



THE HIDDEN ISLE

A TAROT RPG OF SORcery AND ADVENTURE

I call on the Outcast: lend us thy protection!
I call on the Forgotten God: lend us thy wisdom!
I call on the Dioscori: lend us your compassion!

—The last invocation of Hermes Trismegistus



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FOREWORD

Medieval German has the most delicious proverbs. The one that comes to mind for *The Hidden Isle* is: “An open door seduces even saints.” This is pretty much where we found ourselves in late 2022, in the midst of fulfilling the crowdfunding campaign for our Tarot board game *Sefirot*. Thanks to a small army of backers, we had been able to make the leap into the realms of both Tarot and, to a lesser degree, board games.

But we found ourselves with the question of where to go from here. Another Tarot deck? Alas, we needed a break after designing all those cards. An update to the *Sefirot* ruleset? Better to let the game be played for a while, to give the design room to breathe.

This was the moment that we revisited the curious fact that we had already introduced some backstory into the board game: something about an isle of outcasts and free thinkers. Not entirely necessary, but as the narrative designer in charge of the board game rules, I just couldn’t resist a bit of alternative history world-building. It angered a handful of people, which is nothing new in this day and age. Others were enticed, though, and wanted to hear more about this mysterious “Dioscoria”. And so we found ourselves before a seductive, open door. It screamed “TABLETOP ROLE PLAYING GAME” at us with all its might, and there was nothing that could have kept us from stepping through.

Needless to say, we might in fact have forced a closed door open instead. Our entire team, from art to production to writing and design, grew up on a diet of dungeons, dice, and dragons. Many of us still spend a sizable amount of our leisure time in magical realms as bards, vampires, paladins, barbarians and clerics with substance abuse problems. (Yes, that would be mine.)

We knew that this journey, however, should lead to a different sort of world. Away from wizard-dominated coastlines to entirely new shores, never before visited. Entire libraries¹ were raided to learn all we could about the sixteenth century, the better to craft our own mystical version. Our designers took a careful look at the *Forged in the Dark* roleplaying system, then modified it for unique Tarot card mechanics. Finally, we looked once more to our artists to add the finishing touches of Jugenstil-inspired, human-made art that will, we hope, echo through the ages.

Et voilà. *The Hidden Isle*, hidden no more.

— Georg Hobmeier

¹ Specifically, the digital library of archive.org and the physical library of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek – JP



I INTRODUCTION

The Hidden Isle is a **pen and paper RPG** that uses **Tarot cards instead of dice**. The game is set in the sixteenth century on the island of Dioscoria: a secret city of magicians, adventurers and free thinkers. The game focuses on **roleplaying and collaborative storytelling**, and has mechanics to explore character growth, expanding and contracting its narrative focus as you play, from tight, intense character moments, up to broad card draws inspiring the fates of nations.

This is a game about swashbuckling adventures across Europe and the Middle East, stealing forbidden texts from oppressive regimes, protecting an island of outcasts using ancient magic, and toppling an empire with just the right speech at just the right time.

Guided by the Seer (the game master), Agents (players) use Tarot cards to construct their character's **backstory**, determine the spiritual **burden** they carry, and choose the **ideal** they strive for. As Agents of Dioscoria, players head out into the world to **defend the island's values**: protecting the helpless and preserving knowledge.

If you are familiar with Tarot then *The Hidden Isle* will resonate with you all the more, but **no experience with Tarot is necessary**. To help you feel like a mystical oracle and stay inspired, we've provided you with tables and guides (at the end of this book) to help you quickly understand each card draw.

The setting

Dioscoria: a hidden isle of sages, ancient wisdom, adventurers and mystics. Within the walls of this secret city are gathered the misunderstood, the persecuted, those unjustly punished for the way they live. Here they can flourish, and—when they are ready—return to the world to wage their secret war against injustice and ignorance.

It is a dangerous and disrupted time. Europe has embraced the innovation of gunpowder, and is using it to tear itself apart along religious lines. The Ottoman Empire is poised to break either Vienna to its west or the Safavid Empire to its east. European colonizers are spreading along the coastlines of the world like a hungry parasite. The Inquisition accuses, tortures and executes its victims across the Catholic world.

It is also a world of alchemy and sorcery. English magicians pry the mysteries of the stars. Ottoman scholars unravel the hidden design of the creator. Dioscorian mystics have mastered techniques to peer beyond the veil of time, and steer the world towards sanity.

Into this maelstrom step the Agents of Dioscoria: its actors, magicians, assassins and paladins stand ready to defend the helpless and preserve wisdom. As these Agents tackle scheme after scheme, and topple tyrants, cults and demonic forces, will they live up to their ideal selves, or embrace the darker parts of their humanity?

How to use this book

The Hidden Isle is designed to be flexible, to empower you to have the adventures at your table you want to have. We're very proud of the world of Dioscoria, but there's no reason you couldn't play an adventure set in a fictional fantasy world, a non-magical setting, or even a futuristic or modern universe (with some minor homebrew skill tweaks). If you decide to go this route, you might try using a deck tailored to the setting: a Norse deck for a Viking story, for example, or a futuristic deck for a cyberpunk story. At its core, *The Hidden Isle* is about using Tarot, and the imagination around your table, to tell a story. Take what you need, and feel free to leave the rest.

If you do want to play games set in this magical universe, though, we've got you covered! We'll assume that if you're reading this, you're probably the person most interested in the game, which usually makes you its Game Master (or "Seer"). We've designed the book such that you can start reading from the beginning and have everything you need to play step by step.

First you'll learn the game's rules, including its magic system. Next you'll learn how to create characters, and how their abilities tie into those rules. The last crucial piece is to learn about the beginning, middle and end of every scenario: character downtime before the mission, scenario divination to create the mission, the mission itself, and finally the wrapping up phase.

Those are the bare minimum you'll need to play a session of *The Hidden Isle*, but we've also provided a lot of extra material to help you along the way. The "advice for Seers" section will help you with tips and guidance while running your adventures. A series of alternate game modes let you play with no seer at all, or purely by yourself in the game's Solitaire Mode. To help you understand and channel the game's setting, we have descriptions of the island of Dioscoria and its history, as well as five great cities of the time and a list of mythical creatures. Finally, at the back of the book you'll find a series of divination tables, to help you understand each card you draw and how it might enrich your stories.

May the fates guide you, and your Agents, like feathers in a storm.

James Patton and Daniel Adams



Introduce Dioscoria

Before you begin, you should tell everyone about the game's setting. Tell them a little about Dioscoria, and the world of the sixteenth century. At the very least, we recommend reading the "Introduction" section out loud to the group.

The Deck

The Hidden Isle is played using a standard deck of Tarot cards. Before you begin, split the deck into two smaller decks:

- ♦ The "Pips" deck is made up of the Minor Arcana cards (the pentacle, sword, wand and cup cards) from Ace to ten.
- ♦ The "Vision" deck is made up of all remaining cards: the Major Arcana and the Court Cards (the pages, knights, queens and kings).

When a card is drawn, we find it best if the Seer fans the deck and allows the player to pick their card. When a card is discarded, it should be shuffled back into the deck it came from.

Note: If you are using the Sefirot Tarot deck, be aware this deck comes with three options for The Lovers card. Select one Lovers card, and remove the other two from the game.



A SUMMARY OF PLAY

This section briefly explains how a typical session of *The Hidden Isle* unfolds. You will find more detailed information about each step in later sections of the book.

A session progresses as follows:

1. Downtime
2. Scenario Divination
3. Playing the scenario
4. Wrapping up

Note: We feel confident that groups who follow this session template will generate engaging, character-driven stories without needing to modify the game's format. However, since *The Hidden Isle* is more focused on collaborative storytelling than mechanical number crunching, Seers should feel free to play any extra scenes they feel are necessary to allow players to tell their story.

Downtime

Before they are tasked with a mission, the Agents have some time to spend in Dioscoria: meeting friends or making new ones, training in their chosen skills and magical proficiencies, or tending to injuries received on a previous mission.

Scenario Divination

Agents are given missions by a Dioscorian Oracle, played by the Seer. The Agents walk into a darkened room, cave or tent, and consult the Oracle. Smoldering incense fills the air, and the light of a single candle casts flickering shadows on the walls. The Oracle performs a Tarot spread, divining the nature of the mission to come.

Playing the Scenario

The Agents travel to the mission's location. They are granted passage on one of Dioscoria's merchant ships to travel the world without drawing attention to themselves.

By the time the scenario begins, the Agents know their goal and are poised to pursue their first lead. The rest of the scenario will be a conversation and improvised performance between the Agents and the Seer as the Agents attempt to achieve their goal and the Seer introduces obstacles, opportunities, and challenges.

(See "The Cycle of Play / Playing the scenario".)

Wrapping Up

Once the scenario is complete, all that remains is to wrap things up by exploring Agent relationships, awarding experience points, and noting how the world, and your adversaries, change.

(See "The Cycle of Play / Wrapping up".)

FOR EXPERIENCED TAROT USERS

The Hidden Isle can be played with any deck of Tarot cards as long as the Pips deck is comprised of numbered cards from Ace to ten. If your deck uses non-standard suits, you will have to decide which suits are associated with which skills. (See "Game rules / Skills".)

If your deck has non-standard Major Arcana or Court Cards you will not be able to use the standard divinatory tables or guides, but this will not pose a problem as long as you understand the spiritual meaning of your cards and can interpret them for players.



CAMPAIGN STRUCTURE

The Hidden Isle can easily be played as a series of “one-shot” adventures, where each scenario has nothing to do with prior or future scenarios. However, the systems and structure of the game have been designed to thrive on character development and a larger narrative arc where each scenario forms part of a longer “season”, like in a TV show.

When you create your characters, your first season begins. This season tells the story of a mysterious adversary, who comes to dominate your efforts and endanger Dioscoria or the world at large. When an adversary is summarily defeated, this may mark the end of a season, and may also coincide with the end of your Agents’ terms of Dioscorian service. At this point, you are free to establish them as a career Agent and follow their journey further, or to retire your Agent and create a new character.

There is also no reason you shouldn’t drop a character that no longer interests you, or roleplay a scene where an Agent abandons Dioscoria and the Hand to return to the mainland. If you decide to retire a character like this, simply create a new one for the next session: the Dioscorian Council will soon find a replacement Agent.



III

GAME RULES



SKILLS

Each Agent faces challenges during the scenario by using one of twelve skills divided into four suits.

Skills are flexible: the summaries below are suggestions for how these skills could be used, but they are intended to be used creatively.

***Note:** Every character receives training from Dioscoria in each of these areas. You can use a skill even if you have zero points in it.*

***Example:** Sariah is attempting to sneak backstage during a performance. She could choose the 'convince' skill to use a clever argument to explain her presence, use the 'perform' skill to act like she belongs there, or perhaps the 'mingle' skill to blend in with the crowd. While all three actions attempt to accomplish the same thing, and have a lot of cross-over, choosing a different skill allows Agents to change the narrative flavor of how they are acting.*

FORTUNE CARDS

Each player has a fortune hand. This is a hand of pip cards that can be used to avert failure during a challenge, for yourself or another Agent.

Note: Keep your fortune hand to yourself! Only you are allowed to see it.

IDEALS AND BURDENS

Agents are not perfect machines: they are human beings with rich, tumultuous inner lives. These inner aspects are represented by an Agent's ideal and burden.

Your ideal is a version of yourself you wish to become, but struggle to live up to. Embodying your ideal will take patience and inner strength, but will yield great rewards.

Your burden is a character flaw or habit that you lean on in times of crisis: an aspect of your worst self. Giving in to your burden will pay off in the short term, but may harm you in the long run.

SKILLS



Swords represent wits, strength, and applying your mental abilities.

- Skirmish** Sword fighting, grappling, short-range shooting
- Convince** Persuasion, rhetoric, coercing
- Study** Focused research, getting a read on someone



Wands represent creativity, passion, and magic.

- Unleash** Brutal fighting, furious argument, destruction
- Perform** Singing, playing music, acting or disguising yourself
- Channel** Using or sensing magic



Cups represent subtlety, emotion, and conversation.

- Slip** Stealth, acrobatics, sneak attacks
- Soothe** Healing, allaying fears, using bodily energies
- Mingle** Blending into crowds, socializing, making friends



Pentacles represent exchange, appraising, and attention to detail.

- Finesse** Lockpicking, pickpocketing, long-range shooting, tinkering
- Bargain** Making deals, finding compromises, manipulating
- Survey** Getting a general impression, scouting

VICES, VIRTUES, AND THE CORE SELF

At the bottom of the character sheet are three boxes labeled “Vices”, “Virtues” and “Core self”. These represent aspects of the Agent’s personality deeper than their burden and ideal. The burden and ideal are what they struggle with, but their virtues, vices and core self are what they have become.

A vice is simply a burden that has been fully leveled; similarly, a virtue is a fully leveled ideal. (See “Downtime / Character transformation” for more details.)

***Note:** There is no limit to the number of vices an Agent can have. During the downtime phase, each vice harms the Agent. Vices can be removed by converting them into ideals.*

If an Agent gains more than three virtues, they must move the excess into the “Fulfilled virtues” section of their core self.



CHALLENGE RESOLUTION

Dioscorian missions are full of challenges. A challenge is when an Agent attempts to do something non-trivial such as picking a lock, fighting an enemy, performing a difficult piece of music, or convincing a guard to leave their post. Challenges are the basic building blocks of play. A challenge will result in either a total success, a complicated success, or failure. The Agent performing the challenge is the challenger.

To attempt a challenge, follow these steps:

1. Define the challenge:

The challenger describes what they want to do, and which skill they are using to do it. This skill's suit will be the **trump** suit for this challenge.

2. Draw hands:

The challenger and Seer each draw a hand of cards from the Pips deck. The challenger draws one card for every skill point in the challenge skill, and one card for free. The Seer draws two, three or four cards for an easy, medium or difficult challenge.

The Seer also draws additional cards if the situation is dangerous due to its context. Some challenges may be incredibly difficult: the Seer might draw four cards for base difficulty, and a further two or three in extremely unfavorable circumstances. Players may draw additional cards for any advantages they have, such as preparations, visions or using items.

Note: A challenger always draws a minimum of one card during challenge draws, even if modifiers should force them to draw zero or less than zero.

3. Play a card:

The challenger and Seer each choose one card to play from their draw hand, and reveal them simultaneously. The card played by the challenger is called the challenge card.

Example: Anton is facing a guard in an alleyway, and wants to get past. He explains he wants to attack the guard with his short sword, and selects the Skirmish skill. Skirmish is a Sword skill, so Swords are trump.

Example: Anton has 2 points in the Skirmish skill, so draws three cards. The Seer reminds everyone that this guard is a Janissary, an elite soldier. This means the challenge is difficult, so the Seer draws four cards. In addition, the guard is on the alert because Anton raised his suspicions earlier, so the Seer draws one further card, bringing the total to five cards.

Example: Sarah has zero points in Skirmish. She begins a Skirmish action, and decides she wants to use her ideal, causing her to draw one fewer card. While this would logically result in her drawing zero cards, she must draw one. (See "Using burdens and ideals during challenges".)

4. Determine the outcome:

If one card is in the trump suit and the other is not, the owner of the trump card wins, regardless of its numerical value.

Otherwise, the winning card is the one with the highest number, regardless of suit. If the numbers are equal, the player wins. Note that Aces have a value of 11.

If the Seer wins, the challenge is a failure.

If the challenger wins, determine how successful they are:

- ♦ If the challenge card is in the trump suit and the Seer's card is not, the challenger's success is total. They just do it! The challenger describes how they overcome this challenge.
- ♦ Otherwise, their success is complicated (see below).

***Example:** Anton plays the 3 of Swords. The Seer plays the 10 of Pentacles. Since Swords are trump, Anton is totally successful: he skewers the guard, killing him. Anton will never know that the Seer drew the 9 of Swords, but decided against playing it, because they wanted to give Anton a fighting chance.*

***Example:** Anton plays the Ace of Wands. The Seer plays the 10 of Pentacles. Since neither card is trump, but Anton's is higher, his success is complicated: he thrusts at the guard, severely wounding him, but is harmed in return.*

***Example:** Anton plays the 3 of Wands. The Seer plays the 10 of Pentacles. Since neither card is trump, the Seer's higher-numbered card wins. Anton fails this challenge.*

***Note:** The challenger playing the Ace of the trump suit is always a total success, no matter what the Seer plays.*

Once the challenge is resolved, discard all cards drawn for the challenge.

***Note:** If you are an experienced Tarot user, feel free to let the spiritual meaning of the pip cards inspire what happens narratively during the challenge, and what the outcome is—although it must be consistent with the challenge's success or failure.*



Failing challenges

If a challenger fails, they don't achieve their intended action. This might be due to incompetence or lack of skill, or through no fault of their own. Perhaps their enemies were better prepared than they expected, or the Agent was simply unlucky.

Failure must result in a tangible change to the world. This stops players from simply repeating the challenge, which would rob the scene of narrative momentum.

When an Agent fails a challenge, the following consequences could occur:

- ◆ **Harm.** You are bested in combat, and take physical harm. Your arguments are shredded by an experienced orator, and you take spiritual harm.
- ◆ **Losing items, temporarily or permanently.** The gargoyle rips open your pack and you lose two items. Your dagger is knocked into the canyon.
- ◆ **Complication.** The guards are alerted to your presence. You fall under the witch's spell.
- ◆ **Rising danger.** The ritual moves one step closer to completion. As you search the captain's office you are interrupted: he's coming back! This might involve starting or advancing a clock. (See "Advice for Seers / Clocks")
- ◆ **Future disadvantages.** The fortress goes into lockdown, making sneaking more difficult. The magician weakens your muscles, making physical challenges more difficult.
- ◆ **Enemy activity.** Enemies—such as guards or antagonists—advance their own ends while the Agent is busy failing.
- ◆ **Losing opportunities.** The diplomat refuses to let you see the princess, and insists you leave the palace at once. You fail to decipher the occult text, and are shocked to find it disintegrating in your hands.
- ◆ **Higher stakes.** The guard is unconvinced, and suddenly recognizes you from your criminal, pre-Dioscorian past. You lose the upper hand in combat, and find yourself teetering over the edge of the roof.
- ◆ **Interpersonal conflict.** You lose affection with a contact. Tension rises between you and another Agent, or a political figure within Dioscoria. This is especially effective for challenges taken during downtime.

Example: Elead, an elite sharpshooter, fails to hit his target. The Seer explains that Elead's skill is not in question: the failure occurs because the platform Elead is standing on suddenly collapses.

Example: Anton fails the challenge. The Janissary glimpses him out of the corner of his eye and dodges the strike, drawing his sword. He calls for backup. Anton must now face the Janissary, and the city's guards have been alerted.

Complications

If a challenger's success is complicated, they overcome the challenge but with a downside. This could include:

- ◆ **Harm.** You win the fight, but suffer a serious cut. You successfully channel magical forces, but they sear your spirit.
- ◆ **Cost.** You persuade an NPC to do what you want, but only if you do them a favor. The guard lets you past, but only if you hand over your weapons first. You can convince the adversary that you are a turncoat, but only if you stab your fellow Agent.
- ◆ **Losing an item, temporarily or permanently.** You pick the lock, but your lockpicks break. You dodge the attack but drop your weapon.
- ◆ **Reduced effect.** Your attack succeeds, but the blow is glancing. You learn something about the artifact, but your knowledge is still incomplete. You persuade an NPC to confide in you, but they still hold something back.
- ◆ **Rising danger.** You successfully clamber to the window, but it draws attention. You pick the lock, but suddenly hear footsteps approaching from the other side of the door. A guard will remember your face.
- ◆ **Losing opportunities.** You subdue the minion, but their master gets away. You use the magic mirror, but it cracks, and cannot be used again.
- ◆ **Unexpected problems.** You sneak past the guard, but realize the way is blocked further ahead. You are able to make progress breaking down the door, but it's sturdier than it looks, and you will need to make another action to fully get through it.
- ◆ **Higher stakes.** Someone from your past recognizes you, and confronts you. You push the demon through the magical gate, but it pulls you through as well.

Note: If a challenge doesn't have an obvious complication, feel free to draw a vision card and let it inspire you. This may be something that happens immediately, may prompt the creation of a clock, or become a possible future threat.

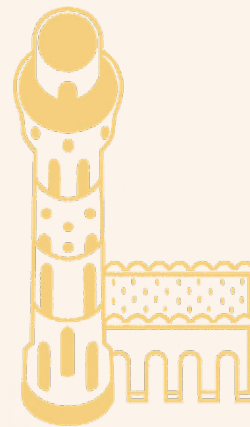
Using fortune cards during challenges

During a challenge, after the Seer's and challenger's cards have been revealed, and any complications have been narrated, any player can play a card from their fortune hand to improve the challenge card and avert disaster.

The fortune card either changes the suit of the challenge card to match the fortune card, or adds its number value.

Multiple players can play fortune cards to improve the challenge card, but each player can only play one fortune card per challenge. The challenger may refuse help if they wish.

If your fortune card changes the outcome to a success, explain how your intervention helped snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, even if this contradicts the failure which the Seer just narrated. If an Agent has no way to help, they cannot play a fortune card. But note that players can assist each other without their Agent realizing.



Suit bonuses to fortune cards

If you have at least one skill point in all of a suit's skills, you resonate with the energy of this suit, and can use fortune cards more effectively. Whenever you play a fortune card of that suit, either on yourself or another Agent, the fortune card adds +3 to the challenge card's numerical value. This is in addition to the fortune card's normal benefits.

Example: Anton is trying to convince a guard to leave his post. Convince is a Sword skill, so Swords are trump.

He plays the 5 of Pentacles; the Seer plays the 8 of Swords. This is a failure: the Seer describes how the guard grabs Anton and throws him out of the palace. Anton is disgraced and takes one spiritual harm.

Anton, however, desperately wants to succeed, and has the 2 of Swords in his fortune hand. He plays the 2 of Swords, adding the Sword suit to the 5 of Pentacles: the challenge card is now the 5 of Swords. Anton's friend Sarah has the 3 of Wands in her fortune hand, and decides to help: she plays it, adding its number value.

The challenge card is now the 8 of Swords. Since this is in the trump suit, and the number matches the Seer's card, the challenge succeeds, though there will be a complication.

Sarah rewinds the narrative and describes how, before the guard can throw Anton out, she runs at the guard, screaming that a horrible crime has been committed in a nearby street and his help is desperately needed. Swayed by this, the guard leaves his post—but he will remember her face, and will grow suspicious when he realizes she lied to him. The spiritual harm suffered by Anton when he was thrown out is undone: he was never actually thrown out, so suffers no harm.

Example: Aziza is sneaking through the top floor of a mansion, and is undetected. Sarah is on the bottom floor, disguised as a servant, and is trying to get past a guard checkpoint. She has just failed her challenge draw and the guards are getting suspicious. Aziza plays a fortune card and explains that, while her character has no idea what's going on below, she accidentally knocks over a vase and causes a noise, distracting the guard and causing him to wave Sarah through.

Example: Darwin the Occultist skirmishes with a member of a street gang and fails the challenge: he plays the 4 of Wands against the gang member's 5 of Swords. Eldon assists Darwin by playing one of his fortune cards: the 2 of Swords. He uses it to change the challenge card's suit to Swords. This would normally mean Darwin fails the challenge with a 4 of Swords against the 5 of Swords. However, Eldon has 3 points in Skirmish, 1 in Convince, and 1 in Study, and has therefore unlocked the bonus to his Swords fortune cards. This increases the challenge card's value by 3, making it the 7 of Swords, which grants Darwin a complicated success.

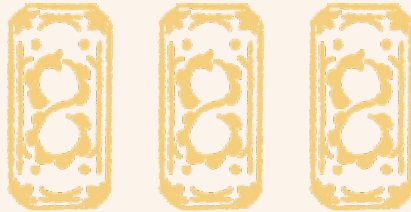
Using ideals or burdens during challenges

During a challenge, the challenger may use their burden, ideal, vice, or virtue. To use your burden or ideal:

After you have chosen what skill you are using, but **before** you have looked at your challenge hand:

1. Describe how, in this moment, you leverage your burden or live up to your ideal.
2. If you are using your burden, draw one more card.
3. If you are using your ideal,
 - ♦ Draw one fewer card
 - ♦ The numerical value of all cards in your challenge hand is increased by 3 (eg. a 5 of wands is now an 8 of wands).
4. Mark 1 progress on your ideal or burden progress track on your character sheet, regardless of the challenge outcome.

***Note:** While using your ideal makes life more difficult in the short term, leveling your ideal is better in the long run than leveling your burden. For more information, see “Cycle of Play / Downtime / Character Transformation”.*



Using vices or virtues during challenges

Agents may use their vices or virtues during challenges, just as they would use their burden or ideal.

After you have begun the challenge, but **before** you have looked at your challenge hand:

1. Describe how, in this moment, you embody your virtue or vice, and how it helps in this situation.
2. If you are using a vice, draw one extra card.
3. If you are using a virtue, the numerical value of all cards in your challenge hand is increased by 3.
4. Do not mark any progress on your burden or ideal track.

***Note:** Unlike using an ideal, using a virtue does not result in drawing one fewer card. Once an Agent has become accustomed to living up to their ideal, it becomes an unmitigated strength.*

Player-versus-player challenges

Occasionally, one Agent may find it necessary to work against, or try to manipulate, another Agent. When this happens:

1. Each competing player—the challengers—decides what their goal is for this challenge, including whether they intend harm.
2. Each challenger chooses which skill they are using to perform this action. The trump suit for each challenger is the suit of their chosen skill.
3. Each challenger draws that skill as normal, and may use burdens, ideals, vices or virtues to modify this draw. If the Seer agrees, they may draw extra cards to account for advantages for them or disadvantages for their opponent.
4. Each challenger plays one card from their hand.
5. The cards are compared as with normal challenge resolution.
 - I. If it is a total success for one challenger, that challenger's goal is fully accomplished.
 - II. If it is a complicated success for one challenger, they achieve their goal but there is a complication. The loser can suggest a complication, but the Seer has the final say.
 - III. If it is a draw—both challengers have cards of equal value—there is no clear winner at first. Both players discard these challenge cards, and select new challenge cards from their remaining hands.
 - IV. If one challenger is reduced to a hand of zero cards, they lose. If neither challenger has any remaining cards, the challenge has no clear winner.

***Example:** Hashim wishes to keep part of his backstory secret from the Hand, but Jeera is pressuring him to reveal the information. While the players could resolve this without a challenge, they decide it would be more interesting to test their skills against each other. Hashim chooses to Perform in an attempt to act like there is nothing worth discussing; Jeera chooses to Study Hashim to judge whether or not he is hiding something. Trump for Hashim is Wands, while trump for Jeera is Swords. Hashim has 1 point in Perform and chooses to lean on his burden, so draws a challenge hand of 3 cards. Jeera has 1 point in Study, so draws 2 cards. The players consider their hands; Hashim plays the 9 of Swords, and Jeera plays the 3 of Swords. While it may seem like Hashim has won the challenge, remember that Swords are trump only for Jeera, meaning that she played trump and Hashim did not. Jeera achieves a total success and sees through Hashim's attempt to hide the truth.*

***Example:** Eldon is perturbed by Antoine's careless nature and wants to use Skirmish to rough him up a bit and teach him a lesson. Antoine decides to avoid the confrontation and will use Slip to stay out of Eldon's reach. For Eldon, trump is Swords, while trump for Antoine is Cups. After drawing their challenge hands and selecting a card, they both play the 5 of their respective trump suit. The challenge is a stalemate. Ignoring the first card played, each Agent plays a second card from their challenge hand: Eldon plays the 3 of Wands, and Antoine plays the 4 of Pentacles. As neither card is trump, Antoine wins by having the higher numerical value: he avoids Eldon's onslaught. Since it is a complicated success, the Seer determines the complication: their scuffle has attracted the attention of the city watch.*

Group actions

Sometimes players may wish to act as a group to overcome a challenge, working together to perform an action as one. For example, the party might sneak through a dark alleyway together, sing together as a choir, form a circle and perform a magic ritual, or pool their arcane arts to banish a demon. In situations like these, the group can collectively perform a single challenge.

1. Choose the skill for the group action, and define what success in this action means.
2. Decide which Agents are participating.
3. Every participating Agent draws a challenge hand based on their level in this skill. They may use vices, virtues, burdens and ideals as normal.
4. The Seer draws a hand of cards as normal (based on difficulty and modifiers), plus one extra card for every participating Agent.
5. The Seer plays one challenge card to each participant, and each participant plays a challenge card in return.
6. The cards are revealed. They are evaluated as normal, as though each participant had their own private challenge against the Seer.
7. If any participant is successful, the group action as a whole succeeds. Any failures or complicated successes incur penalties or complications as normal. This could mean harm or penalties are applied specifically to failing or less successful Agents, or could begin a negative clock that affects the group but does not cause them to fail the goal outright.

Fortune cards can be played as usual. Non-participating Agents can still play Fortune cards if they can justify how they help.

***Note:** If even one participant succeeds, the originally defined group action must succeed for all participants. Penalties from failure cannot cause any participant to fail to achieve the goal of the group action.*



HARM

Being an Agent is dangerous: during your tenure you may be physically injured or spiritually wounded. This is represented by harm, which can be physical or spiritual.

- ◆ **1 harm** is a glancing blow or a wounding insult.
- ◆ **2 harm** is a serious injury or a curse that shakes your spirit.
- ◆ **3 harm** shatters your body or soul.

When an Agent takes harm, the Seer tells them whether the harm is physical or spiritual, and may specify where the harm should be received: into the player's Swords, Wands, Cups or Pentacles suit. If the Seer does not specify a suit, or if the chosen suit is already full, the player decides where the harm is taken.

The player notes down the harm on their character sheet in the boxes labeled "Harm" to the bottom-right of the skill suits. Each suit has two harm boxes. To note down harm, write either a "P" (for physical) or "S" (for spiritual) in the relevant harm box.

Suits relate to harm as follows:

Swords harm

mental clarity and precision

Wands harm

magic, performance and passion

Cups harm

stealth, inner feelings and social connections

Pentacles harm

pragmatism, business and dexterity

Harm may be healed during the downtime phase.

***Example:** Chani is performing a song in a tavern. She fails the challenge, botches the song and is booed by the crowd. The Seer decides she takes one harm, since Chani is proud of her skill as a performer and is grieved by this setback. The Seer decides it is spiritual harm (because it wounds her spirit, not her body), and is taken to the Wands suit (since it is related to the "Perform" skill). Chani writes an "S" in one of the harm boxes in her Wands suit.*

Trauma

Trauma is the worst kind of harm. It is gained when a burden is fully leveled. It can only be healed through personal growth (by leveling an ideal), or through the emotional support of an intimate contact.

For more information, see “Cycle of Play / Downtime / Character transformation” or “Cycle of Play / Downtime / Visit Contact”.

Harm consequences

Every time you use a skill in a suit with 2 harm, draw 1 fewer card for that challenge. Having only one harm in a suit does not affect you in any way.

If an Agent’s harm slots are all filled, they are **broken**. When an Agent is broken, they take 1 point of trauma to a harm slot of their choosing, and all their skills have a value of zero. Their player then decides what **disaster** they suffer: perhaps they fall unconscious, are captured, die, or are otherwise rendered incapable. If the disaster is not permanent (eg. the Agent is not dead), and if the Seer agrees, the Agent recovers from the disaster after a short period. Even after recovering, however, their skills are still locked to a value of zero.

Note: An Agent can only die with the player’s consent. Seer’s cannot unilaterally kill Agents.

If a broken Agent removes any harm, their skills return to their unbroken levels. The trauma remains.

Example: Saray has 6 harm. She takes another 2 harm, filling her final harm slots, and is broken. Her player decides to take 1 trauma to Swords, overwriting 1 physical harm with 1 trauma. Her player decides she crawls into an alleyway and falls unconscious. After twenty minutes of in-game time, the Seer announces Saray has woken up in the alleyway, still dazed. Saray may continue play as normal, but all her skills will be locked to zero until she can find healing (most likely in Dioscoria).

Example: Anton takes harm and is broken. His player takes the trauma to Cups, and says Anton is overwhelmed and captured. Later in the same session, the Seer explains Anton has been taken to the adversary’s ship and is tied up in the hold. Anton may now try to escape, his companions can try to free him, or they can abandon him and try to rescue him in a followup mission.

ABILITIES

Agents can perform impressive or noteworthy feats, known as abilities. They may have picked up these abilities before they came to Dioscoria, or learned them while serving on the island. Abilities are things your Agent can just do, so rarely require a challenge draw.

You can find the complete list of abilities later in this book (see “Classes and abilities”), including descriptions for how they are used during play. Players should write any abilities they learn in the “Abilities” box on their character sheet.

By themselves, Agents can only learn abilities of their own class. By visiting their contacts, however, Agents can potentially learn abilities from any class; see “Rules / Experience points”.

Magical abilities

Some abilities are magical in nature, but do not follow the standard rules for Agents performing magic. By gaining this ability, an Agent has mastered this technique and, as with any other ability, a challenge draw is not required. (See “Magic / Using magic in scenario play / Changes and sources”)

EXPERIENCE POINTS

Experience points (xp) are gained after each scenario. They symbolize Agents becoming more skilled and learning from their experiences, and can be spent by players to improve their skills or abilities.

When a player gains xp, they may put that xp in one of five xp tracks: the four suit tracks, and their abilities track. Players may put their xp wherever they like in whatever combination.

***Example:** Chani gains 2 xp at the end of the scenario. She opts to put one point into her abilities track, and one in her Cups track.*

When a suit track is filled, gain a skill point in that suit and reduce the track to zero. Note that, by default, all skills have a maximum of 3 points. A fourth skill point can be unlocked by leveling your burden or ideal. (See “Cycle of Play / Downtime / Character transformation”.)

***Note:** Having at least 1 point in each skill of a given suit grants a bonus to your fortune cards, encouraging players to spread their points across more skills. For more information, see “Game Rules / Challenge Resolution / Suit bonuses to fortune cards”.*

When the ability track is filled, choose a new ability to learn and reduce the track to zero.

You may choose any ability from your class’s ability list.

Or, if you have a contact at maximum affection, they are willing to teach you one of their abilities. Select an ability from any class’s ability list that this contact could be skilled in.

VISIONS

Dioscorian agents are trained to open their inner eye to receive visions of other places or times. This can reveal useful information, fill in explanations or backstory, give Agents a glimpse of possible futures, or let players nudge the future of the scenario.

During scenario divination, all players receive a vision card from the Seer. They do not yet know what vision they will witness, but they are ready to receive it. The Seer also has vision cards, which can be used to give visions to Agents.

A vision is a brief glimpse of the past, present, or a possible future. They need not be things an Agent could directly witness, and can be from any point of view. Think of a vision as a brief shot from a movie, or a glimpse through someone else's eyes.

Triggering visions

At any point during scenario play, a player or the Seer may play a vision card. This signifies that the Agent, or the entire party, is experiencing a vision. The vision must be somehow related to either the vision card's meaning, or the imagery on the card. Feel free to consult the Vision Guide for inspiration.

Whoever plays the vision card may ask for ideas or inspiration from other players about what their card could mean.

If the player played the vision card, they suggest the content of the vision. The Seer takes this suggestion as their starting point, modifies it as necessary, and narrates the vision. The player's Agent receives the vision, and can share the vision by touching others.

If the Seer played the vision card, they narrate the vision and decide which Agents receive it.

The Seer may decide whether the vision gives an Agent some kind of advantage: perhaps hidden information is now known, or a challenge is easier, or so trivial as to no longer require a challenge draw.

Note: If a vision grants an advantage to a challenge draw (eg. giving a player an extra card), the vision must be triggered before the player has seen the cards of this draw.

Example: Anton receives the Death vision card during scenario divination. During the scenario, he meets a swordmaster he would like to kill. He plays the Death vision card, explaining that he receives a vision of the fight to come so that he is forewarned when it occurs. The Seer agrees, and describes Anton's vision.

Anton attacks the swordmaster. Since he is armed with foreknowledge, he knows the swordmaster's tricks, and draws one extra challenge card while attacking.

Visions of the future

If this vision is of a future that may come to pass, place the vision card on the table. (Otherwise, discard it.) This future may occur, or it may be averted.

If the future from a vision becomes more likely to pass, the Seer should put a token on the relevant vision card. If it becomes less likely, remove tokens. If this future comes to pass, or is definitely averted, remove its tokens and discard the vision card.

Note: Tokens placed on a vision card should loosely convey how close the vision is to being fulfilled. Placing or removing tokens should be an expressive act conveying the shifting of possible futures, not a mathematical count system. There is no upper limit on how many tokens a card can have.

Example: The Seer plays The Tower vision card, and explains that the Agents witness a vision of a library in flames. As the scenario goes on, and the Agents fail to stop the arsonist, the Seer places more and more tokens on The Tower card, showing that time is running out.

Eventually, they kill the arsonist. The Seer does not remove any tokens. They continue searching, and realize the true cause of the fire is not the arsonist, but a magician performing experiments in the basement. They kill the magician. The Seer declares the crisis averted, and discards The Tower and its tokens.

ITEMS AND INVENTORY

The Hidden Isle's inventory system is more flexible than in many other RPGs. There is no need to keep an exhaustive list of everything your Agents are carrying. It is assumed each Agent is competent enough to pack for the journey ahead, without the player doing the tedious work of planning or trying to predict what their Agent will need.

Items can grant many advantages. Lockpicks, for example, allow an Agent to attempt to bypass a lock, an action that might otherwise be impossible. Other items may grant a bonus to a challenge: for example, a shimmer cloak (which partially conceals the user) might give the Agent +1 Slip while using it.

Using items

When an Agent needs an item, they simply reach into their pack and pull it out: they had the foresight to pack it before the trip. Circle the item in your Agent's inventory box and tick one of the "Load" checkboxes. If the item in question is not listed on the sheet, write its name in the space provided.

Players can only do this with items it is plausible their character would pack ahead of time. To pull a very specific item from their pack—which the Agent could not have foreseen—fate must be on their side. Thus, if a player wishes to pull a specific, unforeseeable item from their pack, they must first discard a fortune card.

***Example:** Jamal wants to convince a magician to help him. The magician is interested in Jinni. Jamal decides he is going to bribe him with a book on Jinni, but this is not an area Jamal has any connection with. As such, he would only pack such a book as a fluke of fate. He discards a fortune card, writes "Book on Jinni" in his inventory box, ticks 1 Load, and pulls out the book.*

***Note:** Using a downtime action to research or investigate ahead of time is a great way to make having a very specific item more plausible.*

Some inventory items are single use; this is indicated by items written in italic text. If desired, Agents can choose to have multiple instances of single-use items, but each instance costs 1 Load.

***Note:** Being caught using a rare inventory item (eg. a Concealment charm) might cause NPCs to become suspicious of you, or for world powers to research and then use such items in the future.*

Load

Each Agent has a Load of five: this means they can carry five items at a time, and can therefore pull items from their pack five times per scenario. If they try to retrieve a sixth item, they realize they didn't have room to pack it.

Carrying other items during the scenario (eg. an armful of books) can further reduce Load.

ADVERSARIES

The Agents will encounter and foil many enemies during their tenure. Some enemies are so important or driven that they could feature across numerous scenarios. These are adversaries.

An adversary is someone with an ambitious, dangerous plan that is not limited to one single territory or scenario. Adversaries can be one person, or an entire organization. The Seer does not have to know the plan in any detail for the adversary to be classified as such.

Adversaries are tracked on the Adversary Sheet, which stores the name of the organization, their leader, its plot and progress toward it, their motivation, and other members of this organization. There is also a space for the organization's coat of arms or symbol. Seers may add information to the adversary sheet even if the adversary has not been encountered: this represents rumor and gossip about this foe.

***Note:** An adversary's progress track cannot increase unless the adversary is written on the sheet. But note that very little need be known about an adversary for the Seer to write it on the sheet.*

The Adversary Sheet can be viewed by players at any time. Any secret information the Seer wishes to withhold should be kept in their private notes.

