
| Likely | The characters can infer it from signs, but may be wrong. | The enemy line is hidden by smoke, but the drums are steady. They probably have not broken. |
| Unknown | The characters need scouting, signals, reports, or movement to confirm it. | You cannot tell whether the left flank has collapsed or simply vanished behind powder smoke. |

The GM should speak in these terms. Do not say, "The enemy cavalry is behind the hill," unless the characters have reason to know it. Say, "You hear horses beyond the ridge, but you cannot see how many."

## Simple Battlefield Beat

A battery has found the road you need to cross.

The Heller line is holding, but smoke has hidden its left.

Show the field. Show the immediate danger.

They move, command, sneak, fire, repair, signal, rally, or retreat.

Ask what the characters do.

Then change the battle: success improves cohesion, pressure, or position; failure worsens one of them or creates a complication.

Resolve the action in your chosen system.

> These are system-neutral procedures. The appendix keeps the D&D 5e, Pathfinder 1e, Pathfinder 2e, and Blades in the Dark conversion guidance where it belongs: after the setting chapters, ready for tables that want mechanical translation.

CHAPTER 14

# ARMS, DRESS AND EQUIPMENT

In Mar de Oro, equipment is never only decoration. A coat, a bayonet, a cuirass, a pressure key, or a boarding harness tells other people what a character is, who claims them, and what kind of danger may follow behind them. Uniforms carry authority. Weapons carry expectation. Specialist gear marks training, access, and purpose.

This chapter adds a player-facing equipment layer to the Setting Guide. It is not a shopping catalogue. It is a guide to recognition, role, access, and consequence: what a character can plausibly do with the right kit, how obvious that kit is, who is likely to possess it, and what complications it creates when carried into a scene.

**Use the plates by asking three questions.**
What does this gear let the character attempt? What does it tell strangers before the character speaks? What price does it carry in weight, law, suspicion, maintenance, or politics?











VISUAL PLATE

# HOW EQUIPMENT WORKS IN PLAY

Equipment should create choices at the table. It should never be only a list of objects. The following four lenses help players and Game Masters turn kit into action, pressure, and consequence.

### Capability

Gear gives permission for action. A boarding harness supports climbing and grappling. A pressure key supports emergency repair. A musket supports threat at range, but not endless fire.

### Visibility

Some gear announces itself at once. Uniform, cuirass, artillery limber, and officer insignia shape the scene before anyone speaks.

### Access

Common gear can be bought. Military issue gear requires service, theft, favor, or papers. Elite and covert gear creates questions the moment it is found.

### Burden

Useful gear has a cost. It can be heavy, loud, hot, illegal, fragile, hard to maintain, or too political for the conversation at hand.

| Tag | Meaning in play |
|---|---|
| Common | Easy to find and socially unsurprising. |
| Military Issue | Recognized service equipment. It implies allegiance or access. |
| Restricted | Requires permits, rank, connections, or explanation. |
| Concealable | Can be hidden under ordinary clothing or packed away. |
| Bulky | Difficult to hide, carry, or move through tight spaces. |
| Formal | Communicates status, rank, and official authority. |
| Boarding | Optimized for ship assault, rope work, and deck fighting. |
| Technical | Supports repair, control, measurement, and emergency response. |
| Elite Issue | Marks trust, expense, special training, or political importance. |

VISUAL PLATE

# DUCHY OF HELLER NAVY




*Plate: Heller naval officer and rating dress, with colors, insignia, cutlass, and service kit.*

### What it is

Heller naval dress separates command from shipboard labor while keeping both inside the same blue, white, and gold service identity. Officers carry formal authority, education, and command presence. Ratings wear practical undress for watch duty, labor, and crowded maritime life.

### In play

Naval dress gives authority in ports, shipyards, and Heller service networks. Officer uniform improves recognition and command presence. Rating dress supports believable movement among sailors, dock labor, and shipboard crews.

**Complications:** Uniforms make secrecy difficult. Wearing them in rival ports can turn a simple errand into a political scene.

VISUAL PLATE

# DUCHY OF HELLER LINE INFANTRY




*Plate: Heller line infantry uniform, musket, bayonet, and field service equipment.*

### What it is

The line infantry of Heller belong to a young but ambitious state that values discipline, endurance, and practical service. Their kit is formal enough to project authority and sturdy enough to campaign in hard colonial conditions.

### In play

Supports volleys, checkpoints, convoy escort, patrols, and garrison scenes. The uniform clearly marks the wearer as military personnel and raises the stakes of any public confrontation.

**Complications:** Hard to conceal or pass off as civilian attire. It commands compliance in Heller territory and suspicion elsewhere.

VISUAL PLATE

# VALDEGRACIA LINE INFANTRY




*Plate: Valdegracian line infantry uniform with musket, bayonet, pack, and ceremonial detail.*

### What it is

Valdegracian line infantry reflect the long habits of an old imperial power. Their uniforms project hierarchy, ceremony, and institutional confidence. The kit says that crown authority has arrived in an ordered and recognizable form.

### In play

Useful for formal military presence, disciplined formations, escorts, parades, checkpoint control, and urban authority scenes. The uniform carries weight wherever Valdegracian authority is respected.

**Complications:** Highly visible and politically charged in contested territory. It can invite deference, resentment, or challenge depending on the flag above the street.

VISUAL PLATE

# ALBION LINE INFANTRY




*Plate: Albion line infantry with marching kit, musket, bayonet, pack, and regimental colors.*

### What it is

Albion line infantry balance discipline with expeditionary practicality. Their kit is made to move, endure weather, and operate abroad in sustained campaigns. It reads as professional, mobile, and accustomed to foreign service.

### In play

Good for patrols, road security, coastal expeditions, disciplined combat, and scenes where imperial reach matters. Albion troops look ready to act at distance from home.

**Complications:** The uniform is less ceremonial than some rivals, but it still marks allegiance clearly and may trigger local fear or hostility.

VISUAL PLATE

# MARINE BOARDING GEAR




*Plate: Heller marine boarding gear for shipboard assault, prize taking, and deck fighting.*

### What it is

Marine boarding gear is built for wet decks, smoke, flying splinters, unstable footing, grapples, and sudden violence. Everything favors survival and aggression in confined shipboard combat.

### In play

Supports boarding actions, deck fighting, prize taking, repelling boarders, climbing, grappling, and dock assaults. It lets a character plausibly move and fight in brutal short-range conditions.

**Complications:** Heavy, conspicuous, and clearly military. Excellent in short violent actions, poor in polite society or quiet negotiation.

VISUAL PLATE

# ENGINEER'S FIELD GEAR




*Plate: Heller naval air-service engineer field gear with hood, goggles, gauges, tools, and insulated gauntlet.*

### What it is

Airship engineers are the technical nerve of a vessel. Their gear reflects maintenance, repair, safety, and control under dangerous conditions: pressure, lift-lines, valves, fittings, and engine spaces.

### In play

Supports repair scenes, engine-room action, emergency response, technical problem solving, and hazardous work. It gives a character believable access to airship systems and lift infrastructure.

**Complications:** Bulky, work-stained, and specialist. It may grant authority in a crisis while marking the wearer as responsible when machinery fails.

VISUAL PLATE

# HELLER FIELD ARTILLERY




*Plate: Heller 6-pounder breech-loading field gun, mechanism, crew drill, ammunition, and maintenance notes.*

### What it is

The Heller breech-loading field gun represents more than firepower. It represents a different pace of war: faster service, trained drill, and sustained pressure against roads, fortifications, docks, and landing grounds.

### In play

Changes the scale of a fight immediately. Best used as battlefield support, defense, bombardment, or an objective to seize or silence. It creates noise, smoke, urgency, and maneuver.

**Complications:** Requires trained crew, transport, ammunition, time to deploy, and maintenance. It is a scene-shaper rather than casual equipment.

VISUAL PLATE

# DUCHY OF HELLER GUARD




*Plate: Heller Guard armor, musket, sword, cuirass detail, and ducal insignia.*

### What it is

The Heller Guard stands between ceremonial prestige and real combat value. These troops represent ducal authority in its most visible form, guarding important persons, compounds, institutions, and critical military spaces.

### In play

Ideal for palace guards, elite sentries, official escorts, and scenes of rank and protocol. Their presence increases the weight of authority in any encounter.

