

# *The Realm of Castles*

There exists a world where nobility, honor, and oaths are still respected. In this lushly forested place, castles and farming settlements jut out of the pristine, temperate wilderness. Safe roadways connect these cities to one another, each one ruled by a beautiful and virtuous Queen. On maps of the world, areas next to the roads are well inhabited and well-detailed. Cities are clearly marked, and the borders of the Queens' lands are delineated perfectly. Outside these safe places however, there is a stern warning: "Beware of Monsters". The wilderness teems with strange and ferocious creatures, seemingly birthed from the nightmares of mankind. Worse, mist so dark that the sun cannot pierce it blankets the regions where the monsters dwell. Only the foolish or brave walk willingly into the mists, for no one returns without meeting one of the great beasts of legend.

This is the Realm of Castles; a peninsula surrounded on three sides by a mighty ocean and bordered on the other by impenetrable mists. Where the mists do not cling, Queens claim the land as theirs. Beyond the mists, however, lie castles, fully formed and intact, which are the objects of desire for young Princesses. Knights, eager to win the hands of noble maidens, must capture one of these castles for their ladies. Among the nobility, this is the dowry that must be paid for such a union. Most noble marriages are sealed with the blood of one of the great monsters that roam the wastes. A knight cannot easily wed for love until he can offer his mistress a place suitable to her glory; one of the castles of old, built during the glorious days of Empire and conquest. As a Princess takes residence in an unclaimed castle, she becomes a Queen, and is given rights over her Queen's Hold.

Once a castle is claimed, peasants return to the Hold and give the city life once again. In time, a Queen's Hold mirrors the Queen herself. Many feel that the land responds to its ruler in fundamental ways. Angry Queens, it is said, have stormy, hot lands, while compassionate Queens have temperate, lush lands that are attractive to new peasants. Melancholy Queens have lands that are blanketed in rain, surrounded on all sides by mushrooms.

Within the cities, however, there are places where men gather. Monks--a calling almost entirely reserved for men--dwell within vast cathedrals in the shadows of grand palaces. Here, monks of the Order of the Blessed Horn scribe new copies of Scripture when they are not helping the unfortunate. When night falls, they retreat to their breweries where fresh beer and alchemical wonders are created. Life as a monk is quite exacting. The Order devotes itself to scholarly study and help for the unfortunate. Their efforts focus on helping the poor, sick, and wounded. Following the Unicorn's instructions, handed down through Scripture, they seek to give as much compassion to those around them as they possibly can. Through good works, one can become significantly blessed in the Realm of Castles.

# *The History of the Realm of Castles*

## **The Unicorn and the Lion**

In times so ancient they are known only through Scripture, two great creatures roamed the land. One, the noble white Unicorn, made her way peaceably through the forest. She was one with the harmony of nature, and her hair flowed like silver. She spent her days in silent contemplation on the bank of a small river. Yet, she was not alone in the world, for in the darker parts of the primal forest lurked the ferocious white Lion.

The Lion was enraged by the tranquility of the forest, thus he set out to harm the Unicorn. The Lion found her resting beside the river, and rushed towards her, shouting "I demand that you meet me in combat, for I am the Lion, ruler of this place." The Unicorn was unmoved, and took a stance of defense with her horn before her. The Lion was unprepared for the Unicorn's stoicism, and rushed headlong into the Unicorn's horn, stabbing himself in the belly. The Unicorn stamped twice as the Lion slunk off into the darkness once again. Defeated, the Lion spoke curses against the Unicorn and vowed to one day have dominion over the whole of the forest.

The Lion, wounded in both body and pride, created a brood of monsters from the very drops of blood he had shed. In time, the Unicorn found these other creatures in the forest as they sought to do her harm. She wrestled with the bloodthirsty Manticore, defended herself from deadly gryphons, conquered a dozen hungry Wyverns, and repelled an army of Ogres. The Lion created dozens of new and dangerous creatures, all the while assuming that his latest creation would be the one to finally defeat his rival.

The last creation of the vengeful Lion was the great Hydra, a beast full of rage and venom who was immune to the horn of the Unicorn. The Unicorn, who was wise and able to see what would eventually transpire, summoned, from the very mud of her quiet river, an upright form. The creature came to her, and the Unicorn filled it with a spirit and gave it free will. The this creature, formed from the mud of the Unicorn's river, was called Woman, and she was beautiful. Like her creator, Woman had a great silver horn upon her crown. In contrast to the Lion, who wantonly fathered new breeds of beasts, the Unicorn needed only one attempt to create her perfect champion.

When the Hydra came to hunt the Unicorn, it was Woman who slew it. The Hydra's venom spilled on the ground as it lashed out at Woman, and its hundred heads gnashed its teeth at her, each time missing her entirely. When the Hydra began to tire, Woman leapt down onto its back and wrenched its heads from its very neck.

Sensing this, the Lion rose up in anger and made his way to the place where the Hydra's blood had been spilled. He would have devoured Woman, but the Unicorn intervened and once again drove off the fearful Lion, giving him wounds so deep that they would never fully heal. In honor of her victory, the Unicorn removed Woman's horn and turned it into a worthy mate, Man. Man was given unto Woman as a reward for her valor and purity.

Although Woman lost her greatest weapon, that weapon had been animated so that it might fight in her stead. Throughout their lives, Woman and Man would serve each other in whatever capacity was deemed worthy, each the perfect compliment to one another. While Woman was given dominion over

the most important aspects of life, Man was created to enact Woman's will in the world. Woman would lead, while Man would be her hand and fist. In time, Woman and Man created a number of children. Those children, in turn, bore children of their own. The descendants of Woman called themselves human beings and in time came to rule the land that came to be known as the Realm of Castles.

Woman's first daughter, Aithne, crowned herself Empress and set out to tame the wilderness. Eventually, the forest yielded to cities, roads, and ports. Great Queens and Empresses followed in the footsteps of Woman, who had passed on her knowledge to her descendants. The world grew prosperous from the wisdom Woman had left to her children.

The world was still a dangerous place, however. The men of the world were called to do battle against the monsters of the world, while the women ensured that the laws and order of society would be fair and wise. As the land was conquered, new Queens ascended to power.

### **The Age of Beasts and Black Iron**

Humankind reached its height in the Realm of Castles during the Era of Beasts and Black Iron. The beginning of this age is often marked by the ascension of Empress Alexia the Great. Alexia led scores of men into battle against the creatures of the dark who hid in the forest. Her worship of the Unicorn was unailing, and she was granted great victories in battle. Her flag, a rampant Unicorn set against a purple background, was raised over countless dragon lairs she claimed in the name of her grand Empire.

Where Alexia's standard stood, great castles sprung up to be ruled over by those who served beneath the Great Empress. The lieutenants of Alexia's army eventually became the Queens of the newly conquered land. Retired from battle, but not the war effort, these newly-minted leaders kept the lands safe and free of monsters. The Queen's knights fought in their names and, to this day, great tales are told of those Queens who led their knights beneath Empress Alexia's banner. Eventually, Alexia succeeded in capturing the entire peninsula and a small portion of the continent, though she could never fully eradicate the monsters. By the time of her death, the Realm of Castles was supreme in the land.

The fall of the Empire came in only a single generation. Alexia died entirely chaste, a virgin to her last breath, and thus bore no children. Instead, she split the Empire between her three closest advisers and asked that they rule each part of their kingdom in solidarity with one another. Although the names of these advisers have been lost to history, the three kingdoms were named Hearth, Cricket, and Orchard.

Unfortunately, immediately after the death of Alexia the Great, her advisers began to make war upon one another. Their civil war was brutal, and knights that set out to prove their bravery and loyalty to their Queens did so by the shedding of other men's blood. This violence left the remnants of the Empire woefully weak, and a subterranean horde of Ogres soon washed across the land like a flea-ridden tidal wave. The kingdoms of Hearth and Cricket fell to the horde, but the knights of Orchard were able to hold their kingdom.

The land that was once known as Orchard is now the whole of the Realm of Castles, as the kingdoms of Cricket and Hearth have once again vanished into the mists. What came after the fall of these kingdoms was a bloody conflict with the descendants of the Lion, who were apparently still trying to claim the world for themselves.

Hundreds of years passed as knights fought to regain land for the glory of their Queen. Castles originally built during the reign of Alexia, now captured by monsters, were being uncovered at a prodigiously slow rate. As new land was captured, however, new Queens' Holds opened on the frontier. Consequently, the majority of the Realm of Castles remains unbroken wilderness, differentiated only by roads between cities that grow up around the Castles of the old Empire.