***Example:** The Hand encounters a mysterious death cult and prevents them from sacrificing an entire town. Though they know little about this strange organization, this is enough for the Seer to add "Death cult" as an adversary. The Seer will fill in the cult's motivation, leader, its true name etc. as the Agents discover these facts.*

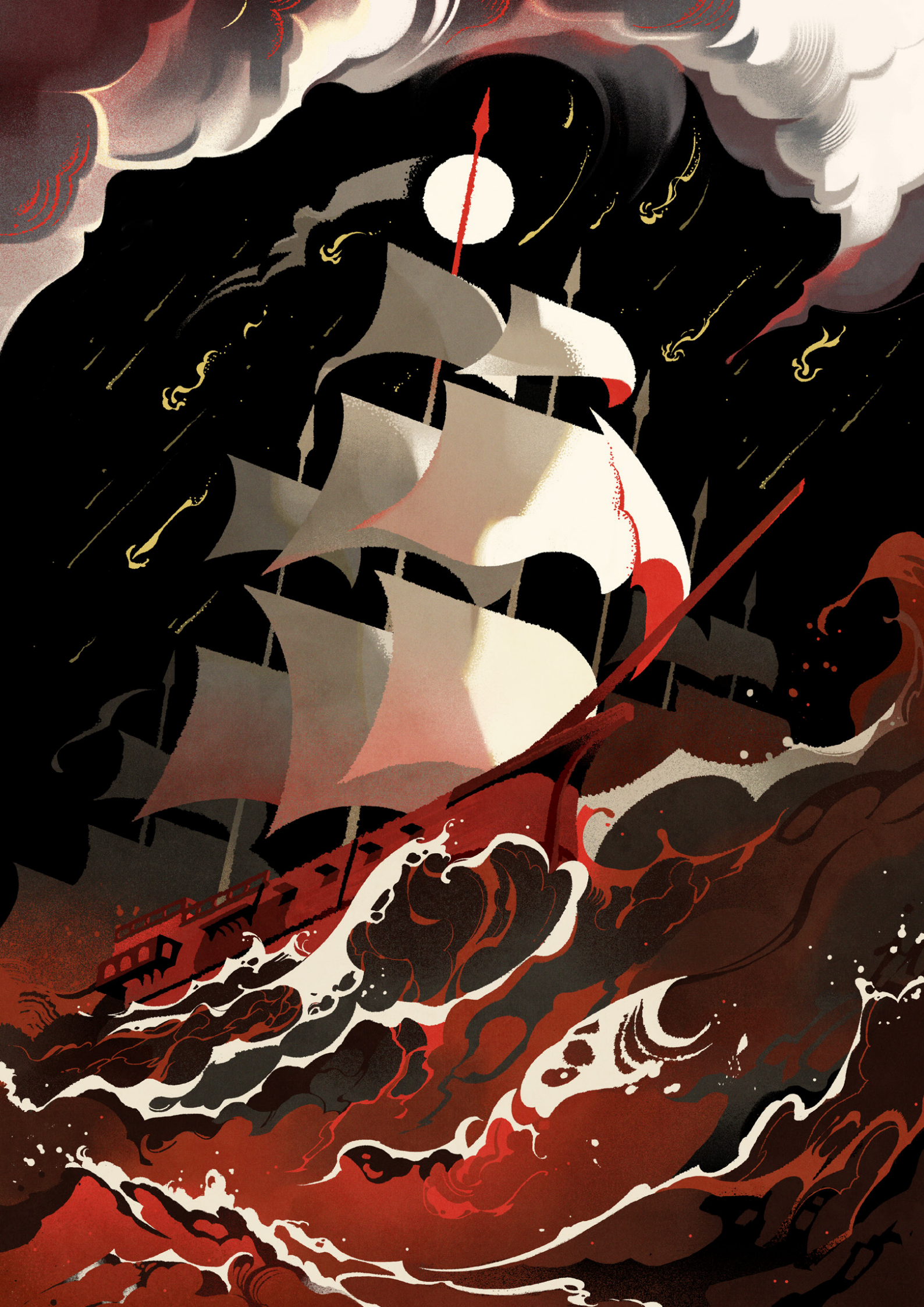
Adversary plot progress

When an Adversary clears the first section of its progress track, the group's identity becomes known to the Hand.

When an Adversary clears the middle section of its progress track, their plot enters its final phase. This becomes an urgent problem for Dioscoria; the Agents must focus all their attention on it if they are to stop it.

When the progress track is full, the adversary's plan is put into motion—but may yet be foiled.

To learn what happens when an adversary is defeated, see "Cycle of Play / Wrapping up / Advance Adversaries".



MAGIC

Magic in *The Hidden Isle* is an open system, allowing players to experiment with these otherworldly forces without breaking the game. There is no mana pool, spell list or complicated spell slot system. This isn't a rigidly defined science: it's magic! As such, Agents can attempt to bend reality however they wish; the Seer then decides whether this action is feasible, and what risks and complications could arise. You can tweak magic to follow whatever norms or rules resonate with you and your group, while still enjoying the structure and risk that comes from this system.

The following section is designed to inspire players, so they can cast more creative and interesting magic—informed by the magical theories and worldviews of the Renaissance and Islamic world—and to help Seers decide which spells are simple, which are complicated or risky, and which are impossible.

What is magic?

Occult—literally “unseen”—forces are all around us. What is it that makes trees grow, or gathers a storm? What differentiates gold from iron, or living things from inanimate objects? How can some commune with spirits, or the Divine? Clearly, there are invisible forces all around us, capable of causing visible changes. To master these forces, and bend them to one's will, is magic.

For centuries sages have sought to understand these forces. Every culture has its magical tradition. It is understood that each planet, each creature, each spiritual entity, each and every particle of the material realm emits rays which touch and affect other things, passing on something of its own nature in the process. This is why, when the planet Mars is ascendent, strife and conflict erupt in the hearts of men: the world is bathed in its warlike rays.

The reality we perceive, then, is like many lights passing through many prisms. To practice magic is to wield a prism of your own, to bend these forces as you wish. An experienced sorcerer can bend human perception and emotion, the physical properties of all material things, and even the forces of fate and fortune. But magic has one constant: something cannot come from nothing. Magic must always have a source. Your source could be ambient magical energy, the life energy of your own body, the power of nature found in storms or forests, heavenly bodies, magical creatures such as Jinni or ghosts, magical reagents, or entities of immense, divine power such as angels or demons.

Dioscoria and magic

Dioscorian sages have been gathering magical texts for centuries, transforming and synthesizing them into the most advanced magical knowledge in the world. Magical training programs for agents have been carefully honed; a neophyte can be taught the basics of magic in a few weeks, feats which take most sorcerers a lifetime to attempt.

Dioscoria does not discriminate against, or forbid, any school or source of magic, except that summoning demons is only permitted to trained Occultists. All sources are permitted, if no harm is done without consent. But this does not mean all sources are safe. Each source comes with its own risks and costs, and some contain hidden snares.

Dioscorian agents are taught to use magic discreetly. Magic is rare outside Dioscoria, and will draw attention. Everyday people are not accustomed to it, and will react with fear or wonder. This could result in agents being arrested and interrogated, forced to teach magic to greedy or irresponsible scholars, or could kickstart magical research in a foreign nation, leading to an empire armed with sorcerer soldiers. It could also lead to Dioscoria being targeted by other powers who believe their magic is heretical, or simply too powerful to be allowed to flourish.

While magic among the masses is rare, there are select individuals who have mastered it. Vizir magicians, long-lived sorceresses and forest-dwelling witches all have some magical capability. Important figures such as rulers often wear protection charms, making them immune to all but the strongest magic. While magic is a powerful tool in an Agent's arsenal, it is by no means guaranteed to achieve its goal, especially if your enemies are aware of, or proficient in, the magical arts.



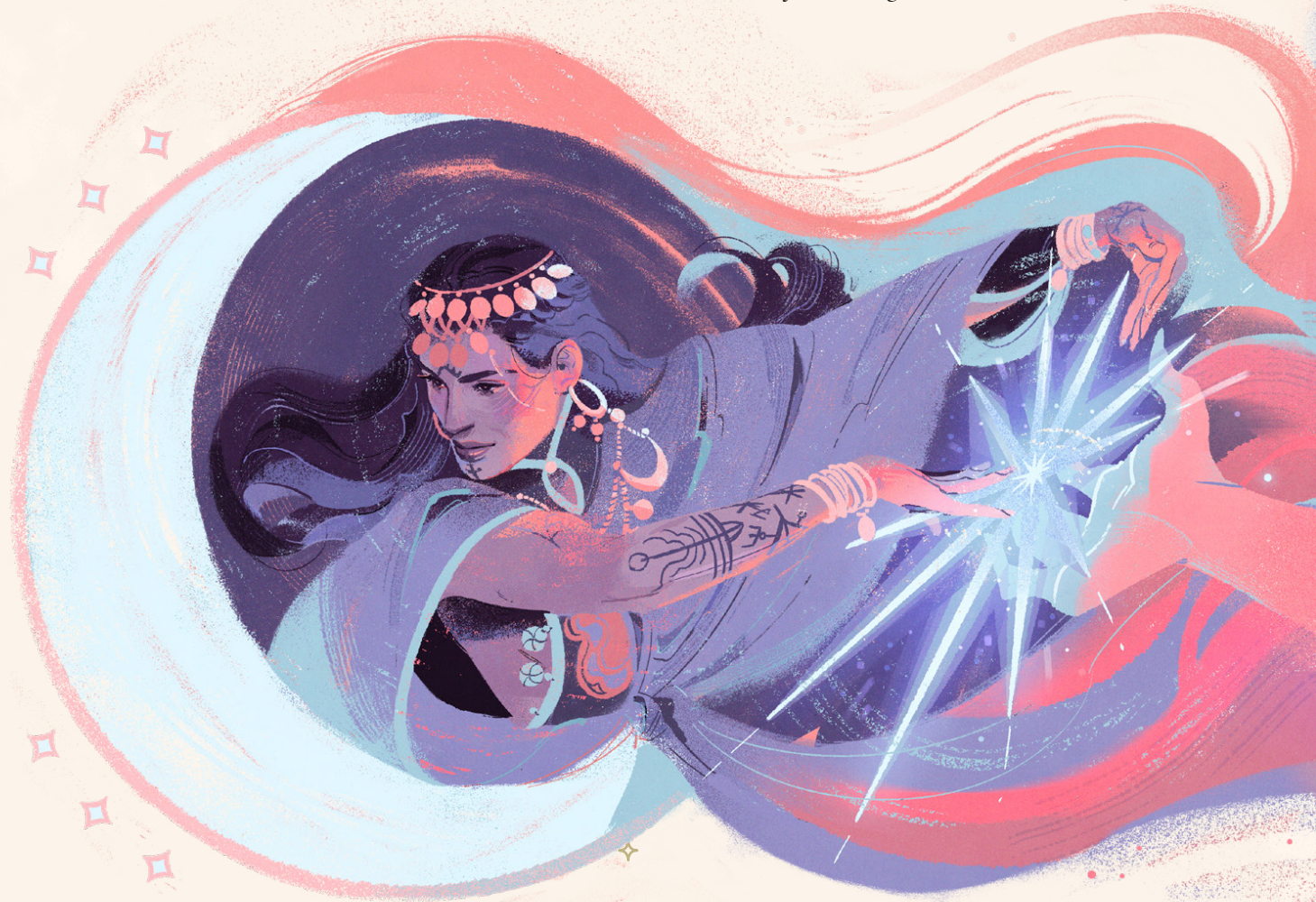
Using magic in scenario play

In the world of Dioscoria, an Agent's Channel skill is used to sense or perform magic. All Agents receive basic training in the occult arts and are able to open their minds and perceive the magical energies and entities around them. Most Agents will not pursue magic further, but some study it and hone their proficiency in various magical disciplines.

To **sense** magic, an Agent makes a Channel draw, and the Seer explains what they sense in the spiritual realm based on their success. The challenge difficulty depends on how difficult it is to sense your target through ambient magical noise, or the specificity of the information you wish to gather.

Performing magic is more complex.

1. The Agent chooses which **proficiency** to use. (eg. Summoning, Transmutation etc.)
2. The Agent describes the magical **change** they wish to accomplish. Remember: even with magical power you can't make something from nothing. All magic is a manipulation of something already present in the world.
3. The Seer judges the **scale** of this magic, and informs the player of its risks and potential consequences. If the change is deemed impossible, the spell is aborted.
4. The Agent performs a **Channel draw**. The challenge's difficulty is determined by their proficiency: 4 cards for a novice, 3 for an adept, 2 for a master. If the magic's scale is high, this increases the difficulty further. A powerful source can reduce difficulty.
5. The success of the magical action, and the complications or consequences arising from it, are determined by the **outcome** of the challenge draw.
6. The player fills in one segment on their **proficiency clock**: they have gained experience with this style of magic.



Magical proficiencies

Agents do not have a list of spells they can perform, nor do they have a limit to the number of spells they can cast per day. If a magical change is seemed possible by the Seer, the only limit to an Agent's magical capabilities is whether or not they are willing to accept the consequences of their casting. Performing magic often results in an Agent taking harm as they exert themselves and wrestle with great powers. To minimize this risk, Agents train in distinct magical arts, allowing them to recognize and avoid risks. The training of a distinct art is called a proficiency and is included on the Agent's character sheet as a clock, their rank, and the proficiency's name (eg. "Summoning"). A suggested list of proficiencies is available overleaf, or on the back of each character sheet.

Agents gain a new proficiency the first time they attempt a new form of magic. When this happens, write the relevant magical art in a new proficiency space on the character sheet; you are now a novice of this proficiency. There is no limit to the number of proficiencies an Agent can have.



Magical proficiencies cont.

When an Agent begins using a proficiency, they are a novice. Due to their inexperience, all challenges using this proficiency are hard: the Seer will draw four or more cards every time this proficiency is used. Once they gain more experience, they become an adept: challenges are of medium difficulty, and the Seer will draw three or more cards. With practice and study, they can attain the rank of master, at which point such challenges become easy, with the Seer drawing two or more cards.

Each time an Agent uses a proficiency, they fill one segment of its proficiency clock. Each time a proficiency clock is completed, tick the adjacent diamond to indicate your gained expertise, then erase the clock to begin anew. When you fill the first clock, tick the box labeled 'adept'. When you fill the second clock, tick the first 'master' box. You must fill the second 'master' box before becoming a master. This means that it takes six segments to become an adept, but twelve to become a master, reflecting how easy it is to learn the basics of a skill, but how difficult it is to master it.

Changes

Changes are the distinct ways a magic user can bend or alter reality. Below are the most common schools of magic, and an example of a small and large change for each:

Summoning or banishing a spiritual entity or natural force.

- ◆ **Small-scale:** Banish a vengeful ghost while the Hand travels through a graveyard.
- ◆ **Large-scale:** Summon a demon or angel.

Binding or unbinding a spiritual entity or natural force to a person, creature or object.

- ◆ **Small-scale:** Bind a cooperative ghost to a spirit flask for a few hours.
- ◆ **Large-scale:** Bind an angel to yourself as a permanent guide.

Blessing or cursing a person or creature to alter their fate and fortune.

- ◆ **Small-scale:** Curse a wicked person to suffer a minor misfortune.
- ◆ **Large-scale:** Bless a location to keep all who enter safe from harm.

Mentalism to steer the thoughts or actions of a person or creature.

- ◆ **Small-scale:** Make a lazy guard ignore a suspicious sound.
- ◆ **Large-scale:** Inspire a mob to revolt by planting false memories of injustice in their minds.

Illusion to alter the appearance of things, or cause hallucinations.

- ◆ **Small-scale:** Fill an alley with a billow of mist and fog.
- ◆ **Large-scale:** While a ruler is giving a speech to a large crowd, change their appearance so they seem to be a devil in disguise.

Transmutation to alter or transform the material properties of a person or creature.

- ◆ **Small-scale:** Turn a disk of iron into a gold coin.
- ◆ **Large-scale:** Turn a guard into a pig.

Brigomancy to manipulate or transfer the life force of a person or creature.

- ◆ **Small-scale:** Transfer a fellow Agent's wound to your own body.
- ◆ **Large-scale:** Leech the life force from a small group of soldiers and use it to augment your own power.

This list is non-exhaustive, and meant to be tailored to the interests of your group. What other schools of magic would add richness to your world?

***Note:** Using the magician's own life force as a source might cause them harm before the Channel draw has even begun, so potent and unpredictable are the forces involved. This would make the change easier to accomplish.*

Magical sources

Sources are wells of magical power that Agents can draw from. They can be used to make a dangerous, difficult challenge easier and less risky. Some magic is impossible without a source. Sources must be acquired before they can be used in spellwork.

The following sources are listed from most to least powerful; the more powerful a source, the more difficult it is to harness.

Angels, messengers of the Divine and protectors of Creation.

- ◆ **How to acquire:** Call an angel to your aid by consecrating yourself and convincing it of your pure intentions. This is a lengthy process requiring focus and piety, so must be done during the downtime phase.
- ◆ **Consequences:** Angels are sticklers for righteousness and view most humans as flawed, irritating creatures. Persuading one to support you will be difficult, and will attract divine attention—meaning you had better be on your best, holiest behavior, or the angelic host may require a demonstration of your righteousness before you may contact them again.

Demons, fallen angels or god-like entities who enjoy wreaking havoc on the material realm, or have their own inscrutable motivations.

- ◆ **How to acquire:** Strike a costly bargain with a demon in exchange for its assistance. This would either require a lengthy summoning ritual during the downtime phase, or for you to have caught the attention of a demon already.
- ◆ **Consequences:** You may be forced to help the demon further its own goals, and may be locked into a nefarious contract. The demon may decide to summon you to its presence and demand fulfillment of a favor. You may also have to convince the demon you are worth sponsoring; demons seldom waste time on losers.

Spirits of nature such as nymphs, water spirits or incarnations of the forest.

- ◆ **How to acquire:** Aiding a spirit in protecting its domain may earn you its favor.
- ◆ **Consequences:** A nature spirit is limited in its reach, and largely powerless outside its own domain. A spirit which has been betrayed will wreak revenge if you return to its territory.



Spirits of the dead such as ghosts.

- ◆ **How to acquire:** Ghosts linger in the mortal realm due to having unfinished business, or being killed via magic. They are found where their host's body lies, or where they were killed.
- ◆ **Consequences:** Ghosts might be destroyed by the effort of supporting your magic. They might also become aggressive if forced to be part of a spell they didn't agree to.

Jinni, spirits of the desert who wield magical power. Some jinni wield immense power, and can grant wishes. These are sometimes captured and imprisoned in objects such as lamps or rings. Other jinni are weaker: invisible to human eyes, and able to wield minor magic.

- ◆ **How to acquire:** An imprisoned jinn must obey its master and grant wishes. Jinni are sentient, reasoning people, and could be persuaded to aid you if it helped them or their people somehow. They are sometimes found in the desert living in invisible or ruined cities.
- ◆ **Consequences:** A bound jinn will obey its master to the letter, and may find creative ways to subvert its instructions. Jinni at large have no particular interest in the wellbeing of humans and would need a good reason to continue cooperating.

Forces of the natural world such as trees, mountains, rivers, and storms.

- ◆ **How to acquire:** In contrast to the other sources on this list, these are elemental forces and do not possess personality or the ability to reason. Their power, while limited, can nonetheless be harnessed.
- ◆ **Consequences:** Channeling these powers of nature is difficult, like directing lightning. Failure might mean the explosion of devastating energies, or the death of a forest.

Life force belonging to the Agent or other living things.

- ◆ **How to acquire:** You can draw on your own essence to perform magic. Note that this might require you to take harm before you have even attempted the Channel challenge.
- ◆ **Consequences:** The change you intend may be misdirected, or backfire and affect you rather than the intended target. The source may be seriously injured or die depending on the scale of the change and the proficiency of the magician.

Magical reagents and ingredients such as crystals, flowers or herbs. These are magical reservoirs of energy: a plant, which transforms the energy of the earth and sky into its own life, can be crushed to release this energy. Crystals are reservoirs of pure spiritual energy; the type of energy depends on the crystal structure. For example, salt is dry and purifies, so repels hostile spirits. Lapis lazuli is deep and blue, so soothes and calms.

- ◆ **How to acquire:** Dioscorian magicians often carry pouches of ritual ingredients.
- ◆ **Consequences:** These ingredients might be consumed during spellwork.

Ambient magical energy. The base magical field of the natural world, and the living things within it. Suitable for weak or everyday magic.

Some sources are better suited to certain magic; others are too weak, or too unrelated to a particular change, to have much effect.

***Example:** David wishes to summon an angel. The Seer explains this is a huge magical task and requires a source. He opts to use the power of a peaceful ghost. He is an adept in the proficiency “summoning”, so this challenge begins at medium (3-card) difficulty. The Seer explains that angels are incredibly potent beings, whereas a ghost is a minor entity. Due to this difference in scale, the Seer draws an additional 2 cards for the challenge, making it very difficult. The Seer also explains that even if the attempt is successful, it will only summon the angel for a minute or so.*

***Example:** Aisha wants to transmute a wooden cup into silver. She is a novice in the proficiency “Transmutation”. The Seer decides this is possible, and draws 4 cards since Aisha is a novice. Aisha decides this is too difficult, and wishes to augment the spell with some of her own life force. The Seer agrees, and draws one fewer card. Aisha completes the challenge and achieves a complicated success. Since she used her own life force, the Seer inflicts 1 spiritual harm and 1 physical harm on her.*

Judging scale

The scale of a magical action determines how difficult it is, and how much magical energy is required. When determining scale, the Seer considers these factors, drawing 1 extra challenge card for each:

1. The **physical size** of the effect. (Turning a pebble to sand is easier than turning a boulder to sand.)
2. The **deviation** from a target’s natural state. (Turning a stone to sand is easier than turning a stone to metal, which is easier than turning a stone into a sparrow.)
3. The **number of people** affected. (Inspiring one person to enter a blind rage is easier than inspiring a whole crowd to do the same.)
4. If a source is used, consider the **synergy** between the **change** and the chosen **source**. (Using an angel’s power to bind a demon is easier than using the power of a river to bind a demon.)

Some actions are so great as to be impossible. Transmuting an entire city into salt, for example, is beyond the power of human sorcerers without the aid of a host of angels. Likewise, summoning a host of angels is a near-impossible task unless an Agent has made adequate preparations to do so. If the Seer decides this change is impossible, the caster should either pick a new change, or use a powerful source which would make the challenge feasible.

Magical consequences

If the spell is not a total success, or if the Agent is wielding impossible energies, the Seer should dole out some hefty consequences. This is the flip side of the game's "anything goes" magic system: when anything goes *wrong*, it can *hurt*.

The Seer is encouraged to give more severe consequences for Agents with lower proficiencies, and for spells with larger scales, or mismatched sources and changes. Try to make consequences affect the target or source in creative ways.

Example: Anton is trying to transmute a wooden cup into a silver one, and is using a bound ghost as a source. He fails. The Seer decides that the cup is now cracked, and the ghost has been banished to the next world.

Example: Deena is practicing the proficiency of "Brigomancy" and is a novice. It is fitting that she would take 1-2 harm as the cost of attempting this change, since it is fueled by her life force, and an additional 1-2 harm as a consequence if she fails the challenge. For a master of this same proficiency, the attempt may cost nothing and to fail would likely result in only 1 harm.

Magical practicalities

Performing magic requires some outward gesture or expression, such as a wave of your arm or hand, an incantation, a ritual act such as lighting a candle, or even a strange light coming from your eyes or fingers.

In general, the larger your intended effect, the larger the gesture must be. Sensing magic does not require a gesture: senses are passive. Transforming a coin into a card requires the wave of a hand; transforming a man into a pig requires a loud incantation, or the waving of a large wand or staff. This means that larger, more potent magic is more noticeable.

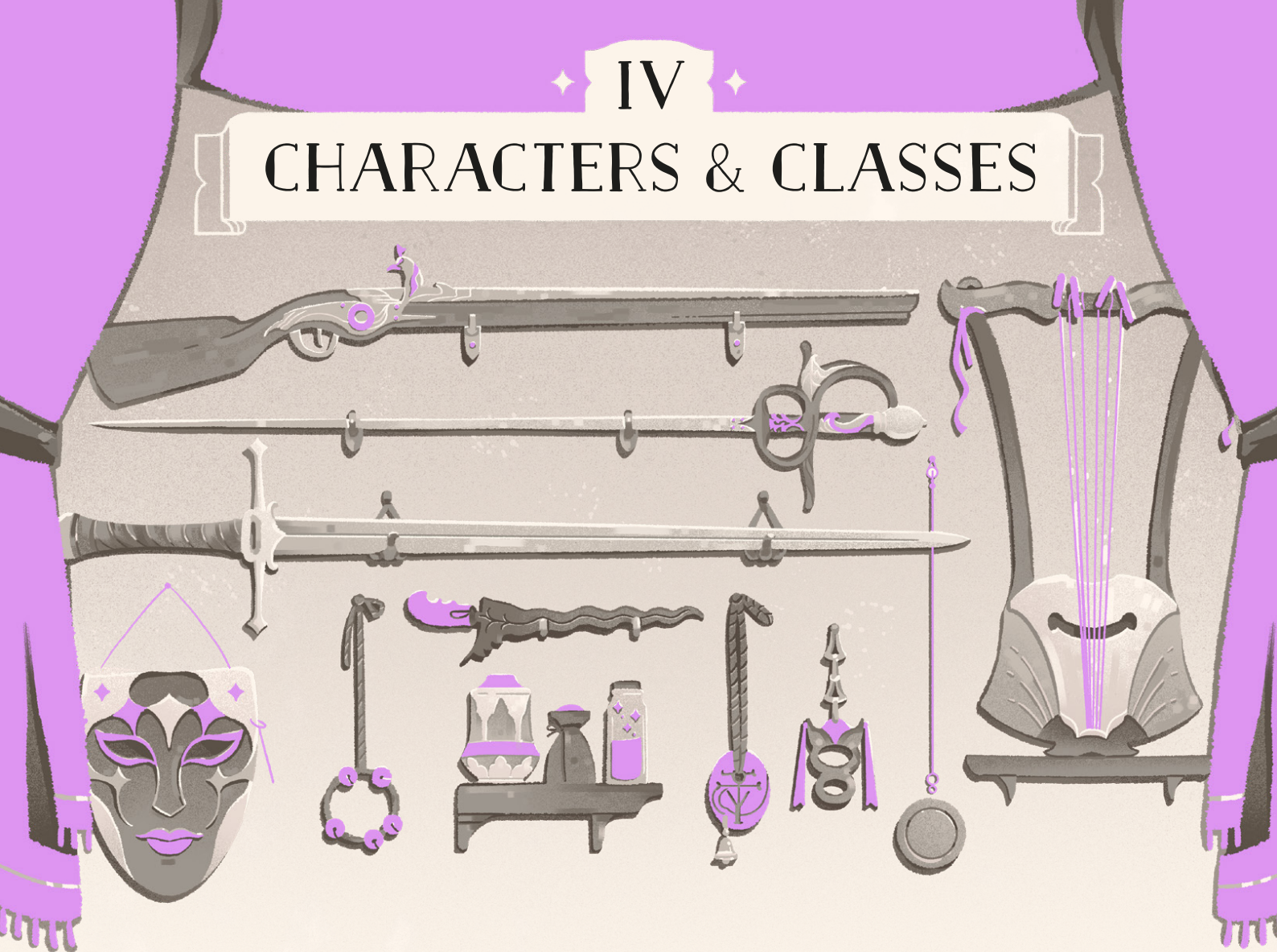
Charms and amulets have been used for centuries to protect or heal, or bring good or bad fortune. These are usually small rings, pendants or scraps of parchment, inscribed with characters. This inscription refers to a magical source, and channels this borrowed power to achieve the desired effect. Some charms use religious quotations or an epithet of God to channel divine power directly.

In gameplay terms, ritual items like these could give players more cards during a challenge draw, or act as a magical source.



FURTHER READING

- ◆ *The Cunning Man's Handbook*, by Jim Baker.
- ◆ *On the Stellar Rays*, by Al-Kindi, available at archive.org.
- ◆ *Shams al-Ma'arif*, by Ahmad al-Buni and others. We could not locate a full English translation of this text. This book is widely regarded as a cursed text; *explore at your own risk*.
- ◆ The *Picatrix* or *Ghayat al-Hakim*, available at archive.org



IV

CHARACTERS & CLASSES

Before you can play *The Hidden Isle*, you will need to prepare some player characters: “Agents”.

While it is possible to think of a character ahead of time—as in many other tabletop RPGs—we recommend coming in with no preconceptions and letting the cards surprise you. If you still want to bring an existing character to the game, try to keep character creation brisk: fill in only the core self section and your name, age, culture and look ahead of time, and perhaps some notes.

Character creation is about constructing the foundation of a character, onto which you can later build an in-depth backstory. It’s better to “show” your character traits during play, rather than “telling” them during character creation, particularly if you can share these backstory details in a moment of crisis or triumph during a scenario. As such, there’s no pressure to completely define your character by the end of character creation. If it happens, that’s great—but if not, you can get to know your character during play.

A note on identity

Although *The Hidden Isle* is set in the sixteenth century, don’t feel restricted by historical ideas of gender or identity. Dioscoria is an island that welcomes everyone, and encourages them all to explore who they are as fully as possible. Dioscoria is made up of people of all races, genders and sexualities, so let your imagination run as wild as you’d like!

CHARACTER CREATION

To create a character, follow these steps:

1. Pick your class, and take a blank version of that class's character sheet.
2. Look at the **Core self** section at the bottom of your character sheet. We will now determine your past, and how it shaped you:
 - I. Draw a vision card, and consult the *Character history* table at the back of this book. Choose a phrase to complete the sentence "As a child, I solved problems by..." in your core self, or write your own phrase inspired by the card. If the card doesn't feel right for the character you wish to play, draw again.
 - II. Do the same for the sentence "As an adult, I survived / flourished by..." Choose whether you survived or flourished.
3. Look at the **Burden** box at the bottom left of your character sheet. This is an emotional weight you carry. It must be either an adjective (eg. "Reckless") or a verb in the -ing form (eg. "Doubting").
 - I. If you already know your burden, fill it in now.
 - II. Otherwise, draw a vision card and consult the *Burdens* table. Choose a word from the list, or think of a similar word.
4. Look at the **Ideal** box at the bottom right of your character sheet. This is an ideal you strive to live by. Like the burden, it must be either an adjective or a verb in the -ing form.
 - I. If you already know your ideal, fill it in now.
 - II. Otherwise, draw a vision card and consult the *Ideals* table. Choose a word from the list, or think of a similar word.

*Note: During character creation you do **not** create a Vice or Virtue. These are advanced versions of a Burden or Ideal and must be earned through play.*

5. Choose two abilities from your class's abilities list. (See "Characters & Classes / Classes and Abilities".) Write them in the Abilities box in the center of your character sheet.
6. Look at your skills: the twelve words ("Skirmish" to "Survey") arranged into four suits near the top of your character sheet. Three skill points are already assigned.
 - I. Assign 2 skill points inspired by your core self.
 - II. Assign another 2 points wherever you want.

Note: During character creation, no skill may have more than 2 points.

7. If you are an Occultist, Illusionist or Siphoner—or if you have decided your character has some magical experience, regardless of your class—choose a magical proficiency. Write it on your character sheet, and fill in the “Adept” marker.
8. Fill in your name, your look (appearance), your age, and your culture (eg. “Turkish”).
9. Decide what brought you to Dioscoria and write it in the “Notes” section. For example:
 - I. You were fleeing a famine, natural disaster or war.
 - II. A government, church or cult persecuted you for how you choose to live.
 - III. You are a magician eager to practice your art in a place where it is accepted.
 - IV. You are a native-born Dioscorian coming of age, ready to serve.
10. Create a contact you know from your homeland.
 - I. To do this, draw 3 vision cards. Consult the Vision Guide for inspiration about what these cards could mean, and/or take inspiration from the card imagery.
 - II. Choose one card to represent the new contact. Describe who they are, their profession and personality.
 - III. On your character sheet, write their name under the “Contacts” section.
 - IV. Fill in up to 6 segments of the “Affection” clock: 2 if you are acquaintances, 4 if you are friends, 6 if you are very close. Write their homeland under “Land”.
11. Create a Dioscorian contact you already know.
 - I. To do this, repeat the steps of creating your previous contact.
 - II. Fill in only 1 affection for this contact.

Note: If you are running a one-shot, or want to get things moving quickly, skip steps 10 and 11, or save them for Session Two.



Introductions

Once you have all created your characters, you are ready to band together to become a party. You are taken in by the Dioscorian authorities, given basic training in literacy, numeracy, magical principles and combat, and grouped together to form a “Hand of Dioscoria”: a group of Agents ready for missions.

Dioscoria has many Hands, and uses them to shape the world as best it can. Sometimes they are flexible and delicate, like the hands of a musician. Sometimes they are sudden and violent, like a blow from a fist.

You meet for the first time before your first mission. Introduce yourselves to each other. This can be done in or out of character.

What are your first impressions of each other? Each player may describe something about another Agent (or Agents) their character connects with, or has an aversion to.

Choosing a mascot

You must also pick your **Hand Animal**. This is your Hand’s mascot. Here are some suggestions:

Hound, wolf, rat, cat, lynx, horse, fox, snake, lion, gazelle, crow, pelican, elephant, dove, bull, owl, camel, bee, ibis, jackal, hyena, ibex, vulture, jerboa, bat.

Your Hand name will be complete once you have completed several scenarios together. (See “The cycle of play / Wrapping up / Final cleanup”.)

On Dioscorian Agents

Dioscorian agents are sent out by the city’s seers to safeguard knowledge, protect the innocent, and preserve the city’s future. These agents come from many backgrounds: some are new refugees paying off their debt to their new homeland, some are young Dioscorians taking their first steps into the wider world, some are veteran agents who enjoy this task and volunteer year after year, and some are criminals sentenced to agency duties.

Each Hand serves for a fixed term, often a year. When the term is over, the team receive uniquely minted badges commemorating their term of service. Dioscorians wear these with pride in public; veterans of multiple Hands often wear their pin collection on their breast, or bristling on a sash.

Ethical concerns

The world beyond Dioscoria is a dangerous and arbitrary place, where violence is often the rule rather than the exception. Nonetheless, Dioscoria’s philosophers insist that agents should not stoop to murder or causing serious injury except as a last resort, for two reasons. First, the people of the wider world do not have Dioscorians’ education or spiritual experience, so it behooves agents to offer them a chance to change their ways. Secondly, violence tends to beget more violence: killing may be the most efficient choice today, but will cause a backlash tomorrow.

Agents may ignore these guidelines if the situation demands, but the Council may hold them accountable for too many infractions.

Practical concerns

Agents are often sent to distant cities. To save time, their vessel sails into the Dioscorian mist and magically emerges at one of the other **veiled havens**, allowing them to instantly travel to distant shores. (See “The City of Dioscoria / History and Culture / The Seven Veiled Havens”.)

Dioscorian agents learn the Speech of Eden, a magical tongue which allows them to speak in any chosen language, and understand all languages. This means they do not need to learn the languages of their mission targets to communicate. (See “The City of Dioscoria / History and Culture / Culture / Language”.)

Classes and Abilities

As part of their training, each Agent chooses a guild which will train and teach them. The guild chosen determines each Agent's class. They are:

- ◆ Occultists, from the Guild of Spirits
- ◆ Illusionists, from the Guild of the Prism
- ◆ Hunters, from the Guild of Wolves
- ◆ Champions, from the Guild of Shields
- ◆ Prowlers, from the Guild of Shadows
- ◆ Scoundrels, from the Guild of the Lost
- ◆ Siphoners, from the Guild of Blood
- ◆ Performers, from the Guild of Song and Masks

Each Agent can learn abilities from their guild simply by training. Cross-class exchanges are encouraged, however, and many agents teach each other the techniques of their various guilds.

Ability terminology

Clocks

If an ability clock is filled, the clock should be emptied again once its effect has been applied.

Harm

If an ability causes harm but does not specify which type, the player may choose which type to take.

Minions

A minion is a guard, henchman, soldier, servant etc. These are generally unnamed enemies which are not critical for the plot of a scenario, and exist to create tension and obstacles for Agents to overcome. Adversaries are never minions: they're too important.

Resistance

Some abilities can be resisted. This means that if an Agent uses this ability on an enemy, the enemy can attempt to cancel out the effect or turn it back on the Agent. This is only possible if the ability has become well-known, probably because players have used it in numerous scenarios. The enemy must also be powerful enough to resist: for example, to resist

“Shatter” the enemy must be a powerful warrior, and to resist “Master of affect” the enemy must be mentally or emotionally grounded. As time goes on, news of the Hand's tricks will spread, making these abilities easier to resist. Minions are unable to resist unless they are elite guards, and this ability has become so infamous they have been trained to counter it.

If the Seer decides an enemy is resisting, they must choose the skill with which they are resisting. For a purely magical ability this would probably be Channel, or possibly Soothe. For an ability that centers around movement and sneakiness, Slip or Finesse might be more applicable. The Agent may attempt to overcome the resistance by drawing this skill; the difficulty of the challenge is determined by how strong the enemy's resistance is. If the Agent wins the challenge, the ability is successful. If not, the resistance is successful: the ability fails or its power is turned back on the Agent somehow, at the Seer's discretion.

Item resistance

Items can also be resisted if the Seer feels they have been overused. For example, if the Hand has a penchant for sleep charms, the Seer could decide that all guards and officials have received counter-charms and wakefulness training to counter the effects of such items.

Magical resistance

Magical resistance is similar to normal resistance. The main difference is that enemies can resist magically if they are experienced magic users, or if they employ magic users who can prepare charms or talismans to counter the ability in question. This means that a mighty wizard could resist magically, but so could an emperor who happens to be wearing an amulet that counters the magical ability in question.

As with normal resistance, an ability must become widely known before enemies can resist it, and minions can only resist if they have been specifically prepared—in this case, given magical amulets.



THE OCCULTIST

An expert at the manipulation of spirits, magic, energy and otherworldly forces. The occultist bends spiritual forces and binds or unbinds them to the physical realm. This is the most aggressive type of magician, since their craft is focused on the outward effects of magic.

THE WAY OF THE SPIRITS

SPIRIT SHACKLE: Perform a medium Channel draw to call upon a spirit of the dead. They are bound to you until they have fulfilled one command from you. On a failure, they struggle against the bond you have created: take 2 spiritual harm.

WEATHER: Manipulate the weather. A mild change (eg. cloud coverage, fog, heavy rain) is free. Take 1 harm to cause more extreme weather events such as a lightning storm.

SWAP: Trade positions with another person who you can see. This can be magically resisted. Each time you use this ability, your essence thins: take 1 spiritual harm.

SHROUD: Shift partially into the spirit world for a moment. You cannot take physical damage and are shadowy, but not invisible. Take 1 harm to stay here for a few minutes rather than a moment, or to pass through solid objects. After each use you need some time to rest before you can use this again or you will take harm.

EVIL EYE: When you take this ability, start a three-segment “Law of reflection” clock. Choose a target, and describe a misfortune that will soon befall them. (The Seer decides when this occurs exactly.) If they are seriously wounded, advance the clock by 1. If they are killed, advance the clock by 2. When filled, take 1 trauma.

THE OLD WAYS: When you take this ability, create a new contact: an ancient pagan deity. Create a ritual that calls on the favor of this god. When you perform this ritual, it achieves a strong effect if your **affection** with this contact is at 6, otherwise it achieves a weak effect. Affection is raised by communing with this god during downtime, costing 1 downtime action; distance cannot be gained. Using the ritual costs 1 affection. Affection is also lost by betraying their sacred principles. The ritual can be magically resisted.

CELESTIAL BARGAIN: When you take this ability gain a new contact—an Angel or Demon—and set **affection** to maximum. This being will assist you in the performance of powerful or devastating magic, and can act as a magical **source**. Each time you use this ability, lose 1 affection. When affection is empty or distance is full, this being demands your aid as their earthly representative and gives you a task. When you have fulfilled this obligation, fill affection back to maximum. They will not offer further assistance until the task is done. Distance does not increase during downtime, but fill in one distance segment every time you do something this entity disapproves of.

MASTER OF MATTER: When you take this ability, fill 4 segments of your “Transmutation” proficiency clock. When using this proficiency, gain +1 Channel.

THE WAY OF THE PRISM

MIND READ: When you take this ability, start a four-segment “Mind fracture” clock. You close your eyes and enter another’s mind, seeking information. If they are magically or mentally strong, they try to force you out: face a Channel challenge. On failure, you gain no information; on anything but a total success, advance the clock. When the clock is filled, take 1 trauma.

MIRAGE: Perform an illusion to fool one of the senses. The illusion cannot affect your appearance. You may take 1 spiritual harm for each additional sense affected by the illusion, and/or take 1 spiritual harm to affect more than a dozen people.

UNRAVEL: You reverse the fate of a nearby object, undoing the work that led to its present state, such as untying shoelaces or unlatching the lock of a door. If the work you are undoing took more than a few seconds, take 1 physical harm. If it took more than a few hours, take 2 physical harm. Undoing work performed by more than a few people is not possible.

MIRROR WORLD: Choose one target and unleash a full-sensory illusion to make them feel terror, euphoria, or misery. Take 1 spiritual harm to affect up to five targets. This can be magically resisted.

GLAMOR: Change how you appear. You can change anything about your appearance but may not become invisible. Each time you use this ability (unless this is the first time this scenario), your essence thins: take 1 harm.

SPIRIT DOWSING: You seek the location of a specific creature or object by entering a trance. You must know what your target looks like.

MASTER OF THE MIND: When you take this ability, fill 4 segments on your “Mentalism” proficiency clock. Gain +1 Channel when using mentalism.

WHISPER: Telepathically whisper in another person’s mind, inserting an idea, suspicion, fear or fantasy. This can be magically resisted.

THE ILLUSIONIST

A magician who bends perception and senses, operating on the mind rather than the world. Since each human connects to the world only through the senses which are at the beck and call of the illusionist, this can grant immense power, though of a subtle kind.






THE HUNTER

Hunters do not fight their prey: they simply kill it. These implacable soldiers are trained to within an inch of their lives, and will achieve their goal no matter the pain and injury they sustain. They are the anti-heroes spoken of in soft tones, equal parts reverence and fear.

THE WAY OF THE WOLF



BUTCHER: You kill, at any cost. Create a four-segment “butcher” clock. When you use this ability, kill three or more minions effortlessly. Draw a pip card; aces have a value of 1. If the value of the pip card is equal to or less than the number of minions you butchered, advance the clock. If you already used Butcher this scenario, fill one clock segment. When the clock is filled, take 1 trauma.

PREDATOR: When you reach a target without being seen, describe how you eliminate them. This can be resisted. If you dispatch them in a spectacular way, nearby people panic and are more prone to blunders.

HEART STOPPER: You know secret pressure point techniques. Perform them on an unsuspecting target and they will drop dead after taking a number of steps that you decide.

FEARSOME: Before a challenge roll, explain how you intimidate someone and gain +1 for the challenge. You may also take 1 physical harm to perform a feat of almost superhuman strength, and gain an additional +1.

MATCHLOCK: A team from Dioscoria has smuggled a matchlock rifle with tripod to a sniping spot. Once per session you may trigger this ability: declare that you have reached the spot and retrieve the gun. It's cumbersome, hard to move and unwieldy in close combat, but effective at longer ranges.