**Complications:** Highly visible and hard to imitate. Attacking or impersonating them carries direct political consequences.

VISUAL PLATE

# HELLER HEAVY CAVALRY




*Plate: Heller cuirassiers, horse furniture, armor, weapons, saddlecloth, and heraldry.*

### What it is

Heller cuirassiers are shock troops, symbols of prestige, and instruments of decisive force. Their armor and horse equipment are costly, visible, and demanding to maintain.

### In play

Useful for charges, pursuit, mounted escort, intimidation, and battlefield presence. Their arrival changes the emotional temperature of a scene before combat begins.

**Complications:** Expensive, heavy, dependent on mounts and support. Poor for stealth, dense jungle, narrow streets, ship interiors, and prolonged dismounted travel.

VISUAL PLATE

# ALBION SPECIAL OPERATIONS SERVICE




*Plate: Albion Special Operations Service black operations kit, dark fabrics, face cover, soft-step boots, weapons, and tools.*

### What it is

Albion Special Operations Service kit exists for missions official histories prefer to leave unnamed. Its clothing, tools, and weapons support infiltration, surveillance, sabotage, extraction, and deniable violence.

### In play

Excellent for stealth, sabotage, reconnaissance, extraction, lock work, discreet carry, and hidden identity. It turns gear into permission for covert play.

Complications: If recognized, it brings immediate suspicion and fear. Possession may incriminate even when no government admits ownership.

VISUAL PLATE

# WHAT YOUR GEAR SAYS

When a character enters a scene, their equipment speaks first. Use this reference to decide how the room reads them before conversation begins. The goal is not to punish equipment choices. The goal is to make those choices meaningful.

| What you carry | What it suggests | Likely table effect |
|---|---|---|
| Uniform coat or rank insignia | Service, authority, allegiance | Doors open in friendly territory. Questions sharpen elsewhere. |
| Musket or longarm | Readiness for violence | Guards notice. Civilians keep distance. Stealth becomes harder. |
| Concealed pistol or knife | Precaution or criminal intent | Useful in close scenes. Risky if searched. |
| Cuirass or heavy armor | Elite status, battlefield role | Intimidating and protective. Poor for subtle work. |
| Boarding harness and cutlass | Marine assault or ship security | Excellent on decks, docks, and rigging. Awkward at dinner. |
| Engineer tools and gauges | Technical authority | Access to machinery and crisis work. Heavy and conspicuous. |
| Black operations kit | Deniable work | Supports infiltration. Dangerous if recognized or captured. |
| Artillery or crew-served weapon | A military operation is underway | Creates objectives: seize, silence, defend, escape. |

For player characters, the best equipment choice is rarely the most powerful one. It is the one that fits the scene you intend to create and the consequences you are willing to carry.



CHAPTER 15

# SHIPS, TRADE AND COMMUNICATION

A SHIP IS A COMMUNITY, A HIERARCHY, A HOME, A PRISON, AND A SYMBOL.

A ship is never only transportation in this setting. It is a community, a hierarchy, a workplace, a machine, a home, a prison, a symbol, and often the most honest portrait of a society in miniature.

A frigate and an airship produce different forms of life. The frigate teaches endurance, salt, labor, hierarchy, and the long intimacy of travel at sea. The airship adds engineers, containment discipline, and the permanent awareness that the vessel remains aloft by cooperation between human discipline and a substance with no patience for bravado.

For campaign play, ships are ideal because they force people into relation. Secrets travel badly in close quarters, but so do fear, loyalty, class resentment, devotion, competence, and grief.

## The Sea Vessel

The frigate, the sloop, the merchant barque, the armed transport: these are the working vessels of Mar de Oro, and their logic is the logic of bulk. A sea vessel's hull is mostly hold. Crew quarters, stores, powder, and armament occupy what must be occupied; everything else is cargo. This is what makes sea transport the backbone of colonial commerce. Timber, grain, cannon, troops, horses, livestock, barrels of salted meat, crates of finished goods, and the ten thousand unglamorous necessities of a colonial economy all move by sea because nothing else can carry them at scale.

The sea vessel's relationship to danger is also fundamentally different from the airship's. A ship that takes damage may be crippled, may be sunk, may be taken as a prize; but between those outcomes and the moment of decision, there is usually time. Time to fight back, time to negotiate, time to run, time to pump the bilges and see what can be saved. The sea is indifferent and sometimes murderous, but it is a surface, and surfaces can be reasoned with in ways that open air cannot.

## The Airship

An airship is not a ship that flies. The distinction is not poetic; it is structural, and it determines everything about how airships are used, crewed, and feared.

The drive system and Éterlumin containment infrastructure of an airship occupy the space that a sea vessel would

dedicate entirely to cargo. The containment chambers, the pressure regulation mechanisms, the Fortera-attuned drive apparatus, the engineering spaces required to maintain them under operational load: these are not optional systems that could be reduced to make room. They are the reason the vessel moves at all. What remains after they are accounted for is enough space to carry what the mission requires and not much more.

High-value dispatches, bullion, precision instruments, officials whose arrival cannot wait on weather or tide, specific military payloads that justify the cost: these are airship cargoes. Grain, timber, and cannon are not. An airship captain who tries to run bulk cargo to make the economics work on a voyage will find that the economics do not work regardless, and that the attempt simply makes the voyage more dangerous.

The cost structure compounds this. A sea vessel requires a hull, rigging, crew, and provisions. An airship requires all of those things, and additionally: a supply of Éterlumin refined to operational specification, which is expensive and not universally available; a certified engineering crew with the specific training to maintain the drive and containment systems, who are scarcer and more expensive than ordinary sailors; a maintenance program between voyages that cannot be deferred the way a frigate's caulking sometimes can; and documentation. The documentation alone distinguishes an airship from virtually every other vessel operating in Mar de Oro. Airship operation requires permits that sea vessels do not, because the colonial authorities, having watched what happens when an airship loses containment integrity over a populated harbor, have decided that the consequences of unregulated airship traffic are unacceptable.

The permits are not cheap, are not quickly obtained, and are not issued to vessels whose maintenance records are incomplete or whose engineering crew cannot be verified. This creates a barrier to entry that keeps airship operation in the hands of powers and institutions substantial enough to support it, which is, from the perspective of those powers and institutions, entirely the point.

The danger is proportionate. A sea vessel that loses propulsion drifts; it can often be recovered, or at minimum abandoned onto the water. An airship that loses containment integrity does neither of these things. Éterlumin is not forgiving of structural failure or cascading damage, and when an airship comes apart at altitude, what follows is not a sinking but a disappearance. The crews who fly these vessels know this. It is not bravado that keeps them aloft; it is the specific culture that develops in any community where the work demands continuous coordinated

vigilance, where a single person failing at their post at the wrong moment can kill everyone, and where that knowledge must be lived with daily without being allowed to paralyze function.

What this produces is closer to a military order than a merchant crew: ranks, protocols, and an institutional memory for what went wrong last time, preserved with the seriousness of a religious text. The pay is significant. The washout rate in training is higher than any other maritime tradition. The survivors have been tested for a specific combination of technical competence and psychological stability under sustained pressure, and they know that being found adequate is not the same as being safe.

Airships are, consequently, a superb instrument of war precisely because of these constraints. They are fast, difficult to intercept, capable of operating above weather that grounds sea fleets, and able to deliver a small number of exactly the right people or exactly the right payload to exactly the right place without requiring a harbor. A military power that can sustain airship operations has an intelligence and logistics advantage that no purely sea-going rival can easily match.

The expense is real. The operational limitations are real. The powers that maintain airship fleets have decided that what those fleets can do is worth what they cost, and in the colonial theater of Mar de Oro, where speed of information and precision of delivery can determine which crown controls a strategic harbor before anyone else knows it is contested, that calculation has been proven correct often enough to sustain the investment.

## National Designs

The airships of different powers are not interchangeable. They reflect the industrial traditions, the political priorities, and the doctrinal assumptions of the societies that built them, and an experienced observer can often tell a vessel's origin within a few moments of seeing it clearly, the same way a veteran soldier can read uniform, kit, and bearing before anyone speaks.