### **The Age of Great Daughters**

The descendants of Woman are fruitful and happy. Knights have successfully conquered much of the old Empire once again. Monsters still roam the wilderness, however, and half of the peninsula is still blanketed in opaque mists, not to mention the continent beyond. The world is still in constant preparation for war, and low-born men are frequently recruited as soldiers. These soldiers serve the noble knights who are bound to retake the old lands and castles for the glory of their ladies.

Soldiering is a respected profession amongst commoners, and good money can be made for those willing to fight against beasts twice their size. Specialized soldiers, known as Double Soldiers, receive double pay for their mastery of the Greatsword. Those who choose not to go to war against the monsters of the wilderness live at home and work as farmers. Some lucky people learn trade skills and live comfortably as craftsmen who produce beautiful things for the nobility.

Despite constant war against the beasts, however, there is a high degree of prosperity and peace between castles. During the evening, nobles gather for grand galas held at their neighbor's castles, and each day a different Queen plays host to the local nobility. At these grand affairs, politics, intrigue, and romance are the currency of the noble trade. Personal drama follows in the wake of any gathering of nobles, as great tales are written about the lives of those who live them. Nobles lead lives of luxury, where their greatest concerns are those of fashion, politics, and love. It is no wonder that they fill their lives with endless personal trivialities.

### **The Age of Three Sisters – The World as it is Now**

Recently, Anastasia the Just, the previous Empress of the Realm, passed away after a long battle with a lingering illness. Anastasia died without naming an heir, and the nobles of the Realm held their breath, waiting to see which of the former Empress's three daughters would hold the throne. Shortly thereafter, Anastasia's youngest daughter, the Princess Sabine, laid claim to her mother's seat and named herself Empress.

Since Sabine's coronation, several other prominent castles have fallen in line with the new Empress in the hopes that the ascension of an heir to the throne will remain largely bloodless. Respected castles such as Amber and Dread have already sworn fealty to the new Empress, though several other well-known castles have remained carefully silent until they have a better idea of how the situation will play out, politically. Empress Sabine herself seems to be a very careful ruler and has made many allies among the Realm's common people, promoting several to prominent positions within the military and as overseers for some of the more far-flung areas of the kingdom. She is generally well-liked and respected among much of the populace and has, so far, made few political missteps.

For nearly a year the new Empress's seat on the throne remained unchallenged. Recently, however, Anastasia's two eldest daughters, Princess Madeleine and Princess Brigitte, have returned from a place called the Forest of Doors and are claiming Madeleine's right to the throne. The Forest of Doors is known to be an arcane and mysterious place beyond the Realm and there are rumors of Madeleine's

involvement with creatures of dark magics. Princess Brigitte is well respected within the Realm, however, so, to many, her support of her elder sister is puzzling.

Even more mysterious are rumors among some of the populace that Princess Madeleine has returned to the Realm with a powerful holy artifact: the once lost Chalice of the Unicorn. This sublime relic was stolen from Castle Paradise many years ago, and some mention that its recovery is proof that Princess Madeleine is the chosen of the Unicorn. Few have actually seen the Chalice, however, and many people dismiss this claim as idle rumor.

Regardless, Castle Paradise has thrown its lot in with Princess Madeleine, as Paradise's former ruler, Queen Jocelyn, has abdicated the throne in favor of her eldest daughter, Princess Marguerite. Now, Queen Marguerite's forces stand beside those of Princess Madeleine and Princess Brigitte in the war for the throne.

In the recent spring, the Empress's army began to march on Castle Paradise, where her two sisters' forces were stationed. The Empress's men were joined not long after by forces from Castle Sapphire and Castle Amber. Now, the battle rages on and there seems to be no clear winner, for both sides are evenly matched. Should one or another of the other prominent castles in the Realm throw in with either side, it is likely they would tip the balance of power. Only time will tell who will hold the Empress's throne when the dust clears.

## *People of the Realm of Castles*

### **Nobility in the Realm of Castles**

The nobility of the Realm are those who can claim descent from Woman's first daughter, Aithne. Nobles often own extremely long scrolls listing their ancestry back hundreds of generations. Such scrolls always end with Aithne, for she was the successor to Woman at her death. This has created a heredity ruling class who devote their lives to the ruling and conquest of the land, and to their own passions.

This is the perfect order for the Realm of Castles, for the very land revolves around a castle and its mistress. Cities are made around castles for safety and, in turn, the people who live in the cities pay taxes to the Queens of their respective castles. A Queen will send her husband and his warriors to defend the town whenever it becomes necessary, and, if she is a wise leader and her army virtuous, they will triumph over the horrors that slink out from the forest.

Marriage amongst the nobility is a complex and exacting ritual, as ancient as the Realm of Castles itself. If a knight wishes to marry a princess, he approaches her and claims his undying love. He is then bound by a powerful and dangerous oath to win her heart in the heat of battle against inhuman foes. He is then obligated to travel into the mists and capture one of the great long forgotten castles built in the ancient age of conquest for her hand.

This is an incredibly dangerous undertaking and many knights are dreadfully wounded or simply don't return from the mists. Canny knights research surrounding areas and assess the level of difficulty they will face before venturing off in search of a castle. Ancient texts from the old Empire occasionally reference the terrain of occupied areas, giving a clever knight a potential edge.

Some castles simply cannot be taken, however. A castle inhabited by a Dragon or a horde of Ogres cannot be conquered by your average questing knight; an army, at the very least, would be necessary. There is no prohibition against a knight bringing others to help him on his quest, however, so a nobleman with powerful friends can succeed where a skilled but single knight might fail. Finding others to help in such a quest, however, is not always an easy task. Such a quest is about as dangerous a journey as can be undertaken. Few men casually wander into the killing mists and live to tell about it. Yet, this is the only way for nobility to marry for love in the Forest of Castles.

There is another possible route to marriage, but it is far less glamorous and, some would say, less passionate. The parents of an available princess and knight can approach the Empress and gain her blessing for their marriage. This is actually more common than the daring conquest approach, but is also much less desirable, as the couple have no say in who they spend the rest of their lives with. Romantic love is a luxury in such a situation, though the couple is expected to live in and eventually inherit the princess's mother's castle.

### **Common Folk and the Military**

The common folk of the Realm of Castles are humble, hard working people. They are loyal to their Queens, pious when they go to temple, and generally peaceful folk. In the Realm of Castles, "Common" is synonymous with "Simple". The folk of the Realm are just that: simple. They lead lives as farmers, craftsmen, and other simple professions. The most intelligent among them become monks and the strongest become soldiers. They are clever enough to avoid the misty forests at night and virtuous enough to help one another when the need arises.

The military is the most acceptable way for a peasant to improve his lot in life. The pay is excellent, but the work is more dangerous than any other profession in the Realm. Many a potential soldier has had to ask themselves the question, 'What is a Queen's shilling worth at the expense of one's limbs?' Still, it is well worth it for many of the Realm of Castles' poor.

Knights are constantly searching for good soldiers to follow them into the wilderness to capture castles for their ladies. The pay for these missions is quite good, even if it does mean months away from home in dangerous monster-infested lands. Very skilled soldiers even have opportunities to earn more money. Soldiers who practice the great sword as their primary weapon can earn double the income of a regular soldier. Such fighters are referred to as Double Soldiers, but they are expected to always be on the front lines of every conflict. Double Soldiers are among the most successful soldiers, as their techniques have honed them to a level of skill beyond that of regular sword fighting.

Knights traditionally practice a different fighting style than most soldiers. Every knight, whether he uses it or not, owns a mace and a shield. This is the traditional style of the male nobility and there is a specific fighting discipline called the Noble Paladin which employs the mace and shield. Generally, only noble men who show great promise, and who embody the utmost purity and valor among knights, are taught this discipline. The mace and shield is the icon of the warriors of the Realm, and weapon smiths everywhere use a shield crossed with a mace as their symbol.

While Knights are field commanders, they frequently take orders from a woman who is behind the lines of battle. Low-born women can become soldiers if they so desire, but it is extremely frowned upon for noble women to fight in the military. Fighting is not considered an acceptable profession for a noble

woman, as most believe she should be focusing on politics and finding a strong husband, not meeting blades with Ogres in the mists.