UNSTOPPABLE: If you have 4 or more physical harm, gain +1 to all Skirmish or Unleash challenges, and do not draw fewer cards during such challenges due to the effect of harm.

RESILIENT: You naturally heal faster, and may heal +1 physical harm with the “Heal harm” downtime action.

ASSASSIN: Gain +1 Slip when the end goal of a Slip challenge is ending a life.

THE WAY OF THE SHIELD

STIRRING SPEECH: Once per scenario, give a stirring speech to the group. (Actually give this speech at the table.) All players who hear it except you take a fortune card.

CHIVALRY: During challenges where you are directly protecting those who cannot protect themselves, gain +1 to all skills.

WARRIOR OF FAITH: After you invoke your ideal during a challenge, you find yourself closer to your faith: gain +1 Channel or Unleash for the rest of the scenario.

SHATTER: Throw caution to the wind and obliterate enemy defenses. Take 1 physical harm to destroy your enemy's sword or shield with a mighty strike. This can be resisted. The Seer will decide whether they flee in terror, their defenses are in tatters, or they stand in awe and await the killing blow.

BODYGUARD: Before or during combat you may choose one person to protect. Every time they would take physical harm, you defend them and take it instead. You may then make a counterattack, drawing 1 extra card for each harm you just protected them from.

PHALANX: Before combat begins, if you are outnumbered, make a Survey or Study draw. If successful, you guide the party to fight like a well-oiled machine: for the rest of this combat all Agents gain +1 to all combat-related draws. If you fail, your plan comes apart: the Seer gains +1 for the first attack each Agent makes.

DUELIST: Pick a target. You and that target will be 100% focused on each other until one is victorious. Gain +1 to challenges where you fight this target. If you abandon the duel, or are not the one to strike the final blow, your pride is wounded: take 1 spiritual harm.

CONSECRATE: Take some time to commune with angelic or demonic forces, and consecrate or curse this location. If consecrating, every player draws one extra card for challenge draws while in this location; if cursing, the Seer draws one fewer. What demands do these forces make in exchange?

THE CHAMPION

Champions are sincere devotees of some deeply held value. Perhaps they are medieval knights hankering for a lost age of decency and justice, or Ottoman janissaries determined to defend those who cannot protect themselves. They live by a code—even if that code, as with so much in Dioscoria, is self-written.





THE PROWLER

Prowlers are thieves, burglars and pilferers. They slip across moonlit rooftops or half-open windows to acquire what should, by rights, be theirs: money, items, an entrance or access point. They are masters of stealth, and would rather steal into the shadows than join the fray.

THE WAY OF THE SHADOWS

LIVING SHADOW: +1 to challenges which involve remaining unseen; +2 if they are searching for you.

LEVITATION: Use magic to float through the air. This slows your fall, lets you leap great distances or climb a wall that would be impossible to scale. Each time per scenario you use it after the first, your magical energies wane: take 1 spiritual harm.

SLEIGHT OF HAND: +1 to Finesse if you are trying to steal or plant something on a person. +2 if you're trying to conceal an object.

WISP: Disappear in a wreath of smoke and teleport through a wall, ceiling, or floor. Each time per scenario you use this after the first, your essence thins: take 1 spiritual harm. After each wisp your character must also wait a few minutes before the power can be used again.

SLIPPERY: It looked like you got injured, but it was only a glancing blow! When the scenario is over, remove 1 physical harm. Also gain +1 to Finesse or Slip when climbing, running or leaping in a creative or unorthodox way.

BURGLAR: +1 to Survey or Study challenges while casing a joint. +1 to Finesse when gaining access to a forbidden area or container.

GETAWAY: Once per session, when you are discovered somewhere you shouldn't be, draw a fortune card.

THIEF'S INSTINCT: When you take this ability, start a 4-segment "Loot" clock. You have a knack for knowing where your target would hide their treasures: when searching for a secret hiding spot, you find it immediately. Each time you do this, fill a "Loot" segment as you pocket treasures or information. When the clock is full, you may trade it in during the downtime phase for free training and information: gain 3xp.

THE WAY OF THE LOST

DESPERATE GAMBIT: Gain +2 for an attack challenge, but if you fail take 2 more physical harm.

SHOW FIGHTER: Make a difficult Finesse attack against a target. If successful, you may choose to do something showy rather than cause harm. This pauses the fight and lets you talk to them for a second, and you impress any onlookers with your skill.

ADAPTIVE STYLE: You allow your opponent to strike you; take 1 physical harm. You now have a better understanding of their technique: gain +1 to combat challenges in this scenario when fighting them, or others trained in the same way.

INTERROGATOR: Gain +1 for a challenge when trying to get information using ruthless intimidation or threats of violence. Gain an extra +1 if you have 3 or more harm.

UNCANNY LUCK: Every time you use a fortune card to win one of your own challenges, flip a coin. If it's heads, keep the fortune card. Also, the first time per scenario you fill your final Harm slot, ignore that harm.

QUICK TONGUE: +1 to Bargain when negotiating with corrupt or criminal NPCs. If you are negotiating for your life or the life of someone else, also draw a fortune card.

MELT INTO THE CROWD: +2 to Slip or Mingle when evading pursuers in a crowd.

OUTCAST: Take -1 Mingle when consorting with regular folk, but +2 Mingle when consorting with exiles, outcasts, criminals and ne'er-do-wells.

THE SCOUNDREL

The Guild of the Lost takes in the black sheep who are refused elsewhere. These mountebanks and ne'er-do-wells live by their wits, their tongue and, when those two fail, by the panache of their swordplay. It is said the Guild sacrifices to Fortuna herself, which explains how their Agents can survive so many absurd brushes with death.





THE SIPHONER

The Guild of Blood is dedicated to healing the body and the mind via the manipulation of humors. Emotions, traumas, illnesses and spiritual blockages may be healed or soothed by their intervention. The legends of rogue siphoners maiming and destroying the minds of others to feast on their humors are certainly exaggerated.

THE WAY OF BLOOD

LIFE'S BLOOD: You sacrifice your humors to beseech the fates. Take any amount of physical harm. Draw the same number of fortune cards and distribute them to yourself or other players.

LIFE THIEF: Inflict any amount of physical harm on the rest of the party; heal half the amount in yourself. If any of the affected Agents resist, make a Soothe draw against them; if they win, this action has no effect even on other Agents and you take 1 spiritual harm.

BLOOD OATH: You make a binding agreement with someone, written or verbal. They must consent to this agreement. If you break the oath, take 6 physical harm; if an NPC breaks it, they are gravely wounded.

DRAIN: When you take this ability, create a three-segment “drain” clock. You reach out and touch another person, draining them of their humors. This can be magically resisted. Decide whether they pass out or die; heal 1 or 3 harm respectively. If they die, flip a coin; on heads, the drain clock advances. When the clock is filled, take 1 trauma.

SIPHON HUMORS: You touch another person and adjust their emotional state. Take 1 spiritual harm to make them happier, sadder, angrier, calmer, lazier or more reasonable.

EASE PAIN: You may transfer any amount of spiritual harm from another Agent to yourself. If you do this during combat you must use a siphon glove.

HEAL: Heal another Agent for 1 physical harm with a medium soothe challenge. If you fail, they still heal 1 harm but you take 1 harm as well. During downtime, you may heal 1 physical harm for another Agent for free.

REBALANCE HUMORS: When you take this ability, start a 6-segment “Flesh fatigue” clock. During a scenario, you may move a skill point from one skill to another. You can use this ability multiple times per scenario, but for each skill point you move after the first, fill a clock segment. When a scenario is complete, return all skill points to their original position. When the clock is full, erase a skill point of your choice and take 2 physical harm.

THE WAY OF THE SONG

METHOD ACTING: You are an expert at inhabiting disguises. +1 to Perform and Convince while disguised.

THE SHOW MUST GO ON: When you take this ability, start an eight-segment “washed up” clock. If you fail a Perform, Bargain, Convince or Mingle challenge, you may draw the top pip card and play it as a free fortune card. If the card does not make you succeed, fill in one segment of the clock. When it is filled, take 1 trauma.

CHARACTER STUDY: If you observe or converse with a character, you can imitate their mannerisms and convincingly speak in their voice. Gain +1 to all challenges when impersonating them, as long as you disguise yourself appropriately.

ART FROM PAIN: For every 2 harm you have, draw +1 card for challenges regarding artistry and performance. If you wish, you may inflict spiritual harm on yourself at any time by opening your heart to the darkness of the world.

MASTER OF AFFECT: Gain +1 Perform when performing a song, poem or other theatrical work. On a success, you determine exactly what emotional reaction the audience has. If the result is a total success, or you take 2 spiritual harm to give it your all, you inspire the audience to take immediate action in response to the emotional message. This can be magically resisted.

FACE STEALER: When everything is quiet and you can concentrate, you can change your face and voice. You must have already seen the face you are trying to steal. Make a medium Channel challenge; on failure it lasts minutes, on total success it lasts up to a day.

JACK IN THE BOX: When not in combat, distract a soon-to-be enemy with a performance, then attack when they least suspect it. Gain +2 Unleash or Skirmish for this attack.

THRIVES IN THE SPOTLIGHT: +1 to Convince, Perform and Mingle when all eyes are on you.

THE PERFORMER

The Guild of Song and Masks dedicates itself to all forms of music, as well as performance and theater. This guild finds all classes of performance worthy of study, from the lowest tavern drinking song to the most delicate tragic opera.



Item Descriptions

These item descriptions should be used to inspire what these items *could* be. They are not intended to be definitive or limit your ideas. Feel free to deviate from these definitions if the Seer or Agent has a better or more creative idea. Seers: if your players ask “What is this item?”, we suggest first asking them “What do you think it is?” to encourage their imaginations.

Items listed on a character sheet *in italics* are consumable and one-use only, though an Agent may choose to bring multiple.

Generic items

A blade or two

The world of the Renaissance is dangerous, and it is foolish to travel without a weapon. This could be a dagger, knife, dirk, throwing knife, sword or other bladed weapon.

Sleep charm

A small item, maybe a stone or necklace. When activated and placed on someone’s person, they will fall into a slumber for a few hours.

Documents

Perhaps shipping manifests, an invitation to a private party, maps of the sewers of London or a summons to see the Sultan. Dioscorian forgeries are quite thorough, though an equally thorough clerk might see through them.

Tarot cards

Suitable for play, card tricks, or divination. A divination should be a hard Channel challenge. On a total success, the player should draw three vision cards and keep one; on a partial, they should draw two and pick one, perhaps taking spiritual harm from failing to channel the energy of fate; on a failure they should take spiritual harm, and either fail at the divination or receive a single card.

Seal of Dioscoria

A small token, coin or sigil. When presented to a sailor or captain with knowledge of Dioscoria, this will grant the holder passage to the hidden isle.



Signal flare

A new Dioscorian invention. A pouch filled with what seems like wet sand. When squeezed in the palm it holds its shape and activates by flying a hundred meters or so into the sky before erupting into a light that will float and linger for 5-10 minutes. Too bright to look at directly.

Occultist

Spirit flask

A bottle or vial that can contain a ghost or spirit. Meant for former humans, it could perhaps hold a jinn or demon but might crack under the pressure.

Ritual materials

All the materials necessary to perform a ritual or spell.

Spirit lure

Each spirit lure is unique, designed by and known only to its user. When activated, the lure draws out nearby ghosts and spiritual entities.

Other-sight lens

Perhaps a mirror, a monocle or a shard of glass. When looking through it, you are able to see things or creatures that are otherwise invisible.

Book of demons and angels

A catalog of the many known demons and angels. Their names, how to summon them, and their attitudes, quirks, and dislikes.

Angelic ward

Has it been blessed by angels to protect the owner via angelic power, or is this a charm to keep angels away?

Alchemy powders

Substances and powders necessary to perform a transmutation: turning lead into gold, or iron into quicksilver.

Illusionist

Flash powder

Creates a bright flash that can disorient and temporarily blind those nearby.

Shimmer cloak

A cloak that shines and reflects when drawn about the shoulders. The user does not become invisible, but seems semi-transparent while the cloak appears like rippling water.

Concealment powder

When rubbed onto an object or person, this causes most observers to glance over it without taking notice. Cannot prevent a thorough search.

True-sight mask

When worn, this mask allows you to see through all deceptions and illusions to the true nature of things.

Truth-bend mirror

This mirror absorbs sights, sounds, faces and so on, and reflects back what you deeply want to see or hear.



Hunter

Wheel-lock pistol

A clockwork pistol capable of firing a single shot before it must be rewound and reloaded.

Tracking charm

When placed on a person, this allows you to vaguely sense which direction they are in.

Snares

Tools and materials for laying traps, capable of capturing someone and holding them in place.

Doppelganger charm

This charm is bound to you. When placed about someone else's neck, it will cause everyone to see your face in place of the wearer's.

Gag of truth

A tattered bit of cloth. When stuffed in someone's mouth, the only words they are able to speak are those that are entirely true.

Warning skull

The skull of a sinner, bound to demonic forces. Must be kissed to activate. Whispers when powerful spirits are close.Laughs when someone is trespassing against you, or sneaking up on you.

Champion

Expandable shield

A defensive tool that can collapse on itself for easy transportation. Invented by cutting-edge Dioscorian clockmakers and smiths.

Blessed water

Holy water from a font or sacred well. Repels demonic or deathly spirits. When drunk, it allows you to attain inner peace.

Numbing salve

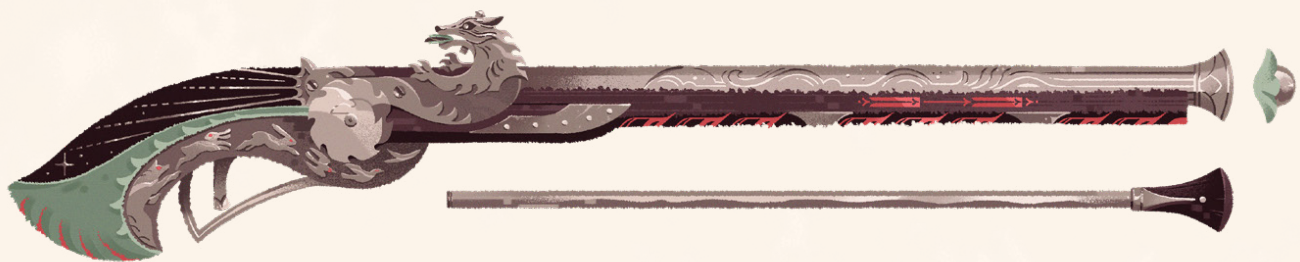
Grazes and scrapes can be ignored when this substance is applied.

Protection charm

Bends fate to assist the bearer in combat.

Psalter

A collection of Holy Psalms. Some pertain to blessing or warding, others to banishing evil. Can inspire and focus a devout champion.



Prowler

Caltrops

Pointed, angled metal shapes. When strewn on the floor they force guards to step through them carefully, or risk their ankles.

Powdered shadow

When thrown, this powder fills a room with darkness for a few minutes. If outside, it fills a space of roughly 10-15 cubic meters.

Distraction charm

When thrown, this emits an irritating sound. It is also enchanted to draw the attention and focus of those around it.

Dousing arrow

Can be fired at lanterns, candles and torches to douse their light.

Scoundrel

Charisma charm

A gold tooth or enchanted makeup which makes the user charming, encouraging others to see them in a friendly light.

Disguise kit

Enough materials to make a single, convincing disguise. Clothing, prosthetics, false beards, hair dyes etc.

Lust powder

When inhaled, all inhibitions dissolve. Vices and primal desire now hold sway.

Performer

Archetype masks

When worn, these masks help a performer channel a theatrical archetype.

Bravado charm

When activated, the user is more charismatic and confident.



Siphoner

Leeches

The most basic tool of any self-respecting healer's trade. Can be used to draw blood from patients, to store it and keep it fresh within the living creature.

Blood net

A small pouch filled with tempered blood. When thrown, the blood expands and congeals across its target. Cannot be cut by metal.

Bile pump

When attached to a willing or sleeping target, this pump can increase or decrease the bile in their system, making them more or less passionate, confident, and prone to anger. Features a useful galvanic charge to quickly wake them.

Phlegm tablets

When swallowed, these tablets increase focus and thoughtfulness for a short time. Can make the patient prone to flights of fancy.

Melancholy charm

Set the charm first—by uttering an incantation into it—to make it inhibit, or increase, melancholy. Place it on someone's person to subsequently make them more or less prone to despair and depression.

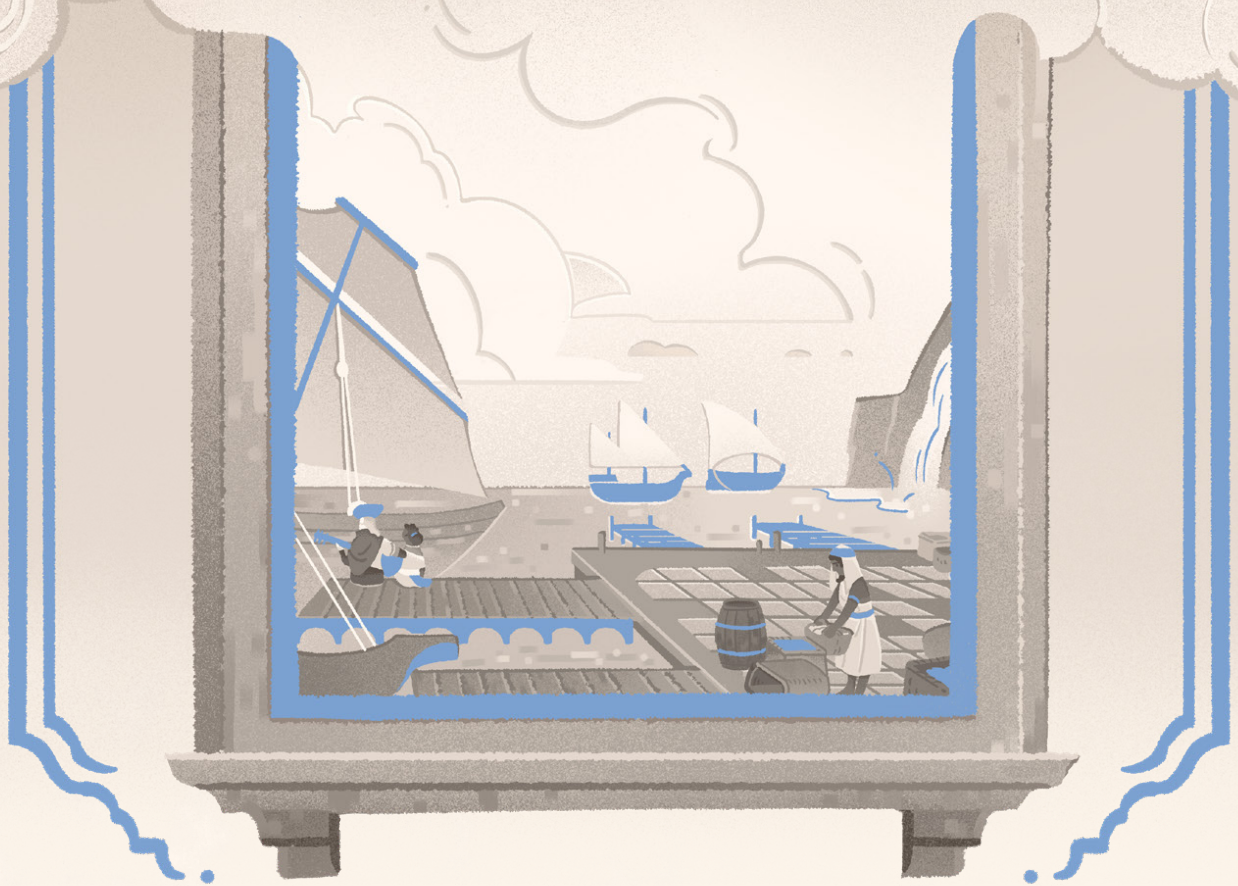
Siphon glove

A leather glove covered in microscopic needles to swap humors between the patient and siphoner without the need for a blade or incision.



V

THE CYCLE OF PLAY



DOWNTIME

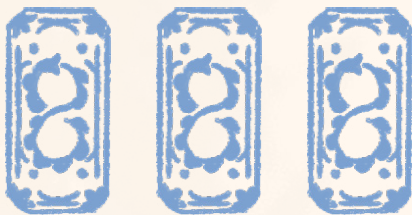
Once each player has created an Agent, you are ready to play! *The Hidden Isle* takes place across several phases, in this order:

1. Downtime
2. Scenario divination
3. Playing the scenario
4. Wrapping up

In the downtime phase, Agents spend time in Dioscoria, visiting contacts and improving themselves while waiting for their next mission. This phase has several steps:

1. Vices cause harm
2. Contacts drift away
3. Character transformation
4. Agents do downtime actions

Note: If this is your group's first session—particularly if you have spent time creating characters—**ask your players** if they want to skip the Downtime phase and get straight to the action. You could be flexible about this: some players keen on Dioscoria could do their downtime actions, and impatient players could skip theirs.



Vices cause harm

Vices are, ultimately, a form of self-harm. While they can be useful, over the long term they cause problems, make Agents unhappy, and hold them back.

Every Agent takes 1 **spiritual harm** for each of their **vices**, and explains how the harm comes to be.

Contacts drift away

While Agents can make many personal connections during their time in Dioscoria, those relationships must be maintained or they will fall apart.

Each Agent looks at the **Contacts** section of their character sheet, and marks +1 **distance** for each contact. If distance is now at maximum, reset distance to zero and remove 1 **affection** with this contact. If you cannot remove any more affection, you and this contact have lost touch. You **may** remove them from your character sheet. Affection can never drop below zero.

Character transformation

Given time, Agents may learn to embrace their darker self, or wield their ideal with greater confidence.

If an Agent's burden and/or ideal track is at maximum, they experience a moment of transformation: this trait becomes a more central aspect of their character.

Note: *There is no reason, from a mechanical perspective, why an Agent cannot level both an ideal and burden at this stage if both tracks are full. However, there may be narrative or emotional reasons why this may not make sense. The player and Seer should work together to decide what fits the character.*

Follow these steps for any filled burdens or ideals:

1. Erase the ideal or burden in question. If this was a burden, move it to the **Vices** box; if this was an ideal, move it to the **Virtues** box.
2. If the ideal you just leveled was linked to a vice (indicated by an asterisk), you may remove the vice. Likewise, if the burden you just leveled was linked to a virtue, you may remove the virtue.
3. Create a new ideal or burden (see below).
4. Either gain 4xp, or unlock the fourth skill pip for a chosen skill by outlining the diamond on your character sheet. (You do not gain this fourth skill point immediately, but it can now be gained via the regular xp leveling system.)
5. If you just acquired a virtue, either remove one trauma or gain 2xp. If you just acquired a vice, gain one trauma. Trauma can either be added to an empty harm slot, or can be "upgraded" from an existing harm.
6. Describe how your character integrates this vice or virtue over the next few days, and what they have learned about themselves. Consider explaining how these developments make you better at any skills you just unlocked or improved.

Note: *Trauma is the worst kind of harm. It is represented by writing a "T" in a harm box on your character sheet. It cannot be removed as easily as physical or spiritual harm.*

An Agent can never have more than three virtues. If an Agent has more than three, they must move one into the "Fulfilled virtues" section of their core self. This virtue once served you, but has settled down to become a passive, content part of your psyche. There is no limit to the number of vices an Agent may have.

Creating a new burden or ideal

When one burden or ideal is dealt with, another rises to take its place. Your characters are never “complete”: there is always another internal challenge to master.

Creating traits with a card draw

The most straightforward way to create a new burden or ideal is:

1. Draw two vision cards.
2. Consult the “Burdens” or “Ideals” table as appropriate.
3. Find the rows of that table that correspond to the two vision cards.
4. Choose a word from one of these rows which resonates for your character. Write it in the burden or ideal box on your character sheet.
5. Discard the vision cards.

If this process does not result in a burden or ideal you are satisfied with, you may abandon this draw and try again, or write your own word.

Creating an ideal from a vice

If you are creating a new **ideal** and already have a **vice**, you may create an ideal inspired by your character’s attempts to conquer this vice. For example, if you have the vice “Reckless”, you could gain the ideal “Patient” to symbolize trying to overcome the vice. You may consult the “Ideals” table for inspiration.

Mark an asterisk beside the Vice and Ideal in question, to indicate they are linked. If you level this Ideal, you may remove the Vice entirely, or decide that it is still a part of your character and keep it.

Creating a burden from a virtue

If you wish, you may create a new burden by taking one of your virtues and rewording this as something you are emotionally hampered by, perhaps because you no longer embody this virtue. This is the inverse of creating an ideal from a vice.

***Note:** Remember that burdens and ideals must be an adjective, or a verb in the -ing form.*

Losing Burdens and Ideals

If a burden or ideal track is ever reduced below zero, you no longer struggle to overcome, or live up to, this aspect of your personality. Remove it, and choose a new burden or ideal as above.

Downtime actions

You can now prepare for the upcoming scenario in Dioscoria. Each player has 2 free downtime actions. You may gain a third action by pushing yourself and taking 2 spiritual harm.

You may do any of the following actions:

- ◆ **Heal harm**
- ◆ **Train**
- ◆ **Make preparations**
- ◆ **Reflect on burden or ideal**
- ◆ **Make new contact**
- ◆ **Visit contact** (*once per downtime*)

Heal harm

Decide whether you wish to heal spiritual or physical harm. Remove up to 3 harm of that type from your character sheet.

Train

Gain 2xp in a skill or ability, or fill 1 segment of a magical proficiency clock. Explain in a brief vignette how you improve that skill.

Reflect on burden or ideal

You spend some time on self-reflection. Add or subtract 1 point from your burden or ideal track. Narrate how you reflect on this.

If this fills your burden or ideal track, experience **character transformation**. This raises this ideal or burden into a vice or virtue. (See “Cycle of Play / Downtime / Character transformation.”) If your burden or ideal track falls below zero, replace it with a new burden or ideal.

Make new contact

Dioscoria is filled to bursting with unique and fascinating people. An Agent who chooses this action takes a leisurely stroll through a district of the city, opening themselves to fate and serendipity, hoping to make new friends.

1. Decide in which part of the city you are looking to strike up a contact.
2. Draw 3 vision cards. Consult the Vision Guide for inspiration on each of the three, and/or take inspiration from the card's imagery.
3. Choose one card to represent the new contact. If you wish, suggest who this person might be.
4. The Seer and you flesh out the character further. If you wish, you may describe how you meet.

***Note:** Use the Vision Guide as a loose inspiration for these people's personalities, not necessarily their occupation.*

5. Write their name, description and the card which represents them on your character sheet, under “Contacts”.
6. Mark 1 point of **affection** with them.

***Note:** There is no limit to how many contacts you can have. If you run out of space, **note** the contact's details somewhere else.*

An Agent may choose to make one of their fellow Agents into a contact. If you do this, you are indicating that the two of you are more than coworkers. Every time you go on a mission or spend a downtime action together, clear distance. The other player gets to decide when Affection goes up or down.

Make preparations

This could involve doing research, creating or acquiring some unusual items, or asking around for information on adversaries. This may create an **item**, a new magical **ritual**, or reveal some useful **knowledge**. This could be a short term preparation, achievable in a single downtime action, or long term one. If it is long term, start a clock to represent making progress towards this personal goal.

These preparations might involve a challenge draw to determine how successful the Agent is in researching, crafting or planning. Even a failed challenge should result in some progress towards the goal.

A player can use this phase to create a **ritual**. This is a unique magical item or rite which confers some advantage. To begin work on a ritual, start a clock: 4 segments for a minor ritual, 6 for a major. When the clock is filled, the ritual is ready. Each time the player works on this ritual, they should perform an appropriate challenge; on a total success, complicated success or failure, fill 3, 2 or 1 segments respectively.

***Note:** The first time an Agent works towards a ritual, they are performing research, gathering ingredients and laying necessary groundwork — hence having to fill a multi-segment clock. An Agent may repeat an already established ritual, eg. to refill a supply of magical items, with a single downtime action.*

A ritual could theoretically do anything, as long as the Seer agrees that this is reasonable and won't break the game. It could confer a +1 advantage to a skill for the duration of a scene or scenario. It could improve an existing ability, perhaps reducing its cost or expanding its power. Or it could effectively be a brand new ability, designed by the player and balanced by the Seer. For inspiration about what a ritual could achieve, see "Magic / Changes".

***Example:** Aisha the Occultist loves the idea of embodying demons, and begins a ritual called "Embody demon". She tells the Seer she wants to use this ability to have a demon possess her and mutate her body, giving her advantages during combat. The Seer agrees, saying this could grant her +2 to Unleash, but would reduce all other skills by 1. Also, each time she does this she must make a Soothe check; on a failure, she must tick up a 4-segment "Mutation" clock, which will cause her body to be warped beyond repair if it ticks over. The Seer tells Aisha to draw a 6-segment "Embody demon ritual" clock to represent her preparing for the ritual, and Aisha makes a Channel challenge to determine how successful her preparations are. She has a complicated success and fills in 2 of the 6 segments.*

Visit contact

You spend some time with one of your contacts and put in the work needed to forge a deeper connection. You may do this only **once per downtime**.

You must have a contact to perform this action. If the contact does not live in Dioscoria, and the last scenario you played was not near where they live, you must also spend a downtime action traveling to their home.

1. Choose which contact you wish to visit.
2. Remove all **distance** from this contact on your character sheet.
3. Decide how you spend time with this contact: Heal harm, Train, Make preparations, Reflect on burden or ideal, or have a Heart-to-heart.
4. Draw a vision card to suggest how their life is going, or the topic of your conversation.
5. If you wish, you may invite another player to play your contact in a short narrative scene inspired by the vision card.
6. Gain +1 **affection** with this contact. (Gain an additional +1 **affection** if you had a Heart-to-heart.)
7. Apply the effect of your chosen action. This is the same as if you had performed the action alone, but may also include bonuses based on your affection. (See below)



***Note:** If you have a contact with maximum affection, they can teach you a special ability you would not otherwise have access to. (See “Game rules / Abilities.”)*

***Note:** If you perform an action but do not qualify for the contact bonus below, you perform the action but with no bonus.*

Make preparations bonus (requires 3 affection):

If your contact has 3 or more affection, you can ask them to help you prepare. If this involves making a challenge draw, gain +1 for the challenge. If this results in a clock filling up, fill one additional clock segment. If the contact is distant, but their help is largely informational (eg. consulting a contact regarding their occult knowledge) you need only spend 1 downtime action writing to them, instead of spending 2 to visit them in person.

These preparations could even involve planning or carrying out a ritual. Rituals performed with contacts who live far from Dioscoria could take advantage of local features such as sacred pools, volcanic forges, or healing springs; this should make the ritual powerful enough that it is worth the extra downtime action spent on traveling to the contact.

Training bonus (requires 4 affection):

If your contact has 4 or more affection and has expertise in the method of your training, gain an additional 1xp or one more segment in your magical proficiency clock.

Heal harm bonus (requires 4 affection):

If you heal with a contact who has 4 or more affection, your healing is not restricted to one type of harm. Instead, heal up to 3 harm of any type (except trauma).

Reflect on burden or ideal bonus (requires 5 affection):

If your contact has 5 affection, you may add or remove an additional point to either the burden or ideal track.

Heart-to-heart bonus (requires 6 affection):

If your contact has 6 affection, you may remove a point of Trauma. However, this is not an easy process: gain 2 spiritual harm.

SCENARIO DIVINATION

In the Scenario Divination phase, the Seer—adopting the role of an Oracle—and the Agents will work together to determine their next mission, guided by a spread of Vision Cards. At the end of this phase, you will be able to answer these questions:

- ◆ What is the main action of our mission? Retrieval, rescue, protection, sabotage, prevention, or contending with earthly or magical forces?
- ◆ Who is the antagonist we will be facing? Something or someone will stand against us as we try to accomplish our goal.
- ◆ What are the stakes of the mission? What would happen if we didn't take action?
- ◆ What is the specific goal of the mission? This will provide more detailed information about the mission's action.
- ◆ Who or what is our lead, our first clue or contact?

Mission types

Mission type	Goal question	Card value
Retrieve a text, map or artifact.	What are you retrieving?	2-3
Retrieve or rescue a person.	Who are you retrieving?	4-5
Protect a person, group or structure.	Who or what are you protecting?	6
Recruit a person or group.	Who are you recruiting?	7
Contend with despotic or dogmatic forces.	Which forces?	8
Contend with demonic or magical forces.	Which forces?	9
Sabotage a stronghold or facility.	Which facility?	10
Prevent a disaster, eg. assassination, magical ritual.	What disaster are we preventing?	A

To plan or improvise?

The Seer may choose to prepare a scenario ahead of time, or improvise one during scenario divination. **Preparing** is better for Seers who have the free time to plan a scenario, and are less comfortable thinking on their feet. **Improvising** is better for Seers with less time, who are comfortable telling stories on the fly.



Preparing a scenario ahead of time

The goal of preparing a scenario is not to exhaustively plan every moment, challenge, or interaction, but to block out the possibility space of the scenario so you are more prepared for the unexpected.

To prepare a scenario, answer these questions:

1. Will this scenario tie into any **existing events**, in Dioscoria or the wider world? (Consult the Territory sheet.)
2. Choose a **mission type** from the table above. This will help you contextualize the scenario you are planning. You need not be limited to this list, but it should help focus your planning.
3. Which **adversary** will the party face? This may be a character from a previous scenario drawn from the adversary sheet, a new character that will be relevant only for this scenario, or a powerful figure that will become a recurring antagonist.
Choose a vision card to represent this.
4. What are the **stakes** of this mission? What would happen if the Agents did not intervene, or failed? Maybe the Agents are trying to avert a disaster, protect knowledge or culture, or keep Dioscoria secret.
Choose a vision card to represent this.
5. What is the mission's **goal**? This must be a specific target and will further clarify the mission type selected above. For example, "Steal the Book of Souls from the Necromancer's cave", "Rescue the visionary artist before the Shah can imprison them", "Stop the play and burn the cursed script before it infects the minds of London".
Choose a vision card to represent this, consulting the Vision Guide if necessary.
6. What **lead** can the players follow to get this mission started? This could be a person or a book with key information, or a location to scout. This will be the first scene of the scenario, granting the Agent's the information they need to create a more detailed plan of action.
Choose a vision card to represent this.
7. In which **territory** does the scenario take place? Which locations or buildings within this territory would be interesting to explore or exploit? (See: "Cities of the Age")
8. Will any player **contacts** feature in this mission?
9. How could the scenario **progress**? Think of opportunities you could give players, considering their characters' strengths.

10. What **dangers** or challenges might the party face?
11. What might the **adversary** do during the scenario?
12. Do you have any **twists**, surprises or tricks planned?
13. What visions will you bestow on the party? **Choose one vision card per Agent.**
14. Now, place the vision cards you have chosen on top of the deck so they will be drawn in this order: Adversary, Stakes, Goal, Lead, and finally the Agent vision cards.

Proceed to the divination ritual. You are now ready to begin the ritual as though you were improvising the scene. Since you have stacked the deck, you already know what mission they will face, and will use the divination as a ritualized way of conveying this.

Improvising a scenario

If the Seer is improvising, each time a card is drawn for the divination ritual, fan the cards and let an Agent pick one. The Seer then reads the card's entry from the Vision Guide: its overall meaning, characters, locations, bad outcomes, etc. They **ask the players for suggestions** about what the card could mean in the context of their chosen mission type. If the group has trouble finding an interesting interpretation, you may draw a **clarification card**: a card that should expand or clarify the meaning of the first card.

***Note:** A clarification card can augment the original card or even replace it entirely, if it speaks to you much more than the first. The goal is to inspire powerful ideas; the cards are just a means to that end.*

Do not make a final decision about a card's meaning **until all cards have been drawn**. It is common for later cards to inspire new interpretations of the previous, or add more nuance or detail. Only when all cards have been drawn will the Seer be able to understand each in the context of the others, and describe the mission in full.

***Example:** The Seer draws Temperance as the adversary card, and asks the group for suggestions. The group has trouble conceiving of an adversary who is patient, calm and temperate, so the Seer draws a clarification card: the Knight of Swords. Different players now chime in with suggestions: perhaps the adversary was a patient, calm person but they were driven to sudden action, which made them reckless. Or maybe they are a reckless knightly order who believe they are bringing balance, but don't see the full picture of the damage they will cause. The Seer mulls over these possibilities, but will only choose the true answer once all cards have been drawn.*

The divination ritual

Whether the Seer has chosen to prepare or improvise the scenario, Agents will receive their mission via a divinatory ritual. This is where the Oracle, speaking with the authority of fate, performs a Tarot reading and determines the Agents' task. We encourage the Seer to make this as ritualistic an experience as possible. Dim lights, light candles, and welcome the Agents with ritualized speech:

"Welcome Agents. May the fates guide us, like feathers in a storm..."

To perform the divination ritual, follow these steps:

1. If improvising, the Seer asks what type of mission the Agents wish to attempt, drawn from the "Mission types" table. If the players can't pick, the Seer either chooses, or draws a pip card to decide, consulting the table's "Card value" column.
2. Draw cards to generate the scenario.
 - I. The Seer, on behalf of the group, asks the cards: "Who is our adversary?" One Agent draws a card. This inspires your **adversary**. This could be an existing character, or a new one. The card could describe the adversary's **character, profession, or internal state**.
 - II. The Seer, on behalf of the group, asks the cards: "What will happen if we don't intervene?" One Agent draws a card. This inspires the **stakes**. Maybe the Agents are trying to avert a disaster, protect knowledge or culture, or keep Dioscoria secret.
 - III. The Seer, on behalf of the group, asks the cards: "What is our goal?" One Agent draws a card. This inspires the **mission**. This must be a **specific, tangible objective**. For example: "Steal an occult book", "Rescue an artist", "Stop a play and burn the script", "Assassinate the king", or "Protect the palace from a mob".
 - ◆ This should answer the goal question posed by the chosen mission type from step 1.
 - IV. The Seer, on behalf of the group, asks the cards: "What is the first step on our path?" One Agent draws a card. This inspires the lead: a clue for the Agents to follow, such as a Dioscorian spy, a witness, someone who knows the adversary, or a location to scout. This will be the first scene of the scenario: a low-stakes situation where Agents can get the information they need to make a plan. For example: "Talk to the explorer with the silver tree pendant", or "Investigate the warehouses near the docks, where the beggars hang out".
 - ◆ Giving players one snippet of information about the Lead is fine, but two or three snippets is more helpful, and paints a richer picture.

3. The Seer determines the scenario's **setting** by choosing a territory. This could be anywhere in the world: an enchantress's isle in the Indian Ocean, a village in the English countryside, or a French monastery. For new Seers, or for the early scenarios of a campaign, we recommend you choose one of our pre-prepared hubs: they tend to be richer and more full of options than other settings.

4. Distill the meaning of all cards into a succinct and **complete answer** to all questions.

"You are facing adversary, whose plans will result in stakes. You must travel to lead in territory to gain more information about how to goal."

5. The Seer bestows **visions** to guide the Hand to victory.

- I. The Seer draws vision cards one by one, laying each one face up on the table. When the Seer finds a card that resonates with the scenario or an Agent, they give that card to an Agent, saying "I bestow upon you a vision of..." followed by the card's name or one of its meanings.
- II. Repeat until each Agent has one **vision card**.
- III. The Seer keeps the vision cards that were used in the divination. These are the Seer's **vision cards**. The Seer cannot take more than 4 vision cards: if they drew clarification cards, some must be discarded so they have one card representing each question.

6. The Seer blesses the journey ahead.

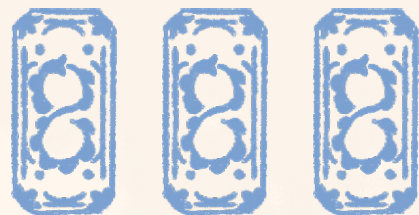
- ♦ The Seer gives each player two pip random cards. These are their **fortune hands**. This represents the spiritual energy Agents bring with them: focus, passion, flexibility, pragmatism and so on.

7. The Seer bids farewell.

***Note:** Scenario divination should only paint the situation in broad strokes. Players don't need actionable information yet: just the basics of the mission. They will only form an actual plan during the "Cut to the action" scene later.*

***Example:** "You must stand against the wealthy aristocrat Rotherford whose mining operations will unearth a new resource that will destroy the balance of the spirit realm. Travel to London to meet with the former overseer of the mine to learn how the operation can be sabotaged and production ceased."*

***Example:** The Seer flips through the deck until they reach the Queen of Swords, which is suggestive of Anton's Agent. The Seer gives Anton the card, saying "I bestow upon you a vision of enlightenment."*



***Note:** While most scenarios take place in foreign climes, Dioscoria itself is a valid territory in which to set a scenario. Seers may find it effective to set the first and last sessions of a season in Dioscoria to add shape to its narrative and reinforce the fact that all missions are an effort to support the Hidden Isle.*

Playing the Scenario

The Agents have made their final preparations, received their mission, and are now ready to travel to the mission location. The Agents are granted passage on one of Dioscoria's merchant ships to travel the world without drawing attention to themselves. If the location is distant from the Arabian sea, the helmsperson makes use of the magic of the Seven Veiled Havens to mystically travel to the nearest haven.

Cut to the action

Thanks to the **lead** from scenario divination, there's no need to narrate the players arriving at the docks, disembarking and getting their bearings. Instead, the Seer cuts to a scene where the party is in a position to pursue their first lead and get the information they need.