Valdegracian vessels represent the oldest continuous airship tradition. Valdegracia invested in airship development before the Treaty of Sunhold, and the result reflects a large empire's priorities: range, endurance, and the ability to operate without resupply for extended periods in territory where the nearest friendly port may be weeks away. Valdegracian hulls are broad-beamed, with containment chambers distributed across the hull rather than concentrated, a design that trades speed and maneuverability for redundancy. A Valdegracian vessel that takes damage becomes a vessel that has lost some fraction of its capability and must work harder; it does not immediately become a catastrophe.

The aesthetic follows the function: Valdegracian hulls are heavy, ornate in the high-church Solarian tradition, with gilded figureheads and painted coats of arms that announce imperial authority to anyone watching from below. The officers dress formally. The vessel is a statement as much as a machine, and that is understood by everyone aboard.

Albion runs in the opposite direction. The Bureau of Correspondent Affairs maintains its own fleet entirely separate from the Royal Naval Air Service, and operates vessels built to be forgotten: lean hulls painted in colors that lose definition at altitude, minimal ornamentation, modular internal fittings that allow rapid reconfiguration depending on whether the mission is correspondence, intelligence extraction, or something that has no name in the official records. The Royal Naval Air Service proper is more conventional, but even those vessels reflect the Albion preference for squeezing speed and performance from whatever tonnage is available rather than trading maneuverability for endurance.

An Albion airship looks, compared to a Valdegracian contemporary, like it was built by people who thought carefully about what the vessel needed to do and then built the smallest thing that could do it. Whether this is precision engineering or an uncomfortable relationship with minimizing safety margins is an ongoing argument within Albion airship culture and not yet resolved.

The other powers operate smaller fleets or none. Stroomdijk runs company vessels on a different calculus: not the most capable, but the most profitable per unit deployed. Luminore's few airships are as much experimental platforms as operational vessels, reflecting a republic where the university has significant influence over the military budget and the theoretical physics of Éterlumin properties is considered as important as their application. Éirighdún maintains no official military airship fleet. What is known, and not officially acknowledged, is that two Justicar-class ships of the line have been observed operating in the western archipelago with no identifying colors and no allegiance that any colonial authority has been able to establish.

Which power built them, who crews them, and what they are doing there are questions the factor houses in Mar de Oro do not appear to have answers to, or do not appear to be sharing.

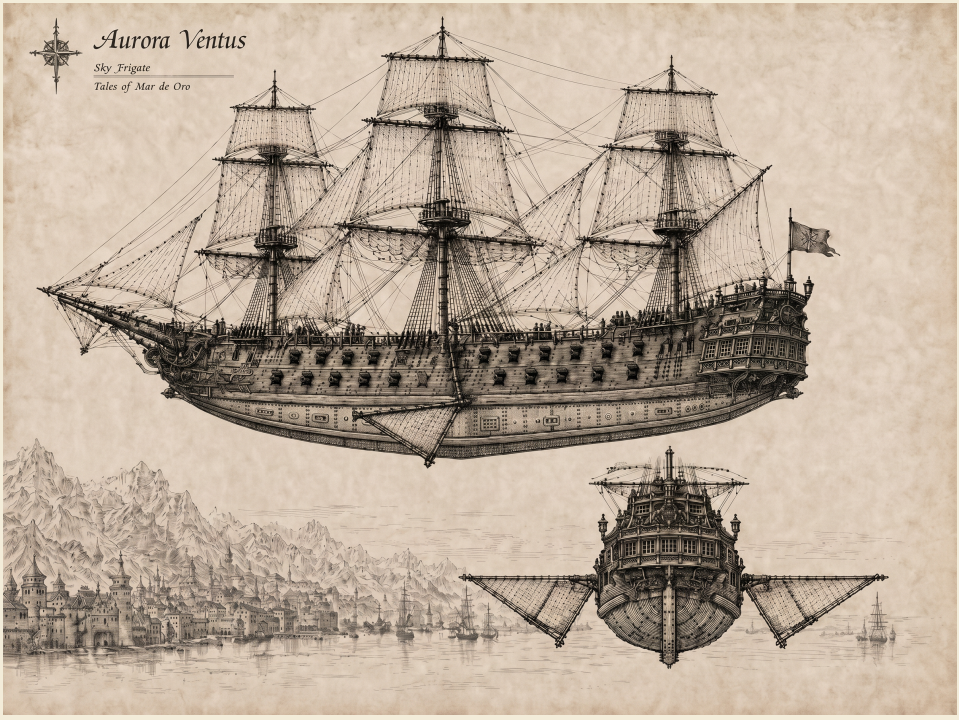
One of these vessels has a name, or at least a name it answers to: the *Wolfhound*. Its captain is Lucian Vega, who appears in no naval register of any power and whose letters of marque, if he carries them, have never been produced for inspection. Vega is known to the harbormasters of a dozen ports as a privateer of considerable competence and uncertain allegiance, a man who asks good prices and delivers what he is paid for, and whose political loyalties have been described by everyone who has attempted to establish them as genuinely unclear.

## What This Means for a Crew

A character aboard an airship is on a vessel where the margin for error is categorically smaller than at sea and the consequences of breach extend to everyone simultaneously. The culture reflects this: more technically demanding, more formally hierarchical in operational matters, more watchful. The engineer is not a specialist confined to the lower deck; they are a constant presence in the chain of command, because the system keeping the vessel aloft is also the system most capable of killing it.

Rank matters, but technical authority intersects rank in ways a purely naval hierarchy does not require, and the officer who fails to understand this will eventually create a situation the engineering crew cannot resolve in time.

An airship also concentrates political significance. Because of what it costs to operate one, the decision to send an airship signals something. Whoever authorized this voyage considered the mission worth the expenditure, and whoever receives the vessel understands what that expenditure means. This is useful to a crew running intelligence operations, inconvenient to a crew trying to arrive unnoticed, and consistently interesting to anyone trying to read what the powers in Mar de Oro consider important enough to spend money on right now.


Aurora Ventus
Sky Frigate
Tales of Mar de Oro

REFERENCE

# SHIP RECOGNITION PLATES

*How vessels become clues, threats, homes, and campaign engines.*

A ship plate should do more than show a pretty vessel. It should tell players what kind of trouble is approaching. A fast frigate promises pursuit. A disruption frigate promises confusion. A battlecruiser promises that a local problem has become imperial policy.

Use these examples as recognition plates: the sort of images a naval office, dockmaster, intelligence clerk, or ambitious captain might keep pinned above a chart table.

| Class | Role in play | When to use it |
|---|---|---|
| Sloop | Scout, courier, smuggler, picket, and fast trouble. | Use when the crew needs speed, stealth, or a small vessel that can vanish into coves and cloud. |
| Fast frigate | Pursuit, escort, rapid intervention, and precision strike. | Use when arrival time matters more than weight of broadside. |
| Disruption frigate | Command-breaking, sabotage, intimidation, and sudden pressure. | Use when the enemy wants confusion before battle fully begins. |
| Assault frigate | Hard frontal attack, close action, boarding support, and pursuit of broken foes. | Use when the players should feel hunted rather than merely opposed. |
| Battlecruiser | Command-and-control, heavy strike, and fleet-level terror. | Use when a local scene becomes a strategic event. |

## Reading a vessel

When characters see a ship, answer three questions: what does it want, what can it reach, and who will be blamed if it fires?

VISUAL PLATE

# VELOZ-CLASS FAST FRIGATE




*Plate: Heller Veloz-class fast frigate, sail plan, heraldry, and speed doctrine.*

### What it is

A Heller fast frigate built for pursuit, escort, rapid intervention, and the hard discipline of arriving before heavier vessels can follow.

### In play

**Use for:** allied rescue, urgent transport, scouting with teeth, and races against enemy orders.

**Complications:** First arrival often means facing danger before support appears. Speed creates opportunities and exposes captains to risk.

VISUAL PLATE

# SPECTRE-CLASS DISRUPTION FRIGATE




*Plate: Albion Spectre-class disruption frigate, heavy bow, casemate guns, and cloud-strike profile.*

### What it is

An Albion disruption frigate designed to unsettle command, interrupt signals, and strike where an enemy formation has not yet understood the danger.

### In play

**Use for:** ambush, false-flag pressure, signal disruption, and encounters where confusion is the real weapon.

**Complications:** Its presence creates diplomatic risk. If seen where Albion denies operating, the sighting itself can start a crisis.