### **The Order of the Blessed Horn**

When people of the Realm of Castles refer to Scripture, they refer to a holy book that they claim was penned the children of Woman and Man. It is a compilation in several parts, recounting the fight between the Lion and Unicorn, parables that exhort one to be virtuous, and a host of advice on how to live well. Although most people attend a temple service at least once a week, the population is not excessively religious in the Realm of Castles. The only exception are monks, who entirely devote themselves to Scripture. In the absence of printing technology, monks spend their days copying the Scripture into books and leaflets to distribute among the peasantry. In this way, the monks of the Realm constantly read and interpret the book.

Reading Scripture is not enough to be in the good graces of the mythic Unicorn, however. Scripture makes it clear that humanity was created in order to improve the world and take care of one another. The Unicorn once lived in a heavenly garden paradise somewhere on the continent in ancient times, and she created humanity in order to turn the entire world into this garden. In order to do this, she teaches that humanity must always protect and cherish one another. In time, the text claims, the world will once again become a paradise and the Lion will be vanquished once and for all. To achieve this, however, mankind must have compassion for one another. War, greed, and distrust can undo this vision, and cause the Lion will triumph. This is the central message of the Scripture. To this end, monks devote themselves to the healing arts. They care for the sick and injured, house the poor and care for orphans.

Most monks also express their compassion for their fellow people through the practice of alchemy. Monks often spend evenings in the basements of their monasteries brewing various and sundry concoctions. In addition to brewing beers, wines, and liquors, monks also brew various alchemical potions and salves. Monks are generally the best alchemists in the Realm of Castles, though their works are entirely focused on doing good deeds. Thus, their most common creations are healing draughts and potions that help protect soldiers.

Monks are also by and large the greatest scholars of the Realm. They keep records of local births, personal histories, military service, and other similar things. These records are massive and often extend back hundreds of generations. This makes monks the keepers of the greatest reserves of history in the Realm of Castles; something that makes them sought after by nobility who set out to conquer the mists. Monks are, of course, interested in helping knights because Scripture makes it clear that monsters should be destroyed in order for the world to return to a state of harmony.

### **Class and Politics in the Realm**

The nobility--those who descend from the mythical child of Man and Woman, Aithne--are obviously at the top of the political order. Women of this familial line are specifically the most powerful people in the land. Marriage between commoners and nobility is completely impossible without renouncing one's title and lineage. These marriages rarely happen, but when it does happen, such a thing is usually remembered for a generation or more. Sad tales are often told about such ill-fated matches. A noble woman renouncing her title is a shocking thing indeed, for she stands to one day inherit a castle and land of her own.

A Princess is an unmarried noble woman. Her male counterpart is a Knight. Should a Princess marry a Knight, she becomes a Queen and is given land, either through inheriting her mother or mother-in-law's castle, the capture of a castle in the mists by her Knight, or as a wedding gift from the Empress. The land she is given is called a Queen's Hold, and is centered around her castle.

Many marriages are sealed by the capture of an ancient castle in the mists, but some marriages are arranged as matters of political necessity, and these marriages do not yield new castles. Often, the newly married couple will inherit a castle from the bride's mother, but this is in no way universal. The first born normally has claim over her parent's castle should both parents die. In rare cases, a younger daughter will inherit her mother's castle if her elder sister already has a castle of her own, or is somehow considered unfit to rule. It is exceptionally unusual that the latter should ever happen, however, as even sickly queens are still considered capable of caring for their people. Only in cases of extreme madness or cruelty would a Queen be considered unfit to rule.

It is usually considered bad form for men to rule over a Queen's Hold, for they are perceived as not being as capable to wield power as well as a woman. Women always seem to create policies that create greater yields of crops, healthier populations, and a higher degree of overall safety. Men are not shut out of the political process, however. Though they do not issue orders outside of the military, many men are able to serve as advisers to the Queen or hold other influential positions in her court.

A husband frequently aids his wife in military or economic matters, while the Queen actually enacts the laws. Knights are given tremendous authority over the military, which is overwhelmingly populated by men. Monks usually have no official political capacity, but their sermons can send strong messages to pious nobles. The Order of the Horn, although unable to actually create law, is quite influential in matters of public discourse.

In the Realm of Castles, there is no true middle class. The line between commoner and noble is stark and distinct. Merchants hold the closest position to middle class citizens, but even they are of common birth. They wield no official political power, but merchant finances are often employed to alter policy or receive invitations to places they otherwise would be unable to go. Merchants have many of the perks of nobility, such as comfortable living arrangements and continued education, without many of the restrictions, such as being beholden to ancient marriage pacts, or being forced to obey the commands of family elders.

Even though merchants are often able to influence the nobility with their wealth, the most populous political group in the Realm are simple peasants. Peasantry are beholden to the laws of the nobility and are obligated to do as they are told. Every peasant owes a significant amount of their income in taxes, and many are bound to work the land surrounding a Queen's castle, so that it might yield crops to feed everyone within the Queen's Hold. Because of this, many peasants join up with the military, a profession whose income is not taxed, or take up a trade, such as tanning or blacksmithing, to increase their income. Although the military life is hard and dangerous, it is worth it for many peasants. A skilled warrior can eventually become a Double Soldier and earn enough money to retire in only a few years.

# *The Gates*

A few years ago, places considered lucky or magical, such as rings of mushrooms, lone trees at the top of hills, fields of heather, and lone standing stones began giving people access to another unfamiliar world. It is difficult to predict when and where these gateways will open, or how long they will remain, but rumors of the strange and mystical world beyond the gates has begun to filter back to the people of the Realm of Castles.

Originally, the opening of these gates caused some anxiety, as there were numerous stories of peasants traveling through thickets or across moors who had vanished without a trace, never to be seen again. The popularity of these stories eventually gave birth to a number of different superstitious practices meant to prevent travelers from accidentally falling victim to a previously unknown gateway.

Reports from the beyond the gates describe a vast, untamed wilderness, rich with all manner of plant life and thick with untapped resources. It is said that there are people of other worlds and races in the forest beyond the gates, and stories of sparkling, winged people who live there have become the favorite bedtime stories of young children. Yet, there are also terrible monsters in this forest, unknown to even the most extensive bestiary, and some frightened travelers have described attacks in the night by vicious creatures who seem to be made more of shadow than flesh.

As stories of this strange and mystical world became more common, the previous Empress decreed that the world beyond the gates should be explored. Empress Anastasia even sent her eldest daughter, Princess Madeleine, to spearhead the exploration, though reports of whether the Princess was successful are limited. There have been rumors, however, of a peasant Queen who has claimed a hold in the forest beyond the gates, though many of the Realm scoff that such a thing must surely be legend. There are also stories of a pious knight who died in her service, whose tomb has been blessed by the Unicorn. His body does not decay, despite the ravages of death, and the sweet smell of flowers permeates the air surrounding his casket.

Meanwhile, the Order of the Horn has begun cataloging all the known gateways and marking them with warnings, to keep peasants from accidentally falling through the gates. This cataloging has inspired a few ambitious Queens to fund explorations of the new land, with the intent of sending a larger faction later, to survey for possible resources. Many Knights and Princesses look to the world beyond the gates as a means to make their marks, and hope to have tales of them told by the bards of the Realm.

## *Life and Death*

### **The Peasantry**

Peasants are born, live, and die as servants to a Queen of a castle. Peasant families will rent a plot of land from a Queen in exchange for a large share of the food that they produce every year. Many peasant families have been on same plot of land for as many years as the Castle they provide for has stood, and many old peasant families take great pride in the exploits of the nobles that rule them.

When a new child is born, it is not given a name until it can be presented at the planting festival. Traditionally it is the right of the Queen of the Hold to name all the commoner children born in her land

under her rule. It is not uncommon for parents to make suggestions to the Queen, but it is wholly the Queen's prerogative what she names the child. As a child grows up, they are taught the necessary skills to tend the land that the family leases from the Queen.

Among commoners, marriages are informal and decided by mutual attraction. Marriage bonds are not always strong and it is not terribly uncommon for an attractive low-born maiden to have a number of young lovers aside from her husband. This debauchery is often looked down upon by the nobility, but not actively discouraged, since large families make for bountiful harvests. When commoners die, they are buried in family plots near their homes. Burials are usually officiated by a representative of the Order of the Horn.