The lead need not be a pushover! Agents might need to face a challenge to unlock the information the lead is holding. If the interaction with the lead does not go smoothly, it should still result in the Agents gaining necessary information, but may create a complication. The lead scene always gives the players the information they need—the question is, at what cost?

The scenario

The Agents know their goal and have gained more information by pursuing their first lead. The rest of the scenario will be a conversation and improvised performance between the Agents and the Seer as the Agents attempt to achieve their goal and the Seer introduces obstacles, opportunities, and challenges.

The players should try to embody their characters and achieve their goal. They can overcome problems any way they see fit; this will probably involve addressing challenges with their skills or special abilities.

The scenario ends when the players achieve their goal and reach safety, or they fail their goal and retreat. Not all players need to make it back: if a player is **broken** (see "Rules / Harm"), they might be left behind.

Non-player allies

An ally is a non-player character who assists the Agents. Perhaps they are a character created by the Seer solely for this one scenario, or a contact who lives at the scenario's location and wishes to help.

This is best handled by having these characters act somewhat independently, while following the Agents' lead. Help from allies should result in Agents drawing more cards during challenge draws as they benefit from their assistance during fights, their magical expertise, their local knowledge and so on.

Narrative thresholds

At certain points during the scenario, the Seer might not know exactly what is coming next, or you may sense a shift in the scenario's energy: perhaps the stakes have been raised, players have transitioned from gathering information to confronting the adversary, or there has been a revelation or plot twist. At junctures like this it can be powerful to allow the Hand to experience a shared moment of divination and narrative control.

Inform the Agents that, together, they are stepping out of time and see beyond the veil of reality. They begin to divine together, and share a vision of this moment and the coming action. Fan the Vision Deck; each Agent draws one card and lays it face up on the table. Together, the Agents decide whether each card pertains to:

- ◆ the coming action
- ◆ a potential future
- ◆ an Agent's emotional state

or whether the card is irrelevant and should be discarded.

By interpreting the cards, Agents can clarify or develop information they already know, or invent new elements of the story. The Seer has final say on these interpretations, but they should ultimately come from the Agents. As with scenario divination, narrative thresholds are an opportunity for the players to help determine the flow of the story and inject it with their imagination, inspired by the Vision Deck.

This brief scene should not interrupt the momentum of your scenario and should be kept to a few minutes at most. When used correctly, this technique can build the group's anticipation, and allow them to add suggestions, inspirations, and potential plot points for the coming action. By working together, the group can combine their imaginative potential to refocus the scenario. It is the Seer's job to prevent the group from slipping into endless 'what-if' brainstorming and to maintain final say on what does and does not occur. We recommend a maximum of two narrative threshold moments per scenario to avoid too many interruptions to regular play.

***Example:** The Hand steps through a hidden doorway into the sorcerer's ritual laboratory, where no one knows what to expect. The Seer tells them they see time slow to a standstill and share a vision. The Agents draw The Devil, The Tower, The Fool, and the Queen of Cups. Eleena claims The Fool and explains that although she has never faced this evil before, she is feeling optimistic and ready to face whatever comes. Jarvin claims the Queen of Cups and explains how he feels a sense of empathy towards the villain and hopes to save him from his evil path. The group then decides that The Devil indicates the sorcerer has been under the control of a demon this whole time. Considering The Tower, they decide that a magical experiment has been running for some time on the floor below, and has just hit a breaking point and explodes, shattering the floor beneath their feet. The vision fades, time returns, and the group resume regular scenario play as the ground collapses below them.*

Wrapping Up

Whether the scenario was a success or failure, it eventually reaches its conclusion. The Agents discuss what transpired, and deepen their relationships with each other. During this phase they can reflect on their actions and focus on their development, to be better prepared for the next mission. Finally, unbeknownst to the Hand, the world changes around them.

Agent relationships

Every Agent chooses a moment from the scenario when another Agent's actions stood out to them, for good or ill.

Play a brief scene where the Agents share their feelings about these moments, be it congratulations, confrontations, etc. After hearing how their actions affected the rest of the group, each Agent whose actions are commented on may increase or decrease their burden or ideal track by 1. This represents their emotional response to this criticism or praise.

If these points cause a burden or ideal to fall below zero, or to reach their maximum values, undergo **character transformation** now. (See "The cycle of play / Character transformation".) If the actions of a particular Agent were not commented on, that Agent should not adjust their ideal or burden track.

***Example:** While below deck on the journey home, the three Agents reflect on the previous scenario. Alois thanks Janda for catching her before she tumbled over the cliff. Janda congratulates Orwell for his first successful summoning of a ghost. Orwell confronts Janda about how she always tries to do everything alone, and how it would be better if she allowed the group to support her.*

Janda takes the criticism from Orwell to heart and adds one point to her "Harmonizing" ideal. She could add an additional point due to the thanks from Alois, but her player decides that this would actually strengthen her "Over-exerting" burden, and adds one point there instead. Feeling empowered by his success and Janda's recognition, Orwell removes one point from his "Aimless" burden.

Distilling experience

The Agents reflect on their choices and the challenges they faced. They gain experience to be better prepared for the next scenario. It is the responsibility of each player to decide for themselves how much xp their Agent receives for each prompt.

For each Agent, ask:

1. Did you solve a problem in a way that reflects your class? Reading the class description at the top of your character sheet can be helpful in determining this.
 - ◆ If your actions overwhelmingly reflected your class, take 2xp.
 - ◆ If your actions reflected your class more often than not, take 1xp.
 - ◆ If your actions were mostly unrelated to your class, take 0xp.
2. Were your actions influenced by your vices, virtues or core self? (Not your burden or ideal.)
 - ◆ If many of your actions were influenced, take 2xp.
 - ◆ If some of your actions were influenced, take 1xp.
 - ◆ If very few or none of your actions were influenced, take 0xp.

Finally, ask:

3. Did you put yourself at risk to help others?
 - ◆ If the risk was great and your ally was defenseless, take 2xp.
 - ◆ If the risk was slight, or the ally could defend themselves, take 1xp.
 - ◆ If you did not risk yourself to help others, take 0xp.

Note: Remember that xp can be divided between as many xp tracks as you wish. There is no need to put all your xp in one track.

Advance adversaries

If an adversary created during this scenario seems important or interesting, add them to the Adversary sheet, either as the leader or member of a new or existing organization. Add any new information you discovered to the Adversaries sheet, such as an organization's name, their motivation, leader and so on.

If there are any adversaries on the sheet, decide if their progress ticks up now and explain why. Progress could be decreased by player action in the scenario. An increase of 1 indicates steady progress; an increase of 2 indicates rapid progress. A decrease of 1 indicates a serious setback.

If the Agents just faced an adversary whose progress is on the final or penultimate space, consider whether this adversary was decisively defeated.

Defeating adversaries

When an Adversary is defeated, remove them from the adversary sheet. This foe has been dealt such a serious blow that their organization is in tatters, and will no longer threaten Dioscoria.

Defeating a major adversary grants Agents a fresh perspective: each player may raise or lower their burden or ideal tracks by a total of 4 spaces. If this causes a burden or ideal to fall below zero, or to reach its maximum value, undergo **character transformation** now. (See “The cycle of play / Character transformation”.)

You may find this victory a good point to wrap up this “season” of your campaign. If so, you may find it more narratively satisfying to *not* create a new ideal or burden to replace one that is leveled now, leaving your Agents on a high note. (See “The cycle of play / Ending a season”.)

The world changes

Put the territory sheet in the center of the table and look it over. If any clocks should be ticked up, or if there are any obvious developments that should happen or have concluded, update the territory boxes accordingly. If there are any unfulfilled visions of the future left over from the scenario, decide if they should be added to a territory box.

Each player may now draw a vision card and use it to inspire how the world changes in some way. This could be inspired or affected by the outcome of the scenario. Add a note about the event to one of the territories; include a clock if suitable. These events may become a catalyst for a future scenario, or may simply provide a bit of flavor to the world.

Example: After a scenario in which a dangerous magical substance with enormous mystical potential was discovered, Anton draws *The Fool*. Inspired by the “Explorer” and “Reckless” elements of the card, he explains that the court of Lisbon has sent explorers to seek new sources of this dangerous material. He writes this in the Lisbon territory box, and starts a clock; when it is full, Lisbon will have found their source.

Here is a list of tensions on the *Hidden Isle* that could be leveraged into Dioscorian events:

Immigration, food security, the gulf between old families and newcomers, the gulf between priests and guilds, disagreement over whether the city should intervene abroad, disagreement over whether the city should focus on helping the vulnerable or mercilessly acquiring knowledge, Cabinet of Extremis secrets coming to light, demonic possession, the ends justifying the means.

Note: Developments within a territory during “The World Changes” can affect adversaries, particularly their progress tracks.

The Seer should also draw a card and describe how the world has changed. Their contribution, however, should always be about how the Hand’s actions have affected the world around them. This does not have to refer to actions the Hand took in their latest scenario; it could refer to actions taken by the Hand several missions ago.

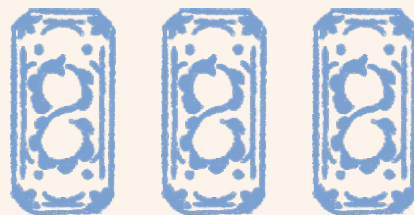
Example: The Seer draws *The Lovers*, and narrates how the city of Venice, which the Hand visited four scenarios ago to rescue a kidnapped pair of lovers, has been celebrating the same lovers’ wedding.

Final cleanup

Discard any remaining fortune and vision cards.

If the Hand has been on several missions, it is now time to choose a full Hand name. Do this by choosing an adjective which will be placed before your Hand mascot (see “Character Creation / Choosing a mascot”). For example: “The stealthy foxes”, “The brave lynxes”, “The puissant badgers”.

If this is the final scenario of the season, proceed to “Ending a season”.



Ending a season

Your season ends when a significant adversary has been defeated, leaving your Agents with a notable victory.

When a season ends, your terms of service as Agents also run out. This is achieved via the magic of narratively satisfactory coincidence, which is also why all TV shows end when they do.

When Dioscorian Agents finish their terms, their service is acknowledged in an awards ceremony. For one day of the year the city stops, and the entire populace gathers in the city plaza beneath the council tower. Of greatest note are these traditions:

- ◆ Speeches are made extolling the accomplishments of each Hand, often by the people the Hand has helped so they can thank them in person. This gives the Agents a feeling of pride and achievement in having helped others.
- ◆ The Agents who served this year are awarded commemorative pins. These pins are custom made for each Agent: the front bears the icon of the Hand (such as an animal), but the back bears an icon commemorating something noteworthy for the Agent in question, such as an achievement they accomplished or an enemy they defeated. Each Agent should pick the icon on the back of their pin.
- ◆ Once the award ceremony is complete the crowd moves to the waterfront, where the bodies of Agents who gave their lives lie in state. Those grieving a fallen Agent speak in remembrance of them. That evening, the bodies are taken on a barge draped in black cloth, and buried at sea.
- ◆ The night is then filled with feasting and gambling. The next morning, Dioscorian authorities start the work of assembling next year's Hands.

The Seer should describe the scene to the players, give some (short!) speeches made in the Hand's honor, describe the icons printed on the front and back of each pin, and give the Agents a chance to speak for any dead comrades. You could also have players' contacts talk to them and reflect on their progress during the evening feast.

This scene should be the culmination of everything your Agents have accomplished this season. Be sure to remind them of how far they have come, and what the effects of their actions have been.



VI ADVICE FOR SEERS

We consider tabletop roleplaying to be a collaborative storytelling experience. The adventure belongs to all of you together. The Seer's role is a combination of world builder and referee. It is your job to create an interesting world for players to experience, and to fill it with narrative stakes and challenging obstacles. It is the players' job to act in that world and figure out how to overcome those challenges. By all means consider how players *might* solve these problems, but don't assume that you know the best solution: they might surprise you!

ATMOSPHERE AND STYLE

Wielding the Pips Deck

While it is possible to play the game with a static Pips deck with a discard pile beside it, we have found the best way to use this deck is for the Seer to keep it in their hand during scenario play, to fan the deck when players need to draw, and to shuffle pip cards back into the deck as soon as the challenge is concluded. This has several benefits: it ensures each draw is as random as the next, something that is not true of a deck with a discard pile. It also means players feel more agency and mystery when drawing: drawing from a fan gives players more feeling of luck, fortune, and divine intervention than drawing from a fixed stack.

Divination atmosphere

Feel free to enhance the atmosphere of Scenario Divination by explaining what is happening in-universe. Describe the sights, sounds and smells of the Oracle's sanctum. Vision cards can be granted by blessing Agents with the foresight of this or that god, by touching their forehead, by serving them a magical brew and so on.

If you are roleplaying an actual oracle during Scenario Divination, we suggest you punctuate the steps of the ritual with ritualistic phrases. When giving out fortune cards, try "May Fortune guide and keep you." When bidding farewell to players, marking the end of divination, some variation of "Go now and [serve your home / spread light in the darkness / defend the defenseless / drive back the forces of evil]" should hit the right tone, perhaps tailored to the mission at hand.

Feel free to showcase different oracles each time you perform scenario divination, to demonstrate the diversity of Dioscoria. Oracles might dwell in caves, peer into obsidian mirrors, read the flight patterns of birds or the entrails of animals, and might dress in the poorest or the richest raiments. Some might not be human.



CLOCKS

You will often need to track progress or developments that have been set in motion, but will not finish right away. Segmented circles or “clocks” are an excellent tool for this purpose.

When you create a clock, give it a name that describes what will occur when it is full (eg. “The alarm is raised”), and decide if it has 3, 4, 6 or 8 segments. Fill in segments as the outcome gets closer. Some clocks will simply fill as time passes, others may fill as the result of challenge draws. When the clock is full, trigger the outcome.

- ◆ **Time-consuming challenges:** Use a clock when an Agent wants to do something that isn’t as simple as immediate success or failure and they are under a time constraint, such as the time-consuming endeavor of picking an enchanted lock with regular lockpicks.
- ◆ **Foreshadowing complications:** Use a clock to build tension slowly. When an Agent fails a sneaking challenge, rather than immediately raising the alarm, start a “Guards suspicious” clock.
- ◆ **Territory events:** Use a clock to track events in Territories. For example, a clock titled “Lisbon Inquisition” can be used to inform players that Inquisition forces are becoming more aggressive, and that something drastic will happen when the clock is filled.
- ◆ **Character clocks:** You may instruct Agents to add clocks to their character sheets. For example, you could tell a player to start a 3-segment clock that will fill when they act in a way that is inconsistent with one of their virtues; when it is full, the virtue will be lost.
- ◆ **“Health Bar”:** For a main adversary or very strong opponent you may use a clock to represent their remaining health, or their ability to keep fighting. Successful attacks made by Agents will fill the clock rather than subdue the enemy directly.
- ◆ **Tug of war:** This type of clock is useful if the Agents are competing against another group, such as a chase through twisting alleys. The clock begins half-filled. When it fills entirely, the Agents catch their quarry. If the clock is emptied, the quarry escapes.
- ◆ **Campaign:** Clocks can be used to track long term campaign events. On the Dioscoria territory sheet you could have a clock for a long term problem, eg. “Unrest over immigration”. Each scenario where the Agents don’t address the problem, or in response to the “world changes” scene, the clock fills by one segment until the crisis reaches a breaking point.



CHALLENGES

When determining the difficulty for a challenge draw, it is best to determine the baseline difficulty of what the Agents are attempting first, and *then* modify the value based on circumstances.

- ◆ If circumstances make a challenge easier, feel free to allow the challenger to draw one extra card, rather than drawing one fewer card yourself. This helps them feel rewarded for making preparations, or engineering a situation to their advantage.
- ◆ You may wish to keep a running list of events which occur during a scenario that might modify challenge difficulty, eg. “Guards distracted”, “Inquisitors at the gates”, “Lightning storm” etc.

As the Seer, you have more power to manage the pacing and flow of play than the Agents. When resolving challenges, **it is not essential that you always play the best card in your hand**. Use this to your advantage to keep the story moving, especially in the earlier parts of a scenario that may be more about gathering information than overcoming obstacles.

Also remember that a failed challenge does not need to mean serious consequences. Even during scenario play, you may decide that an action is guaranteed to succeed to some extent, and the challenge will only be used to determine the scale of the success. For example, if an Agent fails a challenge while researching in a library, it is more natural to decide they find only scraps of information, rather than inflicting harm or having the city watch turn up out of nowhere.

Success

Remember: a successful challenge means the Agents do whatever action they set out to do. That doesn't mean everything goes smoothly for them. For instance, if an Agent Surveys a room to look for a hidden compartment, a success means they find the compartment. Whether the compartment is guarded by traps and magical creatures is an entirely separate matter.

Scaling difficulty over a campaign

As your Agents become more skilled and acquire more abilities, vices and virtues, the challenges they face should also scale in difficulty, perhaps inspired by the consequences of their earlier actions. For example:

- ◆ The Hand is now facing a more formidable enemy, with better guards.
- ◆ Because the Hand was spotted during a previous scenario, this location is now dotted with wanted posters and guards are on high alert.
- ◆ Because the Hand used magic openly in a previous scenario, the guards around this palace all have magical protection charms.
- ◆ Because the Hand used magic openly, the general populace is now on the lookout for magic, and have turned to their local magic users to teach them how to sense magical channeling.
- ◆ Because this adversary has faced the Hand several times, they have trained elite troops to specifically counter the Hand's advantages.
- ◆ The Hand's over-use of sleep charms has made the authorities wary of such talismans; all guards and officials have been given wakefulness training to counter them.

Complications and warnings

It should never be possible for an Agent to succeed at a challenge draw and not have the result they intend. A challenge draw is only to be used if success is possible. If an Agent wishes to try something impossible, you should tell them ahead of time either by narrating their attempt and how they learn it cannot be done (before the draw has begun), or by informing them that the Agent would realize it cannot be accomplished.

In some cases, an Agent may wish to do something that borders on the impossible, but which could be achieved with enough time. In this case, we encourage you to start a clock and introduce time pressure.

Occasionally, players may attempt something particularly ill-advised. This may be because they do not understand the difficulty of the challenge, or the narrative momentum of the scene. If this is the case, there is little harm in pointing out why this course of action is unwise. This prevents players feeling misled, or like the Seer is being unfair. If they still want to, they can fully buy into their decision.

Flexible benefits and consequences

Feel free to offer players tough or interesting choices using whatever tools you deem appropriate. The mechanics of *The Hidden Isle* are designed to be flexible, and can be combined or altered in any way that you see fit.

Example: Amir wishes to pick an enchanted lock with regular lockpicks. Rather than performing the challenge draw, the Seer simply narrates “You insert your lockpicks, but it feels like there is nothing inside but empty air.”

Example: Despite learning that the lock is enchanted, Amir wishes to proceed. “You can’t feel the pins and tumblers but are certain this is still a physical lock. I have started two clocks, one called ‘fumbling tumblers’, another called ‘enchanted alarm’. Someone has been alerted that this lock is being picked and your time is limited.”

Example: Jeera has caught the guards’ attention, and the Seer has started a “Guards alerted” clock which will raise the alarm when filled. Hashim, meanwhile, is trying to slip into the guards’ camp. The Seer offers Hashim a choice: if he waits for the guards to investigate Jeera further, this will take time, ticking up the clock, but make his Slip challenge easier.

DEALING WITH ADVANCED RULES

Narrative thresholds

Narrative thresholds are an advanced mechanic to give players more narrative control, and to add context and raise stakes for important moments. However, they are not necessary for the game to work. If you feel this mechanic bogs down your game too much, or your players feel overwhelmed by the narrative responsibility or creative demands, feel free to ignore this mechanic.

Visions

This mechanic can be overwhelming for players new to *The Hidden Isle*. If you're worried about overwhelming your players, feel free to leave this mechanic out until they have more confidence and familiarity with the game. To do so, follow these steps:

- ◆ Do not give your players vision cards, but keep your own to demonstrate how they can be used in play.
- ◆ When you think the Agents are ready to have their own visions, tie it in narratively: "Before this third mission, the seer gives you a strange-smelling potion. When you drink it, you feel pregnant with premonitions."

You could also hand each player a card during scenario divination, as normal, and tell them not to worry about it too much. Then, during play, you could suggest a relevant vision for them to trigger, easing them into this mechanic and providing an example of how it can be used.

Subverting visions

The premonitions that result from playing a Vision Card are brief flashes, so visions will often lack important context! Feel free to creatively subvert expectations—even betray the Agents and the assumptions they made—when the vision actually comes to pass.

This technique of subversion is more effective when the Seer presents a vision to the Agents. When an Agent uses a vision card, it should ideally give them a sense of power and control over the situation to encourage them to use visions in future.

Unfinished visions

If you wish, a vision that has not come to pass by the end of the scenario might *still* come to pass in the distant future. If so, write it in the appropriate territory box or on the Adversary Sheet.

Holding back vision information

You may wish to hold back key information regarding a vision, in order to surprise players or give the story a twist.

Example: The Seer draws the King of Pentacles for the adversary. They tell players their adversary is unknown, except that they are wealthy beyond imagining, and are greedy of their riches. When the Agents arrive in the scenario, the Seer uses the card to give them a vision of a wealthy mansion, with servants scuttling to and fro frantically carrying out "The Boss's orders". Later, the Agents meet a jovial merchant who helps them infiltrate their goal. Near the end of the scenario the merchant betrays them: he was the adversary all along!

AGENTS

Losing virtues

Virtues are not just mechanical benefits that can be banked and forgotten: they are core elements of an Agent's personality. If an Agent consistently acts contrary to one of their virtues, consider taking it away from them. See the above example under "Clocks / Character clocks" for a suggestion on how to do this.

Items and load

If a player has already drawn five items from their pack, they are carrying a lot and might find it hard to carry out loot, such as an armful of occult books. You must decide how much they can carry, bearing in mind how many items they have already used and whether any of them were consumable.

Being overburdened could make some challenges more difficult for players, granting you an extra card during challenge draws.

Harming Agents

There is no upper or lower limit on how much harm to give Agents during a scenario, but do not be afraid to dish out harm now and then. If each Agent receives 3-5 harm from you per scenario, things will work out just fine. Additionally, the threat of harm can be a powerful way of communicating stakes. When facing off against an adversary in a final showdown, it may be appropriate for an Agent to take 4 harm from a single failure.

Bonus xp

When a player does something awesome, unexpected, or finds a really creative solution to something you intended to be a major challenge, feel free to give them an xp point as a treat.

CAMPAIGN PACING

Adversary pacing

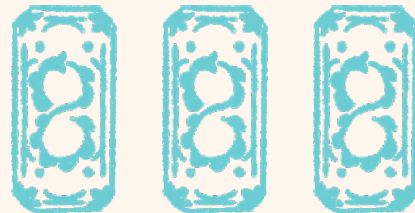
Adversaries are meant to give a campaign narrative momentum and shape, but there's no need to fight the same adversary in scenario after scenario. Remember that the Hand is only one part of Dioscoria's Agent corps: they don't have to fight world-ending threats alone.

Once in a while, explain that the Adversary is lying low, and send your Agents on an unrelated mission. This is a good chance to touch on character backstories and motivations.

Send other Hands to face the Adversary "off-screen", and have a Dioscorian contact such as the Oracle tell your players how these other missions went. Other, non-player Agents fighting the same fight can bring a sense of common purpose and wider meaning to your campaign.

Player-focused scenarios

After a few sessions outside of Dioscoria, you may find it narratively refreshing to set a scenario on Dioscoria itself, and to focus more on player backstories, bonds and drives. The goal in these scenarios might be explicitly linked to a player goal, such as "Find the herbs for Rachel's potion" or "Contact the spirit of Ninshubar's dead husband".



STORYTELLING

Steering the players

If your players start drifting aimlessly or grasping at straws, use a Vision to clue them into other options or possibilities. This is usually enough to get the action moving again.

The Vision Deck as inspiration

If you aren't sure what to throw at your players next, or you feel the scenario is too generic, or if you're just curious what might happen, feel free to draw a card in the middle of a scenario and use it as inspiration for an unexpected encounter. Feel free to elicit suggestions from players.

Exploiting narrative opportunities

If a player makes a promise, sets a personal goal or pursues some kind of relationship, this is meaningful, player-directed **narrative setup**. Hold players accountable for their promises, refer back to their goals, and endanger contacts they care about to get as much juice out of that setup as possible.

Using chance within scenarios

Sometimes you, as the Seer, may not know exactly how a situation will turn out. Sometimes events occur beyond the players' control which could go either way, and you're not sure which way they should land. When this happens, you may draw a Vision card and use it to inform what happens. For more complex interactions, you could perform a challenge draw between two opposing NPCs or NPC groups.

***Example:** The Hand are witnessing a military parade through a capitol city. The watching crowds, unhappy with the regime, are getting restless and jeer at the soldiers. The Seer doesn't know whether this will erupt into violence. They draw a Vision card: the Page of Cups. They decide the tempestuous emotions of the crowd overflow, and the bystanders form into a mob and rush the soldiers.*

If you want further mechanics for determining chance or random events, see the rules for "questioning fate" and "generating non-player characters" under "Alternate play modes / Solitaire mode".

ALTERNATE PLAY MODES



We see *The Hidden Isle* as a series of rules and guidelines to allow you to experience adventures and stories you find compelling. As such, there is no single, fixed way to play. Here we offer alternative playsets, to help you engage with the game in a way that works best for you and your group.

SEER-LESS MODE

If all of the players feel comfortable with the rules, it is very possible to play without a Seer. Instead, all players control a character and share the role of the Seer, proposing consequences and plot points collaboratively. This relies heavily on the improvisational nature of the game, and requires players to be willing to roleplay and tell a collaborative story rather than min-maxing.

One tricky part of playing in Seer-less mode is avoiding accidentally gaming the selection of challenge cards: when you are both Seer and player, it can be difficult to not give yourself an accidental advantage. To avoid this, ensure that the person drawing the Seer's hand is not the Agent performing the challenge. If this is unavoidable—for example, if everyone is performing a group action—simply select Seer cards before you look at your own Agent cards.

MERCIFUL MODE

The question of whether Agents should be able to kill without repercussion is a tricky one: if Dioscoria is sending Agents into the wider world to kill its enemies, this is ethically, politically and spiritually questionable. Some groups may deal with this question by choosing burdens and ideals that address this, such as “merciful” or “ruthless”. This makes the question more personal for each Agent, but still allows naturally lethal classes (such as the Hunter) to kill without consequence. This is fully supported by the base game.

However, some groups may wish to lean into the Dioscorian taboo on murder. If you are Dioscorian Agents, and Dioscoria does not kill, perhaps there should be consequences for killing. To address this, we have devised an optional mechanic: during “Wrapping up”, after “Advance Adversaries”, add a phase called “Answering violence” and follow these steps.

Answering violence

If your Agents killed anybody in the latest scenario, they must answer for it. (If nobody died as a result of your Agents’ actions, skip this step.)

Your Agents are taken to the Pool of Mourning, a shallow pool in a cave deep beneath the city. Here a silent oracle, their cheeks stained white with tears, stirs the pool and shows them a vision concerning each person killed in the latest scenario. This could be a scene of their family grieving, or a vision of the past when they still had dreams and ambitions—before they were brutally cut down.

Any Agent who killed in the last scenario must face a Soothe challenge. This represents their ability to manage their internal emotional state. Before the challenge, the player decides how affected the Agent is by this killing. This determines how many cards the Seer should draw.

- ◆ If the Agent is blasé and unaffected, the Seer draws one card. If they take this death seriously, the Seer draws two cards. If they are emotionally devastated, the Seer draws three cards.
- ◆ If this Agent killed more than one person, the Seer draws an additional card.
- ◆ If this Agent killed many people, the Seer draws an additional card. (The Seer decides what constitutes “many”.)

The Agent draws their Soothe and faces the challenge. They may not use items to adjust the challenge difficulty. If the Agent achieves a total success, they are largely unaffected by the vision. While they may or may not take it to heart, it does not affect their day-to-day function.

Answering violence cont.

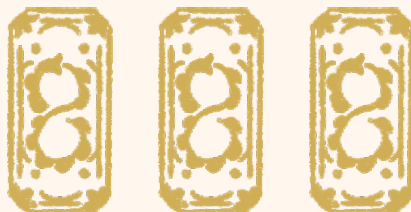
If they achieve a complicated success, they are disturbed at what they have done. They take 1 spiritual harm.

If they suffer a failure, the vision affects them deeply—even if they didn't believe it would. Killing can hit your characters hard, in ways they might not expect! The player decides why the Agent is affected. Here are some suggestions:

- ◆ Spending time in Dioscoria has made a previously ruthless character reconsider their moral compass.
- ◆ Something about this killing reminded the Agent of something from their past, such as a young NPC reminding them of a child or childhood friend.
- ◆ The Agent saw something of themselves in the person they killed, and realize they could have been slain by a Dioscorian Agent if their life had gone differently.
- ◆ They don't know why they are affected, and are in denial – but their unconscious is still telling them this is important.

The Seer decides how this guilt manifests. This must be a mechanical effect. For example:

- ◆ The Agent is emotionally devastated, and takes 2 spiritual harm.
- ◆ The Agent realizes this killing betrayed their Ideal, and loses 1 **ideal** progress.
- ◆ The Agent is overwhelmed, and spends much of the next week locked in their quarters. This wastes 1 downtime action.
- ◆ The Agent is compelled to confess what they did to a contact, who loses 1 affection for them.
- ◆ This killing entrenches the Agent's **burden**, granting them one extra burden progress.





SOLITAIRE MODE

The isle of Dioscoria prides itself on the web of espionage it has woven around the world. Agents from countless cultures can be sent to any locale, to serve the Council's purposes and nudge the world towards a brighter future. So effective are Dioscorian training and cultural assimilation that newcomers to the isle can begin projecting its interests abroad in a matter of months.

Some missions, however, are not permitted to new recruits. These divinations come not to the island's regular oracles, but to the "gray seers": oracles employed solely by the Cabinet of Extremis to channel the darkest and most dangerous messages of fate. They receive these visions in the Listening Grotto: a great vaulted and pillared hall buried at the heart of a Dioscorian mountain, which is always filled with a shallow pool of oily water reaching to the oracle's knees. This liquid helps to focus and sustain the oracles' divinatory powers.

Solo characters

The Agent you play in solitaire mode is a cut above—or at least distinct from—regular Agents. Your Agent will be trusted with missions which are more dangerous than the norm, or which question Dioscoria's values. The Cabinet of Extremis has chosen them to carry out their will, perhaps because they are more experienced, more capable, or more morally flexible than most newcomer Agents.

Character creation

When assigning skill points, grant yourself 2 extra (for a total of 9 skill points). During character creation, no skill may have 4 points, and only one skill may have 3 points.

***Note:** After the origin scenario, you will receive an extra skill point. This means that after the origin scenario, you will have a total of 10 skill points.*

Origin scenarios

In Solitaire Mode, the first scenario you play should take place just before you come to Dioscoria, and explain how or why you join the hidden isle.

If you want to skip your origin scenario, that's fine: just give yourself one extra skill point, to represent the Dioscorian training you receive after you join the isle.

***Note:** An origin scenario could even be played between a Seer and each member of a regular, multiplayer campaign, to give each character a deeper backstory. If you do this, don't grant the character an extra skill point on completion of the scenario.*

Generating an origin scenario

Before the origin scenario, perform a scenario divination. This represents the oracles of Dioscoria consulting the fates to find their newest recruit—you! However, instead of a normal scenario divination spread, the meaning of the cards will be slightly different.

First, choose your character's **goal type** at the start of the scenario. For the most part, these goals are more self-serving, and less idealistic, than those of regular Dioscorian Agents. Most people of the sixteenth century, before they realize Dioscoria exists, have few options but to pursue self-interested, pragmatic goals to survive such turbulent times.

Once you have your goal type, draw five cards. They will tell you:

1. What is your character's specific goal? (This should answer the question posed by your goal type.)
2. Who is your adversary at the start of the scenario—whether you know it or not?
3. The stakes: what will happen if this adversary succeeds?

4. How will Dioscoria meddle in this situation? Perhaps they have sent an Agent or Hand to stop the adversary. Perhaps a local Dioscorian expat just wants to help the helpless. Perhaps a trader who knows of Dioscoria is determined to help you get there. Perhaps your character is acting unethically, and must be confronted.
5. What is your character's lead? What rumor or legend have you heard that will set you on a path to achieve your goal?

As with normal scenario divination, draw all the cards *first*, and only *then* decide what they mean: the last card might change everything. Remember that you can draw clarification cards if a card's meaning is unclear.

Playing an origin scenario

During the scenario, your character will encounter Dioscoria somehow: perhaps through an Agent, an expat, a merchant who trades with the isle, or even just a rumor of this hidden civilization. When the scenario ends, your character is somehow influenced by this encounter, and travels to Dioscoria, there to be recruited as an Agent. Perhaps they are told of this incredible place and join voluntarily; perhaps they join because their home has been destroyed, or rejects them; or perhaps they join for selfish reasons, hoping to gain some material benefit or even steal from the island.

Don't be afraid to let allied characters such as Dioscorian Agents assist you. For more information, see "Non-player characters" below.

After the origin scenario

When your character arrives in Dioscoria and undergoes training, gain one free skill point and heal all harm.

Goal type	Question posed
To acquire money.	How?
To right a wrong.	Which wrong? How?
To flee persecution.	How are you being persecuted?
To seek knowledge.	What knowledge? Why?
For ambition.	How will this thing give you power or status?
Driven by my burden.	What is it driving you to do?
To relieve or overcome my burden.	How?

Rule changes for Solitaire Mode

To play *The Hidden Isle* in Solitaire Mode, play as normal but observe these rule changes.

Downtime

During downtime, your character has 3 downtime actions rather than 2. This is to reflect your status as an Agent of the Cabinet: your missions are rarer and more difficult than standard, so you have more time to take much-needed rest between them. You may, as normal, give yourself an additional downtime action by taking 2 spiritual harm.

Scenario divination

In addition to the regular scenario divination questions, you must also answer the question: “Why must this mission remain a secret from the Dioscorian public?” That is, why is this a mission for the Cabinet, and not a regular Hand? You may draw a card to inspire the answer, but this is not mandated.

If you have no companions, take 3 fortune cards instead of 2. If you have one or more companions, give yourself and each companion 2 fortune cards as normal.

Visions are not recommended in Solitaire Mode, so do not take vision cards for your Agent or the Seer. This is because in Solitaire Mode you will have enough to worry about without wondering whether or not to give yourself a vision.

Challenge draws

During challenge draws you must draw a hand both for your Agent, and for the Seer, as normal. As in regular play, you do not have to select the best card from the Seer’s hand (but do not go too easy on yourself). Note, however, that to prevent accidental cheating, you **must select** the Seer’s card before you **look** at your Agent’s hand.

Narrative thresholds

If you encounter a narrative threshold, instead of drawing one card per Agent, simply draw three cards.

Broken characters

When your character is **broken** (ie. when all harm slots are filled), decide whether they are killed, captured or knocked unconscious as normal. Being captured ends the scenario.

Capture

If captured, draw a vision card to inspire what form your prison takes.

The first time you perform “Wrapping up” while captured, perform each phase as normal. Do not perform downtime or scenario divination. Heal 4 harm as you wait, imprisoned, and your wounds heal.

When the scenario begins, your mission is simply to escape. Draw fortune cards as normal. There is an opportunity that allows you to escape: draw a vision card to inspire it. Note that you might gain something useful from your time being captured: perhaps the adversary reveals their plan, or you have the opportunity to free an important prisoner or overhear vital information.

If you are recaptured, repeat this process but do not perform “Agent relationships” or “Distilling experience” during the wrapping up phase. Instead, take 2 xp if your escape attempt was largely unsuccessful, or 3xp if it was close to succeeding.

Agent relationships

When a scenario ends and you are the lone character, instead of talking about the mission with other Agents, have your character reflect on how the mission went. Think of one moment that sticks in your Agent’s mind. Inspired by this moment of reflection, you may increase or decrease your burden or ideal track by 1 point.

Answering violence

The Cabinet understands that sometimes violence is the only tool left. Thus, an Agent of the Cabinet must only visit the Pool of Mourning if the killing could have been avoided. (For more information on this phase, see “Alternate play modes / Non-lethal mode”.

The world changes

Instead of drawing one card per player, simply draw three cards. One of these cards must reflect a change that has occurred because of your own actions.

Questioning Fate

The biggest difference between regular and solo play is the presence of the Seer. During regular play, a player can turn to the Seer to answer questions about the setting, such as “What do I see when I open the door?”, “Is the warehouse guarded?” or “Who is the NPC manning this shop?” During solo play, it falls to the player to both create the world and play in it: a large mental load, and one where the temptation to make things easier on yourself—even unconsciously—can muddy the waters.

To this end, *The Hidden Isle* has a Fate System, to answer questions which would normally fall to the Seer. Fate should be used to only answer questions about the world state: *not* questions about your character’s interaction with the world, which is the purview of roleplaying and challenge draws.

To play through the scenario, make sure you ask frequent questions about the world and the people you meet in it. When you ask such questions, decide: is this question **closed**, **numerical** or **open**? That is, can it be answered with “yes/no”, with a number, or is the answer more complicated than that?

Open Fate questions

An open Fate Question is one which cannot be answered with “yes” or “no”, or a number.

If you already know the answer to an open Fate Question, that is the answer. But if you need inspiration, aren’t sure of your answer, or would like clarification, simply draw a card from the Vision Deck and consult the Vision Guide. If the answer is unclear or confusing, you may draw a second card for clarification.

Numerical Fate Questions

Sometimes you simply need a numerical answer to a question, such as “How many guards are there on the watchtower?” First, decide how high the answer *might* be. Then, draw a pip card and consult the table below. (For these calculations, an Ace counts as one, **not** eleven.)

Answer range	Modify pip card value like this:
1-5	Half the value, rounding fractions up.
1-10	Simply take the value.
2-20	Double the value.
10-100	Multiply the value by ten.

If you ask a numerical Fate Question and draw an Ace, this triggers a random event (see below).

Closed Fate Questions

A closed Fate Question is one which can be answered with “yes” or “no”. To answer a closed Fate Question, follow these steps.

1. Decide on the exact wording of the question.
2. Decide how likely the answer is to be “yes”. It can be unlikely, 50/50, or likely.
3. Draw pip cards to create two hands: one for “yes”, one for “no”.
 - I. If a yes is **unlikely**, draw two “no” cards and one “yes” card.
 - II. If the answer is **50/50**, draw one card for each.
 - III. If a yes is **likely**, draw one “no” card and two “yes” cards.
4. Reveal cards. If a hand contains more than one card, discard all but the highest card to leave each hand with one card each.
5. If the “yes” card has a value equal to or greater than the “no” card, the answer is yes. Otherwise, the answer is no.
6. If the suits of the cards match, the answer is **extreme**.
7. Once Fate has been consulted, discard the pip cards.

Extreme answers

An extreme answer is a strong yes or no.

If this was the answer your Agent wanted, this means some kind of advantage. This might be reflected in +1 card for a future draw, or an unforeseen opportunity.

If your Agent did not want this answer, there is a complication: perhaps a -1 card draw to a future action, a negative clock ticking up, or a negative consequence such as a guard spotting you.

***Example:** You are sneaking through a palace at night and pass through a door. To determine what’s on the other side, you draw a Vision card: The Emperor. You decide this means you have reached the throne room. You ask Fate, “Is the room guarded?” You decide this is likely, so you draw two “yes” cards and one “no” card. The “yes” cards are the 2 of Pentacles and the 8 of Wands; you discard the lower card. The “no” card is the 7 of Wands. The “yes” hand’s 8 beats the “no” hand’s 7, so the answer is yes: the room is guarded. What’s more, the cards bear matching suits (they’re both Wands), so the answer is extreme: the room is thronged with a dozen guards.*

Random Events

If you ask a **numerical** or **closed** Question of Fate and **you draw an Ace**, a random event is triggered. This means you encounter something unexpected.

To find out what you encounter, draw a pip card. The card's number determines the event's **timeframe**:

2-4	Past	You encounter evidence of something that occurred in the past.
5-8	Present	You encounter an action happening right now.
9-A	Future	You encounter a plan or seed of something that could occur later.

You must also choose the event's **theme** by noting the card's suit and consulting the table below. Choose whichever theme seems most appropriate for the current scene.

Swords	Violence or scholarship
Wands	Magic or passion
Cups	Care or stealth
Pentacles	Bargains or labor

Once you have the event's **timeframe** and **nature**, consult the random event table below and choose the specifics of the encounter.

Event type	Examples and inspiration
Past violence	A dead body. A ruined town. A graveyard. Evidence of colonialism.
Present violence	Ambush. Fight. Harassment.
Future violence	Threats. Posturing. Signs of an imminent attack. A trap. Invasion plans.
Past scholarship	Notes or books. Library. Forgotten study.
Present scholarship	Scholar studying. Experts talking. Doctor examining.
Future scholarship	Plans for an expedition. Blueprints for a library. Research plan.
Past magic	Used magical ingredients. The effects of a spell gone wrong. Rumors of a magical event. Ancient shrine.
Present magic	Magical barrier. Charm. Curse. Creature. Ritual in progress.
Future magic	Spell instructions. Ritual preparations. A well-stocked laboratory.
Past passion	Lovers' tomb. Love letters. A washed up poet. An art gallery. A dying artist.
Present passion	A performance. A passionate couple. An argument. An artist working.
Future passion	An artist planning a new work. Rough notes for a letter or project. Lovers flirting. An apprentice artist learning.
Past care	A healed scar. Letters from a past love. Reminiscing. A token of friendship.
Present care	A patient. Friends consoling each other. The kindness of strangers.
Future care	A caring promise. Looking forward to good times. A vow of friendship. An apprentice healer.
Past stealth	Something stolen. A hoard of loot. A victim of theft. Footprints. Signs of a burglary.
Present stealth	A robbery in progress. Spies. Watchers from the shadows. A whisper.
Future stealth	Planning a heist. Putting on a disguise. Thief signs. Casing a joint. Conspirators.
Past bargains	A treasure vault. Contracts or treaties. The scar of an oath. A conman's trophies.
Present bargains	Merchants. Haggling. Guards betting. Diplomats negotiating. A con in progress. Sleight of hand.
Future bargains	Explorers seeking new markets. Merchants enquiring after opportunities. A peace proposal. Planning a con.
Past labor	A building or structure. A stockpile of finished goods. A sown field. A warehouse.
Present labor	Farmers reaping. A workman working. A building under construction. Singing as they work. Hunters or poachers.
Future labor	Blueprints or scaffolding. Rough sketches. An unplowed field. Apprentices training. Raw materials.

