

brigands and outlaws. In Cainite circles, these outlaws are called *Furores*.

Ordeals

Borrowing from mortal society, the prince can call for an ordeal and allow the offending Cainite to prove her innocence through a challenge. The challenge can vary in severity, though many are designed more to be entertaining (to the prince and assembled court) than to be fair to the Cainite on trial. The most common ordeals include trial by combat, ordeal by fire, test of the Beast and the purifying light.

- **Trial by Combat:** The most common manner in which a prince can settle the matter of a subject's innocence is through trial by combat, which pits the accused against his accusers. Princes and elders are traditionally offered a trail by combat to prove their innocence. Lesser Cainites seldom get the privilege, unless the prince is bored and in need of a spectacle. The prince sets the conditions of the trial, naming arena, weapons and rules (though fair fights are rarely the norm). Although the trial does not have to be to Final Death, most end only when one of the two combatants drinks the other's blood.

- **Ordeals by Fire:** Another popular alternative to the blood hunt is the ordeal by fire. In an ordeal by fire, the accused is forced to walk over burning coals or tied to a wooden stake that is then set ablaze. If the accused survives, she is presumed innocent and set free. However, few Cainites do. For less severe transgressions, a prince might order the accused to hold a burning coal or reach into a fire to retrieve a ring or other object to prove their innocence. Although not fatal, such ordeals require great will on the part of the accused — so much so that innocence rarely plays a part in the outcome.

- **Tests of the Beast:** Inspired by tales of Byzantine Cainites, the test of the Beast consists of caging the accused, usually in iron cages suspended in midair, or in dank cells, denying them any sustenance. Cainites who frenzy are summarily destroyed, while those who resist their Beasts are pardoned. However, even if pardoned, there is little guarantee that the accused will be set free. Many are condemned to spend the remainder of their unlives either caged like animals or in torpor.

- **Purifying Light:** Like the ordeal by fire, few Cainites survive the purifying light. Those who are condemned to the purifying light are locked away on rooftops, open attics or courtyards minutes before dawn. If the Cainite survives for a period as set by the prince, she has proven her innocence and is freed. If not, Final Death proclaims her guilt.

The Nocturnal Nobility

The Dark Medieval night belongs to Cainites. They exist by their own rules, firm in their command of the time from dusk 'til dawn. In cities, the breathing head home or to the taverns and brothels to take refuge from the darkness and drink their fears away, leaving the streets vacant and quiet. Even nobles and knights refrain from stepping out into the cool night — allowing Cainites full run of the cities. In castles

and royal palaces, Cainites gather and hold their own courts of blood once the mortal dignitaries have gone to sleep. The world of mortal kings and kingdoms fades, and Cainites become the nocturnal nobility, concerned with their own goals and intrigues. Princes and lords only care about mortal kings and queens when it concerns their immediate survival or plans. After all, a breathing monarch rules for no more than a few decades, making him almost insignificant in the eyes of Cainite princes who have existed for centuries. Mortals — the *kine*, to use the Cainite's derogatory term — inhabit the world of day and vampires that of the night, and rarely do the two collide. Rarely, but not never. When they do, the results are usually violent and cataclysmic — flooding the streets with blood and filling the sky with ashes.

Even short of such pitched conflict, the schism between the Cainite and mortal spheres is neither clean nor total. The relationship is akin to that between natural predators and their prey. Cainites do not control mortals any more than a wolf controls a herd of deer. Instead, the wolf reacts to the herd's movements and influences and alters the flow of the herd in turn. The worlds of Cainites and *kine* exist on two separate levels, but both react and are influenced by each other. In time, this relationship may change, but for now, Cainites are confident in their supreme mastery, and they have developed their own form of feudalism to fill the nights with conflict and intrigue, just as do mortal rulers living by day.

Feudal Lextalionis

Cainite society has reached its feudal apex, creating a society of the night that is both complex and beautiful in its intricacy. Cainite feudalism, more commonly known as Feudal Lextalionis, is the heart of Cainite society and what drives the War of Princes. The system is closely tied to the teachings of the Road of Kings, whose members are concerned with the proper distribution of authority. Not all rulers are followers of the road, but most pay lip service to its precepts and have advisors who are schooled in its teachings.

The Cainite nobility is replete with ranks and titles. Some are ceremonial, and others are tied directly to a vampire's status. Unlike the mortal nobility, gender does not divide Cainites; there are probably as many male princes as they are female ones. While some male Cainites might hold on to their mortal preconceptions about the "fairer" sex, only the truly foolish underestimate their female counterparts.