## **The Nobility**

Births among nobles are welcomed with celebration and occasionally dread. The first birth of a daughter among nobles is seen as a boon, as she will be the person who will eventually rule the Queen's Hold. Subsequent births are sometimes viewed with trepidation, as this means that the properties of the Queen's Hold may eventually be contested, if one or more of the younger siblings are unable to obtain their own Queen's Hold. While a Queen bearing multiple children isn't a terrible situation, it can cause friction. It is a common superstition that a castle divided in hatred will eventually divide the land itself.

Noble children are given the best education that their mothers can afford. Many young children are sent to one of the many teaching monasteries scattered throughout the Realm, although some especially powerful Queens have tutors from the Order of the Horn who live within their castle walls. Noble children are taught reading, writing, mathematics and the history of the Realm of Castles. Young men are expected to have an extensive knowledge of military history, while young women are expected to be well-versed in domestic law.

When children reach the age of fifteen, they are presented with their personal heraldry by their Queen and mother, and are considered an adult from that point forward. If the child is the eldest of the Queen's children, then there might already be a marriage arranged for them. A Queen's other children, however, are not always so lucky. Children who do not have marriages arranged for them when they reach the age of maturity, will typically raise support for a campaign into the mists, become a courtier for another Queen, hoping to gain enough political power to attract a spouse, or will join the Order of the Horn, if they are male.

Politics among young nobles vying for political standing can become especially vicious, but is always hidden beneath a veneer of civility. Any behavior but civility and politeness is considered a sign of personal weakness, and nobles are taught from an early age that visible villainy is detestable. Those who possess a more ruthless nature are forced to hide it behind precision and cunning and some of the most dangerous nobles in the Realm of Castles are those who are well-liked and respected by everyone.

When a noble dies, it affects the commoners who served them as deeply as the noble family itself. Noble funerals are usually very large, attracting not only all of the commoners who served the Noble's family, but also many nobles from nearby Queen's Holds who wish to pay their respects and curry the favor of deceased's family. Nobles are usually buried in family crypts beneath the castle where they lived. It is not considered at all morbid for people to visit the catacombs and pay respects to the dead, even years after they have been interred.

# *Here There Be Dragons*

The Realm of Castles is a relatively safe place. Peasants live without fear that something will come to harm them in their beds. Every peasant knows not to go into the forest, however, for the mists lie there. Where the mists cling, monsters roam in search of prey. Knights hunt these beasts when they emerge from the mists, and great hunts are frequently called to destroy some specific, deadly monster.

## **Manticores**

Manticores are cunning creatures. Although they walk on all fours, they have the heads of men, the bodies of lions, and the tails of great scorpions. Their intellect is equal or greater to that of a man, however, and they frequently use tactical maneuvers against questing knights. They can think and speak clearly, and enjoy toying with their pray. Because a manticore's body is like that of a lion, it possesses overpowering strength and the ability to climb rocks or trees. A manticore's most deadly weapon, however, is not its sharp claws, or the three rows of teeth hiding its glib tongue, but its venomous tail which is used with terrifying efficiency. It is said that the venom from a manticore's sting causes terrible nightmares of being flayed alive by a pack of vicious, skinless lions. Savants claim that the manticore is the first creation of the great Lion of legend, because it roughly mimics a lion's form but crudely copies the reasoning of humankind.

## **Ogres**

Ogres are a perennial problem in the Realm of Castles. Ogres are very much like men, but are considerably larger, hairier, smellier, and stronger. Thankfully, they are nowhere near as bright as humankind. Ogres loathe the touch of the sun and normally hide away in caves during the day, or cling to areas strongly shrouded in mist. Ogres are largely solitary, but massive hordes of ogres crop up every few generations. Ogres are always male, which leads many to believe that they are not born in the same manner as human beings. Ogres are also terrible cannibals, and revel in the devouring of intelligent creatures.

## **Wyverns**

Wyverns are widely dreaded across the Realm, for they are bold enough to attack farms or small settlements without fear. Great winged serpents, wyverns swoop down from the air and carry off their prey in taloned claws. Their shrieks are deafening, and they are willing to fly great distances from the mists in search of prey. Bowmen are usually called in to deal with wyverns, but a knight with a strong lance can sometimes down one if it tries to carry him off.

## **Gryphons**

The skies do not belong to wyverns entirely, however; gryphons can often be seen as swiftly approaching shapes in the mist. Gryphons are both aerial and arboreal, keeping to the tree line or the skies as appropriate. Gryphons are highly intelligent and can converse with their foes. Though evil creations of the Lion, they seem to have an insatiable lust for gold and can sometimes be bargained with by shrewd knights. The treasures that gryphons nest upon are things of legend. There are many more knights who have died at the hands of gryphons, however, than knights who have slain a gryphon.

## **Dragons**

Dragons are, by far, the most feared creature in the Realm of Castles. Their shadow turns a peasant's blood cold and kills any livestock caught in its dark embrace. Dragons are the ultimate creation of the Lion and they are well aware of their power. Although none has ever been known to speak, it is surmised by sages that dragons possess an intellect that is far greater than that of men. When their blood is spilled, it kills every plant within fifty miles, and their saliva is venomous, acidic, and flammable. While it is not impossible to kill a dragon, there is no one currently living who can claim such an honor. Defeating such a creature would warrant every possible accolade that the Realm of Castles can bestow.

## *Great Queen's Holds and Locations in the Realm of Castles*

Of the three great kingdoms, whose existence heralded the end of Alexia's reign, Orchard is the only one which remains unconquered. The old borders of Orchard comprise most of what is currently known as the Realm of Castles, but roughly a third of Cricket has been reclaimed from the mists. What is left of Cricket is considered frontier land, reclaimed only within the past few generations. It will take many more generations for Cricket to be fully conquered, for the Lion's minions are powerful and numerous.

The kingdom once known as Hearth is still entirely unclaimed. Few have ever ventured into its old borders, and those who do simply do not return. Historical records claim that Hearth was the old capital of Alexia's empire and that it holds numerous magical wonders and objects of religious significance. Of the three kingdoms, Hearth was the largest and most prosperous. It extended well into the continent, and had numerous trade routes connecting it to other parts of the Realm. Legend tells of its capital city, whose name is now forgotten, which housed a wondrous fountain. It is said that the Unicorn came to the fountain when it was still a spring, and blessed it with the power to grant those who drink from it eternal youth. Such a fountain has never been seen, nor does it make much sense in light of Empress Alexia's death from old age, but savants, knights, and the foolhardy still make treks into the wilderness to find it and other miracles from the old Empire.