VISUAL PLATE

# WRIGHT-CLASS ASSAULT FRIGATE




*Plate: Albion Wright-class assault frigate, forward guns and strike hull.*

### What it is

A hard-striking assault frigate built to push through smoke, force decisions, and punish vessels that hesitate under pressure.

### In play

**Use for:** pursuit, forced maneuver, boarding support, and scenes where the crew must escape rather than trade volleys.

**Complications:** It is dangerous but committed. Once it attacks, it reveals intent and may be lured into overextension.

VISUAL PLATE

# BANSHEE-CLASS BATTLECRUISER




*Plate: Albion Banshee-class battlecruiser, command ship and heavy strike platform.*

### What it is

A major Albion command-and-strike vessel. It is not merely a scout; it coordinates formations, carries authority, and delivers decisive violence.

### In play

**Use for:** campaign escalation, enemy flagship scenes, command disruption, and the moment a harbor understands war has arrived.

**Complications:** A Banshee changes diplomacy. Every nearby faction must explain why such a ship was needed, seen, hidden, or denied.

## Trade, Letters and Signals

Empires move on paper as much as on powder. Bills of lading, coded dispatches, manifests, relay chains, customs seals, pilot books, harbor logs, private letters, and false certifications all matter. A delayed message may alter more lives than a skirmish.

Mar de Oro is a setting of communication under strain. Signals fail. Couriers vanish. Cipher keys change hands. A governor delays a dispatch for profit. A tower keeper sees too much. A sealed pouch becomes worth killing for before anyone in the crew knows what it contains.

## The Commodity and the Crown

Colonial trade in Mar de Oro is not a free market in any sense that the word implies. Every major commodity that moves through the archipelago moves under a license, a monopoly grant, a crown charter, or a company seal that ultimately traces back to one of the continental powers. Stroomdijk's *avondrekening* system assigns extraction quotas to company agents and accounts for variance with a precision that is either admirably efficient or deliberately designed to make fraud difficult to prove, depending on your relationship to the company.

Valdegracian trade law requires that Mar de Oro exports travel through Valdegracian-licensed factors and be taxed at a rate that has been adjusted upward three times in the last decade without a corresponding adjustment in what the license costs to obtain. Albion operates through crown-granted trading companies that are technically private but whose leadership overlaps with the Bureau of Correspondent Affairs to a degree that the Bureau does not encourage discussion of.

Against this structure sits everything else. Unlicensed trade, which is the dominant form of trade in the archipelago by volume if not by official record, runs through the independent harbors, the factor houses of Éirighdún that do not appear on Valdegracian customs manifests, and the informal credit networks maintained by local merchants who have been in the archipelago longer than any of the continental powers and who have their own accounting systems that predate the colonial period.

Canula Prime, as a Valdegracian-governed free port with a governor who reports directly to the crown and not to the colonial administration, occupies a specific position in this informal economy: officially regulated, practically flexible, a place where cargoes whose origin does not bear close inspection can clear without the documentation that a normal port would require.

## Letters and What They Carry

The letter of marque is a license to operate outside the law while technically remaining inside it. A crown authorizes a private vessel to conduct military operations against specified enemies or to operate in restricted waters, and in exchange the vessel's captain accepts accountability to the crown's legal framework while retaining the practical independence that a naval commission does not provide.

In Mar de Oro, letters of marque are more common than official naval records suggest, because every power in the archipelago has found it useful to have vessels operating without the formal diplomatic consequences that a naval engagement would produce. The letter is a fiction that all parties find useful, and the fiction is maintained with care on all sides.

The dispatch is the information economy's primary instrument. A dispatch from the colonial governor to Valdegracia takes weeks by sea under favorable conditions. By airship, under favorable conditions, the same message arrives in days. This difference is not abstract; it is the difference between a response that arrives while the situation described still exists and a response that arrives after decisions have already been made by people on the ground who could not wait.

The powers that can afford regular airship dispatch service have a structural advantage in colonial administration that no amount of efficient sea-borne communication can fully compensate for. The powers that cannot afford it have learned to compose dispatches that anticipate rather than describe, authorizing their colonial administrators to act on conditions that may obtain rather than reporting conditions that did obtain.

The signal tower network in Mar de Oro is partial, contested, and in three places actively maintained by factions with conflicting interests in what information it carries. Albion constructed the eastern relay chain; Valdegracia operates the primary chain connecting the largest harbors; there is a third network, shorter and not on any official chart, that the Éirighdún factor houses maintain between their own premises. The overlap and gaps in these networks are known to anyone who uses them professionally, and what can be transmitted, intercepted, delayed, or misdirected through them is a subject of permanent practical interest to the Bureau of Correspondent Affairs.

## Currency and Credit

Mar de Oro uses a common monetary standard across the major powers. Copper, silver, gold, and rare platinum are denominations rather than national currency names. Every major power strikes its own coinage, and the face, mint, weight, condition, and reputation of the issuing authority affect how readily a piece is accepted.

| Denomination | Value | Typical use |
|---|---|---|
| Copper | Base unit | Food, drink, market goods, small services |
| Silver | 10 copper | Wages, lodging, ordinary trade |
| Gold | 10 silver | Equipment, contracts, substantial purchases |
| Platinum | 10 gold | Rare high-value specie, banks, treasuries, major commerce |

1 platinum = 10 gold = 100 silver = 1,000 copper.

Heller does not maintain a separate monetary standard. It uses the Valdegracian standard. Coins struck for circulation in Heller retain Valdegracian authority on one face and bear the emblem of Heller on the reverse; approved older or foreign issues may carry an official Heller countermark. Heller recognition of paper likewise certifies local acceptance rather than creating a separate currency.

Foreign coin crosses borders because metal can be weighed. A sound coin from another power still has its denomination, but unfamiliar, damaged, or politically awkward money may be weighed, tested, exchanged at a discount, or refused. Serious ports support money changers for exactly this reason.

Credit is money too. Merchants keep accounts, captains provision against reputable backers, and banks and trading houses issue notes and bills of exchange so value can move without the metal making the same journey.

The Éirighdún factor houses form a private credit and correspondent network across the archipelago. Their *cuimhne* ledgers record relationships, obligations, and reputations with unusual continuity; they are not a separate currency.

Stroomdijk's financial power is centered on the Wisselbank, the Exchange Bank of Stroomdijk. It handles letters of credit, currency exchange, commercial insurance, and clearing between states, giving Stroomdijk influence far beyond the size of its territory.

## What This Means in Play

A crew that understands trade and signals has access to a layer of the world that most people moving through it do not see. The harbormaster's log is a record of what came in, which is also a record of what did not. The factor house that declines to extend credit is communicating something without saying it. The relay message that arrives ahead of any ship that could have carried it implies a vessel that is not on the official schedule. The letter of marque signed under one crown's seal found in a hold flying another crown's flag is either a mistake, a cover, or a situation that has changed since the document was issued.

The colonial economy of Mar de Oro is a system in which information is the most valuable cargo, secrecy is a competitive advantage, and the official record consistently understates what is actually moving, because the official record is written by people who have reasons to understate it. A crew that can read the gap between the manifest and the hold, between the dispatch and the situation it describes, between the coin accepted at face value and the coin sent to the scales, is a crew that is operating in the actual economy of the archipelago rather than the one that appears on the colonial administration's books.



CHAPTER 16

# TRAVEL AND THE HARD COUNTRY

Travel in Aeon should feel like movement through reality, not a blank space between scenes. Roads flood, maps simplify, jungle closes, guides matter, local knowledge becomes precious, and weather punishes arrogance with an efficiency no villain can improve upon.

The world should press back on movement. Fever, poor stores, damp bedding, bad boots, insects, broken axles, spoiled powder, mistranslation, and wrong assumptions all make excellent drama because they remind the table that the world is not made of highlights alone.

## The Interior

Mar de Oro is an archipelago, and archipelagos present a specific geography of travel: between the harbors, which are connected and legible, and the interiors of the larger islands, which are not. The colonial powers have mapped the coastlines with reasonable accuracy. The interiors of the major islands are mapped with the confidence of people who have not been there, and experienced guides can tell you how much that confidence is worth in practice.