Monarchs

Monarchs stand above all others, they are regents of Cainite kingdoms who rule over courts that span across Europe and reach to the Holy Land. Most, if not all, are Methuselahs, ancient Cainites who remember the nights of Rome as clearly as most neonates remember their mortal lives. The monarchs were once lords themselves, exiles and survivors of Rome's fall, who grew powerful when Europe was still young and unknown. In the War of Princes, the monarchs goad their lords and princes to battle, trying to secure themselves for the uncertain future that unfolds with each passing night. Some fear that the age of Cainite

dominance is coming to a close, and that they will eventually have to hide from humans and rule like lepers in the night. Others long for battle, centuries of absence making them thirsty for conflict and strife.

The monarchs keep their physical locations well hidden, known only to their most loyal lords and attendants, and they don't claim domain over vulnerable cities that can be burned down by Cainite rivals or zealous mortals. To exert their influence, they sponsor powerful lords (through force, coercion or promises of power), effectively claiming domain over them. Doing so provides a lord with the backing of a potent Methuselah, and it grants the monarch agents in return with which to extend his influence, without having to compromise or expose himself outright. This last element is key, especially considering the fact that some monarchs have been in torpor for centuries and their power bases have eroded. Yet some monarchs, such as the Ventrué Mithras and Hardestadt or the Lasombra Montano, are very active in the War of Princes. They do not shy away from making a personal appearance or leading the occasional charge.

Lords and Ladies

Although they are nowhere near as powerful as the monarchs, the lords command vast domains and armies of loyal princes, barons and knights. Lords rule territories analogous to most Medieval kingdoms, which are divided in turn into a number of principalities held by vassal princes. Most lords hold their own courts only once or twice per year, spending the rest of their time traveling to the courts of their vassals, settling disputes and attending ceremonies and tournaments.

Princes

The most active rank in the War of Princes, prince is a generic term for a vampire with domain over a significant, and strategically vital, territory and tied to the feudal system. This domain is usually one of Europe's cities — which are growing in number — or large towns or even key castles. Princes who ruled their fiefdoms before the First Crusade are commonly called counts or dukes to distinguish themselves from younger princes. Although they are impressive titles that command much respect, count, duke or earl are normally honorific.

Barons and Baronesses

As aides-de-camp and companions of princes or lords, barons are the field commanders, sheriffs and chamberlains of the nocturnal nobility. Although most claim a domain of sorts (a hamlet, guild, bridge or even castle), the rank of baron is bequeathed in part because of the skills and talents of the vassal. From the title of baron, many Cainites eventually earn their own fiefdoms and become princes themselves. While princes and lords are the plotters and schemers of the War of Princes, barons (and the knights below them) are Cainites of action.

Knights

The lowest rank, but in many ways the most important, vampiric knights are usually neonates and ancillae who have

proven themselves and sworn fealty to a baron or prince. Although it is a common rank, knight is a noble title and a privilege that puts the vampire above his kin and ties him to official vassalage. Knights are usually dispatched to rival courts as messengers and spies, or they are granted a small domain to test their worth and devotion to their prince, lord and monarch. In the War of Princes, it is more often the ashes of knights and their squires that cover battlefields, left to scatter with the morning winds. But it is also the neonate knights who stand to gain the most. Many inherit vast domains as spoils of war and become forces to be reckoned with in the War of Princes. Knights have little to fear. Most are too young to dread eternity, so they throw themselves into the fray with reckless abandon. Europe might belong to the lords and monarchs, but the battlefields belong to knights.

The Low Clans

The Low Clans are stigmatized under Feudal Lextalionis. Although individuals are routinely welcomed at court, their broods rarely receive the same treatment that a Lasombra or Ventrué's might. It is possible for a low-blooded vampire to rise into the nobility, but she must work twice as hard and face constant second-guessing. It is far more common for low-blooded vampires to be given a post at court without the noble rank that usually accompanies it. Malkavian mystics, Gangrel sergeants, Nosferatu spies and Tremere sorcerers are becoming more and more frequent at court, but even being knighted for their service is a rare blessing.

The War of Princes, however, has started to blur the lines separating High and Low Clans. Many Low-Clan Cainites take to the battlefield under the banner of princes and lords, which has given them significant leverage in recent years. Their status grows with each battle, and some have even received domains as their reward. And of course there are several powerful low-blooded vampires who have simply claimed and defended domains, earning the title of prince without some high-blooded fool's approval.