Non-player characters

During the scenario, your Agent will meet many characters. Some will help you; others may hinder you or become hostile.

Creating non-player characters

When you meet a non-player character, ask yourself who this person might be. If you already have a good idea, listen to your inspiration and create the character you imagine. However, if you need more inspiration, follow these steps.

1. If you do not know the character's **profession**, draw a vision card, and consult the Vision Guide, to inspire their profession.
2. If you already know their profession, instead draw a vision card to inspire their **character**.
3. Draw a pip card to inspire the **method** by which they perform their profession, or express their character. Look at the card's suit, and choose a word from the table below.

Suit	Method
Swords	Knowledge, precision, fighting, wisdom, persuasion
Wands	Passion, brutality, magic, artistry, inspiration
Cups	Sensitivity, subtlety, manipulation, kindness, instinct
Pentacles	Pragmatism, experience, cunning, deftness, eagerness

If the pip card is an Ace, this triggers a random event (see above). Finish creating the NPC first, then deal with the random event.

Controlling non-player characters

While playing, do not be afraid to take control of allied non-player characters such as allied Dioscorian Agents. This could mean using them to give your character a bonus during a challenge draw, or even making a challenge draw on their behalf when they attempt to do something. If you do this, there's no need to draw up an entire character sheet for them: just estimate how good they are at the skill in question by using this formula:

Skill level	Skill value
Beginner	0
Competent	1
Experienced	2
Expert	3

Just remember: you don't actually control these non-player characters, so you can't count on the fact that they will always act the way you want them to. But if it's a natural outcome of the situation, there's nothing wrong with a character fighting by your side.

Companions

Sometimes you will face a mission where one of your contacts has expertise that would be relevant and helpful. If this is the case, you may upgrade your contact into a companion.

A companion is a contact who can go on missions with you. Effectively, they are a second Agent for you to control.

Creating a companion

To create a companion, follow these steps.

1. Pick which contact will become a companion.
2. Determine their class.
3. Draw up their character sheet as you would for a new player character.
 - a. If you already know any key information—such as their childhood history, or their ideal—fill it in without drawing any cards.
 - b. When picking abilities and skills, do not choose any that explicitly contradict what you already know about the character. Taking the character in a new or unexpected direction is fine.
 - c. Only give them seven skill points. (ie. do not give them the extra skill points that would normally come with a solo character.)
 - d. Do not perform introductions or assign them to a Hand.



Playing with a companion

Playing with a companion can be a lot of work: roleplaying *one* person is already quite demanding. But it can be rewarding and fun, especially if your two characters can bond, or argue, or interact in some interesting way during the scenario. Just try to make sure that both your characters are taking actions, and taking risks, because of their own *internal* motivations and instincts, and not just because it would be convenient for you as the player.

After playing a mission with a companion, decide whether your bond improved or deteriorated. Raise or lower your affection with this character by 1 point to reflect this.

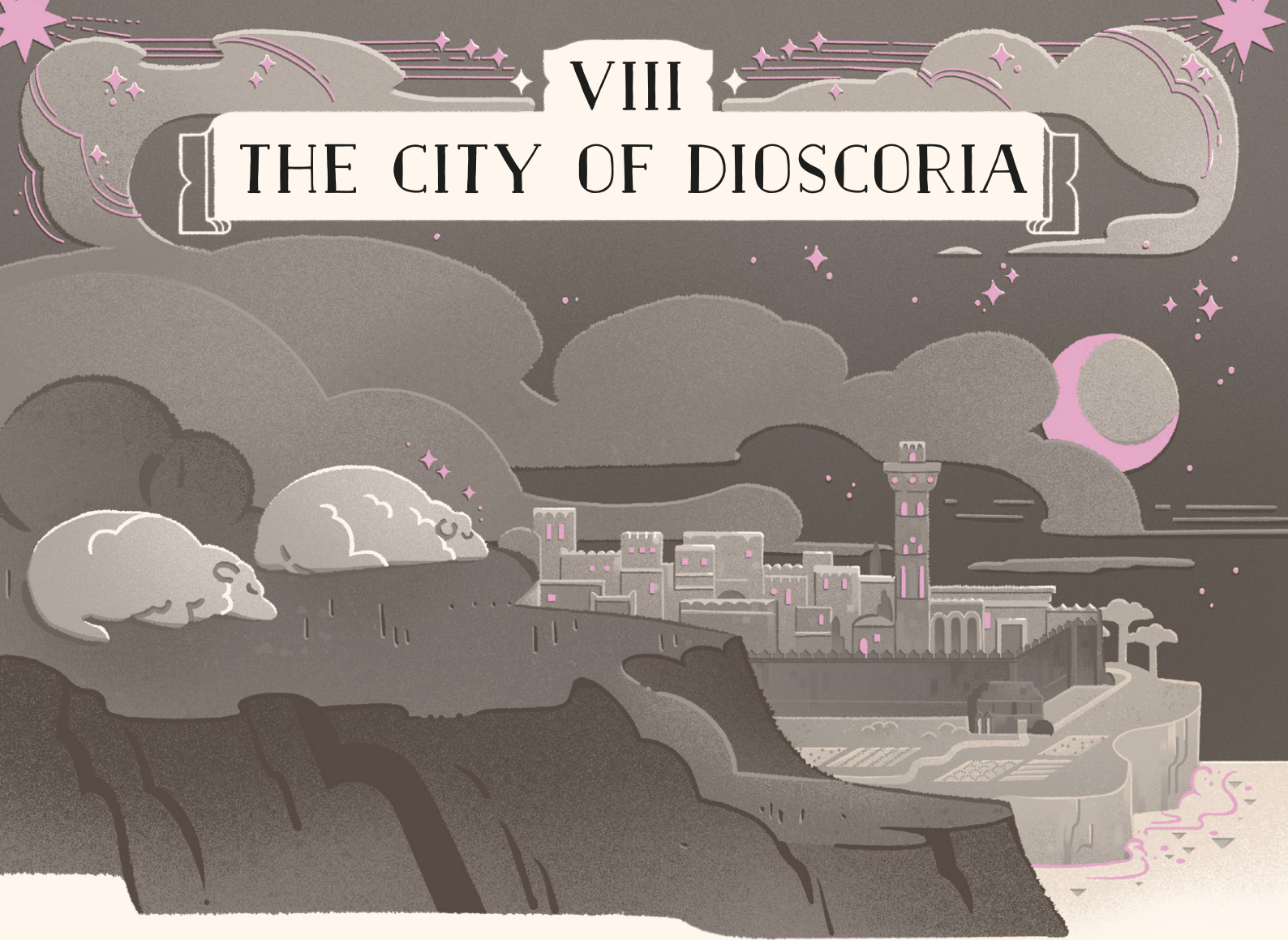
Companions should experience the Downtime and Wrapping Up phases, but only if they just finished a scenario. A companion who did not participate in the latest scenario should not be active during these phases.

If you use this companion in a future scenario, simply re-use the character sheet from last time. If you want a break from your main character, you could even play a solo scenario with this companion as the main character instead.

When on a mission against an adversary whose progress track is in the final phase, you may take up to three companions. This is to let you enjoy a climactic scenario surrounded by the allies and friends you have made in your time on Dioscoria. Note that this is only an option, however, and not a requirement: controlling four characters is extremely challenging!

Tips for solitaire play

Try jotting down what happens during play, as it happens. This will help you separate speculation and mind-wandering (“It would be so cool if this forest were full of red glowing eyes...”) from events that have actually taken place in the theater of your mind (“I am now surrounded by a dozen glowing red eyes. This might be a problem.”) To really get into your character’s head, you could even write a journal entry after each scenario.



VIII

THE CITY OF DIOSCORIA

Adapted from the Voyages of Beatrice of Grantabruge

Dioscoria: an island of alchemy and hope, of a dozen faiths and a hundred magics. A rowboat's journey from the Arabian coast, but only reachable by those who already know where to look. A city founded by gods, maintained by their blessing, and ruled by the winds of fate.

Or so it is said.

What is undeniable, at least, is that Dioscoria was founded millennia ago. In this, the year of our Lord 1562, the city has reached a golden age, built on centuries of spiritual tradition, culture, and prosperity. My time here—welcomed by the Dioscorian council to record their culture with fresh, unbiased eyes—has opened my mind to the possibilities of life. But I fear this calm will not last: when the seers look into the island's future they speak of unseen forces building, soon to spill out into the open. Who knows what the fates have in store?

DIOSCORIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

Origins

Though I am unable to find an exact date for the city's founding, legends claim it was shortly after the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great. Led by the fabled Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus, a group of Hecatean priestesses fled the city to protect both their lives and their magic from the invaders. Fleeing across the sea, they washed up on an island blessed by the divine twins Castor and Pollux, the so-called "Dioscori". Here they gave thanks to their new patrons, marshaled their magical abilities, prepared defenses, and began to rebuild their lives.

The accuracy of this account is suspect. Firstly, Hermes Trismegistus was not a historical figure, but a mythic combination of the Greek god Hermes and his Egyptian counterpart, Thoth. Why this figure, half Greek and half Egyptian, should dwell in Egypt only to flee his Greek brethren is a mystery—assuming he existed at all. But gods are known to possess the living, or appear during times of need. Perhaps some mysteries belong in the past.

Though the island's population was initially small, Hermes and his priestesses befriended other victims of Alexander's conquests, and brought them and their knowledge to their island haven. Its population grew. This tradition of rescuing those in need—and their knowledge—persists to this day as a pillar of Dioscorian culture.

Political Development

As the population swelled, some form of government became necessary. Five wise priestesses were selected by lot—four embodying the elements, and one for magic—to form the original **ruling council**.

At the same time, more laborers, craftspeople and professionals were emigrating to Dioscoria and forming **guilds** to better manage their resources. Eventually the guilds felt their needs were not recognised by the council, and rose up to demand fuller representation. It is unclear how bloody this conflict was—my sources become patchy—but the result was the addition of four guild representatives to the council, raising the council total to nine. The **ruling chamber** was established at this time, giving common Dioscorians a space for their political needs and court cases to be heard.

By this time, Dioscoria's unique culture and governmental style was fully formed: a knowledge-loving, game- and chance-obsessed people, governed by a mix of spiritual and worldly representatives.

The Seven Veiled Havens

As empires and oppressors gained power across the world, those they persecuted fled to remote sanctuaries and made them their homes. Like Dioscoria, these became freehavens for the outcasts of the world, each with a unique tradition and culture. Including Dioscoria, there are seven such havens: **Vazimba**, the hidden city within the cliffs of Madagascar whose name is not spoken to outsiders; the Kingdom of **Scythia** in the Black Sea, founded in ancient times by those fleeing the Gothic conquest of Scythian Neapolis; **Aeaea**, the wandering sorceress's isle in the Tyrrhenian sea; the island of **Kachwa**, hidden among the thousand isles of the Lakshadweep archipelago; **Antillia**, the Atlantic island of seven sages who fled the terror of Isabella's Alhambra Decree; and **Hybra**, the isle of the druids in the Irish Sea.

In its early years, the Dioscorian council reached out to these fellow lovers of freedom and knowledge. Natural allies due to their shared values and vulnerability they began to work together, sharing their innovations and magical craft, eventually binding the seven isles under *The Veiled Accord*.

Under this accord, Hekate's daughters found ways to step through the mists encircling one island and onto the shore of another. To this day, one can sail into fog off the shores of Dioscoria and emerge off the Lakshmi archipelago, the Tauric peninsula, or in the midst of the Atlantic. Those untrained in the ways of the fog only lose their way.

As the centuries passed, Dioscoria shifted from myth to rumor to curiosity, and back again. By the sixteenth century its existence, once common knowledge, has been widely forgotten, though it remains an open secret among the powerful.

Although Dioscoria is happy to cooperate—even collaborate—with other world powers, it has no interest in expanding its territory. Firstly, Dioscoria flourishes through, and depends on, its secrecy. If Dioscoria were to raise an army and attack its neighbors, it would step onto the world stage—a stage filled with stronger powers, who would quickly regroup and snuff out this new contender. Better, the council believe, to maintain their secrecy: their greatest shield. Secondly, the wisdom the council has accumulated tells them that conquest and glory are false idols: only by looking inward can a person, or a state, reach its true potential. Taking this lesson to heart, they are focused on nurturing Dioscoria rather than demanding fealty from its neighbors. The island has everything Dioscorians need: why stoop to conquest?

This is not to say the island has never been discovered or threatened: numerous attempts have been made over the centuries by militaristic foreign powers. All were rebuffed, however: the island's impenetrable fog makes Dioscoria unreachable without a guide, and the island's defenses have seen off any fortunate enough to slip through.



Culture

Anti-orthodoxy

The most prominent feature of Dioscorian culture is Dioscorians' distrust of authority, and hatred of orthodoxy. Religious zealotry is particularly loathed, and many popular plays and songs feature the downfall of a Pope or Caliph, often at the hands of an enlightened Dioscorian hermit. As a result, Dioscorian society strives towards egalitarianism. Even if it falls short of this ideal, its denizens feel their society is fairer than the alternatives. Better to attempt justice and fall short than to never try at all.

Dioscorians hail from across the globe, many seized from the jaws of orthodoxy and spirited through the mist to an incredible, and incredibly strange, island. To accommodate this culture shock—not to mention the city's countless philosophies and religions—Dioscoria is, politically speaking, neutral ground. Although newcomers must study the history and values of Dioscoria in order to integrate, some differences will always remain. The city makes no attempt to expunge these differences: rather, it celebrates and embraces them.

Although tolerance and representative government are cornerstones of Dioscorian culture, this is not to say the city is entirely harmonious. Tensions are rife: between priests and guildspeople, between the council and the ruling chamber, between those with the time and money to step into government and those whose livelihoods would suffer, between newcomers and old families, between high-minded scholars who see magic as pure and street magicians who use it for a quick buck... The island is replete with disagreements, and its anti-authoritarianism means these often become heated. But Dioscorians have also learned, through the harshness of life beyond the island, that working through arguments is better than erupting into violence. As such, a compromise can generally be reached, even if it requires divinatory guidance or a literal, otherworldly soul-search.

Games

Dioscorians adore games and gambling; since Tarot cards and the throwing of knucklebones or dice were vital to ancient Dioscorian fortune telling, it is likely games grew out of the island's ritualistic origins.

Walking through the main plaza or the narrow backstreets, one finds gamesters of all kinds: card players hunched over a barrel; couples playing senet or backgammon, with rings or jewels as playing pieces to foretell their future; old men and children hunched over chess sets, until a piece is taken and they whip out dueling sticks to determine the combat. I am proud to say I was invited to make up the largest Trionfi-style game ever played, in a great ring of dozens of players in the city plaza. I am prouder to say I lost my entire fortune that afternoon, and won most of it back that evening at dice.

This love of games has molded Dioscorians over the centuries. They prize intellectual prowess, forethought and tactical skill, but also play for joy, pleasure and excitement, or to access their spiritual, unconscious selves. A number of games have emerged from the island over the centuries, most notably the mystical game whose cards, they say, inspired *Tarocchi*.

The national game, of course, is Sefirot: the card game of divine orders. This is played on street corners, on the walls of buildings, and in gaming houses everywhere. It is a test of skill and flexibility, an idle pastime, and a divinatory or meditative aid. When two grandmasters compete, entire gaming houses are cleared and spectators are charged entry; it is said such games reveal a lesson to the onlooker that must not be ignored. On the new year a solitaire game of Sefirot is begun in the Temple of the Dioscorii, played over the next few months by one random, anonymous citizen. The outcome of the game is said to portend the future of the city.

Spirituality and knowledge

Dioscoria treasures knowledge, especially of a spiritual kind. From its founding, the council has been aware of the inevitability of change and the ceaseless turning of the wheel of fortune. Ironically, it is this commitment to flexibility, and the wisdom that emerges from it, that has allowed Dioscoria to weather the storms of history.

As a result Dioscoria hungers for knowledge, its archives devouring scrolls and books. Should the empires beyond Dioscoria fall, these vaults will preserve knowledge that would otherwise be lost. Tensions are always high between those who value knowledge for its own sake — as a lantern to illuminate truth, for even false information reveals something — and those who insist Dioscoria must protect the oppressed first and foremost, honoring its history as a haven, whether or not they bear precious knowledge. They force us to confront the question of which is more valuable: a human life, vibrant and fully lived, or a book which lasts a thousand years, teaching all that time?

Love and sexuality

A society of those rejected by convention, Dioscorians express their love and gender in uncountable ways. For Dioscorians femininity is the desire to protect and lead, to nurture something until it is prosperous or powerful. Masculinity, meanwhile, is expressed as the need for stability and order. Bad laws may be the tools of tyrants, but good laws are necessary for peace, and their maintenance is seen as a masculine responsibility. These messages have been enshrined in the symbolism of the Empress and Emperor Tarot cards.

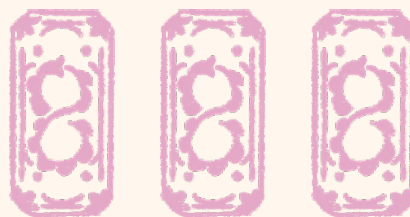
Dioscorians believe that both impulses are necessary for a healthy society—indeed, for a healthy individual—but neither stands above the other. Dioscorian priests stress that these two forces move in each of us, in infinite combinations, and should be equally embraced. Some Tarot decks reflect this, depicting female Emperors and male Empresses.

It is therefore natural, to a Dioscorian mindset, that each person be respected as a rare jewel, and that one's sex has no bearing on the matter. Many Dioscorians also see friendship, love and sexual desire as facets of the same powerful forces, and openly take multiple lovers. In some cases, citizens who wish to sculpt their body may do so with the help of powerful magicians and priests. This free attitude toward gender and love is enshrined in the Dioscorian Lovers card, which can show any combination of different loved ones. Bespoke Lovers cards, depicting the owner and their loves, are a typical mark of affection.

Incidentally, I was shocked to learn that the sorcery concealing the isle is driven by the fertilizing energy of the island's countless lovers, the vivifying power of their couplings burned off as magical fuel. This means that the concealment spell doubles as a method of contraception, allowing lovers to explore the sexual arts without fear of an unwanted pregnancy. Families wishing to conceive often journey away from Dioscoria for a few weeks or months for the purpose.

Language

As Dioscorians hail from across the world, it should be a Babel of a hundred languages. Thankfully, the city's founders accounted for this: one of the mysteries they brought to the island was the knowledge of the Speech of Eden, the first language and the one spoken by the Divine. Unlike human, “fallen” languages, the Speech of Eden maps perfectly onto reality. Anyone who hears this language understands the words as though they were in their native tongue. With time and immersion, this sacred speech is learned by all inhabitants of the island. Newcomers describe the process as more like remembering a forgotten language than learning a new one.



Immigration and refugees

Dioscoria's oldest families can trace their lineage back to the city's founding. Nonetheless, one of the city's tenets is that Dioscoria must be a safe haven for those who have none. Dioscoria has therefore seen an influx of new blood over the centuries.

When an émigré arrives in Dioscoria, they are housed in enormous refugee barges anchored in the harbor until they have achieved minimal Dioscorian assimilation. Charitable guilds (usually one of the Guilds of Cups) provide food, clothing and basic necessities. A Dioscorian family will then welcome the newcomer into their home, adopting them as a new arrival to the city.

Cultural clashes are inevitable—refugees come from all manner of backgrounds, and Dioscorian culture is unique—but if they wish to settle in Dioscoria they must accept the city's creed: "All is permissible, all are welcome, if no harm is done." They are taught tolerance and Dioscorian values by volunteer scholars. Later, they are encouraged to welcome new arrivals from their own lands, easing the transition.

Newcomers also take on a debt to the city: to live in Dioscoria is a privilege, and while it is available to many, it comes with a cost. This debt can be paid off by providing free services to a guild for a set period, donating a wealth of money or texts, or by becoming a Dioscorian Agent and pursuing the city's needs abroad.

Magic

Drawn from the brightest minds of the age and the deepest recesses of tradition, Dioscoria is rich with magic. Citizens habitually wear talismans and charms: to protect from evildoers and sorcerers, from spirits and demons, to ward off disease, to aid sleep or banish nightmares, to encourage smooth travels or business transactions, or simply for good luck.

Advanced practitioners such as scholars or street magicians manipulate unseen forces to achieve spectacular effects. By the use of runes, herbs, incantations, candles and crystals they can bend the weft of nature, transforming themselves or others, making objects invisible or conjuring illusions. Alchemists can change the nature of metals. Illusionists can beautify themselves, or render themselves or others hideous. The Guild of Blood trains siphoners in the manipulation of bodily energies and fluids; a trained siphoner can draw excess blood, bile, phlegm or choler from their patient, or supply them in case of a deficit.

The most potent and dangerous magic is summoning and possession. By invoking a demon or spirit, and sacrificing one's lifeblood, one can invite the entity to occupy one's body: to see through one's eyes, speak through one's lips, and use the body for whatever magical channeling takes the spirit's fancy. This is exceptionally dangerous since some spirits, having tasted the mortal realm, may be reluctant to leave. This magic is therefore forbidden to all but those trained by the Guild of Spirits. The punishment for breaking this taboo is to have one's humors drawn out to the point of permanent debilitation—but never death, since taking Dioscorian life is taboo.

The entities summoned can be of various types. Jinni are a popular target, but it should be known that most jinni are simply invisible people, akin to spirits. The powerful jinn of fables and legends, who grants wishes of immense power or transports their master through space—the *ifreet* or *marid*—is rare, and difficult to overpower. The Guild of Spirits warns against trapping or enslaving these creatures, for reasons both ethical and practical.

Ancestor spirits are commonly invoked, and seen as more trustworthy. Angels or demons may also be summoned: as in the Christian tradition, these were formed by God before humankind. Demons are a dangerous prospect: they are chaotic and manipulative, and usually summoned accidentally. Angels, meanwhile, are aloof and strict, fuelled by an inner piety no human can match.

Despite its dangers, summoning is a notable part of Dioscorian culture: during festivals, expert summoners call upon the spirits of trusted gods or ancestors, letting them speak directly to the people. Even this is not without risk: I have heard accounts of spirits who were not what they seemed, taking on the magical essence of a trusted ancestor to trick their way into a corporeal body and abscond with it. In one case, this demon hunted humans and ate their flesh to sustain itself, terrorizing the city for weeks.

But divine access, Dioscorians claim, is worth the risk: some suspect Dioscoria was founded not by the corporeal Hermes and Hekate, but by followers possessed by these gods. Whether this was consensual is unclear, but the Dioscorian reverence for such powers runs deep.

An impression of the city

As I sit here in my attic room, hosted by the Özdemir family—whose friendliness and welcome cannot be overstated—I find myself gazing over the tiled roofs of this remarkable city and setting down my impressions.

It is a bustling city of markets and bazaars; some merchant is always calling out their wares, or greeting a customer or friend. The harbors throng with foreigners, newcomers and dock workers; the libraries shuffle with the quiet feet of archivists and the rustle of antique pages; the lecture halls ring with the tone of knowledge and the echoes of ancient wisdom. Gaming halls and taverns rattle with dice and ripple with cards, each sip of wine punctuated by the rap of game tokens. Festivals crack with fireworks and shimmer with celebratory illusions; they are drink and song, blood and spirits and the sacrificial bowl, the voices of the dead and the raucous glee of the living.

Books, goods and people flow through this city like grain through a millstone: they enter without a clear purpose, are refined, and leave with a new sense of themselves and the world. Yet in Dioscoria we are our own millstones: we refine ourselves, each the craftsman of our own soul.

To allow my readers to picture Dioscoria—to imagine themselves walking its streets, admiring its plazas, sampling its delights—I have described a journey through the city itself. We shall travel together, I as your guide, you the marveling newcomer. I invite you to open yourself, that you might experience Dioscoria as I have.

The approach by sea

Dioscoria is a hidden isle, cloaked by mist and magic. As we approach, the air turns thick; our guide takes the helm, using her secret arts to steer the ship through the fog. I tumble on the deck, unable to tell up from down, sea from sky. Though the bow remains fixed on the horizon, I should never know the way forward. There is no sound but the creaking of the hull and the wash of the ocean.

Then, like a blindfold snatched away, the fog lifts and my senses settle. The island stands before us: dry and sandy, and along its spine a line of mountains. But patches of green speckle the landscape, and whole flanks of the isle are painted lush with chalice-shaped trees.

As we near the coast, the island's sandy beaches come into sharper focus. The city and its harbor draw closer, a projection of lighter stone against the darker mountains. The harbor waters are crowded with all manner of vessels: small rowboats to travel up and down the coast, uncountable dhows used for trade and fishing, the occasional caravel, and the immense hulks of the immigration flotilla. Their masts are a forest to match the thick woodland of the nearby shore.



The harbor is nestled within a natural bay, and is built of massive granite blocks. A bronze colossus towers over the harbor, its form that of a mounted warrior. Five long piers project into the sea, allowing goods and travelers to disembark into the port proper. The square is buzzing with activity: goods and materials are loaded and unloaded, merchants hawk their wares from stalls, and travelers must push through the crowds to reach the city itself. The market here is chaotic and disorganized: whoever sets up a stall by dawn claims the space for the day, leading to all manner of tricks and sabotage come nightfall. The harbor master and their clerks patrol the docks, ensuring that all ships have a berth, and that each new arrival pays the docking fee: one book or scroll per ship, rendered to the city's archive.

There is only one gate out of the port, set in an immense sandstone wall and flanked by two dozen guards. Only Dioscorian citizens or refugees may pass beyond this point: merchants are free to conduct business within the port square, but may not pass into the city proper. To make their stay more pleasant, and relieve them of their heavy profits, a number of boarding houses and entertainments have sprung up within the port walls. Immigrants and refugees are housed in the immigration flotilla: large ships that once sailed deep waters, now gutted and transformed into dense lodgings. One often sees groups of wide-eyed refugees led onto dry land and ushered through the gate by an officiator, wielding a seal of passage and an air of smug generosity.

The naval academy lies off to one side of the harbor, and has its own dock. A low, long building, here Dioscorians train for a naval career, preparing to defend the island. Carracks and galleys lie anchored just off the coast, manned by crews of sailors who drill often but go to war rarely.

If an enemy fleet were to approach, these brave souls would be called on to defend the isle and prevent landfall. Every citizen is trained in evacuation procedures, so the city would quickly be deserted, its people fled inland or onto ships hidden around the coast.

The island's defenses would, in such circumstances, be activated. The bronze colossus watching the harbor mouth is, so the rumor goes, a golem: an animated warrior of metal awaiting its masters' signal. Somewhere below the harbor waters sleeps a second golem, this one of coral, fashioned from the reefs around the isle. In the event of an assault these titans will rise, and lay waste to the aggressors.

Within the city itself, the streets are thronged with statues of granite, bronze or copper, crafted by skilled artificers. These too would awaken and defend the isle, laying down their artificial lives so their creators could escape.

The city plaza

Passing through the harbor gate, citizens enter the city plaza. This is the city's central square, as vast as any in Rome. The space is lined with sandstone pillars; at its center is a great fountain, supporting a statue of Castor and Pollux welcoming Hermes.

This plaza is the center of Dioscorian public life. The square is ringed with all manner of temples, theaters, and public buildings. Public debates are often held here, with the disputants standing on marble platforms built for this purpose. On the rare occasions that one councilor debates another in public, the plaza is filled with a rapturous (and raucous) audience.

Once a year, on the anniversary of the city's founding, a great feast is held here. All Dioscorians are invited, and enjoy rich food, speeches from councilors and public figures, magical displays with coloured lightning powder, theatrical re-enactments of the city's history, and—if the omens are favorable—a possession of the high priest by the spirit of Hermes or Hekate themselves.

The inner market is the city's second, larger market. Here citizens sell everything from the day-to-day necessities of life, to ecstatic artworks meant only for fellow Dioscorian eyes. Whereas the harbor market is chaotic and disorganized, here the stalls are laid out in sections for each commodity, and each stall is apportioned to each seller via an annual lottery.

Here one may observe an odd Dioscorian tradition: a customer may, while paying for their merchandise, flip one of the coins with which they are paying. If it lands heads, the coin is worth twice its minted value until the transaction is complete. But if it lands tails, the coin becomes “the merchant's tithe”, and must be gifted to the merchant.



The council tower is the tallest structure in Dioscoria, and can be seen from anywhere in the city. This building has many functions, pertaining to the governance and stability of the city.

At the top of the tower are the council's chambers. Dioscoria is ruled by a council of nine: five priests or priestesses, and four representatives of the city's guilds—one each for the Leagues of Swords, Cups, Wands and Pentacles. This council oversees and governs the isle. Their tasks include matters of import such as greeting ambassadors and merchants of standing, the maintenance and use of the navy, and the management of immigration, housing, fiscal matters and the city's food supply.

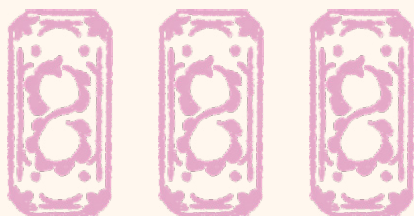
When a guild councilor dies—the councilor for the League of Wands, for example—elections are held to appoint a successor. Any Wands guild member—for example, actors from the Guild of Masks, or artists from the Guild of Hues—may vote.

When a priest councilor dies, the process is rather esoteric. The remaining priests perform a divination, seeking the next person who should be councilor. It is believed that the Fates guide this fortune telling, revealing the qualities Dioscoria needs in her next councilor. Once the divination is complete, notices are posted across the city asking for any Dioscorians who match the prophecy. The council interviews every candidate, and selects from them a councilor.

This method has its difficulties. If no suitable candidates are found, the net is widened beyond Dioscoria. Agents are sent to the far corners of the world, seeking some foreign scholar or dignitary who fits the divined description. Many a council member first learned of Dioscoria when the city's agents approached them in private, offering a sealed letter and a council position from a mysterious isle.

It is worth noting that the council tower's likeness may be seen on the Dioscorian Tarot's *Tower* card. This tradition dates back centuries. The council was perturbed when the tower—the symbol of their power—was first depicted on the card, which stands for destruction, upheaval and chaos. Their initial reaction was to imprison the artist responsible and seize his sketches. After the island's commoners and artists gathered in protest, however, the council took the advice of priests and historians. Accepting that Dioscoria's tower must, one day, fall, they released the artist and his sketches. The tower has remained on the card ever since, a statement of political protest and governmental humility.

Dioscoria's *agent residences* are on the tower's middle floors. Here Dioscorian agents are educated in Dioscorian values and history, trained for agent work, fed, and housed. There are rooms for convalescence and meditation, to allow agents to recover after arduous missions.



At the foot of the tower lies the city's *ruling chamber*, a large hall where the city's representatives discuss and pass laws. It is not unlike the Great Council of Venice, or the parliament of England: a congregation where lawmakers gather to keep the realm stable. Unlike England or Venice, however, membership is extremely open. Any Dioscorian with the support of one hundred citizens may sit in the Chamber for one year. They are obliged to hear Chamber business. They may also introduce laws, speak for or against such laws, and vote on them. They receive a small stipend from the state in exchange for this service.¹ Chamber sessions are public, so any Dioscorian may see how government is progressing. Most debates pertain to taxation, the city budget, general upkeep and the maintenance of the city's defenses. Squabbles between guilds are often heard here, with the Chamber acting as a neutral third party.

While the Council may not introduce laws to the Chamber, each councilor has a contact or two within the Chamber willing to introduce legislation on their behalf. The Chamber's order of business is determined by the Reader, a unique elected position within the Chamber. Anyone on good terms with the Reader and one other Chamber member may, therefore, use these connections to introduce and rapidly pass a bill, before opposition can form. Coincidentally, Readers who do this regularly are often granted Council positions later in life.

Rumor has it that the *Cabinet of Extremis* is located somewhere within the tower. This secretive organization operates behind the scenes, sending Dioscorian agents on clandestine missions, and bending—sometimes explicitly breaking—Dioscorian values when it is necessary to preserve the city. Their membership and leadership are unknown, though it is rumored they are led by a member of the ruling council.

¹ I do not wish to clutter this account with the intricacies of government, but I would have it set down that Dioscorians are no fools when it comes to abuses of power: these people have seen many abuses in their history, and now guard against them. For instance, no council member may also be a member of the ruling chamber: this would create a fundamental conflict of responsibilities.

Furthermore, a Dioscorian representative requires the support of 100 *non-ruling* fellow citizens. This rule was instituted after the events of the “self-voting chamber” in the twelfth century.

A Chamber member can only be removed if half their erstwhile supporters publicly condemn them, or as the result of a Council vote. There is no way for the Chamber to directly expel one of its members, though such a law has been proposed. There is also no way for the Chamber to expel a Council member.

Beside the council tower is the **tax office**, a low brick building of modest design. Clerks and bureaucrats are often seen shuffling in and out, in addition to bemused or furious citizens.

Taxation in Dioscoria is paid “in kind”: each citizen is taxed according to their occupation. Merchants pay a monetary tax, as do artists, but the latter receive a discount if they perform for civic events. Farmers are taxed in crops, and laborers or craftsmen either pay in money, or by donating some of their work to the city: boatbuilders, for example, either donate small vessels to the city’s fleet, or work on city naval projects one day a week.

Affluent citizens are also taxed: not by their income, but as a portion of their total wealth at the year’s end. This has given rise to a custom at the new year, in which citizens flock to the gambling halls to lose everything by midnight, hoping to win it back in the early hours of the morning. Needless to say, this has led the council to make some wide-reaching fiduciary decisions over the years to maintain economic stability.

On the other side of the tower is the city’s **courthouse**. The building is elaborate and ornate: great sandstone steps lead through a line of corinthian pillars and into the entrance hall, where a bronze statue of Justice—identical to her Tarot incarnations—stands, the height of five men. The floor is inlaid with mosaics depicting acts of justice throughout Dioscorian history; most prominent is the image of Gaius Germanicus, a roman centurion who laid waste to scores of gothic towns and attempted to storm Dioscoria itself, before being captured. With time and fair judgment, he came to understand those he had discounted as barbarians, and became a model Dioscorian citizen. Notably, no written accounts of this tale survive: our only sources are word-of-mouth.

To the left of the entrance hall is the city’s **legal advisory**, a series of spaces and meeting rooms where citizens can seek free legal advice, and find lawyers to try their case. To the right of the entrance hall is another antechamber, leading to the city’s three **law courts**. During cases, the defense and prosecution are performed by trained advocates;

if the plaintiffs cannot afford an advocate, one is provided by the city. Eleven jurors—the numerical value of the Justice card—are selected via divination. It is their task to come to a ruling and, if necessary, determine punishment. Dioscorian courts have no judge—the jury is the ultimate authority—but each case has a legal administrator. This expert is tasked with advising the jury, ensuring legal protocol is followed, and explaining or bringing to light legal details which pertain to the case. The jury are encouraged to ask questions to clarify uncertainties. Legal precedent is used as a guide, but is not binding.

Since many Dioscorians were subject to the unjust laws of cruel princes, courts are reluctant to mete out “the justice of the sword”. Indeed, Justice’s sword—visibly brandished by her statue in the foyer—is a complex and potent symbol. For Dioscorians, it represents the cutting force of knowledge and clarity, and is often paired with her book of laws, held in her other hand. Armed with both, Dioscorian courts focus on understanding the causes of wrongdoing, and guiding the evildoer back to their path.

Legal punishments are used to repay the victim, and to encourage the malefactor to mend their ways. Criminals are often sentenced to monasteries or holy places; to serve in the victim’s household for a number of years; becoming a Dioscorian Agent; washing and preparing the bodies of the dead in the city morgue; or serving in some cause that is important to the victim. Capital punishment is forbidden, and exile is a last resort: many feel Dioscoria is honor-bound to accept those who have nowhere else.

As one passes by the courthouse, one cannot help noticing groups of citizens gathered around its side wall. This has become a traditional place to play the game of Sefirot: some vandal once chiseled the game’s board into the courthouse wall. To this day people bring their decks and play the game of divine orders as others look on.

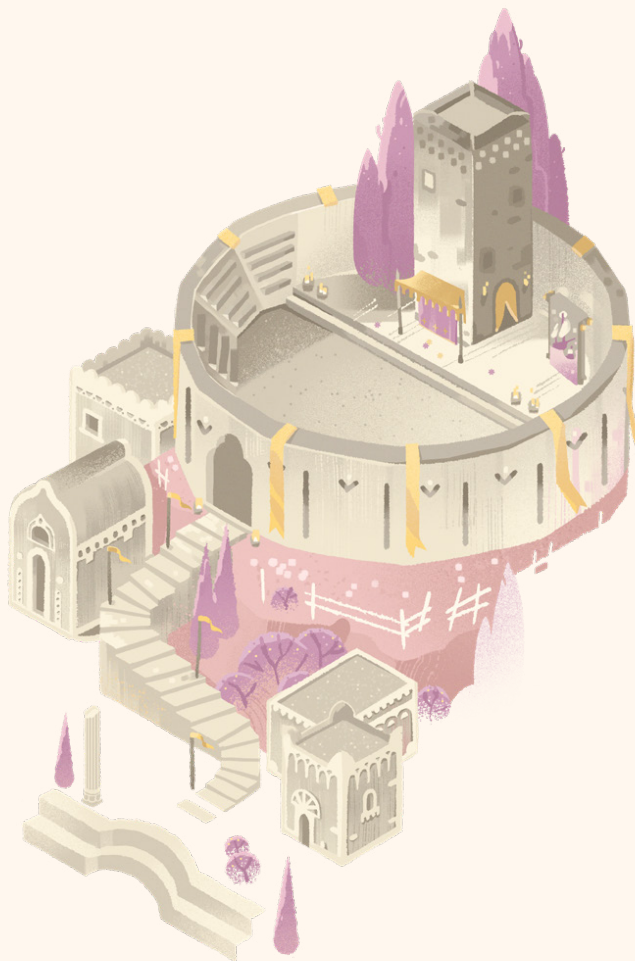
Scattered around the wider plaza are diplomatic **embassies**. Few nations know of Dioscoria, and fewer still have formal diplomatic relations. But Dioscoria enjoys strong links with the other veiled havens. They are the final homes of the exiled and lost, and must count on each other's support.

Countless **temples** sit around the plaza, with smaller shrines dotted throughout the city. The oldest and grandest are the temples of Hermes and Hekate—the island's founding deities—and the temple to the Dioscori, the divine twins and patron gods of the island. Their architecture is in the classical style of the Greeks and Romans, with grand pillars and pediments, and statues of marble or bronze. These statues are seen as avatars of the gods, through which they may perceive and act; each temple is therefore the house of a god.

The temples' priests commune with the gods through meditation, prayer, or ecstatic trances. They perform ceremonies to celebrate the gods' deeds; each week there is some festival at another shrine or temple. Sacrifices are burnt on temple altars to seek the gods' favor, but temples are also places of healing, both physical and spiritual. Those sick in mind or body seek the medicine of priests' unguents or herbs, or the cleansing of confession or sympathy. Those afflicted by possession, or haunted by spirits or jinni, will go to a priest for exorcism or to speak to, and come to terms with, the spirit. Priests also create talismans; many a supplicant addicted to gambling, drink or lust has come away with a charm to curb their urges.

As time passes, older temples that used to command huge audiences may fall out of public favor. Immigrant communities are angered that these temples lie empty, while their gods, newer arrivals to the island, make do with roadside shrines.

The **theater** is the final location of note on the city plaza. An outdoor playhouse in the ancient Greek style, it is comprised of a circular granite stage, ringed by a semicircle of stone seats rising away from the center. Behind the stage is a flat wall, upon which scenery and decorations are painted or hung. Actors enter and leave the stage via one central double door, or one of two side doors.



This space was originally an outdoor temple: there was once an altar at the center of the stage, on which sacrifices and rituals would be performed before thousands of spectators, the blood dripping into runnels around the edge of the stage. Though it can still perform this function (the altar can be moved to its original position with a team of strong bearers), it is more common for this space to be used for the performance of plays, whether tragic, historic, comedic or satirical. Plays are staged frequently. During the city annual founding festival, five plays are produced by five different playwrights; the best is awarded a crown of coral and bronze, an homage to the titans of the harbor. Just as the golems protect the island physically, it is the responsibility of the playwright to safeguard citizens' spirits by tempering their emotions.

This building has also been used, during moments of crisis, to perform emergency summoning spells: the focus of the spectators increases the potency of such rituals.

The streets and alleyways

Leaving the city plaza, a visitor to Dioscoria will choose a side-street and strike out into the city itself. Dioscoria is a labyrinth of winding streets, broad boulevards and twisting alleyways, peppered with the odd shrine, statue, monument or well. The city is an architectural mongrel, with styles pulled from across the known and ancient worlds.