The interior of the main island changes character within a few hours of walking from the coast. The ground shifts from the compacted soil of harbor districts and plantation edges to a substrate that holds water and releases it unpredictably, where a path that was passable at dawn becomes impassable by midmorning after rain that the coast did not receive. The canopy is dense enough in the mature jungle sections that navigation by sun or stars becomes impossible during the day and requires specific techniques at night, and the techniques themselves vary: what a Valdegracian survey expedition calls adequate navigation has been fatal for people who trusted it in this specific terrain.

Local guides who know the interior do not use the continental methods. They use landmarks that do not appear on any official chart because official charts record the landscape from outside it.

Fever is not a dramatic exception in the interior; it is a logistical baseline. Campaigns that venture into the jungle for more than a few days should plan for degraded capacity, because the people who planned optimistically are the people whose

expeditions are now part of the cautionary literature. This is not defeatism. It is the difference between a mission that returns with its objectives achieved and one that returns with fewer people than it left with and no clear account of why.

## On Water

Between islands, the sea is a travel medium with its own politics. The currents of Mar de Oro are well-known to navigators who work the archipelago regularly and misleading to pilots who know only the charts. Several of the inter-island passages have local names that encode specific seasonal warnings; the official charts use different names, and the warnings are not included because they were not known to the cartographers who produced the official charts from the accounts of people who were not there in the relevant season.

Storms in Mar de Oro come faster and from less predictable directions than the continental weather patterns that most trained navigators learned on. The local pilots who grew up reading this weather have an advantage that cannot be acquired from books, and they know it, and the negotiation over what their knowledge is worth is a recurring feature of harbor commerce. A pilot who asks for an unusual fee is either extorting the situation or knows something about the next few days that the ship's navigator does not, and the question of which is the case is one that a prudent captain resolves before the weather arrives rather than after.

Airship travel between islands adds altitude as a variable. Above a certain height, the weather below becomes something the crew can see rather than experience, which is an advantage in planning and a limitation in that the vessel must eventually descend, and descent into weather that was visible from above is not the same as avoiding it. The specific approach angles and descent protocols for archipelago weather are a Hellerite specialty; the Duchy's factor pilots have more accumulated experience with the local conditions than any continental air service, and the few who make themselves available to outside vessels charge accordingly.

## Provisions and Resupply

A vessel that is well-provisioned for a voyage of a certain length is not well-provisioned for a voyage that takes longer, which describes most voyages in the archipelago because most voyages in the archipelago are longer than planned. The resupply options between harbors vary from adequate to nonexistent. Fresh water, which kills more expeditions than any other scarcity, is available on every major island in quantities that depend entirely on whether you know where to look, which returns immediately to the question of local knowledge and what it costs.

The expedition that carries adequate powder and inadequate food has made a specific kind of mistake. The expedition that carries adequate food and inadequate medical stores has made a different specific kind of mistake. The crew that has been through the archipelago before knows this and provisions accordingly. The crew on their first voyage learns it. The learning tends to be thorough.

## Hard Country for Different Callings

Different callings experience the interior differently. The engineer reads it as a series of problems with structural solutions: how to move equipment across this terrain, how to establish a camp that will not flood, how to preserve the technical gear that the mission depends on. The scholar reads it as data: which species indicate which conditions, what the soil composition implies about the water table, why this particular clearing has no canopy overgrowth despite being surrounded by old growth.

The soldier reads it as a threat environment: where the sight lines are, where an ambush would be placed, what the noise signatures of the different sectors mean. None of these readings is wrong. All of them are incomplete without the others. The crew that has learned to share its different readings of the same ground is the crew that moves through it without losing people to preventable mistakes.

The guide, if the crew has one, reads it in a way that may not translate into any of the above frameworks and that matters more than any of them. The best guides in Mar de Oro are not communicative in the way that people who have been trained in explanation are communicative. They know things that they acquired through experience in specific places and that they carry as embodied knowledge rather than as propositions that can be stated.

Working with a good guide requires trusting decisions whose reasoning you cannot follow, which is a specific kind of difficulty for people accustomed to understanding what they are doing and why. The crew that cannot manage this tends to find out the relevant reasoning afterward, in retrospect, when the situation the guide was reading has resolved itself one way or the other.

AT THE TABLE

## Hard country rewards shared readings.

Engineer, scholar, soldier, sailor, and guide can read the same ground differently. The crew survives by combining those readings rather than treating one perspective as complete.

PART VI

# BEGIN PLAY

## IN THIS PART

*Read for*

Chapters 17-18: build the crew and begin the campaign.

## USE THIS WHEN

*At the table*

You are ready to turn characters into a working crew and put pressure on them in the first session.

## TABLE ESSENTIALS

*Carry forward*

Start with a situation in motion. Let choices reveal the world.

CHAPTER 17

# BUILD THE CREW

Strong Mar de Oro campaigns begin with a shared shape. The group may be privateers with a letter of marque and a talent for attracting moral ambiguity, reformers disguised as a trading concern, a church inquiry with conflicting denominational loyalties, a Hellerite survey expedition, a diplomatic escort, an anti-slavery operation, smugglers coerced into public service, or survivors of a failed voyage who now know too much to be left alone.

The best openings begin in motion. The ship is already inbound. The witness is already dead. The crate is already aboard. The chart is already missing its corner. The engine is already making the wrong sound. The players should feel immediately that the world did not wait for them to become interesting.

## What Holds a Crew Together

A crew in this setting is not automatically a team, and the campaign works better when it does not pretend otherwise. People with different callings, different homeland formations, different loyalties to different powers have reasons to be in the same place and reasons not to fully trust each other, and the gradual, earned negotiation of those tensions over the course of play produces the specific texture that makes long campaigns worth running.

The practical answer to what holds a crew together is usually the ship. Not sentiment about the ship, though that develops, but the fact that the ship is a commons: it belongs to everyone on it in the sense that its failure kills everyone, its success benefits everyone, and its daily operation requires that people who might otherwise choose to avoid each other learn to function in coordination. The bond chapter in this book is not there to create artificial loyalty. It is there to give the table a starting structure that the campaign can test, complicate, and occasionally confirm.

A second answer is the mission. The crew with a shared objective, even a contested or morally ambiguous one, has a reason to continue operating together past the first complication. The mission does not need to be good or clear or stable; it needs to be shared, at least provisionally, while the campaign finds its feet. Letters of marque, charter obligations, debts owed to people who have leverage, institutional mandates that cannot be easily declined: these are all functional reasons for a crew to remain a crew without requiring that everyone like each other.

## Campaign Shapes

The privateer campaign begins with legal violence and the question of where the line is. A letter of marque authorizes action against specific enemies of the issuing crown; it does not authorize everything the crew might find profitable, though the distance between those two categories tends to compress under pressure and far from oversight. The privateer campaign works when the crew has genuine stakes in the political situation that authorized them, not just in the income.

The investigation campaign begins with something wrong. A vessel that disappeared. An official whose account of events does not match the physical evidence. A cargo that cannot be explained by any manifest in the harbor records. Investigation campaigns in Mar de Oro have structural advantages: the colonial setting means that authority is layered, contradictory, and often motivated to misdirect, which gives investigators reason to distrust official versions without requiring that the officials be cartoonishly corrupt. Most of them are doing their best in a system that selects for obfuscation.

The Duchy campaign begins in Hellerite waters with Hellerite stakes: the politics of a young polity that is simultaneously a Valdegracian colony, an autonomous government, and a community of people who came to Mar de Oro for reasons that have not all been fulfilled. The founding Compañero covenant gives the campaign an ethical baseline to agree about and disagree about and occasionally violate and live with the consequences of. The silver dragon on the Duchy's flag is a permanent reminder of a founder who is presumed dead and whose absence shapes the Duchy's political present in ways that are not settled. That is a campaign premise in itself.

The intelligence campaign begins with the Bureau of Correspondent Affairs or with being caught in one of its operations. Albion intelligence work in Mar de Oro is not covert in the sense that no one knows it is happening; it is covert in the sense that no one can prove what is specifically occurring, which is different and more useful. The Bureau's *duty book* system, the discipline of its operatives, and the specific way that Albion conceives of loyalty as a contractual relationship rather than an emotional one all produce a campaign texture distinct from privateering or investigation.