Fealty

Fealty lies at the core of Feudal Lextalionis, as a network of oaths and alliances that tie the many courts of Europe to their lords, and through them, the monarchs who are the true powers of the Dark Medieval. From the knights to the monarchs, fealty is represented by oaths and vows that underpin the courts as social bonds and governing institutions. Whenever one Cainite acknowledges another as her superior, she is pledging her fealty in return for protection and support. The Feudal Lextalionis fosters ties from the lowest to the highest strata of the nocturnal nobility.

In swearing fealty, the vassal, be he knight, prince or lord, offers support and loyalty to his liege, both military and political. The vassal also vows never to attack her liege, though in the turbulent War of Princes, such is not always the case. In return, the liege usually, though not always, grants the vassal a domain, to rule as her own. The size of the fief depends on the rank and status of the vassal — knights are usually

given taverns or small neighborhoods, barons larger estates or providence over a guild for example. Finally, the liege also vows to protect the vassal on the battlefield and at court. The Traditions of Caine help institutionalize the act of swearing fealty and, thus, the feudal system as a whole. The Traditions of Domain, Progeny and Destruction cement the rule of the liege. They allow the liege to both protect and offer domain and other gifts (such as the right to create progeny) to vassals in return for their fealty. They also allow the liege to punish any transgressions.

At the bottom rung of the feudal ladder, a knight offers to protect the liege (usually a prince, but sometimes a baron or even a lord) and support his endeavors, by acting as emissaries or on the field of battle. In return, the prince (or baron or lord) grants the knight a domain and all its privileges, and he pledges to protect his vassal. Most princes also require a tithe to be paid, usually a percentage of any income that the domain generates or, in times of war, to raise a troop of vampires or ghouls under the prince's banner.

Above the knight, princes bow down to lords or monarchs, but the bonds of fealty are not as strict. Many princes hold their fiefdoms because those fiefdoms were bequeathed to them by a lord—or because the prince pays the lord enough tribute to prevent him from marching in and taking over. Even so, a goodly number of princes see themselves as autonomous, and they only ally themselves with a lord to present a united front against mutual enemies. The rival of a prince who is under the banner of a lord or monarch had better think twice before starting a war, at least without the backing of his own lord. Furthermore, for a lord to hold his domain, he must maintain the predominance of his vassal princes. Therefore, Feudal Lextralionis provides a system whereby a rival lord (or monarch) can usurp control by setting up his own "rival" princes or extracting feudal oaths (by force, coercion, etc.) from vassals of the first lord.

The Roads

The rule of kings and the power of the Church are often entwined, creating a complicated system that has found a tenuous balance in the 13th century, and this is no different for the courts of the nocturnal nobility. Matters of faith (either in God above or the roads) are not trivial or academic—they underpin Cainite society as they do mortal courts. In the medieval mindset of most Cainites, roads are not only ways to deal with the darker urges of vampirism, but also a measure of a vampire's worth. Those who are faithful and pious in their road are respected, seen as noble in body and soul and hence worthy leaders. The sinful, on the other hand, are no better than devils, and a prince or lord of low road standing must usually resort to tyranny or violence to cement her rule. The roads, like the Roman Church, are powers unto themselves. While they are nowhere near as organized as the Church, the roads are part of the Feudal Lextralionis nonetheless.

The rise of the roads in Cainite society has mirrored the rise of Christianity. Most roads, which started as small cult-like faiths in the nights before Rome, have blossomed into

quasi-religions in the 13th century, complete with rites, liturgies and priests. Although not all roads have developed these trappings, the religious atmosphere of the age means that all roads possess a spiritual and political dimension. While the nocturnal nobility rules the night, the roads hold domain over the souls and Beasts of all Cainites, and this the source of their political power. Even roads like the largely apolitical *Via Bestiae* carry a degree of power that helps counter the established rule of lords and princes. All Cainites claim dual fealty—to their liege and their road. One protects the vampire from her rivals, the other from her Beast.

Many princes, like their mortal counterparts who look to the Church, use the roads to legitimize their claims to the throne. Most undergo elaborate coronations in which their right to rule is conferred, not only based on their claim of domain and enforcement of the Lextralionis, but by the blessing of their road. In other cases, princes and lords court the roads and their priests for their backing and the support of their followers. The result has been a slow but gradual rise of the roads as political entities. As princes and lords look to the roads for support and offer gifts of domain and other promises, the roads and their clerics grow in prestige and influence as advisors or outright feudal powers.