Much of the city is made up of *housing*. Houses are typically large, with a common area for relaxation and cooking, adjoined by five to two-dozen private rooms. These are often occupied by families, who sometimes take adjoining rooms, or by individuals, friends, lovers, or by refugees and immigrants. Books and scrolls, often philosophical or religious, are common throughout. A household “empress” is responsible for making newcomers welcome, and organizing household events for fellowship and bonding. Thus a sense of community forms within each household.

When children reach the age of majority (sixteen) they are encouraged to join the Dioscorian military or trade fleets, or to seek their fortune among expatriate Dioscorian communities. For example, my host’s youngest son, aged fifteen, is considering an apprenticeship with a stonemason in Antwerp, a Dioscorian citizen who moved away from the island and found a home on distant shores.

This tradition is something of a necessity, since Dioscoria is always taking in newcomers: the native-born should leave, or there would be a crisis of housing. But there is more to this than pragmatism: growth is only possible with a balance of both security and challenge. Furthermore, those born in Dioscoria might otherwise never see beyond its shores, and might never understand the cruel and arbitrary empires which Dioscoria opposes. A free person who has never witnessed bondage will never understand that freedom. These citizens also spread their philosophy of liberty wherever they settle.

Guildhalls can be found dotted among the streets. Each features a coat of arms with the guild arms; many feature statues or frescoes depicting the guild’s patron saint or god. Most are imposing buildings with intricate stonework, a large dais or flights of steps, grand pillars, pediments and other architectural flourishes. These extravagances are paid for by the wealth or favors accrued by the guild. Each hall’s style and materials are unique to the guild, and express their history and values.

There are dozens of guilds across the city—perhaps hundreds—encompassing professionals from all walks of life. These guilds are grouped into four **guild leagues**. The League of Swords includes the guilds of soldiers, rhetoricians, scholars and mystics. The League of Wands incorporates the interests of the city's artists, performers, magicians and eroticists. The League of Cups includes the many guilds of healers, priests and counselors, as well as dancers and acrobats. Finally, the League of Pentacles encompasses merchants, gambling houses, farmers, fishermen and laborers. Each League holds a quarterly conclave to settle differences and resolve issues. Each League also elects one city council member.

Entrance to each guildhall is tightly controlled. Would-be apprentices may tour a guildhall with an escort, as may honored guests such as myself. Foreign traders may often visit, but must be accompanied by a guard. Guild members come and go as they please, but entry by the public is not allowed: guilds are places of work and focus. This can cause tension: apprentices often live in guild residences, and are therefore unable to host paramours. It is said that in the guild halls, trade and duty walk arm in arm with lust and stealth.

Most guilds open into a courtyard, often filled with members' works in progress. There are usually living spaces for apprentices, lecture rooms, workshops, and libraries or archives to house the guild's records and master texts.

Occasionally entire populations of refugees will be welcomed into Dioscoria, particularly if they possess a unique craft or method of production. This gives the refugees a safe haven to continue their craft, and benefits Dioscoria with new styles of pottery, cloth, steel and so on. The newcomers often found a guild of their own, focused on these craftworks. The Dioscorian authorities see this as part of their remit to preserve knowledge in all its forms: such traditions can seldom be preserved only in texts, but must be continually practiced. To this day, the Guild of Glass and the Guild of Clay—the city's glaziers and potters—maintain the traditions of the Carthaginian refugees who founded them over a millennia ago.

One notable guild is the **Guild of Hues**, the artists' guild. This structure is itself a work of art: painted a terracotta red with clean white highlights, it stands out boldly from the lighter sandstone and coral of the rest of the neighborhood. The twin pillars flanking the door are entwined in gold leaf vines painted onto their surface; frescos of Apollo and Ptah flank the entrance, welcoming the worthy to hone their crafts.

These works, and others from the guild, feature gilt accents and stylistic, angular forms. This “new art”, which to my eyes is both bolder and more beautiful than the works of our Italian or German masters, is a style perfected by Dioscorian artists over the last century or so, and is widely used in their Tarot decks.

Artists are not limited to this style, however; journeymen must submit three masterworks in three different styles to become masters, and are encouraged to learn many styles throughout their careers. Artists may be called upon to create portraits or paintings for private clients, to adorn the facades of temples, private buildings or public architecture, to fashion votive objects, or even to



depict supernatural or divine landscapes to aid spirit work. As such, they must be ready to wield any number of methods to complete their work.

The guildhall itself features dozens of workshops and studios; often masters will collaborate, or employ journeymen and apprentices, to complete a larger work. The guild maintains strong links with models and athletes, as well as the Guild of Forms—the sculptors' guild—next door.

The ***Guild of Clemency*** is another notable guild. Tucked just behind the council tower, this guild's function is to integrate newcomers into Dioscoria. The building's facade is full of symbolic meaning, with two refugees—rendered after Hermes and Hekate—flanking the entrance. They are bound in chains, which lead downward into a floor mosaic depicting the Devil, signifying newcomers' bondage to old worldviews. But the chains are broken by a scorpion, the astrological symbol of change and upheaval. New Dioscorians may be in a tumultuous phase, but this tumult can free them from the old world and its painful beliefs.

The Guild of Clemency also operates hospitals, houses of care, houses of shelter, and charitable food wagons, for those who cannot care for, house, or feed themselves. Each institution is named for a god, saint or prophet revered for healing the sick, feeding the hungry and so on. The Guild is therefore vital to Dioscorian government: without it, much of the healing and care within the state would cease, and newcomers would be left rudderless. To reflect this, the Guild of Clemency pays no tax other than a pledge to maintain these services, and is supported by city taxes.

The ***Guild of Mist*** is the most vital guild for the island's security. The veil of mist which cloaks the island can only be navigated by a skilled guide, trained by the guild; as a result, these guild members are highly sought and indispensable for trade and travel.

The guildhall is of an unusual design: set into the cliff face near the harbor, the figure of the Hermit has been carved into the unfinished rock. In his stone hand he clasps a lantern: an immense iron construction welded into the statue itself, perpetually lit. Guildmembers enter the hall by walking into the folds of the statue's cloak, letting darkness enfold them. Finally they emerge into the cavern of the guildhall itself, as though emerging from a mist, or from the darkness of ignorance. I was not permitted to visit the hall, but rumor claims apprentices train in great underground grottos and lakes; to graduate, they must navigate the crags and outcroppings in complete darkness.

Since the veil of mist is the first and most powerful defense against an attack, guides must be absolutely trustworthy. A traitorous guide could easily land a spy on the island's coast, or lead a foreign armada to the harbor itself. To prevent this, any council member can veto the apprenticeship of any guide. Furthermore, the guild itself has a number of secret rituals to ensure loyalty. There are rumors of blood and binding spells, as well as truth-telling demons and devices that see into one's heart.

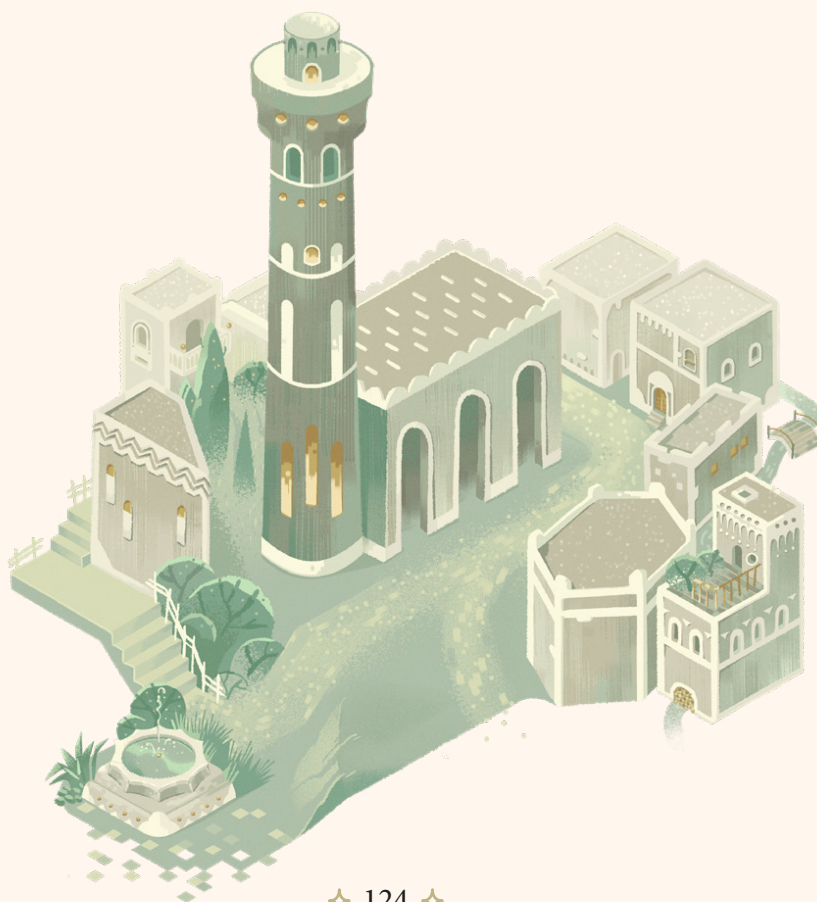
Not all guilds are ancient and storied. The ***printers' guild***—the Guild of Ink—is a new addition, whose adherents make use of recently invented movable type to print scores of books and pamphlets. This has flooded Dioscoria with even more literature, from the highest spiritual and philosophical texts to the lowest lustful scribblings. In a nod to the guild's technological foundation, the bell pull is a clockwork mechanism activated by pulling the lever of a miniature printing press.

Every major street in Dioscoria houses at least one **school**. Dioscorians' insistence on knowledge and learning means schools are revered. All children living in Dioscoria, whether native-born or newcomers, must attend school until the age of fourteen. This rudimentary schooling encompasses literacy, numeracy, logic, rhetoric and its abuses, history, the study of culture, ethics, divination, theology, and civic duty. Each class has one or two dozen students, and teachers are paid by the state.

Schools are open to all, not only children. Newcomers keen to bolster their education, or children who left school early and wish to return to their studies, are also welcome. Dioscorians believe that learning is a lifelong activity. This has shocked some of my English fellows, who believe humans are educated once—in a trade or discipline of import—and then join society as productive members. But does not a stonemason master his craft with decades of praxis? And if a stonemason takes the decision to give up his acquired craft, and pick up another, who are we to prevent him? On the mainland our educational abilities are slim and rare, but Dioscoria has built what seems to this poor Englishwoman a paradise of knowledge.

Newcomers in particular require speedy, effective schooling, largely in Dioscorian values. Some schools specialize in preparing these would-be Dioscorians for the shocks and confusions of this vibrant city, and understanding its grounding principles. Their first lesson is Dioscoria's founding principle: all is permissible, all are welcome, if no harm is done.

Once schooling is complete, whether for a child or adult, the student is encouraged to apply to a guild, or to join the wider world as part of a Dioscorian enclave. If the student's interest is in knowledge and information itself, they are directed toward the academy. All are encouraged to eventually settle in the wider world, ready to share their culture and knowledge with others.



Those bound for the *academy* live and study in one of a dozen *colleges*. Each college is a maze of courts, quads, halls and residences, clustered around libraries and lecture halls. Each has its own architectural style: some newer ones evoke European universities, with classically-inspired arches and windows; others take the Islamic style, and still others are drafty, ancient shells dating from the island's founding. Each college, regardless of origin, is covered with the graffiti of countless students. These crude daubings are usually snippets of beloved philosophy texts, or scrawled debates back and forth from one wall-writer to another.

Each college is a community unto itself. Each professor has a residence and an office, where students can seek help and feedback, and where long, elaborate discussions often wend into the afternoon. Students eat, study and live together. Feast halls and libraries are places of camaraderie and earnest debate, and both can be turned over to theatrical troupes for light entertainment.

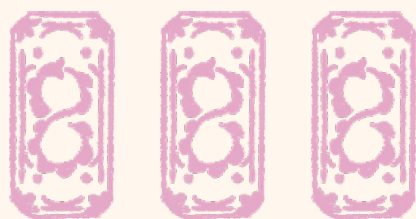
The city's *academy* is a broader organization which allocates college resources, and arranges inter-college cooperation, student transfers and book loans. Eager students may apply to the academy; they must submit a short treatise on their chosen subject, and are interviewed by a scholar from the college of their choice. The college inspects their work and weighs their discussion, to ascertain whether the mind before them can be chiseled into a formidable substance.

Once admitted, students attend lectures and symposia held at various colleges or, in the case of large gatherings, at the central *lecture hall*. This is a large, round building, with pillars and seats arranged in circles six levels high. The acoustics of the space and the amplification charms hanging from the domed ceiling ensure speakers can be heard with ease. Students must also write frequent theses to hone their mental and rhetorical craft. Their ultimate goal is to produce a work of scholarship: a grand thesis or dissertation. After a term of one year their studies cease, but many opt to re-apply, taking three, four, or more years to analyze their particular interest and complete their thesis—enriching Dioscorian knowledge.

If college libraries do not contain a particular text, scholars turn to the *great library and archive*. It contains a copy of every text published in Dioscoria, and countless others besides, saved from the ravages of time, fire or ignorance. An immense structure, this building towers over much of the city: a huge block-shaped edifice, rendered in immense red sandstone bricks, it seems like a fortress of knowledge flanked by the saints of Truth. Statues of Thoth, Alfred the Great, Galileo and countless others stand in niches around the walls, welcoming seekers of wisdom. Inside, immense bookshelves are arranged like wheel spokes, protruding inwards from the exterior walls. At the center is a vast empty space guarded by bronze railings, where light from the great, round skylight swings down to illuminate the space.

Beneath the library lies the archive, where librarians scuttle to fetch texts for eager scholars. It is a tightly-organized maw that swallows all writing, for each ship docking at Dioscoria must pay it a tax of one book, scroll or tablet. The depths below the city yawn with countless texts.

This tax of books, and the city's ceaseless acquisition of knowledge, are hotly debated topics among the citizenry and the council. Those against this policy of knowledge claim their efforts would be better spent focused on practical matters: defense, commerce and so on. But those who advocate for knowledge claim that knowledge, and its refined forms of magic and wisdom, grant unexpected but vital boons, and are well worth the pains. The new technology of printing complicates things further: some argue that a book is now easier to acquire, and therefore worth less, and that Dioscoria should simply tax newcomers in money.



While the citywide evacuation plan—in the event of assault by a foreign power—is one of flight and the preservation of life, the archivists of the central library have taken a vow to protect the texts to their last breath. If attacked, most archivists must seize the rarest texts and flee by sea, via some secret evacuation tunnel. The senior archivists, however, are to hold out until the invaders arrive, then seal the library: enormous granite blocks are suspended above each entrance, ready to drop and plug each doorway at the pull of a fateful lever, or the burning of a merciless fuse. This policy would trap the archivists inside, with no escape. The archivists, however, are willing to make this sacrifice to preserve these works from prying, greedy eyes.

Slipping further into the city's backstreets we find countless *taverns and gaming houses*: one on every corner, and two on every square. Here one may forget one's cares by eating, drinking, making merry, and playing at dice or cards. Regulars saunter down to their local gaming house, challenging strangers and friends alike to best them at backgammon, Sefirot, chess or dice.

These houses are also host to various entertainments such as dancing, singing, and the reading of poetry. Street magicians perform in prominent taverns, amazing audiences with their tricks, wiles and prestidigitations. Those unable to secure a booking fee often perform just *outside* popular taverns, catching punters on their way in or out.

These local gaming houses are the most common, but the city has one large hall of gambling: the so-called "House of the Fates". This mansion was converted into a gaming house by the Dioscorian council, to steer and control gambling within the city and to raise public funds. This imposing, modern building—built in a new, clean style and festooned with slender pillars—is the length of a playing field and spread across three stories. Here one may play all manner of games. Money may be wagered, of course, but one can also bet "in kind", wagering food, goods and other sundries. If one loses catastrophically, and has the ear of the council, one may even be blessed by a miraculous return of good fortune—in the interest of the city's economic stability.

Beyond the city walls

The city is ringed by ancient fortifications, placed—so the myths go—by giants sworn to a contract with Hermes. These titanic parapets are wide enough for two war chariots to ride side by side. Girdling the city from sea to sea, they prevent attack from inland. They also mark the city limits.

Sport and competition are vital for Dioscorian culture: mastering the body goes hand in hand with understanding the soul, and Dioscorians are always eager to outdo each other. To support such activities, many *sporting fields* have been laid out beyond the city walls, for running, tennis, and other pursuits. Numerous arenas and racecourses have been erected, for discus and javelin throwing, archery, wrestling, horse and chariot racing, and even armed combat—though bouts are only to first blood.

But while these athletic arts are an end in themselves, to many citizens the true game lies in betting on the outcome. Gambling stalls and bet-takers sprout in every crowd like good-humored scavengers. Their patter, I confess, is quite convincing, and I found myself parting with my pennies each time I attended a race or bout, thinking the outcome a dead certainty. While I never won, I could not find it in myself to resent these rogues, as they consoled me so kindly after each loss, offering good odds for the next round.

It goes without saying, of course, that to fix fights or matches is utterly taboo. This cuts at the heart of Dioscorian tradition, and is punishable by imprisonment, physical torment, or the seldom-used punishment of exile.

Beyond the sporting fields are the city's *farms, mills and granaries*. Much of the land around the city has been converted to farmland, since the city's population demands a constant supply of food and grain. Here farmers and other laborers produce, store and process the city's food. This is also where many of them live: in farmhouses and cottages dotted around the countryside.

For these citizens, whose farms keep them ever-busy, visiting the city is rare. Council stipends are welcome, but often come with demands for more grain and wheat. Dioscoria, ever welcoming to newcomers, is constantly hungry. This strains the island's farmers, fishermen, and food merchants.

Past the farmland, one finds *camps of newcomers*. Here, longstanding refugees from the immigration flotilla can find a temporary home. The tents and shacks of this shanty town are administered by nearby hospitals and houses of clemency, who do their best to keep the refugees fed, clothed, housed and healthy. Life here is desperate, the days pieced together from scraps and charity. Houses are little more than boards or driftwood hammered together; tents are passed from family to family, and must be patched often. With housing cramped and at a premium in the city itself, these camps seem to grow year on year.

Out in the foothills one finds **monasteries** and houses of seclusion for monks, sages and other holy people. Away from the bustle and noise of city life, these dedicated seekers can focus on spiritual growth and understanding. These monasteries are isolated, towering structures, built by holy hands over the centuries. One monastery I visited was a hulking mass of gray stone, with a tower to the heavens and a great hall whose coloured windows refracted the rising sun, as the stellar spheres refract the light of the Divine. These monks welcomed me to their repast, though to speak was forbidden: they ate in silence, one of their number reading first from the Bible, then the Shams al-Ma'arif.

When I visited another order, I discovered these nuns were not permitted to speak. For much of the day they sat in meditation, stopping only to throw coins or stalks and consult their sacred text, the Chinese Book of Changes. In this way they honor the divine through the study of chance, since they believe fate and fortune are the chaotic windows where God may enter.

While holy ones may go down into the city to study texts in the great library, most are content with their own modest libraries. Their focus is more on meditation, contemplation, and the purification of their souls. These communities are often self-sustaining, keeping their own gardens and plots of land. The labor of maintaining the monastery is often seen as a sacred, nourishing offering.

Further out still, one may find **hermits** living in the mountains. For these sacred sages, contact with society confuses the soul. For them are the mountains, the rivers, the animals, and the contemplation of the heavens. They lack no companions, for both within and without they grasp the countless branches of the world-soul.

One may also find here the utterly destitute: those who cannot live in the city, or on the land, and may barely live at all. Fallen on hard times, these tortured souls roam the island, hoping for some unsuspected clemency. These vagrants' tragic stories remind Dioscoria that not all citizens are free, and that more must be done.

There are rumors of **secret places** tucked into the island's valleys and clefts. According to local legend, the "Cabinet Extremis" has seized these places and uses them for its furtive projects. This clandestine group answers only to itself, and operates in the shadows, crossing whatever ethical boundaries it deems necessary to protect Dioscoria—sometimes from itself. While these projects are sometimes necessary to ensure the city's survival, their questionable nature would disturb Dioscorians, who pride themselves on their righteous values. Here, on the island's far side, assassins are rigorously trained, and magicians of the mind prepare spells of mental violation in secret shrines. According to rumor this area houses a hidden prison, for those possessed by demons or spirits and immune to exorcism, or channellers who pursued forces that, once released, could not be reversed.

The island **coast** is a place of solitude and spiritual significance. Dioscorians are buried at sea, and funerals are held on the coastline, or on ships just offshore. They are of the sea, and feel they should feed it in return.

Beyond the island's borders, Dioscoria employs countless sailors and naval officers, and has connections to a vast web of traders and expatriates. Cities around the world harbor secret Dioscorian settlers, always willing to help another Dioscorian set down roots in a new home. These secretive emigres identify each other by the island's motto and the secret symbols of the sword, cup, wand or vine, and pentacle or coin: the island's spiritual guideposts.

Final thoughts

It has been my pleasure to walk the streets of this ancient and remarkable city, and to record it for posterity. I understand the council's decision that an outside eye such as mine might see their world more clearly, or at least with fewer preconceptions, than they might themselves. But as I ready myself to depart, I confess I am torn: I am glad to have seen such marvels, but despair that, having seen them, I shall never be content to return to England, to be some merchant's wife or lawyer's mistress. My time here in Dioscoria has changed me, as she changes all who touch her shores.

This account will, of course, be copied and rendered unto the city archives, to tell future generations of Dioscoria in these, its golden years. I pray that the council find it sufficient, and that—God willing—it earns me a place among these islanders, where the sharp mind of a woman such as myself is a thing to be treasured, not an aberration to be confined.

— *Beatrice of Grantabruge*



IX

CITIES OF THE AGE



It can be challenging to tell stories and roleplay in a century so removed from our own. To help both players and Seers with this problem, we have researched a number of cities from the time period—specifically for the year 1562, when the game is officially set—and summarized the features we consider most interesting, or most relevant for play. We have tried to avoid exoticism wherever possible, particularly with regard to non-European locations and cultures, and have done our best to simply report what these places were like as faithfully as possible, given the limited resources which have been preserved, and to which we have access.

Of course, the sixteenth century was a wide and varied place, and you should always feel encouraged to do your own research and take your Hand wherever strikes your interest. Think of these cities as promising starting points, or lively settings to return to time and again. If you want to do your own research, we've included resources we found relevant or interesting under each city's "Further

reading" section. You can also research other historical cities and take your party there instead. The game's setting is as rich and varied as history itself.

We took our historical research seriously, and have tried to give you as accurate and objective a view of these places as possible, for two reasons. First, representing history accurately is important. The people of the past were like us in many ways. Far from being "less civilized" people in a story book, they were individuals who did the things they did for reasons that made sense to them, even if we've learned differently. This can often be lost in our modern sense of superiority.

Secondly, history is stranger than fiction. In our experience, every attempt to "spice up" history with an exciting narrative tends to flatten and homogenize it, whereas every attempt to go deeper, to understand more and to ask piercing questions yields unexpected, fascinating answers. In places we've taken magical or fantastical beliefs of the

time, and presented them as fact. Rather than clouding the waters, we hope this will get you into the mindset of the people of the time, to better understand them and their worldviews.

This doesn't mean you should feel bound by history, though: around your table, your imaginations take the reigns. In fact, this is why we took our research so seriously: so you don't have to! We hope that by presenting you with a rich sandbox of cities filled with historical color, we've given you the tools to wonder at this strange century, and then focus on what you need for your stories. You're not writing a dissertation, you're playing a game with jinn and snake queens and blood magic. Go wild.

OVERVIEW OF A CENTURY

The sixteenth century was a chaotic and difficult time for Europe and the Middle East. Religious tensions between Christians erupted in the split between Catholics (loyal to the Pope) and Protestants (reformers who believed the Papacy was corrupt). War between two great Islamic empires, the Safavids and Ottomans, waged on and off, and the Ottomans also pressed westward into Europe, besieging the Austrian capital of Vienna. The nations of Europe fought over the states of Italy, and France. Spain and the Holy Roman Empire (the German states) clashed in various configurations, often dragging—or inviting—England or Scotland into the mix.

The weaponry of these European wars were also undergoing changes. Gunpowder, rare at the beginning of the century, became standard by its end—although these guns were still quite unwieldy, inaccurate and slow. Clockwork or “wheel-lock” pistols were invented, powered by a wheeled spring. Medieval castles could now be knocked down by cannonfire, demanding new defensive architecture such as star or drum forts to deflect incoming projectiles. Infantry combat also underwent a revolution: modern regiments were armed with pikes—very long spears—which were used to push and gore the enemy while keeping them at a distance. The days of knights dominating

the battlefield were over by 1562, since a horseman could be picked off by shot or skewered by pikes before reaching their target. Instead, horsemen wore less armor, and wielded pistols and a saber. The overall makeup of European armies also changed: it was often more efficient for a ruler to hire professional mercenaries from Switzerland or the Italian or German states, rather than training their own countrymen.

These changes were less pronounced in the Islamic empires, but the Ottomans did wield immense cannons to break sieges, and mounted powerful swivel guns on their ships and fortresses. Ottoman infantry mostly used curved swords or maces. Their ranged troops mostly used bows, more accurate and faster to fire than rifles but taking much longer to master.

Other technological advances were also critical to the history of the sixteenth century. The moveable type printing press allowed books to be printed and distributed cheaply across Europe, causing a boom in scholarship. The use of compasses and astrolabes to navigate the ocean, and advances in cartography and ship design, allowed European explorers to travel farther and map those places more accurately, opening the way towards centuries of colonialism.

On a more abstract level, science and scholarship also developed during this century. In Europe, the heliocentric model of the cosmos was proposed, and deemed heretical by religious figures. In the Islamic world advancements were made in astronomy, such as the invention of the sextant, allowing the creation of more accurate star maps. Ottoman geographers also improved their methods. Toward the end of the century the microscope was invented, opening up unsuspected scientific possibilities.

LONDON

Straddling the river Thames in southern England, London allows access to the English channel and thence to the Atlantic ocean.

The seven gates of London lead to a teeming metropolis filled with creaking wood-and-daub houses thatched with ancient straw. A hundred thousand souls are crammed within the city walls. The streets are winding and maze-like, narrow and dirty, and often the houses are built to such a height that they lean across the street, blocking out the sun—or, more frequently, shielding one from the rain, drizzle or downpours that wash the city's refuse into the river.

Many come to London to seek their fortune, or escape from vagrancy after the decline of the family farm. But the city is no more merciful, and the streets are filled with beggars and the homeless. Alleyways hum with innovative criminals finding new ways to snatch, steal, purloin or trick their way to a score. For those with a sharp mind, quick reflexes and enough speed to outrun their debtors, London is a city brimming with opportunity.

Ruling power: Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603)

London is the capital of the Kingdom of England. It is administered by the Mayor of London, who is responsible for keeping the peace, but is ultimately ruled by Queen Elizabeth. Crowned only three years ago, she has already taken confident steps toward securing her rule, stabilizing the realm and addressing religious tensions.

The Queen rules absolutely, but new laws are made by parliament. Parliament is a necessary tool, but easily led: the Queen has planted her ministers there as Members of Parliament to keep it on track. The Queen is savvy, but still early in her reign; as such, she relies on the advice of her Privy Council. Her councilors are a mixture of the nobility, gentry and business classes. The Queen manages the council by using flattery, promotions, and the threat of revoking privileges.



Districts

Docks

The London docks are crowded and noisy. Workmen hurry to and fro, laden with baggage and bales of goods. Merchants harangue the harbor master for docking rights, and with the high tide there are frequent cries as ships weigh anchor and head out to sea.

The Deptford docks, on the southern bank of the Thames, are the busiest: trade ships arrive and alight like honey bees on a flower, with most stopping at the import quays so their goods can be inspected and import dues paid. Deptford is also where the navy is building its fleet: merchant vessels and warships are assembled here and sent off to strengthen the English fleet and merchant navy.

Men and boys flock here to seek adventure, or an escape from their troubles, at sea. Before they board they will pass the so-called “Execution dock,” where pirates are hanged. Though this “dock” is nothing more than a gallows, it does function as the ne’er-do-well’s “final gangway” to the hereafter.

Streets and alleys

London is a maze of streets, alleys and byways: dirty, narrow and unpaved. Houses are made of timber frames filled with wattle and daub, with tiled or thatched roofs. Tall structures are noticeably precarious: to maximize space, each floor juts out a little from the one below.

The streets are overcrowded and noisy. Tradesmen and traveling merchants hawk their wares: fish, fresh fruit and vegetables, or the fast food of a cookshop: baked apples, strongly seasoned (and suspicious) pies, or oysters from the Thames. This English metropolis, crammed beyond its medieval means, is a blur of faces in crowds: more people than most English could imagine. Stories claim that if you see your own doppelganger in the throng, death is not far behind.

Human waste is thrown from one’s chamber pot into the street, there to be gathered up by muckrakers—who sell it as fertilizer—or washed, by rain, into the Fleet “river”—more an open sewer. Better-off Londoners use privies located atop cesspits.

Markets

Sixteen markets are dotted around London. Each sprawls across its chosen street or square, with scattered stalls or stands offering food, spices or livestock. The most common goods are freshly baked bread, fish or meat. One can also buy imported wine, sand (for household cleaning and scouring) and small amounts of sugar.

London’s markets are patrolled by the Mayor’s men, who keep an eagle eye out for malfeasance such as profiteering or price gouging.

Cheapside market

Cheapside is London's main commercial street, and the heart of the city's economy and businesses. This long, wide street is filled with merchants calling out their wares. Poorer merchants lay out stalls in the street; those of some means can rent a tiny shop only one yard wide, effectively a kiosk. Wealthier merchants have larger shops, and serve customers inside.

The far end of the street broadens into "the Shambles", a large open-air slaughterhouse filled with a sea of butcher's stalls. The smell is atrocious, as are the gutters. At Cheapside's opposite end is Goldsmiths' Row, where rich merchants deal in precious metals, gems or luxury goods. These fine, high buildings feature ornate facades of carved wood.

On special occasions such as royal processions or parades, fabrics are draped from windows and balconies up and down the street like multicolored banners. Pageants and performances accompany these events. The plain drinking fountains of the street, which dispense spring water, can be made to flow with wine.

Taverns, halls and gathering places

Most water is unsafe to drink, and wine is an expensive import. Most households brew their own beer, which is drunk in place of water. Londoners gather in alehouses for gossip, companionship and hot meals. These places are cramped, worn, warm and homey. Songs are sung, and games and gambling are rife.

Inns are another favorite gathering place, where travelers can spend the night. Of more interest to locals are the shows staged at inn-yards, the large, square courtyards in front of each inn, enclosed on all sides. Actors and troubadours entertain hundreds of people at these venues; entry is cheap, and you can get a balcony seat for a little more. Actors also regale audiences in public halls, city courtyards, universities, palaces, the homes of wealthy patrons, and marketplaces. Female actors are not permitted, so female parts are played by boys.

Houses of religion, clemency or punishment

Churches are commonplace on the streets of London. Some priests run multiple churches, pocketing multiple salaries; this is unpopular, but Church salaries are a pittance. The city houses several charitable hospitals, such as St Thomas' hospital—which supports those who are poor or diseased—or Bedlam, for the insane.

London has several prisons: holding places for debtors, heretics or traitors. Prisons are a temporary measure to stop the accused fleeing their trial, not a sentence or punishment.

Gates and walls

London is surrounded by sturdy fortress walls dating back centuries. The city is accessed via seven gates, locked at night. The heads and body parts of traitors and criminals are prominently displayed on London's gates and bridges, to encourage obedience.

The Liberties

Across the river, within the so-called "Liberties", the law is laxer and less attentive. Here we find London's red light district, blood sports such as bear- and bull-baiting, and disreputable taverns. Gambling is rife, as are cutpurses and muggers.

Locations and monuments

London Bridge

A mishmash of teetering wooden buildings, crammed precariously onto an ancient bridge spanning the Thames. These houses are filled with shops and facilities to serve people crossing the bridge. It only rarely burns down.

Tower of London

A large square fortress on the river, enclosed by a moat: an island keep. The most secure building in England, where traitors are imprisoned and executed, and where treaties are signed.

Legend has it the Tower is haunted by the ghosts of those who've perished there, such as the two child-princes murdered by their power-hungry uncle, Richard III. It is also said that if the ravens roosting in the Tower leave, both Tower and Kingdom will fall.

St Paul's Cathedral

A magnificent gothic church with a towering spire, St Paul's dwarfs all of London's churches, and is the seat of the Bishop of London.

Abandoned monasteries

Thirty years ago the English church broke from Rome, dissolving all monastic orders, whose property was sold to the highest bidder. The remnants of these monasteries and abbeys linger; some have been transformed into housing, but most lie abandoned, inhabited by squatters.

Westminster palace

A sprawling gothic structure, this palace is arranged around several courtyards and the great church of St Stephen's Chapel. The English parliament use this chapel as their meeting hall.

The palace windows are stained glass; the building has rooms for dignitaries, offices and servants. A bustling world of political hustle and intrigue.

Whitehall palace

The Queen's usual residence, though in summer she tours the country. A sprawling, luxurious palace built of white stone, with lodgings and offices for prominent courtiers. The palace contains banquet halls, a bowling green, indoor tennis courts, a cock-fighting pit, and a tiltyard for jousting.

Notable groups

The oppressive or wealthy

Priests, from the lowly parish priest assisting his flock, to bishops and archbishops whose proclamations are heard across the kingdom.

Magicians: astrologers and alchemists, employed by the powerful to carry out research, or hired by the middle classes to tell their fortune.

Courtiers: aristocrats, gentry or assistants, perhaps hurrying between Whitehall and Westminster.

Spies, members of the Queen's nascent espionage ring.

Everyday people

Newcomers or Foreigners, seeking their fortune in the big city.

Cunning folk, low-born folk with passed-down knowledge of herbs, charms and spirits. Hired by commoners to bless their future, lift a curse or heal sickness.

Vagrants such as beggars or the homeless; found on every street corner.

Coney-catchers: hustlers. Often use rigged gambling to part newcomers from their coppers.

Performers such as poets, actors and playwrights.

History

England has endured a trying half-century. The country has gone back and forth over the question of whether the nation is Catholic (and owes spiritual allegiance to the Pope), or Protestant (a reformed Christianity). In the past 15 years the country has seen four different monarchs, each with wildly different religious views. The nation has suffered the rigors of Fortune's wheel, and their spiritual and dynastic faith has been shaken.

Furthermore, Dioscorian seers predict that within a year the city will be struck by a great pestilence. If this happens, anyone of means will flee into the country, leaving the poor trapped in a plague city. Some will seal themselves into their dwellings, others will organize quarantine procedures, and others still will behave madly without regard for their safety, knowing the plague is sent by God or the Devil and is beyond man's ability to control.

Culture

The English are a proud, confident people, loyal to their royal family despite recent hiccups. The English are proud of their warlike heritage in the Hundred Years' War, but reticent when an older relative brings up the Wars of the Roses, a chaotic period of civil strife.

Londoners are more independent and single minded than their rural fellows. The metropolis – the highest concentration of people ever seen in England – forces people into close quarters and highlights the rift between rich and poor. It also allows opportunities for all manner of people to mix on its cobblestoned streets, offering the poor a chance to take advantage of the rich.

Religion

Due to the Queen's recent reforms, the English church is headed by the Queen alone, but retains many of the trappings of Catholicism such as choral music, lavish crosses and chalices. Catholicism is banned, but the Queen has no issue with Catholics as long as they keep their practice private. Radical forms of Protestantism such as Puritanism are banned.

In response, the Pope has sent Jesuit priests (stalwart Catholic agents) to England in secret, as part of the "counter-reformation". These priests are hidden in the homes of secret Catholics, and might attempt to foment a Catholic uprising.

Crime and punishment

Punishment is a source of entertainment. Executions and corporal punishments are carried out in public: a jolly treat for the whole family!

Petty crimes are punished by a fine, or a turn in the stocks or on the whipping post. More serious crimes, or repeat offenses, are punished by some form of mutilation: the amputation of fingers or hands, or branding on the hands, arms or cheeks.

Some crimes (particularly treason) are punished by death. Religious treachery, such as hiding a Jesuit priest, is punished by hanging or, in rare cases, burning at the stake. Witchcraft is punished by hanging. If a witch earnestly repents, however, the sentence might be commuted.

Race and oppression

England expelled its Jews centuries ago. They are perceived as deceiving, greedy tricksters and demonized in plays, even though few Englishmen have ever met one. Ex-Jewish converts to Christianity are technically permitted, but are treated with suspicion.

Geopolitics

England is a second-rate power, and is relatively weak against the threats of France or Spain. The English are militarily belligerent—they remember the glory days of the Hundred Years War—but have not enjoyed a serious victory in some time.

As such, the Queen avoids getting into foreign conflicts to conserve the nation's resources, and relies on espionage to outmaneuver her opponents. Rumor has it the Queen is recruiting a group of “Watchers”, spies who will interpret letters, crack ciphers and observe suspected traitors. They might even frequent alehouses and inns to keep their ears to the ground, and spy on the public.

Allies and enemies

England is officially allied with Spain, since the Spanish King harbors hopes of marrying Elizabeth, just as he married the last Queen. But Elizabeth is stalling to maintain English independence, and he grows impatient.

Across the channel, France looks on enviously, still bitter after centuries of intermittent conflict—but religious tensions are tearing the country apart. To the north, France's old ally Scotland is preoccupied with a monarchical crisis.

English trade is heavily reliant on selling wool to the Netherlands across the channel. Good relations with the Netherlands, and with Protestant Germanic states, are the backbone of English commerce.

Opinion of Dioscoria

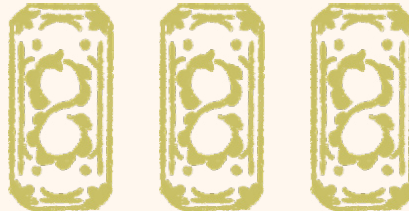
To the Elizabethan court, Dioscoria is but a distant legend. Its resources might be helpful for the Queen's pet alchemists and magicians—if it exists at all.

Further reading

- ◆ For a map, see the one spuriously known as the “[Agas Map](#)”.
- ◆ For daily life: an extensive summary of life in [London](#) at internetshakespeare.uvic.ca.
- ◆ For commerce: “[Food in Elizabethan England](#)”, The British Museum (www.bl.uk).
- ◆ For English magic: *The Cunning Man’s Handbook*, by Jim Baker.
- ◆ For details of the city and its response to plague: *The Plague in Shakespeare’s London*, by F.P. Wilson
- ◆ A firsthand account of London in 1603: *A Survey of London*, by John Stow.

Common names of the region

Agnes, Alexander, Alice, Ambrose, Amy, Archibald, Arthur, Barnaby, Ben, Brian, Charity, Chidiock, Cuthbert, David, Edith, Eleanor, Ellen, Eustace, Florence, Geoffrey, Gerald, Gertrude, Hubert, Hugh, Humphrey, James, Joan, Job, Lambert, Lancelot, Leonard, Leticia, Louis, Mabel, Mark, Martin, Maurice, Matthew, Michael, Owen, Peregrine, Perkin, Peter, Philip, Piers, Ralph, Reginald, Reynold, Roger, Ross, Rowland, Sabine, Simon, Stephen, Susan, Thomasine, Walter, William.



LISBON

Overlooking the natural harbor at the mouth of the river Tagus, Lisbon is perhaps the wealthiest city of the time: a metropolis in its golden age. The seat of the vast Portuguese trading empire, Lisbon is the place to be for the mercantile elite. It is often said: “You haven’t seen anything good until you’ve seen Lisbon.”

Lisbon is a city of contrasts: muddy alleyways twisting between medieval hovels clash with the wide, well-paved Rua Nova, renowned for its commerce. Ramshackle houses scattered around the outskirts rest in the shadow of cathedrals and palaces in the new Manueline style, proclaiming Portugal’s newfound wealth and splendor.

The Empire has achieved greatness. Its capital calls to all who would listen, promising that if they seek their fortunes in Lisbon, the world can be theirs—just as Portugal has allegedly made the world its own.



Ruling power: King Sebastião I (r. 1557–1578)

The child-king Sebastião I, now a boy of nine years, has reigned for half his short life. The regency is handled by his paternal grandmother, Catherine of Austria, who is deeply concerned with her family's education. Catherine has accumulated a substantial library, holds a regular salon at the palace, and has welcomed women scholars into her household.

The functioning of the monarchy is ensured by the tireless work of the Royal Council, representing all crucial parts of government, administration, religion, and most importantly, trade and commerce.

The Inquisition stands ready to stamp out heresy in Lisbon or, more likely, to persecute ex-Jews. Ties are strong between the monarchy and the Inquisition: the Grand Inquisitor is appointed by the King, and must be a member of the royal family.

The Portuguese monarchs, once warriors, are now merchant kings keen to secure trade and safeguard commercial influence. Their goals are most often to steer trade towards routes that would advantage them commercially. To this end, Portuguese explorers have been exploring and seizing ports along the Arabian coast by force.

Districts

Rua Nova

The city's primary commercial center, the Rua Nova is a wide street lined by two terraces of three- or four-storied houses. Beneath the apartments overlooking the bustling avenue, and behind a columned walkway at ground level, shops of all varieties can be found offering goods, or services like changing and borrowing money. Merchants of all kinds fill the immaculately paved road, offering a ceaseless variety of products from the farthest corners of the globe: street foods and fragrant spices, luxury furniture and porcelain from the Ming dynasty, textiles and carpets, precious stones and jewelry, exotic animals both living and taxidermied, and notaries capable of transcribing one's correspondence and ensuring its delivery.