## Starting the First Session

Before the first session, agree on one thing only: why the crew is together in the same place on the same day. The reason does not need to be elaborate. It needs to be specific enough that the players understand it and varied enough that each character's presence has a different logic. The ship the crew is aboard, or the dock they are on, or the harbor they are in: this is the scene, and the scene should have a texture before anything happens.

The opening problem should be practical, immediate, and connected to something larger without announcing the connection. Not "a conspiracy threatens the archipelago" but "the cargo we were paid to deliver is not what we were told it contained, and the person who hired us is not at the meeting point, and three people on this dock are watching us with a professional quality of attention that suggests they are not here by coincidence." The large thing emerges from the small thing if the small thing is specific enough.

The crew that starts in motion has less opportunity to hesitate. The harbour official asks for documents that were not mentioned in the commission. The boatswain reports that the watch found something in the hold that was not in the manifest. The pilot who was supposed to be here at dawn arrives two hours late, without explanation, and is

careful not to explain why their hands are unsteady. These are all specific, actionable, and connected to the setting's deep structure without requiring a lecture on that structure. The table will learn what Mar de Oro is by moving through it.

### AT THE TABLE

## A crew needs a reason to stay together.

Start with a shared vessel, mission, obligation, danger, or problem. Loyalty can grow later. The first requirement is a reason to keep operating together.

CHAPTER 18

# YOUR FIRST SESSION

For a first session, begin with a concrete pressure. Put the crew on a dock, a deck, a relay tower, a customs stair, a chapel courtyard after burial, or a rain-swept road where the guide has stopped walking. Give them one problem practical enough to grasp in a minute and layered enough to unfold over hours.

Then let the setting reveal itself through consequence rather than lecture. Let the harbour official be more afraid than he says. Let the priest know one thing too much. Let the engineer hear something wrong in the chamber before anyone else does. Let the local pilot refuse extra pay for one route and not explain why.

## The Opening Scene

The opening scene of a Mar de Oro campaign should be doing several things at once, none of which the players need to be aware of. It should establish the physical texture of the setting: the specific quality of tropical heat, the smell of the harbor, the sound profile of a colonial port at whatever time of day the scene begins, the visual details that make it clear this is not a generic fantasy city.

It should establish at least one character who is not what they seem, not because deception is mandatory but because the colonial setting is built on layered presentations, and the first NPC the crew meets should demonstrate this without announcing it. And it should generate a problem that is solvable, at least in theory, by the people present, so that the first session ends with the crew having done something rather than having been told things.

The single most reliable error in first sessions is beginning with too much information and not enough situation. The crew that has been briefed on the political landscape of Mar de Oro has been given material to forget. The crew that has been placed in a situation that generates political consequences has learned the same material through experience and retained it because it was attached to something that happened to them. The setting should be allowed to teach itself.

## Pressure, Not Plot

The distinction between pressure and plot is operational. Plot is a sequence of events that the campaign follows. Pressure is a set of conditions that the crew must navigate, which generates events as a consequence of their choices. Mar de Oro runs better on

pressure because its world is one in which multiple parties with competing interests are already in motion; the crew does not need to be the engine of the story, only a set of actors in a situation that was already complicated before they arrived.

In the first session, pressure might take the following forms. A vessel the crew depends on has a problem that must be resolved before departure, and the resolution requires dealing with a harbor official who is being managed by

someone with an interest in delay. The official problem and the real problem are not the same problem, and the crew's first challenge is recognizing the gap. Alternatively: the crew has arrived to take delivery of something, and the thing is present, but the person who was supposed to deliver it is not, and the thing has an unexpected quality that the original commission did not mention. Or: the crew has been aboard a vessel for enough of the voyage that the opening scene is the approach to port, and something about the approach is wrong in a way that the experienced sailors recognize and the official story does not explain.

None of these is a mystery in the literary sense. They are situations with pressure from multiple directions that require the crew to make decisions before they have full information, which is the structural condition of most of the best moments in this kind of campaign.

## Twelve Rumours in Any Port

Roll a d12 or choose one when the table needs motion. A rumour may be true, partly true, stale, planted, or attached to the wrong person. Decide only when the crew acts on it.

| d12 | Rumour |
|---|---|
| 1 | A customs office paid twice for the same sealed crate, and neither payment appears in the public ledger. |
| 2 | A Royal Hydrographic Survey chart shows an island that is missing from the copy sold to merchant captains. |
| 3 | An Éirighdún factor house refused credit to a captain it has backed for twenty years. |
| 4 | A Stroomdijk company brig entered harbor under escort with an empty hold and left before dawn. |
| 5 | An Eisenmarkian surveyor is buying broken compasses, but only those carried through one stretch of sea. |
| 6 | A priest from the Holy See is asking quiet questions about blue light seen below a ship's waterline. |
| 7 | A supposedly poor dockworker has twenty gold pieces from an Albion naval-pay issue. |
| 8 | A relay tower transmitted a warning before the event named in the warning had happened. |
| 9 | Three crews logged the same vessel in three different harbors on the same night. |

| d12 | Rumour |
|---|---|
| 10 | A physician in Canula Prime is paying unusually well for accurate records of fever cases from one dock district. |
| 11 | A naval officer lost a duty book. Someone else is now paying to make sure it stays lost. |
| 12 | An airship arrived with a patched lift system, no cargo manifest, and one more crew member than it departed with. |

## The Setting Reveals Itself

The colonial world of Mar de Oro in Anno 7202 is a place where the great powers are doing things they cannot fully control, in a theater they do not fully understand, under conditions that their institutional frameworks were not designed for. This is not a critique of those powers; it is the operational reality of colonialism at scale, which is always outrunning the administrative capacity of the center. The crew exists in the gap between what the powers intend and what is actually happening, and that gap is where the interesting work is.

In the first session, the gap should be present but not announced. The customs official who is running a side operation does not announce the side operation; the side operation is revealed by the specific inconsistency in how they handle one category of cargo versus another, which a perceptive character might notice and a less perceptive character might not, and either is fine. The priest at the dockside chapel who knows something uncomfortable about the vessel the crew just arrived on does not volunteer this; it is visible in what questions they ask and what questions they deliberately do not ask.

The local harbor pilot who navigates the crew's vessel in has twenty years of experience in these waters that the commission did not mention; this becomes apparent the first time the pilot makes a correction that no chart would have suggested.

## Ending the First Session

A good first session ends with the crew in motion toward something, aware that the situation is larger than the opening problem suggested, and having established at least one relationship with an NPC that they will remember next session. It does not need to end with everything resolved. It needs to end with the crew caring about what happens next.

The question to ask at the end of the first session is whether the players, as distinct from their characters, want to know what happens next. If the answer is yes, the first session accomplished what it needed to. The political landscape, the ship's specifications, the denominational disputes of the Solarian church, the doctrinal

differences between Valdegracian and Albion naval thinking: all of this is material that the campaign will cover in time. The first session's only obligation is to make the crew want to come back for the second one.

Give them one detail before you end. Something specific and unexplained. Not a cliffhanger; a remainder. The sealed crate that the cargo manifest describes as agricultural instruments and that the chief engineer, who has been around long enough to know what agricultural instruments weigh, noted was too heavy. The name written in the margin of the pilot's chart in a different hand. The Albion officer at the far end of the harbor who watched the crew's

arrival with more attention than a stranger should have and who was gone by the time anyone thought to look again. One thing, specific, unexplained, and remembered. That is what the first session leaves behind.

AT THE TABLE

## Pressure, not plot.

Begin with one concrete situation already in motion. Let the world teach itself through decisions and consequences, then leave one specific thing unexplained.

REFERENCE

# GLOSSARY OF AEON

Fortera
: The subtle influence behind rites, engines, and the Powered Arts; in truth, a universal field.

Éterlumin
: The rare aerial substance most prized for lift; in truth, Fortera's physical carrier in the present age.

The Sundering
: The schism that shattered religious unity and reset the calendar.

Mar de Oro
: The strategic island chain where continental power now converges.

Oruvai
: Indigenous communities of the Lower Estuary, locally governed and linked by shared waterways, seasonal movement, and negotiated obligations rather than a single central state.

Canula Prime
: The cosmopolitan free-trading hub of the archipelago, a free port under Valdegracian dominion whose governor answers directly to the crown.

New Avalon
: Albion colonial settlement in the New World, closely administered from the metropolitan capital.