Ashen Priesthood

The term "ashen priest" derives from the pale cloth French followers of the Road of Heaven wore in the early 1100s, but it has come to refer to any Cainite who has been recognized as a legitimate teacher of a road. In the feudal system, they fill a role similar to that of mortal priests, bishops and archbishops: to counter-balance the power of lords and princes. Many claim domain over their followers, just like a prince claims domain over her subjects. The difference is that the ashen priesthood does not require oaths of fealty, but rather asserts that anyone following a road automatically fall under their providence, and hence, domain.

During the 11th and 12th centuries, many roads (namely the Roads of Heaven and Kings) began to take on the trappings of organized religions. Ashen priests began appearing in great numbers, divorcing themselves from the burgeoning feudal movement. In time, various elders and princes adopted titles such as bishop and archbishop, both out of piety and to counter-balance the growing influence of the lords and monarchs. This is especially true of the early 13th century, when resourceful and independent elders refuse to bow down to lords and their monarchs. They use their roads and followers to gain influence and power instead, creating a parallel to the mortal schism between king and pope.

The role of ashen priests is complex. They are spiritual advisors and mystics, wise in the ways of the roads and great scholars of Caine. They are also political entities, throwing their support behind princes or lords who promise them (or, from time to time, their roads) more influence and respect. The backing of an ashen priest might be enough to grant a prince, or rival, an easy victory over a contested domain. Ashen priests also have the power to depose a prince, citing sins against their road as breaking the covenant of Caine—



an accusation that severely tarnishes a prince's reputation and influence. For this reason, few princes suppress the roads and their priests, knowing that doing so might be enough to touch off a revolt or expose themselves to their rivals. This is not to say that ashen priests who belong to the same roads are unified. Discord and intrigue are just as common among the Cainite priesthood as it is among the nocturnal nobility. This conflict serves to keep the ashen priesthood from becoming too powerful. Also, savvy princes rarely let a single road grow dominant in their fiefs. Instead, they open their doors to as many roads as possible, forcing them to compete for whatever influence a prince grants them.

Sects

Although the network of Cainite feudalism dominates the Dark Medieval night, not all vampires choose to exist under the banners of the lords and princes. Cainite society, for all of its appearance otherwise, has always been fractured, composed of cults and blood families. In the shadows of the courts, a handful of other sects exist. Some are nothing more than secret societies, while others are rivals to the princes and lords of the era.

The Inconnu


When Rome fell, many of its old and powerful Cainite simply vanished—fading into the shadows never to be heard from again. These secretive and melancholic vampires make up the Inconnu. Unlike the monarchs, many of the Inconnu

choose to remain hidden. They are rumored to lair beneath ancient cities, watching their younger brethren make the same mistakes they made with Rome. Some try to guide and help; others are vengeful and proud and only wish to see all Cainites suffer as they did when Rome collapsed. It is said that the Inconnu played a role in the fall of Constantinople. If so, this is a crime for which the sect may never forgive itself. Since the dawn of the 13th century, the Inconnu has practiced a policy of non-interference, only going as far as dispatching spies and envoys ("watchers," to use their term) to keep tabs on the lords and princes. The Inconnu is also leading efforts to safeguard Cainite knowledge as the War of Princes rages, and old and precious manuscripts go up in flames.

Most princes and monarchs discount the Inconnu as a rumor—superstitious babble of ancient "bogeysmen." Behind closed doors, however, those who remember Rome remember the powerful lords of its nights and know better than to provoke the anger of the sleeping dragon that is the Inconnu.

The Order of the Bitter Ashes

The Cainite knights of the Order of the Bitter Ashes seek the redemption that Caine rejected and devote their unives to the Light of God. Its origin is shrouded in mystery, but the Order is present in Europe and the Holy Land. It pursued a mandate supposedly handed down by Christ himself. Most of its followers believe that it is their duty to safeguard and protect holy relics—tangible proof of God's existence—from falling into the wrong Cainite or mortal hands. Countless tales of the Order exist. Some claim that they ride ghoul



stallions and fight infernal forces in the name of God, or that Cainite knights of the Order have partaken of Christ's blood and been freed of the torments of the Beast. Only the knights of the Bitter Ashes know the truth, and few are willing to share their sect's secrets with outsiders.

However, the Order is past its prime. Both internal intrigue and external enemies have eroded much of its influence. Many of its holdings in the Holy Land have been lost, along with its relics, because of the Crusades and Cainite infighting. Even in Europe, the Order is on the defensive. Although the Order was once a power to be reckoned with in Languedoc and Iberia, the Albigensian Crusade and the *Reconquista* have made ruins of many of the Order's keeps. Only its headquarters, the Castle by the Lake, in Scotland remains hidden and safe — but for how much longer none can say for sure. Still, no matter the setbacks, the knights of the Order remain faithful to their mandate, and they are always on the lookout for those who are worthy of God's redemption.

