

Myth No Longer

The Caul slipped away long ago, one of many casualties of Creation's slow decline in the wake of the Usurpation, the Shogunate, and the Contagion. It drifted out of memory until only savants and those few ancient Exalted who'd been there could dimly remember its existence. And then, suddenly, the Caul returned, discovered by a ship bearing the ascendant Realm's flag. The news spread like wildfire; popular imagination was seized by this strange unmade-and-made continent, mythic home of the Elemental Dragons and claimed birthplace of the Dragon-Blooded themselves. Pilgrims flocked to the newly risen continent. But they weren't alone.

The Lunar Anathema felt the Caul's return, a siren call from a sacred realm where Gaia and Luna once walked as one. Here, they thought, was a chance to reclaim miracles and nightmares thought lost to the ages, and a seat that, if conquered, could be their staging ground for final war against the Realm. That Sha'a Oka, the Black Lion lost and mourned long ago, returned with the Caul only lent fuel to the fire. The war commenced immediately, and has raged ever since, the Empress declaring a grand crusade to protect the birthplace of the Exalted and to keep forever open the way to Feng-Yi, the otherworldly Last City at the end of the pilgrim's path.

In this endless struggle, each side's fortunes have waxed and waned over the centuries. At times, the way to Feng-Yi was open — at others, the Lunars claimed two, even three of the sacred shrine cities, barring the way to Feng-Yi and allowing Luna's strange Essence to pervade the land. But as the Deliberative withdrew the Realm's legions from the Caul, dividing them up amongst the Great Houses in preparation for the coming civil war, the Lunar host struck decisively, taking four of the five shrine cities in a rout and leaving the Realm's forces pinned behind the walls of Faxai-on-the-Caul, the Realm's primary port of entry to the sacred continent. The faithful clamor for a counterattack, and in Faxai crusaders sharpen their blades and await reinforcements.

In truth, the crusade to retake the Caul isn't as popular as pilgrims and warriors in Faxai would hope. The Great Houses have been sending daughters and sons to spill their blood on the Caul's strange soil, and for what? To ensure that more Dragon-Blooded will be born by sacrificing those who already live? Though some see the Caul's conquest as a spiritual imperative that will preserve the Dragon-Blooded forever, many in the Deliberative see the struggle as a waste, like casting talents of jade into the ocean's depths.

Nonetheless, as a concession to militarists and Immaculate zealots, the Deliberative voted to order the immediate liberation of the Caul's shrine cities. But to provide legions would be tantamount to admitting that they never should have left the Caul in the first place, and would meet stiff resistance from the Great Houses that had claimed the legions for their own purposes. Instead, they encouraged the Realm's outcastes to join martial orders (p. XX) in the Caul and fight to restore what was rightfully theirs by their birthright as Dragon-Blooded.

The Pilgrimage to Feng-Yi

When the five shrine cities are held by the Dragon-Blooded, the resonance of their elemental Essences can open the way to Feng-Yi. A Dragon-Blood who completes the path of pilgrimage between the five shrine cities and then to the Last City receives the blessings of the land where the Elemental Dragons once dwelled — her next child is assured to draw his Second Breath, receiving the Dragons' gift. Even when the Realm held the shrine cities, the way to Feng-Yi opened only sporadically; the right to undertake a pilgrimage could be granted only by the Empress' decree. She reserved this gift of a miracle for Dragon-Blooded who'd won her favor through deeds of legendary heroism that served her will, scions of families she wished to elevate or restore to power, and the rare outcaste in whom she

saw the potential for greatness. Now, this power is held by the Deliberative, though with the Realm's loss of control over the shrine cities, it's a moot point for now.

But the Dragon-Blooded aren't the only ones who might undertake the pilgrimage. If all five shrine cities were to fall under the Lunars' control, if the Caul were to fully resonate with their otherworldly Essence, the gates of Feng-Yi might open in the other direction. No Lunar has completed the pilgrimage in living memory, so none know what its result might be, but elders and neonates of the Silver Pact alike speak wistfully of what lost wonders might be regained thereby.

Faxai-on-the-Caul

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

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

Life in Faxai-on-the-Caul

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

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

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

The Earth Shrine

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

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

Beyond the Shrine Cities

Realm expansion has been thwarted by the Caul's difficult terrain — high mountains, jagged green hills, dense jungles, treacherous marshes, and reptile-haunted pampas. Neighboring peoples are far better suited to battle here than the Realm's legions, such as the toadfolk of Guchol, who drag their foes beneath the waters of their swamps to drown, or the warriors of Caligo, who hurl arrows and javelins from howdahs mounted atop the shoulders of colossal apes.

In addition to Caulborn and Lunars, the Caul is home to all manner of inhabitants. Wild beasts haunt jungle, hill, and plain. Fair Folk princes' freeholds sparkle on mountain peaks. Demons crawl into the world through the liminal boundaries of the Caul's shores. And elementals and forgotten gods hold court deep beneath the earth.

Enemies Ancient and Powerful

The Lunars of the Caul, who dwell in wild cities of beastfolk and revere pristine demesnes, have long struggled to rid the sacred continent of the Dragon-Blooded. Historically, they know that they and their beastfolk cannot stand against the might of the Realm's legions, and to do so would be folly. Therefore, the history of the Lunar war effort in the Caul is one of asymmetric warfare. Only rarely do they send great hordes against walled cities, when they believe there's advantage to be gained from doing so. Rather, they interdict supply caravans and merchant convoys, hunt pilgrims for sport, and raise vast armies of beastfolk to unleash at the right moment. There has never been a stand-up fight against the Realm's undivided strength in the history of the war for the Caul, which vexes the legions stationed here to no end.

Sha'a Oka, the Black Lion

Sha'a Oka is dead. He died when the Caul sank beneath him into chaos. He died when the Caul returned, slain by the jade daiklaves of the Realm. He died when he led an army against Garianghis, taking hundreds with him before an Immaculate follower of Sextes Jylis sacrificed himself to put the monster down. Sha'a Oka is dead.

Sha'a Oka lives. Every tale of his death is exaggeration, falsehood, or misunderstanding, for more than any of his Lunar kin the Black Lion has a talent for feigning his death and surviving the impossible. His adherents call him His Divine Lunar Presence. The sense that Sha'a Oka stands beside them, even

when he goes into seclusion to prepare a massive attack, is more than just faith in him, and it drives them ever onward, reminding them at all times of the law of the Caul — if you dwell here, you fight the Realm. All those who come to the Caul, from ancient elders to the rawest of the recently Exalted, uphold this rule, for though he's not among the eldest (being scarcely a thousand years old), none can gainsay his greatness.

When Sha'a Oka begins to move, it's like nothing else in Creation. For some days prior, there come great roars from the hills — yet no hawkfolk can find their source. The rivers reverse their flow, drawing brackish water up their great lengths for a day before relaxing and letting it rush out to sea in a torrent. The whole of the Caul seems to quake with his passage, and then, he and an army of lionfolk rise to batter down the walls of the Realm's fortresses. Many times, some hero of the Realm has claimed to have slain the Black Lion, but ever he rises again. Each time, the call goes up: Sha'a Oka is dead. Sha'a Oka lives.