*The Mists*

*Cricket*

*Castle Dread*

*Castle Bellicose*

*Castle Amber*

*Orchard*

*Castle Argent*

*Castle Sapphire*

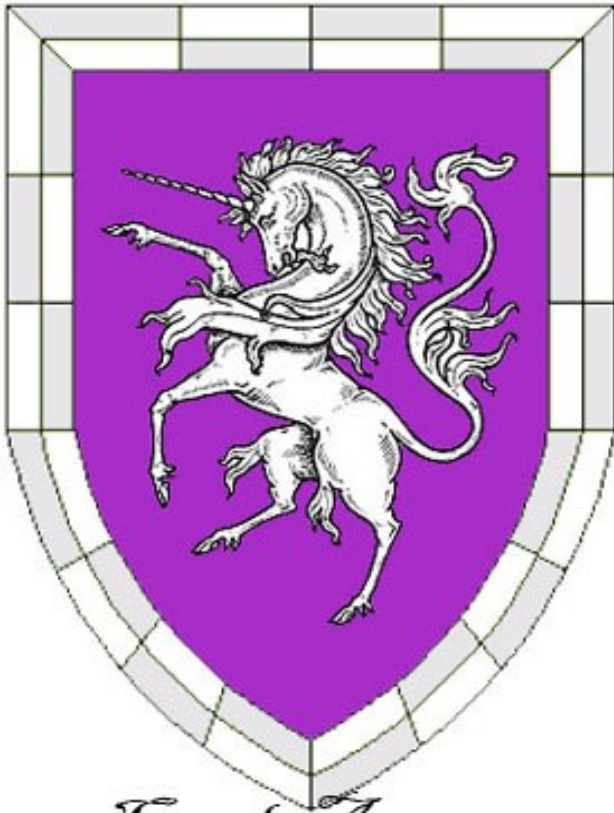
*Castle Paradise*



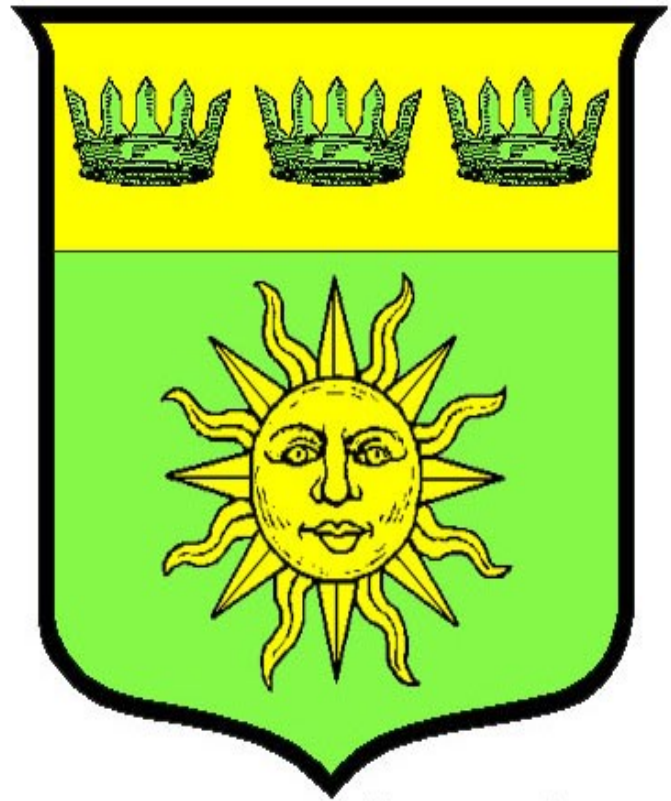
## *Castle Argent*

Currently, the political center of the entire world is Castle Argent, founded by Queen Adrianna during the time of Alexia. Adrianna was Alexia's second in command during the wars of expansion. When the wars were over, Alexia gave Adrianna a castle at the top of a great plateau that overlooked the entire Realm. Now, this castle is the Hold of the Empress. The surrounding city is the largest in the Realm, and is home to hundreds of thousands of commoners. In addition, hundreds of nobles reside in the castle itself, as close to the seat of power as is possible. Empress Anastasia the Just was the previous ruler of Castle Argent. Now, her youngest daughter, Sabine, sits on Argent's throne.

The heraldic device of Castle Argent is reserved specifically for the Empress of the Realm and every Empress has adopted its use, along with her own personal heraldry, upon taking the throne. Other castles may use depictions of the Unicorn in their heraldry, but none may depict the Unicorn on a field of purple; that right is reserved for the Empress and the Empress alone.



*Castle Argent*



*Empress Sabine's Personal Heraldry*

## *Castle Amber*

Castle Amber was founded by Queen Gwyneth, four generations ago at the edges of the old border between Orchard and Cricket. The castle was captured by Gwyneth's knight and husband, Sir Oliver, after he struck a family of gryphons from the skies surrounding it. The treasure horde of the gryphons financed the creation of the castle's city, and scores of settlers flocked to its walls because of its reputation as a prosperous and rich Queen's Hold.

At its founding, the land surrounding Amber was unbroken wilderness, but since being settled, it has become the largest trade hub on the peninsula. Merchants and settlers constantly travel through the city and it is among the most urban of settlements. The city has a single cathedral, but its windows are encrusted with gems from local mines. Queen Brittany, a well-spoken and well-read lady, is the current Queen of Castle Amber.

In the war between the Empress and her sisters, Castle Amber has chosen to side with the Empress.

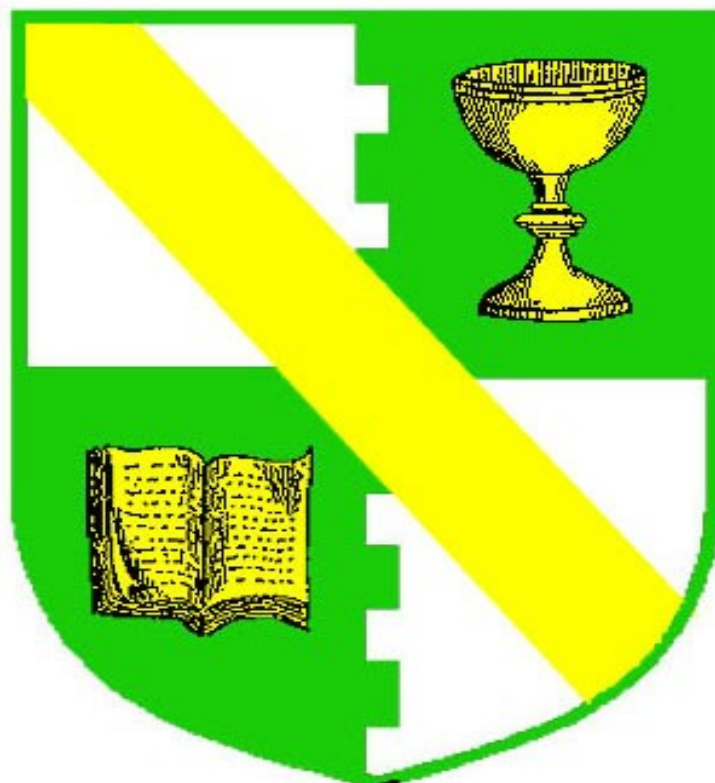


## *Castle Paradise*

The religious center of the Realm is Castle Paradise, founded by Queen Sophia, Alexia's spiritual adviser. Sophia is considered by many to be the catalyst of Alexia's conquest, for she kept the armies devoted to the cause of religious conquest against the Lion's creations.

Castle Paradise is both a castle and cathedral, as it is inhabited by both monks and nobles. The castle was originally built to protect a religious artifact--a sacred chalice said to have been given to the first Woman by the Unicorn. Although the castle was built to house this artifact, the chalice has been missing since Sophia's death, after the fall of the Empire. Citizens of the city surrounding the castle are deeply religious and hold the image of the chalice as their personal symbol. Queen Jocelyn, an elderly, but sharp lady, was formerly the Queen of Castle Paradise.

Recently, Queen Jocelyn came under a bit of scandal as her youngest son, Sir Gerard was captured and tried as a traitor to the Empire. Sir Gerard was ransomed and returned to Castle Paradise in exchange for Queen Jocelyn's oath of fealty to Empress Sabine, but once released, he immediately disappeared. Rumors suggest that he has reemerged in the camp of Princess Madeleine, contender for the Empress's throne, and that he is her lawfully wedded husband by a monk from the Order of the Horn. Because Queen Jocelyn swore fealty to the Empress for Sir Gerard's safe return, as long as she ruled, Castle Paradise could not oppose the Empress. Once Princess Madeleine returned to make her claim to the throne, Queen Jocelyn abdicated in favor of her eldest daughter, Queen Marguerite, so that Castle Paradise could fight on behalf of the Princess.



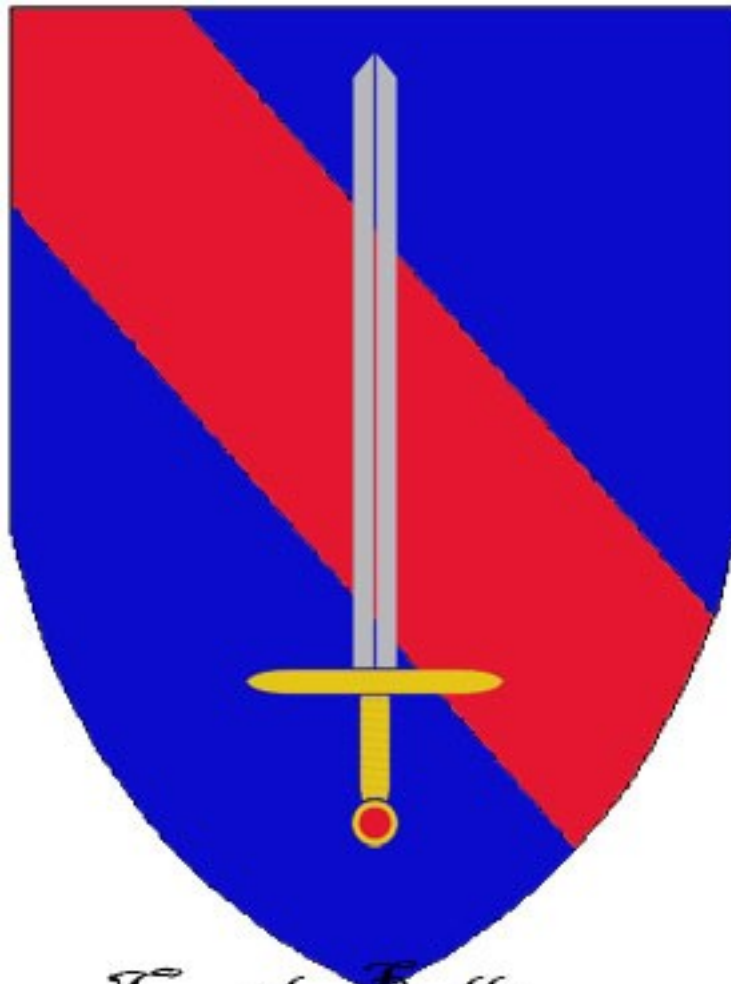
*Castle Paradise*

## *Castle Bellicose*

The greatest military castle is Castle Bellicose, founded by Queen Gretchen, one of Alexia's greatest warriors. Although forbidden to fight by her family, Queen Gretchen followed her knights into battle and slew many foes. Like her commander, Empress Alexia, Queen Gretchen died chaste, needing only the company of her weapons and armor.