Walking down the Rua Nova, visitors brush shoulders with a multitude of people: performers and priests, grizzled sailors and newly wealthy merchants, knights and slaves, common fieldhands and wizened academics. If there is a commodity to be purchased or a type of soul to meet under the sun, they can be found on the Rua Nova.

Medieval quarter

Not remodeled in centuries, Lisbon's winding medieval streets show the contrast between Portugal's past and present. Unplanned and ramshackle, these homes and street markets are dirty, mud-caked, and divided by narrow, crooked streets winding up the hillside.

Fortunate sailors who survive the perils of their first voyages and secure their fortunes often take up residence here. Though the homes here are no mansions, to own a place to lay one's head is a sure sign that one has "made it".

Waterfront

Lisbon is defined by maritime excellence: cartography, shipbuilding, the production of naval instruments. Shipwrights, assisted by immense cranes, are constantly building new vessels at the waterfront shipyard, visible to anyone wandering along the river. Some of these ships are large enough to rival the Ribeira Palace for scale.

Fleets to foreign climes, particularly India, tend to leave in December and return in the summer, laden with luxurious new goods and exotic animals. These fleets of six to two dozen ships dominate the life of the city upon their return, the harbor buzzing with activity as workers scramble to unload, and crowds gather to glimpse the unimaginable rarities they might buy for themselves in the markets over the next few days.

City center

Known as 'Baixa', the city center is oriented around the spacious **Rossio Square**, bordered by the **São Domingo Monastery** and the **Estaus Palace** on its northern side. Though it fails to rival the Rua Nova as a center of commerce, the square hosts the sales of particularly large and luxurious goods, such as ornate cabinets or rhinoceroses. Running the eastern length of the square is the palatial Todos-os-Santos hospital, the city's health provider where doctors also study anatomy.

Baixa is also home to several smaller markets manned by merchants unable to claim a space on the Rua Nova, or whose goods are too niche to command such a prominent place. Guild halls and industrial processes flourish here; craftspeople, enslaved servants, academics, and artists wind through the streets and alleys.

Intellectual quarter

Nestled between the waterfront and the city center, the district of Chiado offers a flurry of culture. Cafes, bookstores, theaters and the residences of writers, artists, and intellectuals set themselves apart from the bustling hive of commerce to focus on the pursuits of creativity and the mind. Though lacking the refined splendor of Lisbon's mansions, a wealth of culture is here for the finding. One only has to navigate the right smoke-filled halls, and strike up a conversation with the right savant.

Wealthy quarter

Uphill from the hustle and bustle, featuring traditional architecture and narrow streets, the neighborhood of Bairro Alto is home to the palaces, mansions, and luxurious apartments of the nobility, the wealthy, and the elite. Though removed and well-to-do, the district features a vibrant nightlife for those with a bit more coin to spend on pursuits of pleasure.

Locations and monuments

Chafariz d'el Rei

"The King's fountain", found near the waterfront, is a fixture of social life where people of all walks of life meet and mingle. A brick wall with six gargoyle spouts dispenses water behind a colonnade; people gather nearby, or wait their turn, in the adjacent square. Lively and crowded, this gathering spot shows just how multicultural this globe-spanning empire is, and the breadth of people who have settled at its heart.

São Jorge Castle

Once the palatial estate of the King, this hilltop fortress stands as a reminder that the Portuguese Empire, once a kingdom of crusaders ruled by a warrior king, has left this medieval legacy behind in favor of trade and splendor.

Ribeira Palace

The newly constructed royal palace was built near the river, only a stone's throw away from the Rua Nova, to embed the monarchy at the nexus of commerce, wealth, and exploration that has made the Empire so powerful. Guests in the King's court have been impressed by his troupe of finely outfitted black musicians; their skilful playing is a sign of the Empire's reach, and its delight in the exotic.

The estate is also surrounded by the royal mint, shipyard, and armory, the areas of highest import to the Empire: money and military might. The palace also houses the **Casa da India**, the organization responsible for managing Portugal's trade and exploration. Possessing the most advanced maps and charts in the world, this customs house oversees the comings and goings of trade fleets and manages all aspects of overseas commerce.

Tower of Belém

The ceremonial gateway to Lisbon and an important fixture in the city's defenses. This fortified waterfront tower overlooks the mouth of the river, and serves as a point of embarkation for explorers setting off to claim glory and riches.

Church of St Dominic

The "São Domingos" is a convent of Dominican monks, but also the headquarters of the Portuguese Inquisition, and the site of much of the Inquisition's violence and torture. The Inquisition is headed by a Grand Inquisitor who must be a royal family member, named by the Pope and confirmed by the King.

It wasn't until 1536 that the inquisition was formally established, but religious violence is not a new phenomenon. Thirty years prior, in the square before this church, thousands of "New Christians"—recent converts from Judaism—were massacred, when three Dominican friars whipped a crowd into a frenzy.

Estaus Palace

A palace to house courtiers, foreign dignitaries and visiting rulers who lack permanent residences in Lisbon. Since it is next door to the Church of St Dominic, the Inquisition uses its lower floors as a prison for heretics. The expanding Inquisition is eager to move into the Estaus Palace and make it their new, grander headquarters.

Notable groups

The oppressive or wealthy

Constables: characterized by their distinctive red hats with white feathers, and marked on the left shoulder with a golden badge of office.

Inquisitors: holy men in white tunics covered by black robes. Inquisitors demand adherence to Catholicism, and often target ex-Jews.

Everyday people

Enslaved servants: making up nearly ten percent of Lisbon's population, slaves are predominantly from Africa, but also India, South America, and Asia.

Merchants from all over Europe, drawn in by Lisbon's economic boom.

Seafarers, sailors and explorers: either young and eager, terrified and inexperienced, or grizzled with age. Many of these sailors don't survive their first few voyages.

Apothecaries and doctors, finding customers on the Rua Nova.

History

At the turn of the sixteenth century, King Manuel I undertook the task of urbanizing the jumbled and medieval city of Lisbon. By reclaiming land from the river, he demonstrated that the Empire was an imposing force, capable even of ruling nature. From this effort emerged the Terreiro do Paco square, the brand new Ribeira palace, and the Lisbon waterfront that would become the nation's economic backbone.

From this point on, Portuguese sailors and explorers began to sail and chart the Americas, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. Their spoils began to flow through Lisbon, attracting further trade and luxury goods, ready to satisfy the tastes of the wealthy across Europe. As a result, Portugal controlled all trade between Japan and the Straits of Gibraltar for decades. Merchants now migrate from across Europe—even in some cases from India, China or Japan—to claim a part of Lisbon's wealth for their own.

Only thirty years later, in 1531, the city was struck by an earthquake which destroyed a third of all structures and caused the deaths of nearly thirty thousand people. The river flooded, and ships were cast onto rocks, or stranded on the riverbed when the water retreated. The seers of Dioscoria know this was not the first such disaster to strike the area, and are wary that the next such occurrence may come sooner than any dare suspect.

Culture

Lisbon has been attracting outsiders for decades, either by making itself appealing to foreigners—who come for commercial opportunities and to be “at the center of the world”—or by enslaving people, and forcing them to live here directly. It is not clear whether this prosperity makes Lisboetas happier. They are seen as gloomy, melancholic, timid and unsmiling, unlike their more jovial foreign counterparts.

Religious persecution

Lisbon has a large “New Christian” population: Jews who have converted to Christianity. Sixty years ago the Spanish expelled their Jewish population, many of whom fled over the border into Portugal. While they were permitted to stay, the Portuguese King demanded all Jews convert to Catholicism. By 1562 the Old and New Christian populations are integrated on a practical level, though anyone with New Christian ancestry is subject to religious suspicion.

This has become the obsessive focus of the Portuguese Inquisition: far from focusing on the threat of Protestantism or heresy, most of their efforts are bent on stalking, accusing and punishing New Christians, in some cases seizing their property. Old Christian businessmen jealous of their New Christian rivals have been known to drip a deadly rumor or two into the Inquisition’s ears. In the most extreme cases, the Inquisition holds an “auto-da-fé”: a public ritual of mass torture to show what happens to unbelievers and the disobedient, held on the palace waterfront square.

Despite these measures, the Portuguese authorities are still paranoid about Jewish influence. Visiting Jews must wear yellow symbols to single themselves out from the Christian population, and they are followed by the Inquisition during their stay to ensure they do not foment any anti-Catholic activity or contact New Christians as part of some grand conspiracy.

Race and slavery

Europeans often remark that the streets of Lisbon are like a game of chess, with as many black figures as white. This is a gross exaggeration—the number is more like one in ten—but demonstrates how racially diverse the city is in comparison to others, and how noteworthy this is to its white population. Mixed couples are accepted, but frowned upon by traditionalists.

Slavery is a major economic pillar throughout Lisbon. Slave auctions occur in town or market squares, or sometimes in the streets of the city center. The trade is largely unregulated except for the payment of taxes on all imported goods, slaves included. Enslaved servants work menial jobs such as cleaning, dock labor, boatmen, second-hand-clothes dealers, and water fetching. However, not all non-whites are enslaved. Many are free expats seeking opportunity in the city; some were once enslaved but have since been freed; and some are the free children of enslaved people. Some of these non-whites are wealthy and may even own land. These free non-whites make up a significant portion of a vibrant multicultural population.

Geopolitics

Allies and enemies

Portugal has established colonies around the world, sometimes via negotiation, but often through force and violence. These colonies, present through much of the Arabian Sea, must tolerate their Portuguese oppressors... for now.

Portugal is also envied by most European powers for its international economic success. Spain in particular is eager to outpace Portuguese exploration and colonial expansion.

Opinion of Dioscoria

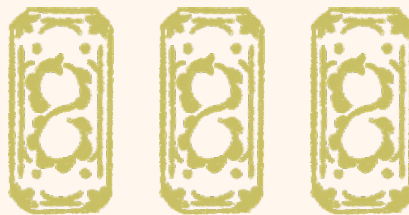
Portugal has heard rumors of Dioscoria in its many voyages, and are alarmed at the thought of a rival power in the Arabian Sea—particularly since Dioscorian ethics may cause them to interfere in Portuguese expansion. As such, the Portuguese monarchy keeps a sharp eye out for Dioscorian Agents, or intelligence pertaining to the isle.

Further reading

- ◆ For a general overview: “[Inside Portugal: Lisbon in the sixteenth century](#)”, by José Tadeu Arantes, from [agencia.fapesp.br](#).
- ◆ For maps: Braun and Hogenberg’s panoramic [view](#) of Lisbon, or Hoefnagel’s bird’s-eye [view](#).
- ◆ For analyses of Lisbon paintings and commercial spaces: “[New exhibition sheds light on Renaissance Lisbon](#)”, from Queen Mary University of London ([qmul.ac.uk](#)), and “[Lisbon in the sixteenth century: decoding the Chafariz d’el Rei](#)”, by Stefan Halikowski.
- ◆ For a thorough analysis of the city, focusing on the Rua Nova: *The Global City: on the Streets of Renaissance Lisbon*, by Gschwend and Lowe.
- ◆ For a firsthand account: *Urbis Olisiponis Descriptio* by Damião de Góis, translated and reprinted as *Lisbon in the Renaissance* by Jeffrey S. Ruth.
- ◆ For images of Lisbon: the paintings of the Chafariz d’El-Rei and the Rua Nova, both painted by unknown Dutch artists.

Common names of the region

Adelaide, Adriana, Affonso, Agueda, Alvaro, Amerique, Antonio, Balltesar, Beatriz, Benedita, Bernaldo, Caetana, Candida, Christovam, Cosme, Delfina, Diogo, Doroteia, Duarte, Efigenia, Eloisa, Fabia, Fatima, Fernam, Francisco, Gabriela, Gaspar, Genoveva, Goncalvo, Ines, Ivone, Joam, Joana, Jorge, Ligia, Lopo, Luciana, Luis, Lurdes, Mafalda, Manuel, Marcia, Marina, Martim, Narcisa, Neves, Nuno, Ofelia, Orquidea, Paulinha, Pero, Quinta, Rodrigo, Rosalia, Rute, Ruy, Silvia, Sol, Symao, Tome, Ursula, Valeria, Vicente, Vitoria, Viviane.



VENICE

A city of 170,000 people and one hundred islands in the shallow Venetian Lagoon. Located in northeastern Italy in an enclosed bay, this nation of co-mingling artists, merchants, clergymen and politicians is held in balance by the Doge's emphasis on cooperation and social harmony.

Though largely orthodox Roman Catholics, the state is notable for its freedom from religious fanaticism, earning it the ire of the Papacy. A once-powerful but dwindling merchant empire, Venice is attempting to cling to its economic and political laurels. For the layperson, however, it remains a thriving metropolis typical of Renaissance Italy.

The city's villas emerge directly onto slithering canals, crammed beside its tall cathedrals and vast squares. Its Jewish ghettos and lavish districts brim with artists, sculptors and craftspeople, all squabbling, haggling, and mingling—often at the same time.



Ruling power:

Doge Girolamo Priuli (r. 1559–1567)

Venice is currently ruled by Doge Girolamo Priuli, and governed by layers upon layers of councils filled with savii (wise men), colleges, and assemblies. Venice is a government characterized by intrigue and political maneuvering, within an official structure designed to limit the prevalence of both.

Dioscorian philosophers predict that this Venetian model of checking and balancing power may gain traction on the world political stage and influence future governments. But the iteration found in Venice, despite its best intentions, is a political snake pit plagued by Papal and Ottoman hawks. The city is held in balance by its dutiful servants, chief among them the Doge's College of Ten, under whose supervision justice is served more-or-less fairly. Their efforts have, until now, prevented riots and political unrest—if necessary, by prosecuting treasonous citizens.

The city state's mainland holdings provide a stable influx of aspiring artists, tradespeople and manual laborers, as well as the city's staple resources.

Districts

Venetian Arsenal

The largest industrial complex found anywhere in Europe, the Arsenal employs nearly ten percent of the city's population and is capable of producing up to one ship each day. A flurry of lumber and cloth, construction and assembly, permeated by the smell of bubbling tar and woodsmoke, this complex builds the lifeblood of Venice's vast trade empire: its naval fleet.

Piazza San Marco

The Piazza San Marco is the beating heart of the Venetian empire. The square is ringed by the palace of the Doge along with lesser mansions and palaces, and crowned with St. Mark's Basilica, a splendid demonstration of the city's wealth, power and Catholic heritage.

Administrators hurry past, heatedly discussing matters of state. Wealthy merchants from around the world conduct their business with clients, or simply perambulate to be seen in public. Walking through this district, one is struck by a city seemingly overflowing with wealth, power and luxury: the thrumming of an empire struggling to return to its former glory.

Canals

There are only two ways to navigate the islands of Venice: via the canals, or over them. Winding through serpentine channels and ornate bridges, the canals are thronged by gondolas, usually piloted by enslaved black gondoliers. They stretch through the city: connecting, diverging, rejoining, and spreading like arteries. Major canals are a flurry of boats and barges laden with bales of goods.

Docks

A cacophony of ocean spray and the cries of sailors. The docks are a place of timber and rope and salt, far from the gilt and marble of the Piazzas and mansions. The quays belong to the merchants and, more than any place in Venice, to the sea.

Exotic goods are unloaded from the ships of the merchant fleet, each of which is obligated to pay an import tax in salt. Officials patrolling the quays ensure that order is maintained and all fees are rightly paid.

Markets

The heart of Venice's commercial activity, the city's markets are colorful, vibrant and thriving, and attract people regardless of their station or prominence. Here there is something for everyone. Those with expensive tastes can try the Mercerie: a shop-lined street selling luxury items, jewelry, textiles and clothing. Those whose interests are more niche and central-European might visit the German merchants, who are only permitted to sell in the Fondaco dei Tedeschi.

Whichever market a traveler finds themselves in, they can be assured of the fairness of the transaction thanks to the city's regulatory guilds and institutions. Their strict regulations allow the government to control the flow of goods through the city, maintain economic dominance and ensure the protection of local merchants above foreigners.

Ghetto Nuovo

Established in 1516, the Ghetto Nuovo is the small area where Venice's thousand-odd Jews are forced to live. The Ghetto is crowded, and its gates are locked at night until noon the next day. Christian guards patrol the canals in boats to ensure compliance. Jewish Venetians are obligated to wear signs of identification: a yellow badge or sash. With limited opportunity to find work, the Jewish population are only allowed to operate as pawnbrokers and moneylenders, or to work in metal foundries.

Art and industrial districts

The artists of Venice are experts at both their craft, and at bragging about it: they are quarrelsome, jealous, vitriolic, visionary or, in the worst case, all of these at once. In the districts housing their apartments and workshops, artists discuss their craft, commiserate over lost commissions, or gossip about the latest prodigies—and how they're actually not what they're cracked up to be.

Locations and monuments

The Molo

This broad stone quay to the south of the Piazza San Marco is the point of disembarkation for all distinguished guests and prominent officials. The quay is flanked by two granite columns, one topped by the winged lion of St. Mark, the other by Venice's first patron, St. Theodore, standing on a crocodile. Among esoteric circles it is rumored that these pillars emanate inscrutable magical forces to protect the city and maintain its prosperity.

The Doge's palace

The Doge's palace is the core of Venetian political life, and houses meeting places and offices for the city's councils and ministries. This is also where the Doge welcomes dignitaries and esteemed guests. The Doge's soldiers are Italian mercenaries armed with vicious, poisoned lances.

The palace structure is prone to burning, and had to be refurbished after a fire in 1483 and another in 1547. Even now, Dioscorian seers warn that the current renovations will still be underway when disaster strikes again.

Campo San Paulo

The largest campo in Venice, this wide paved plaza is a common venue for entertainment and spectacle. The square frequently hosts elegant masked balls, mass sermons, musical and theatrical performances, and bullfights.

Rialto bridge

The oldest and greatest bridge across the grand canal, the Rialto bridge is an architectural and engineering marvel. It stands as a symbol of the quality of Venice's craftsmen, as well as its wealth and opulence. The bridge is a major thoroughfare across the canal, and houses rows of shops for those merchants of too little influence to secure a spot in the nearby Rialto market.

Notable groups

The oppressive or wealthy

The Council of Ten are the foremost of the powers of Venice. As the Doge's advisory council, they steer the state to prosperity and safety.

Savii ("wise men"): The uncountable army of bureaucrats and clerks who administer the government, identifiable by the regalia of their office.

Scuole members, members of social clubs and fraternities bound to support each other. Identified by fraternal symbols.

Constables are organized into distinct groups, each under its own captain. Loathed by the people: "Cop" and "Cop's woman" are sharp insults.

Everyday people

Artists and craftsmen, such as goldsmiths, painters, sculptors, glassblowers and glazers.

Musicians, whose performances fill the canals with song every evening.

Performers, such as street actors and the improvisational experts of the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Moneylenders and bankers, poised to make a killing or a catastrophic loss when they discover whether their investments have survived piracy and robbers.

Merchants, particularly of luxury goods.

Culture

Venice's unique position as an island cluster on the edge of Italy has isolated it from the turmoils of the other city states, allowing its people to pursue the pleasures of art. Its position at the crossroads of trade between Europe and the Islamic world ensures a continuous flow of goods such as spices, pigments, fabrics and luxury items, many of which have found their way into middle class homes alongside locally made Venetian glassware, and colorful glazed ceramics.

Each February the city celebrates its famous carnival. During this period gambling is permitted, regulations on dress are suspended and citizens go about masked and dressed as they like. However, no masked person is permitted to gamble, since this would hinder the collection of debts. Underground gambling dens have sprung up to meet popular demand.

Dürer, a German artist traveling through the city, claims Venetians are genial, welcoming and deeply engaging. He also warns his readers that “there are also amongst them the most faithless, lying, thievish rascals; such as I scarcely believed could exist on earth; and yet if one did not know them, one would think that they were the nicest men”.

Religion

Although the people of Venice are mostly Roman Catholics, the Inquisition—fanatically present in Rome, Spain and Portugal—has not taken root here. Nobody has been executed as part of the Counter Reformation.

Legal and community

Venetian citizens believe their city strengthens community, and promotes liberty and equality. Venetian culture emphasizes relations between neighbors, living together in relative equality. Petrarch, in the mid-fourteenth century, described Venice as “solidly built on marble but standing more solid on a foundation of civil concord.” Its government, unlike many Italian states, is only somewhat corrupt.

Venice's wealth has, however, led to a certain profligacy. Many Venetian households—even the older, more established families—can be ruined by reckless spending and a run of gambling debts. The Venetian state has stepped in and regulated social dress, partly to keep dowries affordable and prevent the marriage market from freezing: multiple affluent families have been ruined by lavish spending on the latest fashions.

A cornerstone of Venetian community is the **scuole**. These are brotherhoods, founded as religious institutions set up with the purpose of providing mutual assistance and humanitarian work. They provide an important guarantee against poverty and play a crucial role in protecting individuals and families in need. Today, many scuole provide a more civic purpose, and in some cases are purely corporate.

Slavery

It is unclear whether Venetians' rosy view of themselves is also held by their slaves. Roughly three thousand of Venice's people are enslaved, and typically work either as gondoliers or as servants in the homes of the wealthy. No patrician family is complete without a retinue of three or four enslaved servants, and even Venetian artisans use enslaved workmen in their shops and workshops.

Enslavement is not inheritable: the children of slaves are born free. It is typical for a slaveholder to free their enslaved servants in their will.

History

Once the most prosperous city in Europe, Venice has now been surpassed by the Portuguese and Ottoman Empires. It is not only Venice's pride that is wounded by this development, but its very stability. Devastated by repeated plagues, and now facing a shrinking of its economic power and the loss of its territorial claims to the east, the city's mood is simultaneously a clamor for political rejuvenation, and an air of lighthearted thriving.

Geopolitics

Allies and enemies

Relations with the Papacy are tense: multicultural Venice lacks the zeal to torment and execute its non-Christian population.

Relations with the Ottoman Empire thrum with tension. The Empire dominates the Mediterranean to Venice's east, and is eager to continue expanding and seizing the city's island and coastal territories. Unable to stand up to Ottoman aggression directly, Venice has invested heavily in its diplomatic arm, effectively inventing the modern embassy while attempting to keep the Ottomans sweet. Occasional Ottoman-Venetian wars show this strategy has mixed success.

Opinion of Dioscoria

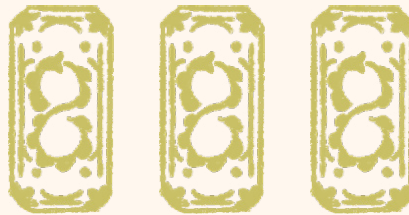
While the term 'allies' would be a vast overstatement, Venice and Dioscoria feel themselves to be kindred spirits. The existence of Dioscoria is not common knowledge, even among the savii, but those in the know appreciate the existence of another island nation that is lax when it comes to religious orthodoxy and revels in the celebration of the arts.

Further reading

- ◆ For maps and city views: Breydenbach's 15th century panorama of Venice; Braun and Hogenberg's bird's eye view in *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*. Interactive maps with highlightable layers are available at cartography.veniceprojectcenter.org.
- ◆ For images of Venice: Bellini's *Miracle of the Cross at the Bridge of San Lorenzo* and *Procession in St Mark's Square*; also, Carpaccio's *Miracle of the Relic of the Cross at the Ponte di Rialto*.
- ◆ For the experience of walking the city: "Walking in Sixteenth-Century Venice", by Filippo de Vivo.
- ◆ For a first-hand account, see Dürer's *Record of Journeys to Venice and the Low Countries*.
- ◆ For in-depth analysis of Venetian systems of credit and reputation, see *Inns and Bastioni: Credit and Poverty in Early Modern Venice*, by Matteo Pompermaier, from brewminate.com.

Common names of the region

Agnella, Alberto, Alegreza, Almerico, Anechino, Baldasera, Balsomo, Benintendi, Bertuccio, Bianca, Blasio, Campagnola, Cristina, Cristoforo, Cionisio, Dea, Donato, Elizabeta, Federico, Florentia, Francesca, Geminiano, Geragio, Gerita, Ginevra, Giovanni, Gregorio, Guido, Helena, Jacobo, Lenuzo, Leonello, Lucia, Luco, Mafeo, Magdalena, Marco, Maria, Martino, Morosino, Palmerio, Pascal, Pasqualina, Pencina, Prospero, Raffiano, Raynucio, Richa, Romaso, Tarvixio, Triadano, Uberto, Vito.





KONSTANTINIYYE

(“ISTANBUL”)

An ancient metropolis, “the city of the world’s desire”, Constantinople was once the capital of the Eastern Roman (or “Byzantine”) Empire. But when it was conquered a century ago by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, it became the jewel in their continent-spanning crown.

The city is built on the coast of the Bosphorus strait, the stretch of water linking the Black and Mediterranean Seas. Across the strait, to the east, lie the cemeteries of Üsküdar; to the north, across the harbor of the Golden Horn, lies Galata, a cluster of fine houses for the rich and well connected.

The city’s two hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants—dwarfing any European city—is a diverse mix from Europe, Asia and Africa, though the majority hail from Anatolia and the Middle East. The climate is warm and dry.

Ruling power: Sultan Suleiman I (r. 1520–1566)

Konstantiniyye is the capital of the Ottoman Empire, an Islamic sultanate ruled by Suleiman I, known as “The Lawgiver”. The Sultan is served by an army of pages and scholars who maintain his treasury, armory and bureaucracy. He is supported (and entertained) by his wife and other consorts, and his will is executed by the Grand Vizir, his highest minister.

The Grand Vizir is responsible for the safety and administration of the city, and makes regular inspections on horseback. Each district is administered by a qadi (judge); below him, each neighborhood is overseen by the local imam (priest). Each imam is responsible for one neighborhood, and the administration of local charitable donations. Since donations are often of land or houses, each imam is a mix of priest, landlord and local bureaucrat. Naturally, every imam is above reproach: petty corruption is surely below him.

Rumor has it the Sultan does not leave the city solely in the hands of his officials, but roams the streets in disguise, seeking out corruption and illegality and punishing it on the spot. But Sultans can also be wrathful: someone caught flaunting clothes beyond their station is ordinarily fined, but could be put to death if the Sultan is feeling impatient.

Districts

Harbors

The Golden Horn bristles with merchants, ships and cargo. From these harbors, vessels travel across the strait to Galata, into the Black Sea, or toward the Mediterranean. The edge of the city is peppered with harbors and wharfs. Every wharf has a warehouse or two nearby, where goods can be stored after being unloaded.

In the middle of the Bosphorus strait sits the Maiden's Tower, a garrisoned guard- and watchtower. In case of invasion, a great chain can be raised between Istanbul and the tower, cutting off sea access to the city.

Streets and alleys

Konstantiniyye's streets are a winding, unpredictable maze. Poorer areas are unpaved. Down the darkest, most winding alleyways one might find a bar that serves alcohol: forbidden under Ottoman Islam and only drunk in secret.

Most dwellings are single-storey houses of timber, adobe or mud, often just a single room for living and sleeping in. Amenities—toilets, kitchens, wells and so on—are shared by several houses, enclosed in a compound wall.

Each neighborhood has its own mosque, market, and a hamam (bath complex). These Turkish baths, descended from the baths of ancient Rome, are not just places to get clean, but places to relax alone or with friends, and for Muslims to ritually purify themselves.

The city is a tangle of streets, courtyards and mosques, but the streets are spacious: Constantinople was vast, and when the Ottomans rebuilt the city they had plenty of space for greenery and public compounds.

Bazaars

A bazaar is a grid of wide, covered tunnels lined with stalls and shopkeepers calling out their wares. Istanbul has two: the older Grand Bazaar, and the New Bazaar. A cluster of traders have set up stalls bridging the two, creating a market district. The area is surrounded by caravansaries: inns to house foreign merchants, offices for business transactions and storehouses for goods and merchandise. Performers entertain crowds in each caravansary's central yard: wrestlers, acrobats, snake charmers, fire dancers and animal trainers.

Gems and luxury goods are produced and sold in the Grand Bazaar, where the air is rich with gold dust. Several bankers occupy the Bazaar's core. At its outer edge, merchants produce elaborate goods of stone, wood and leather. In the Newer Bazaar merchants sell textiles, materials and clothing.

According to legend, if you wander long and deep enough in the Grand Bazaar you will find a portal to another world.

Mosques and külliyes

Istanbul has countless mosques. Each features a prayer hall for men, covered in prayer mats, and a maqfil: an upstairs gallery for women.

Most are surrounded by a külliye: a complex of buildings to support the mosque's community. A külliye might feature drinking fountains, a hospital, a soup kitchen or a convent for sufi (Islamic sages). Many külliyes also house schools: most have a primary school where children study religion, logic, astronomy, philosophy and mathematics, but larger külliyes have school- and lecture rooms for all ages, up to academic levels.

Wealthy districts

Located in the oldest, densest part of the city, these neighborhoods are located across the water from Galata, between the old palace and the Topkapi palace. These mansions have higher roofs and an upper story, housing a courtyard, garden, dining room, kitchen, and living room, as well as slave and servant quarters. The upper floor has private rooms for family members.

The residents of these wealthy neighborhoods are rich merchants or courtiers, many Jewish. Ottoman Jews can work in any profession; many of the city's wealthy merchants, businessmen and doctors are Jewish.

In addition to shops and inns, these neighborhoods contain numerous coffee houses. This recent trend has gripped the Ottoman middle class. Coffee houses are not just places to buy a hot drink, but to relax and discuss the intellectual pursuits of the day. They are also venues for performers and entertainers such as magicians, storytellers and folk poets.

Hippodrome

Once the city's racetrack, the Roman Hippodrome has decayed into a long, ruined public square. It is decorated with crumbling pillars, obelisks and statues, long ago plucked from the far reaches of the ancient world.

Between the hippodrome and the seawall lie the ruins of the Byzantine imperial palace. Little is left of this structure, which has been scavenged for stone, except the spirits of long-dead Emperors and the spiders and owls who attend their ongoing funeral. Some nearby Byzantine churches have been creatively repurposed: one is now a stable for the Sultan's elephants.

The underground

Below the city, the Byzantine underground slumbers. Tunnels run through much of the city, many of them forgotten. It is said there is an entrance within the Grand Bazaar, and locals know many others, but they are sworn to never divulge them.

The city also has a number of cisterns: underground reservoirs which served Byzantine basilicas or forums. They evoke both underground lakes, and crypts or temples. Rowing across, one glimpses fish rushing by in the flicker of torchlight. It is said these cisterns are haunted by the ghosts of Roman slaves who died in their construction.

The walls and coast

The walls of Constantinople are old, crumbling and legendary. The land around them is sparsely populated, and somewhat rural. Orchards, vineyards, beehives, food or rose gardens and the occasional windmill cluster at the city's edge. The houses here are simpler, with only one room. Each has a garden or small plot of land.

This is also where the Sultan's shipwrights work, in enclosed shipyards against the city walls. Many shipyard laborers are enslaved Christians, forced to build the Ottoman fleet.

Beyond the western walls is the slaughterhouse district, located outside the city. This is the city's source of meat, and is where the Janissary barracks obtains its food. Every day Janissaries lead a grisly caravan of animal carcasses down Butcher's Road to feed the troops. Since Janissaries have the right to go about their business unobstructed, anyone blocking the way—or crossing the street at an unwise moment—could be put to death on the spot.

Across the water

Galata, a suburb across the Golden Horn to the north, is a cluster of villas and mansions: homes for the wealthy and powerful, such as rich merchants or ambassadors.

Üsküdar, across the water to the east, is mostly sprawling cemeteries. These are grand public parks of rolling hills or dense forests, filled with grave markers, tombs and crypts. Most prominent are the tombs of Islamic scholars. Rumors claim they are plagued by Ghuls.

Locations and monuments

Topkapi Palace

The seat of Ottoman government and the Sultan's home, the Topkapi palace is located on a hill overlooking the Bosphorus. The palace is a fortress-town in its own right, enclosed in a fortified wall and surrounded by stables, gardens and other amenities. Tens of thousands of servants—enslaved or free—and courtiers dwell within the bustling walls.

The harem, where the sultan's wives, female slaves and female relatives live, is an environment of refined learning: a gilded cage. Potential mistresses of the Sultan are given new names, and learn to dance, recite poetry, play instruments and master the erotic arts. A skilled or beloved harem girl may become the Sultan's favorite and mother to his heir. The harem is run by eunuchs: men who have been castrated and enslaved.

Hagia Sophia

A thousand-year-old Orthodox cathedral, repurposed into a magnificent mosque. Aside from Islamic worship, the Hagia Sophia's külliye is the city's proto-university. Since the Ottoman conquest, Sultans have eagerly supported education and research. This külliye features lecture halls and teaching rooms, with scientists, astronomers and alchemists bustling to and fro.

Legend has it that two angels guard the Hagia Sophia and venerate Allah, and will walk its halls until the day of judgment.

Yedikule Fortress

The “fortress of seven towers”, built onto the old Byzantine walls around the ancient Golden Gate, the main entrance to the city. Legend says that as the walls fell to the Ottomans, an angel plucked the last Emperor from amongst his army, transmuted him to marble and hid him beneath the gate. Some day he will reawaken and claim the city.

The fortress is formed of seven towers, connected by a ring of mighty walls, and must be passed through to gain access to the Golden Gate and the city beyond. Day-to-day, the fortress serves as a prison

and barracks, and houses the state treasury and archives. The fortress is still under construction.

The Old Palace

The “Eski Saray” was the original palace used by Sultans after the conquest, now made obsolete by the Topkapi palace. The palace is located in the center of the city, surrounded by an inner and outer wall. Within the inner wall is the palace complex, including luxury apartments populated by disgraced concubines, and the mistresses or mothers of former Sultans. Gardens fill the space between the inner and outer walls.

To the north lies the Guild of Janissaries. This building comprises dozens of barracks, as well as kitchens and a bath, arranged around a mosque and a large square. There is also a drill field and dog kennels. The whole complex is enclosed in a wall, and accessed via a single gate.

Notable groups

The oppressive or wealthy

Courtiers: pashas (dignitaries or generals) or beys (lieutenants or governors).

Qadi, the city's judges and district administrators.

Imams, neighborhood priests and administrators/landlords.

Janissaries, the Sultan's crack troops and police force. Mostly ex-Christian slaves, or their sons or grandsons: the role of Janissary can be inherited.

Everyday people

Servants, both free and enslaved.

Scholars, studying religion, logic, mathematics, astronomy, alchemy, magic, law.

Laborers: street porters, carpenters, butchers and tailors.

Culture

The Ottoman capital is extremely diverse, made up of people from wildly different backgrounds. Each district of the city has its own culture: people often cluster together into native groupings, and might leave that neighborhood only seldom. Little remains of the pre-Ottoman Byzantines: after conquering the city, the Sultan quickly began repopulating it with immigrants from across his Empire, whether they consented or not.

There is an acknowledgement that the Ottomans are riding high, and that the Sultan is a powerful ruler capable of leading the Empire to great victories. Whether that strength is used to defend or persecute the powerless is another matter.

Law

Islamic citizens are tried under Sharia law. Other religious groups are tried in their own courts. Some minority rights are protected. A wife can accuse a drunken husband in court, entitling her to a divorce if he gets drunk again. Slaves have the right to be provided for by their master, and can ask to be resold.

Demographics

Most Konstantiniyyens are Muslim. Non-Muslims are fairly integrated into Konstantiniyyen society. Christians, Jews, Arabs, Turks, Greeks and Armenians live together peacefully, though they must pay a tax. Non-Muslims form ethnic neighborhoods. They are somewhat discriminated against, but not oppressed.

Those who go against social mores, such as gay men, women who resist gender roles, or radical sufis (Islamic sages) are persecuted. They might be publicly shamed, brought into court, or exiled from their communities.

Slavery

Slavery is legal and regulated. Slaves are typically people captured during raids or warfare, non-Muslim subjects of the Sultan pressed into slavery, or people who volunteer for slavery (or are volunteered by their family), perhaps because their family cannot support them.

Slaves of the state live in large compounds. Many state slaves are employed as shipwrights, or oarsmen for galleys; during winter they are imprisoned in the Galata shipyard dungeon with only rags to sleep on.

Private slaves work as house servants. If they are lucky they negotiate a contract, agreeing to serve for five to ten years and then be freed. Some private slaves become fond of their households, and remain either as a paid servant or by marrying into the family.

An enslaved person can be freed by someone paying their ransom; Islamic culture sees this as an act of great charity, but it is rare. State slaves can be freed by the Sultan.

History

Konstantiniyye is named for its founder, the Roman Emperor Constantine. To Europeans it is still Constantinople. After Rome fell, the city kept the torch of Roman culture burning. This torch was extinguished in 1453, when the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II besieged and captured the city.

By this point the city's population—once numbering half a million—was a mere ten thousand. Mehmed made Konstantiniyye his capital, invested in building projects, and relocated his subjects to fill the city, sometimes forcibly moving entire communities.

Geopolitics

Allies and enemies

The Ottoman Empire's broad territory means Istanbul is isolated from border skirmishes. The Ottomans are in a trade rivalry with Venice: they seek to expand their Mediterranean territories, while Venice seeks to maintain good relations and make war unpalatable. The Ottomans frequently clash with the Safavid Empire. The Holy Roman Empire is concerned about Ottoman northern expansion, having successfully defended Vienna from the Ottoman army thirty years ago.

Opinion of Dioscoria

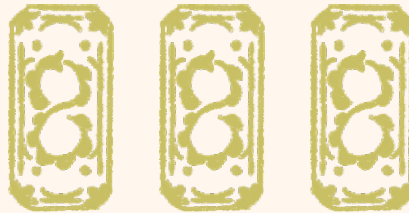
The Sultan and his scholars respect Dioscoria's attitude towards knowledge. In their minds, however, there is only one truth, and their reading of Islam has no room for Dioscorian heresy.

Further reading

- ◆ For maps: the 1572 map by Braun and Hogenberg in *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, based on Giovanni Vavassore's woodcut map from 1535.
- ◆ For panoramas: sketches of the city by Melchior Lorichs, available at eng.travelogues.gr.
- ◆ The *History of Istanbul* project (istanbultarihi.ist) is a thorough resource for the city's history.
- ◆ For an academic overview of the city: “Viewing, walking, mapping Istanbul, ca. 1580”, by Çigdem Kafescioglu.
- ◆ For a wider military perspective on the Ottoman Empire: *Islamic Gunpowder Empires*, by Douglas E. Streusand.
- ◆ For firsthand accounts: *A Description of the City of Constantinople*, by Pierre Gilles; or the account of the great fire of 1569 by Venetian ambassador Barbaro, in “The Great Fire in Istanbul – Two Views” or *Great Fire in the Metropolis*.

Common names of the region:

Ada, Ahmed, Ali, Amine, Ays'e, Bahar, Bayram, Behiye, Benefs'e, Cevahir, Devlet, Emine, Emir, Fatima, Hadice, Hakim, Hamza, Hasan, Huban, Husein, Ilyas, Irini, Isa, Kadem, Kara, Kismet, Lutfullah, Mansur, Manula, Mehmed, Muharrem, Musa, Mustafa, Nar, Nebi, Nefise, Neslihan, Omur, Ravza, Refik, Safiye, Salih, Sara, Selime, Sunduk, Surur, Tenrebile, Ulviye, Yagmur, Yani, Yunus, Yusuf, Zuhul



QAZVIN

Qazvin, the seat of the Safavid Empire and Shah Tahmasp I, recently relocated from Tabriz after its conquest by the Ottoman Empire. Qazvin is a major center of international trade due to its location at the crossroads connecting Tehran, Tabriz, and the Caspian sea. Merchants from India, Russia, the Ottoman Empire and beyond can be found resting in its caravansaries or hawking their wares in the covered bazaar.

The streets of Qazvin are dusty and choking, the surrounding landscape arid, providing a fitting backdrop to emphasize the lush greenery of the royal gardens dotted around the city. Once a town of little import beyond its role as a desert rest stop, the arrival of the Shah has seen the city bloom with new architecture and political importance. Vast garden neighborhoods and palatial estates have sprung up in the north of the historic settlement, a remarkable feat since the entire desert region is watered by a single qanat and a handful of streams. When the Shah commands "build me a garden," the architects do not bemoan the lack of water. They ask, "How lush?"



Ruling power: Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1524–1576)

Qazvin is the capital of the Safavid Empire. Shah Tahmasp has ruled for over thirty years. Tahmasp's rule is secure: his father cemented his dynasty's religious authority by claiming descent from an Islamic sage and establishing Shi'ism as the state religion. In his own reign, Tahmasp has further cemented his power by curbing the ambitions of the Qizilbash tribes who formerly held prominent political positions, now relegated to governorships of Safavid towns and settlements. Currently held in check, these nomadic desert tribes and their chiefs will continue to be a thorn in the side of the Empire.

Although opposition to the Shah is considered a sin, Tahmasp rules prudently and justly. Since the Shah is the source of all political and religious power, his favor is priceless political currency. As his most trusted advisor, the Grand Vizir holds most of that currency, but must defend it from envious rivals. It is also the Grand Vizir's task to keep the Qizilbash governors in check, and the government functioning, supported by the tireless work of the Shah's grand council.

The looming threat of the invading Ottomans and the Shah's flight from the thrice-overthrown former capital threatens a premature end to the Safavid dynasty. But through savvy alliances with European powers, and by leveraging the value of Iranian silks on the global market, Tahmasp has made Qazvin flourish. The city blossoms, both literally and figuratively, as a city of international commerce.

Districts

Palatial gardens

After moving the capital from Tabriz to Qazvin, the Shah ordered the construction of a garden pavilion and palatial estate on the northern edge of the old town. This now serves as his residence, and the administrative center for both the city and Empire. The palace precinct is located in the center of the city. The bazaar, the Jameh Mosque, and the older quarters of the city lie to the west and south.