Nouvelle Lumière
: Luminore colonial establishment in the New World, bound to the metropolitan capital by intimate cultural and commercial ties.

Nieuw Waterland
: Stroomdijk colonial holding in the New World, operated under company charter and answerable to the counting houses of the home kingdom.

The Duchy of Heller
: The autonomous New World polity founded by survivors of the Compañero expeditions, recently granted formal autonomy by Valdegracia and obliged to answer its call in time of war.

Valldeila
: The harbor capital of the Duchy of Heller, practical, proud, and politically alive.

The Codex
: The scripture at the heart of Aeon's religious civilization.

The Powered Arts
: The cultural traditions through which practitioners shape Fortera deliberately.

The Curse of the Moons
: The feared condition associated especially with Umbra's cycle.

The Continental Powers
: The crowns, republics, reform centers, and rising states contending across Aeon.

APPENDIX

# PLAYING IN OTHER SYSTEMS

Mar de Oro has its own Native Rules. Use this appendix when you want to carry the same fiction into another engine.

FIRST-PARTY DEFAULT

## Native Rules

The dedicated Mar de Oro engine: 2d6 + Capability, Risk and Effect, Harm, Callings, Strengths, Techniques, Fortera, personal combat, battlefield scale, ships and airships.

ULTRALIGHT OPTION

## 2d6 Resolution Bridge

For a table that wants the smallest possible rules layer. It keeps the setting fiction and a compact resolution core without the full Native Rules procedures.

BRING YOUR OWN SYSTEM

## External conversions

The setting remains system neutral. The pages that follow explain how to translate the setting into 5e, Pathfinder 1e, Pathfinder 2e, Blades / FitD, or another engine without turning this book into a second rules manual.

APPENDIX

# CONVERSION PRINCIPLES

## Keep the setting stable. Translate procedure, not identity. 1. Start from fiction

The Setting Guide describes the world, institutions, technology, Fortera, gear, and what a character is trying to do. The rules engine resolves uncertainty after that fiction is clear.

## 2. Use the engine you chose

Do not rebuild another game inside your conversion. Use that system's normal skills, actions, conditions, vehicle rules, clocks, or stress economy wherever they already solve the problem.

## 3. Preserve Mar de Oro pressure

Firearms are dangerous. Armour is not bulletproof. Ships and airships are systems with crews and vulnerable functions. Fortera has cost and instability. Consequences persist.

## 4. Keep Setting Callings fiction-facing

A Soldier / Officer, Mariner, Factor, Cleric, Scholar, Engineer, Agent, Frontier Hand, or Independent Operator describes social training and work. It is not a mandatory mechanical class.

## 5. Let the Native Rules book own Mar de Oro-specific procedure

If you want the engine designed for Risk and Effect, Harm, Fortera Practice, personal-to-fleet scale, and the setting's default lethality, use Native Rules rather than reproducing all of those subsystems here.

APPENDIX

# CALLINGS ACROSS SYSTEMS

Examples, not cages. Use the closest mechanical home, then let the fiction do the rest.

| Setting Calling | Native Rules | D&D 5e | PF1e | PF2e | Blades / FitD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Soldier / Officer | Soldier / Officer | Fighter | Fighter / Cavalier | Fighter / Guardian | Cutter |
| Mariner | Scout / Officer | Fighter or Ranger | Fighter / Ranger | Ranger / Sailor bg | Cutter / Hound |
| Factor / Merchant | Diplomat | Rogue | Rogue / Investigator | Investigator / Merchant bg | Spider |
| Cleric / Church Servant | Officer / Diplomat | Cleric | Cleric / Inquisitor | Cleric / Champion | Whisper |
| Scholar / Natural Philosopher | Field Investigator | Wizard | Wizard / Alchemist | Wizard / Alchemist | Whisper / Spider |
| Engineer / Artificer | Engineer | Artificer | Alchemist / Investigator | Alchemist / Inventor | Leech |
| Agent / Intelligence Operative | Operative | Rogue | Rogue / Investigator | Rogue / Investigator | Spider |
| Frontier Hand | Scout | Ranger | Ranger / Druid | Ranger / Druid | Hound |
| Criminal / Independent Operator | Operative | Rogue | Rogue / Slayer | Rogue / Thief | Lurk / Slide |

The Native Rules ready-made Callings are Soldier, Officer, Diplomat, Scout, Field Investigator, Operative, Engineer, and Physician. A physician or surgeon can therefore map directly to Physician even when the fiction-facing Setting Guide role that brought them into the campaign is broader.

SYSTEM CONVERSION

# D&D FIFTH EDITION

Use 5e as 5e. Add only enough Mar de Oro pressure to keep the setting recognisable.

WHERE THIS BEGAN

Mar de Oro began at a 5e table before growing into a system-neutral setting and, later, its own Native Rules. The 5e conversion remains a supported way to play, but it is now one rules interface among several rather than the identity of the setting.

## Characters

Use normal classes and backgrounds. Treat Setting Callings as fiction-facing roles rather than one-to-one class mappings. A soldier may be Fighter, a factor Rogue, a scholar Wizard, and an engineer Artificer, but choose the class that fits the character rather than the label.

## Powered Arts

Map traditions by temperament and method rather than spell list: arcane science to Wizard or Artificer, resonance to Bard, ritual scholarship to Cleric or Paladin, living experimentation to Druid or Ranger, and forbidden or innate paths often to Sorcerer or Warlock.

## Bonds and Burdens

Use Inspiration, background features, complications, and campaign consequences to reward costly loyalty and return unfinished obligations to play. Keep every Bond or Burden specific enough to name a person, place, institution, oath, or event.

## Firearms and danger

Use the dedicated Mar de Oro 5e conversion pack for the full firearm, ambush, battlefield, vessel, and Fortera procedures. The Setting Guide does not need those stat blocks. For ships, use 5e vehicle or object rules where useful, but preserve subsystems and crew roles in the fiction so the right sabotage can matter even when total HP is high.

SYSTEM CONVERSION

# PATHFINDER FIRST EDITION

Let PFɪe keep its detailed character building while Mar de Oro supplies the setting pressures.

## Characters

Use normal PFɪe race, class, archetype, feat, skill, and trait structures. Setting Callings describe profession and social formation rather than replacing class. Choose the mechanical build that fits the character's method and let the Calling explain how Aeon understands their work.

## Powered Arts

Map Powered Arts by method, not spell-list label. Arcane science may use casting, extracts, discoveries, or item creation; resonance fits performance and sonic or language-based abilities; ritual scholarship fits divine or formal ritual structures; living experimentation fits nature-facing classes; forbidden or innate paths fit unusual or spontaneous sources. The rules interface does not create a second cosmology.

## Firearms and danger

Use PFɪe's existing firearm and combat options where useful, but preserve the fiction that a loaded pistol or musket is a serious threat. Add bespoke modifiers only when the existing engine cannot express the danger, positioning, or armor interaction the scene needs.

## Fortera and overdraw

Represent overdraw with native costs where possible: fatigue, exhaustion, ability damage, conditions, expended resources, broken equipment, or persistent consequences. Fortera remains one underlying field regardless of which class feature carries the effect. For ships, preserve hull, movement, weapons, crew, command, and Éterlumin as distinct fictional vulnerabilities even if PFɪe compresses them into fewer statistics.

SYSTEM CONVERSION

# PATHFINDER SECOND EDITION

## Let PF2e provide tactical structure while Mar de Oro supplies the world and stakes. Characters

Use normal ancestry, background, class, skill, and feat structures. Setting Callings identify the work and formation that made the character legible in Aeon; they do not replace PF2e classes.

## Powered Arts

Arcane, occult, divine, and primal traditions already provide useful mechanical homes. Translate the Powered Arts according to method and fiction, then use PF2e actions, traits, conditions, and rituals normally.

## Risk and overdraw

When a working is pushed beyond safe use, prefer existing conditions, action costs, hazards, and resource pressure over a new subsystem. The cost should be real enough that pushing matters.

## Éterlumin and hazards

PF2e hazard design is a natural home for semi-state chambers, unstable engines, resonance failures, and other technical dangers. Treat active Éterlumin as a physical industrial hazard first.

## Ships and large threats

Use PF2e vehicle, siege, hazard, and creature frameworks. Preserve weak points, crew stations, objectives, and environmental solutions so encounters are not reduced to attacking one AC until the HP is gone.