Castle Bellicose follows in her warlike stead, for it is the center of all major military campaigns. It serves as barracks for numerous armies who winter there when no campaign is currently being waged. Those from the Queen's Hold of Bellicose are all the descendants of soldiers or soldiers themselves. Queen Viridian, a hotheaded but youthful lady, in the spirit of Queen Gretchen, currently rules Castle Bellicose.

Castle Bellicose has so far remained neutral in the conflict between the Empress and her sisters, but if this militarily powerful castle should ever choose a side, it would almost certainly tip the balance of power in favor of its ally.



*Castle Bellicose*

## *Castle Dread*

The frontier is a dangerous but rewarding place. The closest city to the border of the Realm is Castle Dread, founded in ancient times by Queen Dolores. A great dragon once roosted at the site of the castle and, in days of conquest, thousands of knights died while trying to take the land. When the dragon's heart was finally pierced, its poisonous blood seeped into the land and blighted it for generations to come.

Queen Dolores was named as the Queen of this hold for, though the land was poisoned and dead, the location was of the utmost military importance. When the Empire split in civil war, Castle Dread served as a major site of conflict between Cricket and Orchard. Queen Dolores, her heart broken from the shedding of blood in her home, leapt from the tallest tower. Now, the castle has been reclaimed by Queen Jessica, a talented but politically ruthless alchemist. Queen Jessica is known for her love of tragedies, thus her castle is the perfect Hold for her to rule. There are no peasants who live on the lands surrounding Castle Dread, for the ground is still corrupted from dragon's blood.

Though Castle Dread is technically allied with the Empress in the conflict between her and her sisters, it has yet to offer men or arms to the Empress's cause, claiming it is unable to spare them due to the sheer number of monsters which emerge from the Mists near their borders.



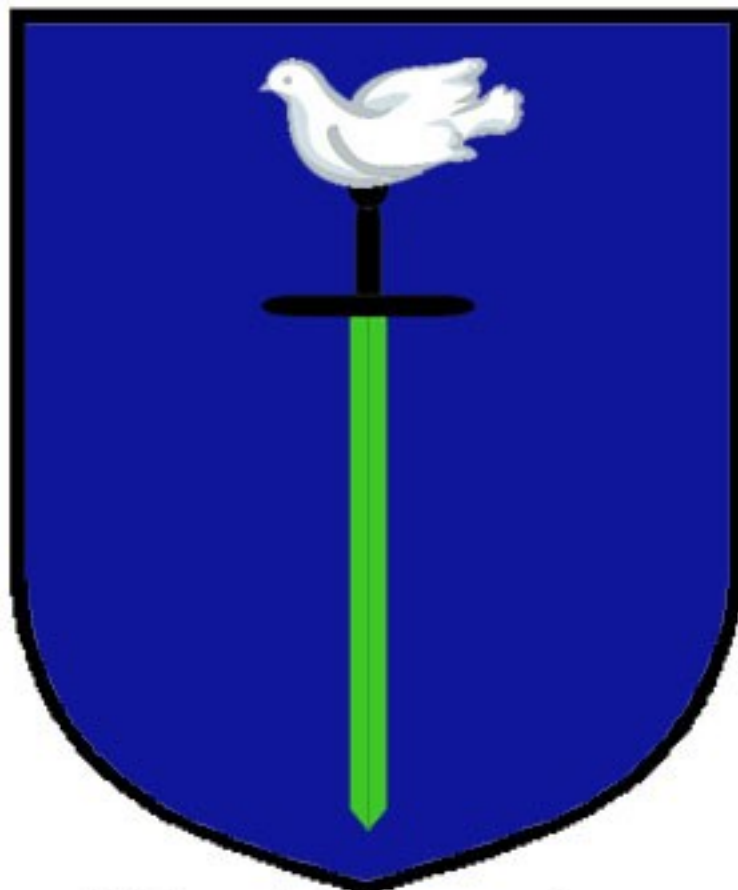
*Castle Dread*

## *Castle Sapphire*

This coastal Queen's Hold has recently made a name for itself, as it was the first among the Realm's peers to swear fealty to the newly crowned Empress Sabine. Castle Sapphire is also one of the few castles in the Realm to claim a robust naval fleet, and most of its wealth comes from a prosperous shipping trade. Queen Annegret of Castle Sapphire has so far only borne sons and her eldest, Sir Christophe, was recently married to the new Empress. With no daughters to carry on her family line, wedding her son to the crown was a particularly keen political move on the part of Queen Annegret, cementing Castle Sapphire's place in the Empress's court at Castle Argent.

Queen Annegret is known as a very shrewd and practical woman, and those who dwell in or near Castle Sapphire tend to be known for their cleverness and keen business sense. Though Castle Sapphire does not nearly possess the wealth of Castle Amber, it is quickly making a name for itself as a fast-growing and prosperous location in the Realm.

Because Queen Annegret's son, Sir Cristophe, is the consort of Empress Sabine, it goes without saying that Castle Sapphire is allied with the new Empress in the conflict between herself and her sisters.



*Castle Sapphire*

## *Minor Castles*

While there are several prominent castles whose names are known throughout the Realm, there are hundreds of smaller, less-famous castles spread across the peninsula. Each of these castles is ruled by a particular Queen and operates with its own court of retainers. Each castle is different, and is known for different strengths, though some are considered more valuable than others.

## *Culture in the Realm of Castles*

### **Naming Conventions**

Traditionally, newborn children are given names by the Queen of a particular Hold during the planting festival each year. The parents are given an opportunity before the festival to make suggestions to the Queen, but it is her final decision as to which name is actually chosen. This ritual is an opportunity for the Queen to connect with the people she rules, and a reminder to the commoners that the Queen is their spiritual mother who will always provide for them.

Family names for commoners tend towards phrases describing the location the family is originally from, the name of the first mother of the family, or the Noble line that the family has traditionally served. For example, Jerome Amber is a footman whose family lives in service to Castle Amber, while Bettina Heathermoor is a peasant who's family owns a farm near a location known as the Heathermoors, and Helene of Maria is a herbalist who's family traces its lineage back to Maria the Nurturer, a commoner woman who, according to story, provided comfort to many who were dying on either side of the battle during the civil war.

Nobles can all trace their lineage back to the same family, thus take no family name, and are known only by a single name given to them by their Queen. To prevent confusion most Nobles who have similar names will include the name of their castle when announcing themselves, such as Sir Marin of Castle Bellicose.

Common female names in the Realm of Castles are: Anne, Diane, Laurette, Florymonde, Charlotte, Isabelle, Louise, Rachel, Barbe, Collette, Danielle, Marjorie, and Antoinette.

Common male names are often: Charles, Guillaume, Marc, Simon, Bernard, Raoul, Quentin, Isaac, Emory, Richard, George, Leon and Pierre.

### **Food and Drink**

The soil of the Realm is especially good for growing grains such as wheat, barley, oats, and rye. Other common crops that grow plentifully in the Realm are apples, legumes, grapes, and acorns. There are a few locations at the southern tip of the Peninsula which are fit for growing more exotic fruits and vegetables, but such fare is very rare and can only be afforded by the most powerful nobles.

Goats are kept on many farms to dispose of harvest waste materials, and to milk them in order to make cheese. Cattle are also herded in many regions for their milk, but primarily for their meat and the leathers made from their hides. Domesticated poultry of all kinds are kept on many farms for meat and eggs.