Although the Order is waning, this has not stopped its knights from continuing their holy mandate. Across Europe, from Provence to Northern Germany, Grail Knights search for lost relics, following rumors and legends to the dark concerns of the known world. It is said that a Grail Knight sees more of the world in a single year than most elders do in centuries of unlife. However, as the Order comes into contact with the blood courts of princes and lords, its knights find it hard to avoid being drawn into the conflicts of the War of Princes. This is proving to be a losing battle. Many princes and lords have baited Grail Knight into fighting for them with promises of relics.

The Furores

The nights are changing. Cainites are pushed further and further into the shadows and the young chafe under the oppression of the old. Wherever there are those with power, such as lords and princes, there are always malcontents and outlaws. Among Cainites, these outlaws have a name — the Furores. Most Furores, be they brigands, bandits or rebels, refuse to bow down to the archaic Traditions of Caine and the rule of the elders. They see unlife as a gift that liberates them from the oppression of their mortal lives. To willingly subject themselves to servitude, whether to their sire or prince, is unforgivable.

Chaotic free spirits, the Furores are growing bold. The rise of the cities and its middle class of guilds and merchants have allowed the Furores to carve out their own kingdoms under the noses of the lords and princes who would not dirty their hands with the likes of artisans, performers and laborers. It is not surprising that the ranks of the Furores swell with neornates of both Low and High Clans who are tired of being oppressed by their sires and princes.

Furores might share a common bond and desire, but they are no more united than the courts of blood. Furthermore, they face a nightly struggle for survival. Many live as outlaws, forming colonies of Furores in the wilderness far from the reach of princes and their sheriffs. Others, hide in the cities using the guilds to mask their movements and agendas.

Over the last few decades, the port city of Marseilles has become a haven for the Furores, a constant source of embarrassment to St. Regis, the Toreador prince of the city. As more and more Furores flock to the city, tensions inch their way toward open warfare. St. Regis, however, is fighting a losing battle, as he is isolated from both the Courts of Love and Paris because of the Albigensian Crusade. Many among the Furores hold out hope that Marseilles will become a free city before the end of the decade.

The Prometheans

The Prometheans remember Carthage and long to recreate it. Taking their name from Prometheus, who defied the gods and gave humanity the gift of fire, the Firebringers (as they are also sometimes called) want to enlighten both Cainites and mortals. They want to usher in a new age when both the Children of Caine and of Seth live as one. Dreamers and idealists, their utopian vision of "New Carthage" unites the Prometheans with a common goal. The sect attracts Cainites from all strata, from princes and lords to those of the Low Clans. Like the Furores, the Firebringers hope to effect change from the bottom up, targeting young Cainites and the burgeoning mortal middle class rather than going after nobles and elders. More organized than the Furores, the Prometheans have influence over the growing criminal elements in cities, as well as the merchants and guilds.

The Cainite Heresy

Dreaded and feared, the Cainite Heresy is a stain upon the nights of the 13th century. Tainting Gnostic and early Christian dogma with lies and Cainite apocrypha, the Heresy's origins stretch as far back as the first centuries after the birth of Christ. Since then, it has used its blasphemous teachings, coercion and outright manipulation (not to mention evangelism and proselytizing) to increase its congregation and weave its tentacles into the Church and many of the royal houses of Europe.

The Crimson Curia, a body of the cult's most influential priests, leads the Heresy. It is the Crimson Curia that sets the Heresy's doctrine and attempts to coordinate its movements, a task near impossible given the Heresy's fragmented nature. The Curia espouses that Caine was, in fact, God's favorite and that his mark was a sign of God's favor, not a curse. In turn, having been touched by the hand of God, all Cainites are akin to angels, revered as divine beings and true prophets and messiahs. Since its early nights, the Cainite Heresy has infiltrated and subverted the Catholic priesthood, amassing great wealth and influence in the process. It has even woven its tendrils into the Road of Heaven, turning otherwise pious Cainites onto a darker path that can lead to darkness and damnation. In turn, some prominent followers of the Road of Heaven have started to focus their attention on eradicating the Heresy.

More pressing for the Heresy is the belief that the year 1239 will herald the coming of Gehenna. Many of its followers, both mortal and Cainite, are busy preparing for this eventuality, convinced that Caine will return to pass his judgment before the decade is over.