SYSTEM CONVERSION

# BLADES / FORGED IN THE DARK

## FitD already speaks the language of position, effect, stress, crew pressure, and consequences. Characters and crew

Map Setting Callings to playbooks loosely. The crew sheet is especially useful for a privateer company, investigation office, survey expedition, smuggling concern, or other shared enterprise.

### Risk and Effect

Position and Effect already express much of Mar de Oro's fiction-first logic. Let preparation, leverage, equipment, terrain, institutional authority, and Fortera permission change the roll before adding bespoke mechanics.

### Bonds and Burdens

Use relationships, vice, trauma, faction status, clocks, and entanglements to carry obligations and consequences. A Burden should have a named fictional source rather than existing only as a generic penalty.

### Powered Arts

Treat Fortera access as special abilities, rituals, long-term projects, or permissions attached to the character's method. Stress is an effective currency for overdraw when the fiction supports it.

### Vessels and campaigns

Ship action works naturally as a score with clocks for escape, boarding, disabling a subsystem, protecting cargo, or surviving a chase. Keep the vessel a shared campaign asset with consequences that persist between scores.

SYSTEM CONVERSION

# FORTERA IN OTHER SYSTEMS

## Translate the interface. Keep the underlying world the same. Keep the fiction

Fortera is the underlying physical field of the setting. The five Powered Arts are cultural and practical approaches to that field. A spell list, ritual system, special ability, or stress spend is a rules interface, not a statement that the setting contains separate supernatural power sources.

## Tradition changes permission

Arcane science, resonance, ritual practice, living experimentation, and forbidden or innate paths change what a character can plausibly attempt, which tools and language they use, and how society responds. They do not need five separate mechanical engines.

## Make overdraw cost something

When a character pushes beyond safe use, translate the cost into the chosen system's native pressure: exhaustion, conditions, stress, resource loss, consequence, or another persistent cost. The exact currency can change. The bargain should remain.

## Treat Éterlumin as matter

Inert Éterlumin is stable cargo. The semi-state is unstable and resonant. Active Éterlumin is volatile and essential to lift. Model those states using ordinary hazard, environmental, or vehicle procedures before inventing new magic rules.

## Anomalies are phenomena first

Source-linked creatures and phenomena should behave according to what they physically are and what they are doing. Convert their function, warning signs, weak points, and consequences before deciding on a stat block.

SYSTEM CONVERSION

# VIOLENCE, WOUNDS, AND VESSELS

## Convert the danger and scale, not every number. Firearms stay dangerous

A musket, pistol, or boarding gun should not become harmless because the target has accumulated levels. Use the chosen system's most direct tools for armour penetration, severe harm, high Effect, critical injury, or positioning. The fiction should still respect a loaded weapon.

## Certain situations do not need a normal exchange

If a sleeping, restrained, or completely helpless person has a pistol pressed to them and nothing meaningful can interrupt the action, the question may no longer be whether the shooter can hit. Resolve the actual uncertainty, if any: hesitation, intervention, noise, witnesses, escape, or consequence.

## Ships are systems, not bags of hit points

Preserve Hull, movement or lift, weapons, crew, command, and Éterlumin as distinct fictional vulnerabilities even when the chosen engine uses one vehicle stat block. Clever play should be able to cripple the right function rather than merely out-damage a larger vessel.

## Zoom out when individuals stop mattering

For formations, batteries, fleets, and other large conflicts, use the chosen game's mass-combat tools, progress clocks, challenge structure, or abstract resolution. Do not make every soldier a separate turn.

## Wounds and return from death carry weight

Mar de Oro treats catastrophic harm and resurrection as consequential. If an external system makes recovery or return routine, add only enough friction to preserve the campaign's intended stakes. Detailed implementations belong in the relevant conversion pack or GM material.

SYSTEM CONVERSION

# BRING YOUR OWN SYSTEM

A SHORT CHECKLIST FOR ANY ENGINE NOT COVERED ABOVE.

### CHARACTERS

Can the system represent competent but mortal people with different professional backgrounds without forcing every role into a combat class?

### CONSEQUENCES

Can harm, debt, reputation, obligation, and institutional pressure matter after a roll is over?

### FIREARMS

Can a loaded firearm remain a serious fictional threat even when the system is built around durable heroes?

### FORTERA

Can the system represent power that depends on permission, context, tools, cost, and overdraw rather than on a universal spell list?

### SHIPS AND SCALE

Can the game zoom between personal action, crew action, vessels, formations, and larger conflict without requiring the same granularity everywhere?

### INVESTIGATION AND TRAVEL

Can preparation, evidence, routes, weather, logistics, and local knowledge solve problems without being reduced to combat bonuses?

## Where to stop

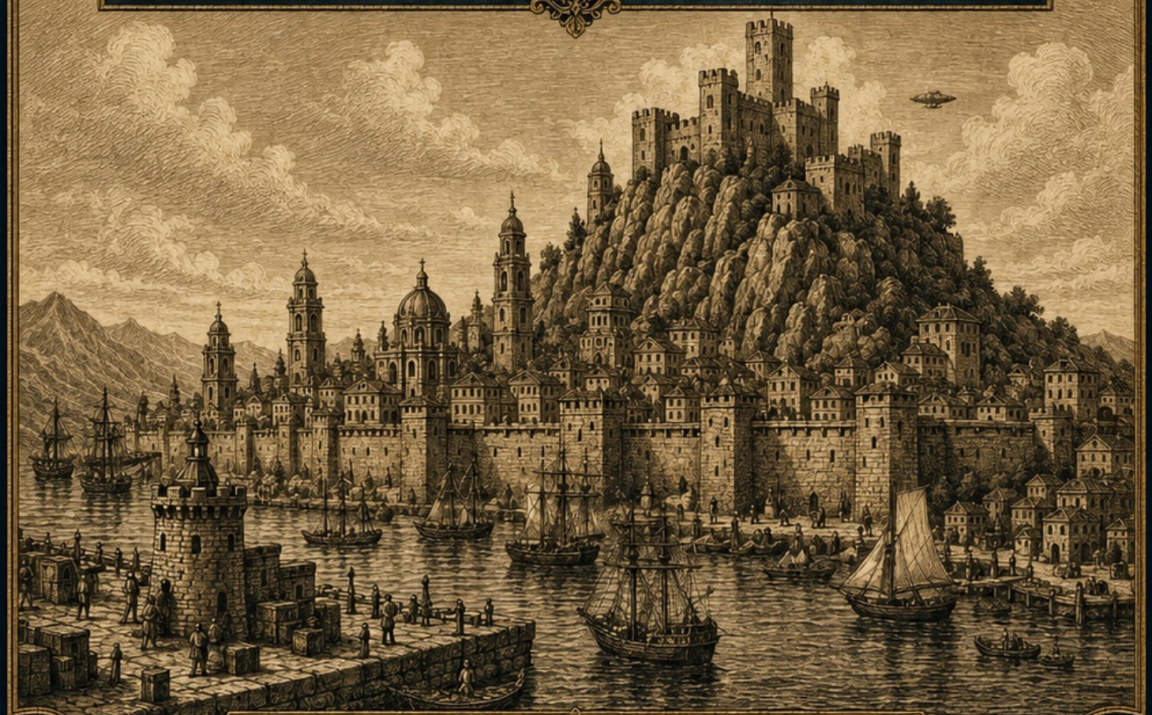
If the system already handles a question well, stop converting. Add a Mar de Oro rule only where the setting would otherwise lose something important. Detailed 5e, Pathfinder, and other conversion packs can carry statistics and specialist subsystems; the Setting Guide stays readable as a setting book.

*An Age of Sail fantasy of sea, sky, faith, empire, and dangerous physics.*

Across the Golden Sea, rival crowns, free ports, inquisitors, merchants, sailors, and skyfarers contend for power beneath the sun.

Mar de Oro is a world of colonial harbors, frontier jungles, ancient ruins, airships, private wars, and perilous discovery. Here, faith and ambition clash, old empires fracture, and every voyage can change the fate of nations.

This guide presents the lands, peoples, powers, conflicts, and mysteries of the setting, and offers a foundation for adventures across sea and sky.



Sea, Sky, Faith, Empire