Breads, beans, and cheese are staple foods for peasants. One of the most popular treats during harvest time is acorn butter, which is made from shelled and ground up acorns that have been leached of their tannin (which is then used for tanning the hides of animals slaughtered that season) before being fermented and churned into a sour, brown, slightly alcoholic butter.

Meats and fruits are much more common fare at noble meals than commoner meals, though nobles frequently enjoy many of the same recipes as commoners. For special occasions, knights will hunt for exotic and interesting beasts to challenge the castle chefs' skills. The latest fad among nobles is treacle wyvern, partly because hunting for wyvern is an extremely difficult endeavor, and because removing the toxins natural to wyvern skin is a long and complicated process, which only the best cooks in the Realm are able to do successfully.

Wine is common at the tables of both commoner and noble alike, the only difference being that commoner wine tends to be fermented from apples or dandelions, while noble wine is fermented from fine grapes grown in only a few places in the Realm. The crafting of beer is an art form invented by the monks of the Order of the Horn as a means to make money and spread their teachings, and is created from grains tithed to the church by nobles. Each monastery makes its own special beer which they sell to the populace through traveling monks who visit all the villages and castles near the monastery. They take only a couple of coins per mug, while giving sermons from the back of their beer-laden wagons. Each monastery takes great pride in their particular brew, and their recipes are closely guarded secrets.

## **Styles of Clothing**

Commoners tend to wear homespun collarless shirts and skirts or breeches made of light, spun wool. Their clothes are rarely dyed, though some Queens are known to provide particular dyes for their peasants so that they may display the colors of the noble house that rules them. Peasant clothing is practical in design and created to withstand long days of hard work in a mostly outdoor environment. Most commoners have at least one suit of 'good' clothing, which is reserved for special occasions, such as weddings or celebrations, or that is worn to temple each week. Good clothing among commoners is not particularly fine, and is usually delineated only by its less-disheveled state, finer weave and perhaps less-muted colors.

Dress among nobles, however, can run the gamut from the understated and austere to the flamboyant and grandiose. The current popular style among men is a collared undershirt with a colorful tunic or vest worn over it, and bi-colored pants in either their Queen's or their own colors, tucked into high boots. Facial hair is currently popular for men, as is long hair tied back in a tail.

The most popular style for women is currently a round-necked, flowing dress in either a single color or two-toned brocade, with elaborate trim at the end of wide, trumpet-shaped sleeves. Long girdles of jeweled cloth, strings of beads or links of chain are worn around the waist, and hair is wound in elaborate braids, then covered with a sheer veil or net. Popular styles tend to change quickly in the Realm, however, and often match whatever the most renowned noble in a region has been wearing during a particular season.

## **Heraldry**

Heraldry is very important part of life in the Realm of Castles, as one's heraldry shows not only a

particular noble's history, but also how they wish to present themselves to the world. A noble receives the first portions of their heraldry when they come of age, on their fifteenth birthday. This heraldry consists of just the ordinary and the colors of the bestowing Queen, though sometimes the Queen will substitute one of her own colors for another.

The ordinary of the heraldry sends a message to the noble about how the Queen perceives them. A man whom a Queen predicts will become a great warrior or knight will receive an ordinary of either a single stripe down the middle (known as a pale) or from the bottom right to top left (a bend). Princesses who are especially clever will normally receive heraldry with a curve on the left and right side of the field (flanches), while those with a talent for social situations tend to receive two angled stripes from the left and right which meet in the middle (a chevron).

After receiving their ordinary, the noble may then add charges to represent their various accomplishments and any qualities they would like to present to other nobles. Knights who have defeated a monster in the wilderness will sometimes place a hunter's horn on their heraldry, while a Princess who is renowned for her keen intellect or love of knowledge might place a spider or a book on her heraldry.

Nobles do not always change their heraldry, and sometimes commoners (at the behest of another noble) will deface a noble's heraldry with a less auspicious symbol, such as a fox for a coward, or a dragon for a noble who is miserly. There are many inauspicious symbols in the heraldry of the Realm of Castles and these are to be avoided when choosing one's heraldry.

One of the least auspicious symbols, known as the bend sinister, is a stripe that goes from the bottom left to the top right of the heraldry. Nobles who are given this device by their Queen are effectively being disowned by the Queen in a ritualized fashion. Sometimes a Queen will substitute one of her normal colors for the color black, to represent a lesser grade of disapproval for the child. Nobles whose heraldry include the color black, or a bend sinister, are almost always considered suspicious by other nobles. Even commoners, who do not normally comprehend all the intricacies of noble heraldry, know that those two symbols are considered to be bad and that particular noble should be avoided.

Charges that are considered inauspicious in the Realm of Castles include those the Lion, the goat, and the skull. More auspicious charges are the bull, the eagle and, of course, the Unicorn. Nobles must choose very carefully which charges to place on their heraldry, because they do not want to display anything that may reflect poorly upon themselves. They also do not want to select anything that they will be unable to live up to, as that could attract even worse ridicule from other nobles.

## **Art and Architecture**

Art in the Realm of Castles takes one of two forms; it is either an act of worship, dedicated to the Unicorn, or is a celebration or exaggeration of the exploits or attributes of the nobility. The Order of the Horn attracts many artists of the Realm who paint great murals within their cathedrals, sing arias about the victory of the Unicorn over the Lion, or sculpt statues commemorating particular stories from the Scripture.

One of the marks of a powerful noble is having a personal artist who can immortalize a noble in painting or song. Some Queens even take young artists as lovers and show them off as trophies at various gatherings, while offering their artistic services in exchange for favors and boons. Such affairs

often create scandal and jealousy, as infidelity is looked down upon, but the service of a great artist to enhance a castle is something few Queens will ignore when offered.

## **Music**

Musicians are a valuable and rare commodity in the Realm of Castles. Most musicians are in the employ of the Order of the Horn in one cathedral or another, performing hymns and symphonies for the commoners and nobles during services and holidays. Some musicians are kept by powerful nobles as a status symbol, creating operettas to honor their patrons. There are also traveling minstrels who progress from village to village, entertaining peasants or following armies into the mist to chronicle the exploits of particular nobles.

A common and respected profession for a musician is that of the jester. Part comedian, part actor, part musician, jesters are tasked with entertaining a court's nobility. The majority of jesters are employed by a specific castle, but lucky and talented jesters can travel the Realm, attending various fetes of the nobility. Of course, jesters are primarily expected to perform, but they are often aware of the interpersonal minutia of noble politics. Thus, many also act as information brokers or advisers to canny nobles. Although they are sometimes called fools, jesters could do much worse.

## *Societal Roles and Requirements*

### **Prejudices and Superstitions**

Although the people of the Realm of Castles practice no specific school of sorcery, there are still those who are born with magical talent. This talent is largely untapped, but people from the Realm of Castles usually find these people a little strange. There is something alien and distant about someone who is constantly aware of universal forces beyond everyone else. People in the Realm aren't afraid of these people to the point of lynching them, but magical ability certainly doesn't cast a person in any kind of good light. Attunement is not something parents wish for their children, and children are severely chastised if they show any sign of magical aptitude. Such children are often called "witches" by others and shunned by their community. An overwhelming majority of these individuals find themselves in the Order of the Horn, for the Order welcomes those with strange gifts.

The people of the Realm of Castles are a naturally superstitious lot. Generally, peasants are more superstitious than nobles, and there are hundreds of old wives' tales among them about objects, actions or symbols to promote prosperity, make a person exceptionally lucky, or to ward off evil. These superstitions tend to vary wildly from one community to the next, so where hammering an iron nail above a barn door in one Hold might be a symbol to ward off evil, in another you would be expected to spit before crossing a threshold to rid any negative influence from your body.

### **Family and Gender Roles**

Women are the natural leaders in the Realm of Castles, as they are the ones who give life to the next generation and are best equipped to shape the world that generation is born to. Women are more even-tempered, more willing to negotiate, and all around better equipped to solve most problems. As is fitting, women frequently live longer than men as a matter of simple biology, which gives each castle a higher degree of stability. Men are warriors and take action at the behest of their Queens, but make poor rulers because of the impulsive nature gifted to them by the Unicorn. While men are quick to act,

sometimes they do not consider the long term consequences of their actions. Therefore, women guide the actions of men with their wisdom, and men carry it out with their strength.

When noble women are young, they are usually guided toward academic pursuits, such as mathematics and history. Men, on the other hand, are encouraged to concentrate on martial and physical skills. Even among commoners, young girls are usually given abacuses and books as gifts, while boys are given wooden swords and toy soldiers. This is not to say that men are not taught academic subjects, only that most young boys who show an interest in books over sword fighting are usually teased by other children.