Homes and Domiciles

Qazvin homes typically have one or two stories, are constructed of packed mud and straw around a central courtyard, and are shared by a multi-generational family. Most people sleep on the floor, but the wealthy may have a mat or rug. Distinct from the simpler and poorer houses found towards the center of the city, it is common to find princely residences and larger estates at the city's edges and adjacent to the walls.

Gardens

Found both inside and outside the city walls, Qazvin's lush, sprawling gardens are perfect for leisure and commerce. Residents can rest by the waters or purchase fresh fruit and produce. During wartime, troops make their encampments on the fields here. The Shah may also receive ambassadors or dignitaries here or, under more regrettable circumstances, oversee the sentencing or execution of prisoners.

Bazaars

The city's many bazaars are the mercantile hotspot of the Safavid capital. Featuring a covered hall with shops, stalls and lodgings for weary merchants, the bazaars also provide space for the city's guilds to conduct their business. Typical of buildings and institutions central to daily and social life, these structures were constructed and supported through charitable investments from wealthy citizens and nobles through the Islamic 'waqf' system.

Qazvin hosts traders from India, Russia, Europe, and the Ottoman Empire; it is truly a multicultural city. The presence of these merchants demonstrates the Empire's dependence on global trade.

Mosques

Dozens of mosques are scattered across the city, each with its own külliye: a complex of buildings around a central plaza, usually including a school, a clinic, kitchens or bakeries, baths, and other buildings housing charitable services for the community. Mosques are segregated by gender, and have two entrances. Shoes must be removed before entering.

Coffeehouses

A novel trend, coffeehouses have begun to emerge in cities across the Safavid Empire as locations of leisure, conversation, debate, discussion, and entertainment. It was common for storytellers to be found here day and night, embellishing their tales with theater and music. A daily ritual has come about where people begin their day with coffee and end it with wine, both accompanied by tobacco and, one hopes, lively conversation. Although wine is arguably forbidden by Islam, no Persian much cares.

The City Walls

The walls of the city house five main gates: one to the north, one to the southwest, and three in the eastern wall of the city. They feature turrets providing a sweeping view of the desert landscape and the city itself.

Locations and monuments

Chehel Sotun pavilion

The grand palatial pavilion and residence of the Shah is located in the sprawling Saadat Abad garden complex. This city-within-a-city features two public squares and a score of mansions, and is linked to Qazvin by a promenade running from the Jameh Mosque, in the old city, to the Ali Qapu gate, one of several entrances to the walled complex. The pavilion stands amid gardens, streams and pools in the complex's central square, and is a masterwork of elegant Safavid architecture, featuring delicate glazed tiles supported by elegant wooden pillars. Here the Shah, surrounded by all that is finest in his city, welcomes (and impresses) foreign dignitaries.

Jameh Mosque

One of the oldest mosques in Iran, rumored to have been constructed on an ancient fire temple. The huge arched, three-walled halls of the mosque and its marble Mihrab—a decorated arch pointing the way to Mecca—are spectacular. Found in the southwestern region of the city, the mosque and its surrounding külliye are a vital part of daily life, as a place of socialization and festivities. This is the largest and most attended Mosque in the city.

Tomb of Imamzadeh Hossein

A grave mosque reminiscent of a generous palace complex with its own walled garden, rows of plants, niches, grave stones and precious blue and cream tiles. The facade of the main gate features six ornamental minarets. A large courtyard opens from the main gate which leads to a pavilion-like, octagonal fountain house. The tomb is covered by a blue-yellow tiled dome, carried by slender columns. One can pray within the tomb: as with a mosque, one must remove one's shoes before entering, and the space is segregated by gender.

Sa'd al-Saltaneh caravansary

Caravansaries are expansive inns that provide travelers a place to rest to break up long journeys; they are typically found along major trade roads far from cities or settlements. This caravansary is located in the south of the city within the walls, and acts as a combination inn and hostel. This large building houses all the amenities a traveling trader could desire, including rooms for rent, stalls to sell their goods, and open spaces to mingle with each other and exchange gossip and rumors.

Kharraqan towers

Found in the desert about a day's ride from Qazvin, these two domed towers are a pair of centuries-old mausoleums. The external walls feature intricately carved geometric designs and a small window, allowing indirect light to enter the interior. The occupants of these monumental tombs have been lost to time.

Notable groups

The oppressive or wealthy

Qizilbash (tribal) chieftains, making backroom alliances and jockeying for political primacy when they're not busy governing their lands.

Diplomats and ambassadors, here to make political connections, maintain links with the Empire, or spy on it.

Ulama (judges), hearing and settling disputes, advocating for the common people, or engaging in underhanded dealings to keep the merchants sweet.

Everyday people

Merchants, many from foreign climes, passing through Qazvin and eager to make a profit on their wares.

Caravansary owners, eager to host and provide services for merchants.

Gardeners, maintaining the city's elaborate gardens.

Haydari and Ne'mati street fighters, eager to triumph over the other in their centuries-long street feud.

Religious figures such as priests or public cursers.

Desert travelers: who knows what mysterious figures drift out of the desert sands?

History

The Safavid Empire is still young, founded by Isma'il I only 60 years ago. This God-like figurehead of the Empire was defeated in battle at Chaldiran in 1514, losing his aura of invincibility and divine blessing as a result. While Tahmasp has secured his dynasty's position, the cracks in the foundation can be clearly felt.

After two decades of war with the Ottoman Empire, a capital city thrice-overthrown, and an economic position based on travel rather than producing any notable goods of its own, the Empire's stability is tenuous at best. Even peace with the Ottomans has done little to secure their position.

In the years since this peace, Tahmasp has seemingly retreated from his public role, preferring to spend his time in the lush palatial complexes and disregarding imperial affairs. He has not entirely abandoned the city, however, but still dispenses distant proclamations. For example, in an attempt to strengthen Shi'a practice and religious devotion, music and poetry has been forbidden at court, and he lambasts poets as drunkards, imploring his people to study the Quran instead.

As the Safavid capital, Qazvin hosts a large number of politicians and diplomats from across the world. These dignitaries are typically invited to stay in the palaces and pavilions found in one of the city's many gardens or complexes.

Culture

The population of the Safavid Empire is highly diverse, and the Persian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian languages are all commonly spoken. Since the Empire is an agrarian state with little presence in global trade, Shah Tahmasp I has sought to rectify this by encouraging the production of silks and woven carpets as a state industry.

Religion

Under Safavid rule, all religions other than Shi'a Islam are strongly persecuted. Conversion is mandatory and is enforced most strongly on the Sunni population. To the devout, the Shah is as vital a figure as God. In sickness or hardship it is not God they turn to, but the Shah. His people present him with gifts, kiss his palace doors, scramble for a piece of cloth from his garments, or gather leftover water in which he has washed his hands, for its healing properties.

The state encourages compliance by employing groups of public cursers to disavow its enemies, and through the tactics of extortion, intimidation and harassment. But religious tensions are nothing new: Sunni-Shi'a conflict within Safavid towns has been common for centuries. The Ne'mati and Haydari religious factions, originating in Tabriz, have found their way to Qazvin's streets; the districts of the city have been divided between them, laying the frontlines in a simmering religious street war.

Political

Until recently it was the Qizilbash—the desert chieftains—who ruled Qazvin, until Shah Tahmasp got their political schemes under control. They formed complicated tribal alliances and used them to apply pressure to the government.

Since Tahmasp's reforms they have been made governors within the Empire. These tribal chiefs are responsible for providing soldiers to the Shah's army and collecting revenues to pay for war. The local Qizilbash chiefs grow wealthy in both land and taxes. While they seem satisfied with the status quo for now, any political shakeup will soon have them jockeying for position again.

Religious officials and justice

The Ulama are religious officials who serve as judges and oversee the wellbeing of Qazvin's people and neighborhoods. The Ulama are granted the power of independent legal reasoning, exercising the religious and judicial authority of the Hidden Imam. The Shi'a Ulama often mediate between the people and the government. They have also formed a corrupt alliance with the city's merchants, using their religious clout to establish waqfs that protect the merchants' property and assets.

Street feuds

The city is split between two feuding factions: the Haydari and Ne'mati. The cause of this feud is unknown, but may have its roots in a Sunni-Shi'a dispute. This conflict has permeated the entire city, with districts pitted against each other in bitter rivalries. Tensions have only increased in the past sixty years, following the establishment of Shi'ism as the state religion and the forced conversion of the Sunni population.

Geopolitics

Allies and enemies

Qazvin is beset by enemies from within and without. Externally, the looming force of the Ottoman Empire chips away at Safavid borders; internally, the Qizilbash chiefs constantly jockey for position, threatening to infiltrate and destabilize the government.

The Empire is not entirely without allies, and has entered into an agreement with the Habsburg Emperor Charles V. He too is concerned by the Ottomans, and has agreed to provide aid and split the Ottoman forces should they attack. As a major power, Qazvin is also filled with ambassadors and spies from Spain, the Ottoman Empire, and most other European powers.

Opinion of Dioscoria

Dioscorian agents frequent the city of Qazvin as they make their way over land from the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean or further north, though this goes largely unnoticed by the Shah. The Safavid Empire is more focused on the threat posed by the Ottomans, and its own tenuous economic position. The Safavids are in need of allies, and are willing to cast a blind eye on the island of mystics and sinners.

Further reading

- ◆ For a broad historical overview, see the entry on “Kazwin” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Available at archive.org.
- ◆ For an overview of the Safavid Empire, see the Safavid entry in *World History Vol 2: from 1400* (available at openstax.org), or in *The Cambridge History of Iran* (cambridge.org).
- ◆ For a first-hand account, see *A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia, in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, by Charles Grey.
- ◆ For an analysis of coffeehouse culture, see “Coffee Houses, Urban Spaces, and the Formation of a Public Sphere in Safavid Isfahan”, by Farshid Emami.

Common names of the region:

Abbas, Afsoun, Amin, Ardashir, Azad, Bahador, Behnam, Bija, Dara, Delshad, Ebrahim, Erfan, Esmat, Farrokh, Firouz, Golbahar, Hadi, Hamid, Jafar, Jahan, Jamali, Jamileh, Kaveh, Khadija, Khanish, Khanzada, Kourosh, Laleh, Mahisti, Mahmoud, Mahsa, Minoo, Mozhdeh, Nahid, Nihani, Padshah, Parvin, Pertevi, Ra'na, Rahim, Saba, Sahar, Setareh, Shams, Sima, Tahereh, Yaser, Yasamin, Zartosht, Ziba, Zohreh.



The world of *The Hidden Isle* is filled with strange beasts and magical entities. Here is a non-exhaustive list.

COMMON CREATURES

Bichura or House spirit: A benevolent household spirit, which takes the form of a cat, dog, or a child in red. When unhappy, it will play tricks on the household until the issue is fixed. The only time humans typically see it is when it warns them of an impending household death or disaster.

Dragon: Snakes which have lived for centuries, and grown to immense size and wisdom, occasionally sprouting wings. Some are obsessed with riddles and treasure, others watch humans from afar and aid them if they deem them worthy.

Erboeru or Werewolf: People compelled to transform into wolves, or human-wolf hybrids, at the full moon. With practice they can control this ability. Spread by being bitten.

Ghost: Spirits of the dead, these linger in our world, bound by ties of unfinished business or magical interference.

Golem: Man-made servants of clay, stone or metal. Created by a Jewish or Kabbalistic sage. Animated by placing a paper, with a sacred name written on it, inside the golem. They can sometimes pass for human, but can't speak.

Ifreet or Demon: Malevolent jinni, more powerful than standard jinni. Ruled by the chief Shaytan, Iblis (the Islamic Devil). They wield immense magical power, but can only harm humans with consent or coercion. They delight in trickery and misleading bargains, to lead humans to their own downfall.

Nature spirit or Nymph: Guardians of forests, lakes, glades and rivers who can take human form. Neither good nor bad, they protect the natural spheres from which they derive their strength. Can grow larger than a person, or as small as a blade of grass.

Nightmare or Karabasan: A great spirit that shifts its form, sometimes into a great goat-like beast or a foaming black cloud. Presses down on sleepers' chests, giving them bad dreams and leaving them breathless as it drinks their fear.

Sphinx: A huge creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion. Delights in riddles and violence.

Ubir or Vampire: A creature of insatiable thirst. Created when a person dies with the weight of horrific sins. They leave their coffins to quench their thirst by sucking clouds from the sky, causing droughts, or by drinking the blood of the living. Their presence corrupts: they travel on stormclouds, bringing plague, discord and confusion to all in the vicinity.



ISLAMIC AND TURKISH CREATURES

Aldachi Han: The horseman of death. A well-built man dressed in long black robes, on a black horse. When someone dies, Aldachi Han collects them and takes them to the next world. When he enters a house, he brings his spirit accomplices with him who linger for 40 days. Nothing may be removed from the house for this period or they become angry.

Azmych: A misleading road spirit. Greets travelers on the road in the guise of someone trustworthy, then leads them in circles, perhaps to their deaths. Can imitate the voices of loved ones.

Ghul: A shapeshifting spirit that eats human flesh. Typically haunts cemeteries and takes on alluring forms to lure visitors to their deaths.

Jinn: (plural: Jinni). People created by Allah from fire. Normally invisible. Most jinni are not especially powerful, and live in large societies in desert ruins. Can possess people, but can be expelled by music. Occasionally, an especially powerful jinn will have the power to grant wishes.

Kayish Baldir: A man without arms or legs who begs travelers to help him. When they pick him up, straps burst from his neck and wrap around his victim, who is now enslaved and must take him wherever he wishes.

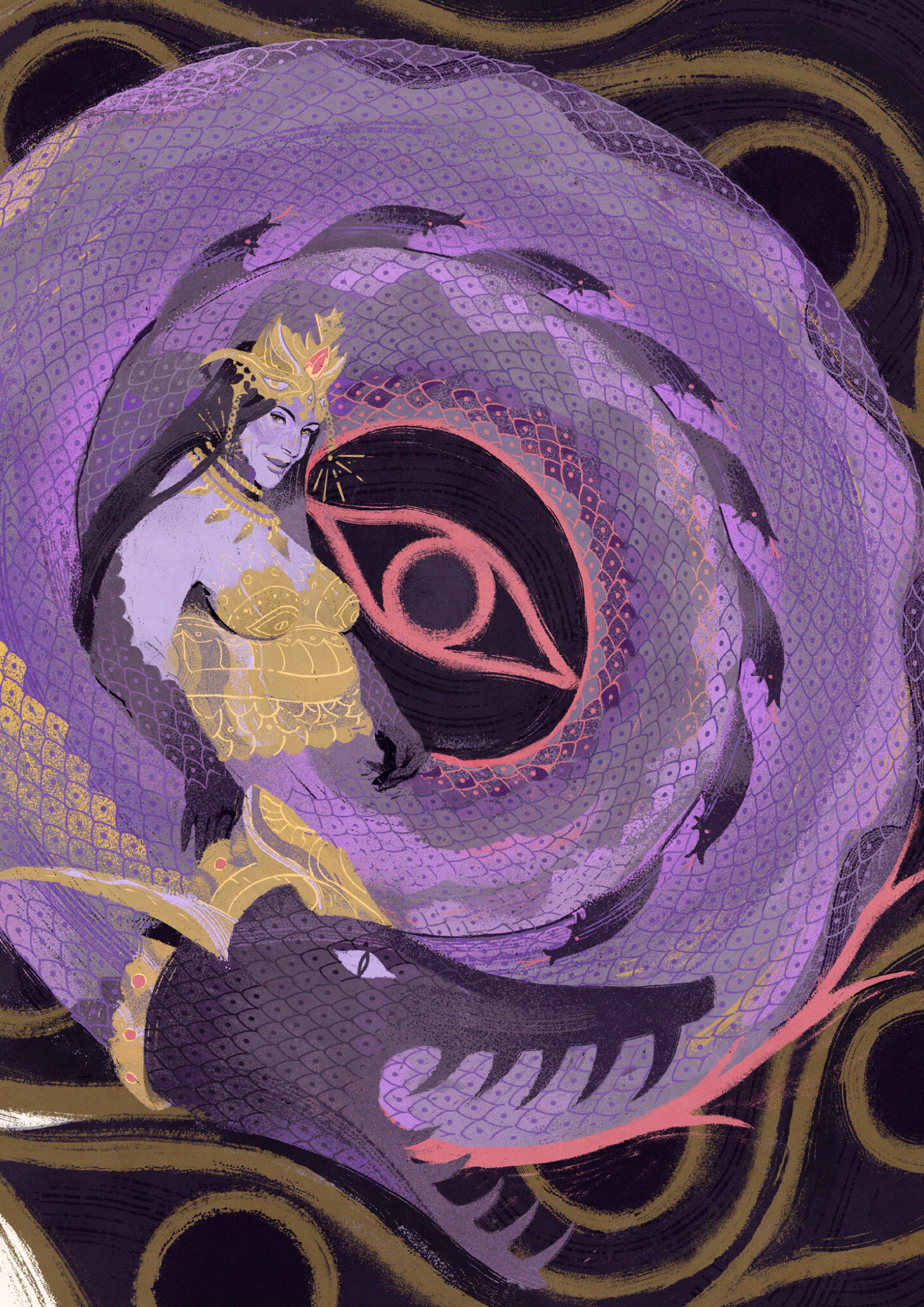
Shiqq: A half-human creature, literally: they have one eye, one arm and one leg. If they mate with a human, their offspring is a similar half-creature—but one which cannot be reasoned with, is extremely aggressive, and whose touch can kill.

SHAHMERAN

THE SNAKE QUEEN

A great snake, or a snake-human hybrid, who rules the serpent people who live in underground cities. Cautious of outsiders, but curious towards humans, and sometimes befriends them. Eating the queen's flesh cures any illness, but betraying her would incur the wrath of her people.

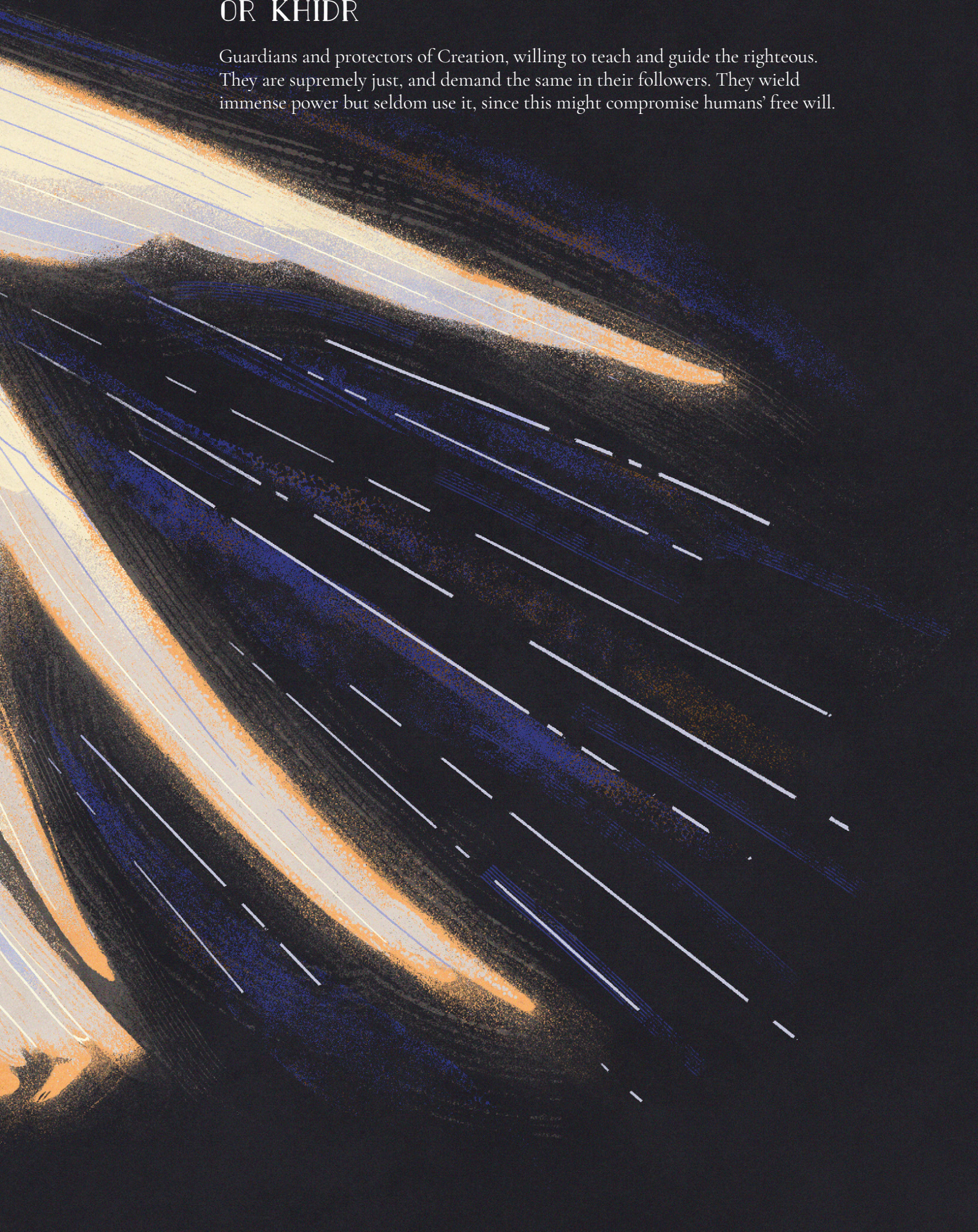






ANGEL OR KHIDR

Guardians and protectors of Creation, willing to teach and guide the righteous. They are supremely just, and demand the same in their followers. They wield immense power but seldom use it, since this might compromise humans' free will.



EUROPEAN CREATURES

Elves, or the Fair Folk: An ancient race of sophisticated and beautiful people. Often live in forests or wilderness. They have ancient settlements and immortal monarchs, have been driven into hiding by human activity, and resent us for it. Can influence a person's mind, and become very small via magic.

Gorgon: An ancient creature who was once human, with snakes for hair. Looking directly at them turns a person to stone.

Siren or Rusalka: Creatures that take the form of beautiful humans and live in the sea or lakes. Their singing is irresistible, and lures travelers to their deaths. Some say these were once women who were betrayed and murdered by men, and seek revenge.

Succubus and Incubus: Beautiful, irresistible spirits which feed on sexual desire and tempt people to copulate with them, often leaving the victim drained or dead.

Rat king: A dozen rats tied together by their tails. These combined creatures form a mental focus point. The rat king attains intelligence, and has the ability to mentally command other rats. There are rumors that rat kings are created by rat catchers to increase their business, and that rat kings hate humans due to their traumatic origins.

White stag: A messenger of the forest which appears to warn when one is trespassing. Catching or killing the stag is impossible, but hunting it may lead you deeper into the forest, where you may lose your way forever or learn the secrets of the wood.

XI

TABLES AND DIVINATION TOOLS



These divination tables are intended to help you understand each card's spiritual meaning, and get inspired during play. Don't worry if you choose something different to what's written here. This guide is only meant to help you along, not limit you. Sometimes Tarot is intuitive, not logical!

CHARACTER HISTORY

	“As a child, I solved problems by...” / “As an adult, I survived / flourished by...”
The Fool	Never looking back Seeking out the unknown Cutting ties that held me back
The Magician	Deceiving or manipulating Creating my own odds Playing by my own rules
The High Priestess	Having mastery of my mind Seeing beyond the material realm Bringing peace to confusion
The Empress	Raising the weak Protecting those I care about Finding strength in community
The Emperor	Appealing to law and order Taking control Never showing weakness
The Hierophant	My religious faith Listening to my elders Teaching others
The Lovers	Relying on my friends Bringing balance Working seamlessly with others
The Chariot	My wild and reckless youth Eagerness to make progress Never believing I could fail
Strength	Holding to my principles Never backing down Enduring all hardship
The Hermit	Keeping my distance Not relying on others Relying on my hard-earned wisdom
Wheel of Fortune	Rolling with the punches Turning the other cheek Predicting the ebb and flow of fate
Justice	Appealing to fairness Seeking truth Keeping myself in balance
The Hanged Man	Watching and learning Making enormous sacrifices Viewing problems from all angles
Death	Transforming myself to fit the problem Cherishing what I had Embracing life and its risks
Temperance	Acting the right way at the right time Holding myself in balance Keeping my impulses in check
The Devil	Escaping invisible bonds Learning from each disaster Trapping others with their own limitations
The Tower	Transforming chaos to insight Destroying in order to rebuild Being willing to tear things to the ground
The Star	Helping others find their path Trusting my path Keeping hope in the face of disaster
The Moon	The depth of my intuition Harnessing my dark instinct Learning to see the darkness in others
The Sun	Staying positive Inspiring joy Burning the candle at both ends
The Gate (Judgment)	Keeping a broad perspective Remaining detached from the moment Chasing moments of epiphany
The World	Traveling widely Sampling the world's wonders Achieving my ambitions

	“As a child, I solved problems by...” / “As an adult, I survived / flourished by...”
Page of Swords	Figuring out how things work Carefully weighing my options My scientific education
Knight of Swords	Rushing in with quick fixes The whiplash of my wits Focusing my intellect on my ambitions
Queen of Swords	Devouring information Savoring knowledge for its own sake Judging truth for myself
King of Swords	My intellect, and the respect it gave me Adapting new knowledge The clarity of my keen mind
Page of Wands	Channeling spirits and magic My curiosity and wonder Impressing people with my performances
Knight of Wands	My courage and conviction Leaping into instinctive action Riding the winds of inspiration or magic
Queen of Wands	Waiting for the perfect moment Cultivating my art as one stokes a fire Being charming and fascinating
King of Wands	Acting with total confidence Becoming a bold leader Enthralling crowds with my art
Page of Cups	My curiosity and intuition My ability to bond with others Letting my emotions rule me
Knight of Cups	My easygoing charm Learning to bend when others would break Training my body to dance and slide
Queen of Cups	Finding my inner peace Being kind to myself Mastering my inner world
King of Cups	Relying on loving friends or family Extending compassion to others Demonstrating the power of kindness
Page of Pentacles	Knowing how to scrape by Seizing opportunities Luck
Knight of Pentacles	Committing to the hard work ahead Diligently assessing before action Taking things at a steady pace
Queen of Pentacles	Striving for independence Building something from nothing Hiding my resources from prying eyes
King of Pentacles	Turning to pragmatic friends or family My keen business sense Patiently turning setbacks into triumphs

BURDENS AND IDEALS

Players can create burdens or ideals not on this list, but they must be an adjective, or a verb in the “-ing” form. (eg. “Doubting”).

	Ideals	Burdens
The Fool	Curious, Innocent, Carefree, Eager	Thoughtless, Uncommitted, Rudderless, Heedless
The Magician	Cunning, Visionary, Conjuring, Inventive	Self-Defeating, Overexerting, Risk-taking, Manipulative
The High Priestess	Divining, Introspecting, Transcending, Harmonizing	Disjointed, Succumbing, Misjudging, Withdrawn
The Empress	Nurturing, Guarding, Caring, Vigilant	Callous, Conceited, Domineering, Aloof
The Emperor	Principled, Disciplined, Coordinating, Leading	Abusing, Arrogant, Rigid, Domineering
The Hierophant	Enlightening, Faithful, Reforming, Eloquent	Rigid, Dogmatic, Indoctrinating, Conforming
The Lovers	Harmonious, Balanced, Supportive, Unifying	Resentful, Exploitative, Self-Centered, Unbalanced
The Chariot	Unrestrained, Unburdened, Bold, Determined	Reckless, Unheeding, Imprudent, Negligent
Strength	Tough, Steadfast, Taming, Soothing	Frantic, Bitter, Inflexible, Wild
The Hermit	Illuminating, Self-improving, Wise, Seeking	Reclusive, Isolated, Selfish, Lost
Wheel of Fortune	Calm, Flexible, Stoic, Far-sighted	Stagnant, Addicted, Inflexible, Short-sighted
Justice	Honest, Balanced, Merciful, Punishing	Merciless, Vengeful, Deceptive, Corrupt
The Hanged Man	Surrendering, Open-minded, Sacrificing, Seeking	Resisting, Stubborn, Traumatized, Self-destructive
Death	Liberating, Relinquishing, Evolving, Deadly	Grieving, Stubborn, Sickly, Bloodthirsty
Temperance	Measured, Purposeful, Patient, Balanced	Erratic, Succumbing, Excessive, Restless
The Devil	Liberated, Awakening, Relishing, Insightful	Manipulative, Ensnaring, Obsessed, Desperate
The Tower	Radical, Rescuing, Decisive, Rebuilding	Destructive, Ruthless, Hateful, Drastic
The Star	Renewing, Hopeful, Resilient, Healing	Hopeless, Doubting, Desperate, Lost
The Moon	Mysterious, Instinctive, Intuitive, Enticing	Phony, Deceptive, Repressed, Bestial
The Sun	Innocent, Purifying, Inspiring, Joyful	Naive, In denial, Distrusting, Cynical
The Gate (Judgment)	Purposeful, Unburdened, Wise, Awakening	Narrow-minded, Immature, Regretful, Fearful
The World	Content, Harmonizing, Reborn, Reflective	Resisting, Bigoted, Arrogant, Frustrated

	Ideals	Burdens
Page of Swords	Experimenting, Considerate, Inquisitive, Pensive	Stagnating, Noncommittal, Clumsy, Inexperienced
Knight of Swords	Agile, Precise, Decisive, Sharp	Delicate, Over-hasty, Frantic, Imprecise
Queen of Swords	Knowledgeable, Perceptive, Truth-seeking, Patient	Cold, Gullible, Implacable, Mean
King of Swords	Enlightened, Patient, Persuasive, Methodical	Manipulative, Severe, Arrogant, Merciless
Page of Wands	Eager, Adventurous, Discovering, Curious	Foolhardy, Unrealistic, Cynical, Dreamy
Knight of Wands	Daring, Heroic, Passionate, Inspired	Reckless, Careless, Angry, Overzealous
Queen of Wands	Stately, Intuitive, Decisive, Restrained	Cruel, Haughty, Overconfident, Cautious
King of Wands	Audacious, Bold, Charismatic, Artful	Ensnaring, Overconfident, Ruthless, Hesitant
Page of Cups	Passionate, Intuitive, Calm, Affable	Sensitive, Overwhelmed, Naive, Tempestuous
Knight of Cups	Flexible, Graceful, Charming, Subtle	Insincere, Avoiding, Shallow, Blunt
Queen of Cups	Pensive, Empathic, Caring, Controlled	Narcissistic, Uncaring, Gullible, Over-sympathetic
King of Cups	Connecting, Diplomatic, Compassionate, Reflective	Appeasing, Callous, Alluring, Mesmerizing
Page of Pentacles	Ambitious, Attentive, Training, Hard-working	Greedy, Obsessive, Overworking, Opportunistic
Knight of Pentacles	Diligent, Patient, Reliable, Steady	Narrow-minded, Stubborn, Chaotic, Perfectionist
Queen of Pentacles	Self-reliant, Pragmatic, Prepared, Canny	Isolated, Maneuvering, Selfish, Puppeteer
King of Pentacles	Generous, Content, Secure, Practical	Complacent, Distant, Lonely, Dissatisfied

THE VISION GUIDE

We hope this guide will help you draw a card and learn its spiritual meaning at a glance, ready to inspire you during play. Our hope is that it sparks your creativity even if you haven't used Tarot before, and helps you generate whatever character, location, antagonist, disaster or general feeling you need.

I • THE MAGICIAN

CUNNING • CONJURING
CREATIVE • MANIPULATING
OVEREXERTING

Trickster • Artist • Sorcerer

Laboratory • Alley • Ritual Altar

Alchemists • Conspirators
Hubristic summoners

Devastating lie • Demonic ritual

II • THE HIGH PRIESTESS

INTROSPECTION
INNER TRUTH • INTUITION
SECLUSION

Priestess • Oracle • Witch

Temple • Ruins • Stone circle
Mindscape

Coven • Mind divers

Coven ritual
Creature from the id

o • THE FOOL

CAREFREE • CURIOUS
OPTIMISTIC • IGNORANT
RUDDERLESS

Explorer • Idiot • Visionary

Desert Cliffs • Asylum

Desert chieftains • Slave-catchers
Spirits of the wasteland

Reckless plan
Decline of knowledge

III • THE EMPRESS

PROTECTIVE • NURTURING
VIGILANT • REGAL • ALOOF
CARING

Queen • Guardian • Gardener

Fields • Throne room • Barracks
Hospital

Queensguard • Guardian spirits
Servants of the Poor

Corruption • Passionate tyrant

IV • THE EMPEROR

ORDER • LAW • DUTY DISCI-
PLINE • RIGIDITY

King • Lawyer • Leader

Mountains • Throne room
Stronghold

Kingsguard • Legalistic jinn
Vigilantes

Anarchy • Rigid tyrant
Colonial Invader

V • THE HIEROPHANT

KNOWLEDGE • FAITH
TEACHING • CONFORMITY
INDOCTRINATION

Priest • Teacher • Guide

Cathedral • Academy • Library

Inquisition • Cult

Ensnaring lies • Invasive religion
Zealots seize power

VI • THE LOVERS

BALANCE • COOPERATION
LOVE • VULNERABILITY
CODEPENDENCE

Suitor • Matchmaker

Bedchamber • Garden

Succubi or incubi
Adoring devotee

Ensnared by love • Selfishness

VII • THE CHARIOT

PROGRESS • MOTION
UNRESTRAINED • RECKLESS
HEADLONG • RASH

Rider • Soldier • Traveler

Gatehouse • Stables • Highway

Pursuing riders • Spirit horsemen
Anarchists

Political upheaval • Stagnation

VIII • STRENGTH

CONTROL • RESILIENCE
COMPASSION • COMPOSURE
TAMING

Soother • Animal tamer • Matriarch

Animal den • Competition

Wild animals • Taming angels

Destructive passion
Oppressive subjugation

IX • THE HERMIT

ISOLATION • INNER GUIDE
HOPE • INTROSPECTION
WITHDRAWAL

Wanderer • Beggar • Exile

Cave • Safehouse • Holy site

Fanatics • Disorienting spirits

Exile • Isolationism

X • WHEEL OF FORTUNE

CHANGE • ACCEPTANCE
REPETITION • CYCLES
REVERSALS OF FORTUNE

Gambler • Revolutionary • Farmer

Gambling den • Seer's workshop

Spirits of seasons • Wagering demon
Servants of status quo

Breaking a cycle
Perpetuating a cycle

XI • JUSTICE

BALANCED • MERCILESS
JUST • KARMIC • REVENGING

Judge • Accused • Lawyer • Angel

Court • Temple • Prison

Law enforcement
Vengeful Spirits

Grave injustice • Police state

XIII • DEATH

RADICAL CHANGE
TRANSFORMATION • GRIEF
INEVITABILITY • ENDINGS

Doctor • Reaper • Midwife
Cemetery • Coming of age ritual
Battlefield

Executioner • Angel of death

Plague • Famine

XII • THE HANGED MAN

SACRIFICE • SURRENDER
SUFFERING • WISDOM
NEW PERSPECTIVES

Scapegoat • Ascetic • Torturer

Forest • Gallows • Altar

Flagellants • Pain demon

Victim sacrificed
Self-destruction

XIV • TEMPERANCE

BALANCED • PATIENT
CONTENT • PASSIVE
PURPOSEFUL

Water bearer • Gentle advisor • Sage

River • Shore • Fountain

Cult of balance
Indifferent angels

Apathetic populace • Drought

XV • THE DEVIL

ENTRAPMENT • DESIRES
CONTRACTS • OBSESSION
FREEDOM

Conman • Puppet master • Jailor

Prison • Notary • Cavern

Bargaining demon • Lawyers
Enchanted servants

Imprisonment
Succumbing to desires

XVI THE TOWER

DISASTER • DESTRUCTION
UPHEAVAL • REBUILDING
RENEWAL

Arsonist • Revolutionary

Fortress • Siege camp • Ruins

Cataclysmic magic • Mob
Demon lord

City in flames • Downfall

XVII • THE STAR

HOPE • DEDICATION
GUIDING LIGHT • PURPOSE
RESILIENCE

Guide • Prophet • Healer

Spring • Mountaintop • Lake

Calming spirits • False guides
Hopeless mob

Hope lost • Following false hope

XVIII • THE MOON

DECEPTION • DARKNESS
UNCONSCIOUS • MYSTERY
CONFUSION

Night stalker • Trickster • Living shadow

City at night • Dark forest
Mirror realm

Deceiving spirits • Shadow self
Spy

Deception
Trapped in mirror world

XIX • THE SUN

JOY • INNOCENCE • LIGHT
NAIVETY • INSPIRATION

Child • Singer • Birdkeeper

Sunlit fields • Nest • Sanctuary

Spirits of delight • Sun Cult

Drought • Enforced happiness

XX • THE GATE

ENLIGHTENMENT
FARSIGHTEDNESS • PERSPECTIVE
TRANSFORMATION

Seer • Immortal • Seeker

Ruins • Ancient Palace
Sacred Door

Threshold guardian • Guide

Dawn of catastrophe
Demon awakes

XXI • THE WORLD

JOURNEYS • COMPLETION
ACCOMPLISHMENT
GROWTH

Traveler • Explorer • Seeker

Island • Mountaintop
Where it all began

The world's soul
Scholar completing life's work
Global conspiracy

Dire work complete
End of the world

PAGE OF SWORDS

CURIOSITY
PLANNING • RESEARCHING
OVERPREPARING

Student • Apprentice • Swordsman • Librarian

Library • Training Ground
Student Dorm

Student • Society • Curious Spirits

Dangerous information found
The wrong lesson learned

KNIGHT OF SWORDS

PRECISION • AGILITY
QUICK THINKING • DECISIVE
ACTION • QUICK FIXES

Swordmaster • Debater

Training field • Debate hall

Martial society • Punishing ghosts

Botched solution
Missing the bigger picture

QUEEN OF SWORDS

ENLIGHTENMENT
SEEING BEYOND
KNOWLEDGE • STUDY

Researcher • Alchemist

Laboratory • Misty ruins

Mad scientist
Forces from beyond

Something from beyond
Experiment gone wrong

KING OF SWORDS

WISDOM • INTELLECT
DELEGATION • RHETORIC
PERSUASION

Philosopher • Orator

Academy Office • War chamber

Gods of order
Enlightenment cult

Total order
Logic as its own undoing

PAGE OF WANDS

CURIOSITY • DREAMS
EAGERNESS • FREE SPIRIT
DISCOVERY

Traveler • Novice Magician • Shepherd

Road • Hills • Strange new lands

Reckless wizards • Curious spirits

Dangerous magic found
Cursed land found

KNIGHT OF WANDS

PASSION • HEROICS
INSPIRATION • ACTION
IMPULSIVENESS

Martyr • Singer • Champion

Tournament field • Pageant

Knightly order • Reckless spirit

Disaster from impulsiveness
Arrogant hero killed

QUEEN OF WANDS

RESTRAINED POWER
COURAGE • DETERMINATION
HAUGHTINESS

Playwright • Spiritualist • Animal tamer

Lion's den • Desert ruins
Bacchanalia

Zealots • Occultists

Haughty ruler
Restrained power unleashed

KING OF WANDS

AUDACITY • ENCHANTMENT
ART • RUTHLESSNESS
OVERCONFIDENCE

Actor • Firebrand • Cult leader

Theater • Den of revolution
Cult altar

Society of sorcerers • Great jinn

Ruler plays with fire
Mob follows firebrand

PAGE OF CUPS

WILD EMOTIONS • INSTINCT
FRIENDLINESS • CURIOSITY

Apprentice healer • Fisher • Young sryer

Tavern • Celebration • Orphanage

Mirthful spirits • Hedonist cult

Emotional melding
Blood magic discovered

KNIGHT OF CUPS

GRACEFUL • FLUID
DYNAMIC • CHARMING

Reveler • Charmer • Dancer

Party • Celebration • River

Sirens • Con artists

Conquered by charm
A great lie takes root

QUEEN OF CUPS

PENSIVE • CARING
EMPATHIC • INTROSPECTIVE

Confessor • Healer • Sryer
Healing pool • Ocean shore
Bathhouse

Succubi or incubi
Corrupting healer

Unhealable wound
Consumed by inner world

KING OF CUPS

DIPLOMACY • KINDNESS
COMPASSION • ALLURE
APPEASEMENT

Diplomat • Abbot • Judge
Throne room • Dining hall
Wetland

Benevolent conspiracy
Ocean ruler

Evil appeased
Villain gains sympathy

PAGE OF PENTACLES

AMBITION • OPPORTUNITY
GREED • EAGERNESS
DEVELOPMENT

Apprentice merchant • Ambitious newcomer

Wharf • Mine • Market

Street urchins • Greedy spirits

Dangerous resource discovered
Short-sighted ambition

KNIGHT OF PENTACLES

DILIGENCE • ROUTINE
PATIENCE • STUBBORNESS
PERFECTIONISM

Farmer • Businessperson • Perfectionist

Workshop • Farm • Forge

Relentless spirits • Bureaucracy

Trapped in routine
Years of work destroyed

QUEEN OF PENTACLES

SELF-SUFFICIENT • CANNY
PREPARED • PUPPETEER

Moneylender • Wealthy widow • Host

Bank • Gang den • Vault

Aggressive merchant
Lady Fortune

Poverty rife
Reliance on unjust ruler

KING OF PENTACLES

GENEROSITY • ABUNDANCE
STABILITY • COMPLACENCE
DISTANCE

Merchant queen • Retired businessman

Treasury • Wealthy guild • Garden

Debt collectors • Ghost caravan

Trade collapse
WRuler grows isolated

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