Women who take up arms are not as strongly discouraged, except perhaps by elder family members who fear losing an heir on the battlefield. Although women are not expected to perform as well as men in battle, their advice on the field of war is well-heeded. The elder woman in a family (whether high or low born) generally sets policy for the family as the whole.

Marriages among commoners are rather informal, and fidelity is not especially valued. This is very different among the nobles, primarily because marriages among nobles usually include sharing of a great deal of power. When infidelity does happen among nobles, it rarely, if ever, ends in a disillusion of the marriage. Usually after such a scandal becomes widely known, one party or the other will retire from public life to a monastery for the rest of their days.

## **Law and Crime**

Queens are the creators and final arbiters of all laws in their Queen's Hold. To uphold the law, Queens will appoint magistrates, usually from among the veteran sergeants of a husband's army or their own council of advisers. These magistrates see to the day to day order in the Queen's Hold and bring any wrongdoers to the Queen for judgment. Most magistrates have friends and family among the commoners, so their decisions on enforcement are usually fair. In some larger Queen's Holds, a female commoner is appointed as a pauper's judge, to decide on those issues which are too trivial to be brought to the Queen's attention.

Commoners who are caught breaking the law and decided guilty are generally imprisoned in the dungeon of the castle for a year or more. Criminals who commit especially heinous crimes, however, are taken to the nearest crossroads and hung by the neck with a sign describing the crime that they committed. The absolute worst offenders, such as heretics and traitors, are tarred and feathered. They are then driven out of town and into the mists where they are expected to remain until taken by the beasts.

## **Competition and Conflict**

Knights are always looking for new challenges to test their strength and display their worth, to attract a suitable Princess. Many knights will travel along the edge of the misty wilderness, hunting the dangerous beasts within, aided by small parties of retainers. Some knights, after attracting the attention of a particular Princess, will be given money to build an army and quest for a castle. These are especially dangerous quests that usually take months of pushing into dense forest and fighting off monsters, until the castle is finally located. Then begins the siege against whatever inhabits the castle. Many knights do not return from these quests and some armies vanish, never to be heard from again, as if swallowed by the mists themselves.

Nobles are constantly competing with one another for renown and fame. They hold celebrations to showcase their power and wealth, make alliances with other nobles to improve or destroy reputations, and seek to remain the name on the commoners' lips. Attracting commoners to work the land of a Queen's Hold is the entire purpose of the social competition that goes on between nobles. Commoners watch the rivalries between the nobles with great interest, rooting for their own Queen or their favorite noble, and many times showing great pride when their ruler scores a minor coup against another. Commoners will sometimes leave the lands of one Queen's Hold in favor of another, more powerful Queen, when their favored noble no longer commands the respect that they once did.

## *Magic and Enchantment*

As far as anyone knows, no formal school of organized magic has ever existed in the Realm of Castles. There are no traditions of wizards, no otherworldly beings to commune with, and no infrastructure to require magical orders. Although acts of a magical nature occur in the Realm of Castles (such as sworn oaths, alchemy, and the creation of monsters), magic is not formalized and is so subtle that human beings are generally incapable of harnessing magical potential.

The Realm of Castles has never really needed sorcery. Soldiers and knights hunt the monsters of the wastes well enough on their own, and the nobility, although rife with political scheming, is not ruthless enough to require magical intervention to dominate. Even the Order of the Blessed Horn has never become an occult organization, for their scholarly studies have led them to a reasonable substitute: alchemy. Alchemy is much easier, more reliable, and a ready source of power, when commanding the energies of the world is not quite so easy as studying the reactions between components.

Despite the lack of direct magical intervention, however, there are those who are born with an aptitude for magic. Such people, attuned to the mystical forces of the world, usually seem out of place or somehow distant from others. The people of the Realm of Castles have many names for such people: star-crossed, witches, wise folk, heroes of destiny, or infernalists. These people can sense places of power, holy objects from the ancient Empire, and the presence of monsters.

They often seem at odds with the world around them, for they are meant for something that is not present in the Realm. They are often thought of as sickly, ugly, wicked, or insane. There is some truth in this perhaps, for people gifted with attunement are less frequently gifted with other traits that could perhaps prove more useful in a world without sorcery. Still, there are many in the Realm who are attuned to the forces beyond, regardless of whether or not they are appreciated for their gifts.

## *Common Aphorisms and Colloquialisms*

“Suffer no monster to live.” - Monsters of all stripes are reviled in the Realm. When found, Knights are dispatched to deal with any supernatural horror from the mists. The Realm offers no quarter to monsters of the mists.

“A man in a place of leadership is begging for conflict.” - In the Realm of Castles, there is the perception that men constantly seek out conflict. Men infrequently rule over Queen's Holds as a result, and those who do are perceived as power-mad. Whether this perception is fair is constantly debated.

“The Queen is the land!” - In the Realm of Castles, it is believed that, when a Queen takes up residence as the ruler of an area, the land mirrors the personality of its ruler. Therefore, it is believed there is a supernatural connection linking the Queen to her land.

“An hour in the mists is worth a week at the hearth.” - It is better to go to war than to remain at home. This directly quotes a passage from Scripture that exhorts men to fight the creations of the mythical Lion.

“No lady is an island.” - No person can live bound up within themselves. This saying exhorts others to deal fairly with society, for they rely on it as much as any other.

## *Five Things Every Citizen of the Realm of Castles Knows*

### **Women are best at solving mental problems while men are best at solving physical problems.**

The Realm of Castles has a long history of women dominating the political landscape. It is a widely held belief that, because Man was created from Woman's horn (the seat of her warlike abilities), that men are meant to be combative while women must remain sedate and reasonable. For this reason, women are favored as leaders and men are favored as enforcers.

### **The Unicorn, as per Scripture, demands that all humanity perform good works for the less fortunate.**

The Unicorn, as the being responsible for the creation of humankind, created human beings to improve the world and its lot. She expressly explains that the reason for each person to live is to help those around them, and to grow strong in their unity. This extends to all people, not just those from the Realm of Castles. Kindness and healing are always looked upon favorably by the Unicorn.

### **Monsters are a threat to humanity and should be destroyed.**

Dangerous mythical beasts roam the Realm of Castles and threaten the lives of those who live there. They are a danger to the world, as they were created by the Lion of legend to run rampant over and destroy the Realm of Castles. Whenever monsters roam too close to civilization, people of the Realm expect brave souls to come forward and slay whatever offending beast threatens them.

### **The political situation.**

Everyone, even the poorest peasant, knows what their monarchs are doing. Although much of politics takes place behind closed doors, servants somehow are able to reveal the latest gossip to other commoners. Since many people believe a land directly reflects its ruler, commoners are very concerned with what is going on in the halls of power. Likewise, nobility are always “in the know” and many traffic in information brokering.

### **Their family or Queen's heraldry.**

Heraldry is a fine art in the Realm of Castles, and it is expected to say as much about a person and their family as does their reputation. In many ways, heraldry serves as a visual representation of a person's standing in society. Everyone is aware of their family standard, as well as that of their Queen.

## *Inspirational Material*

### Sleeping Beauty (Movie)

The image of a knight charging down on a castle overgrown with thorns, to kill a dragon in the service of his lady, is certainly reflective of the ideals of the Realm of Castles.

### The Last Unicorn (Book/Movie)

The world of the Realm of Castles bears some similarities to the world of *The Last Unicorn*. Humanity has overrun the world, darkness threatens from all around and magic is scarce, yet the innocence and purity of the unicorn is nothing short of transformative to those who cross her path.

### The Lion in Winter (Play/Movie)

The grandeur and politics of the court of Henry II, is an excellent example of the complicated machinations of some of the Realm of Castles' nobility.

### J.S. Bach (Music)

Stately, classical, and well formulated, this is the kind of music that would be at home in the great Cathedrals of the Order of the Blessed Horn.

### John William Waterhouse (Art)

A knight leans down to kiss his maiden, alone in the woods; all of John William Waterhouse's works are in the style of the Realm of Castles. They are classical, romantic, and beautiful.

### Arthurian Legend (Literature)

The original, the classic. Avoid that "Once and Future King" nonsense and go straight to Mallory. Obviously, as a staple of traditional western fantasy, the legends of King Arthur loom large. The Realm of Castles is our nod to this tradition.