

Fajad

Like a hidden treasure, jewel-bright Fajad nestles amid the far Northwestern coast's cold whiteness. The city is strangely temperate, its harbor free of pack ice, the snow melting as it touches the particolored domes of the prince's palace and the Grand Mosque's airy minarets. This alien warmth grows strongest at the city's heart, where steaming hot springs gather at the base of the thousand-foot stony spire called the Needle. Drawn down from the heavens by its master, the sorcerer Aqadar, it yet pins the behemoth Pyre vein's smoldering, still-living body beneath the earth.

But the jewel of Fajad has lost its luster. Trade that once enriched the city now flows along different routes — or into pirates' holds — while its satrap squeezes more from its coffers than it has to give. And while there are those who'd pry it free of the Realm's grip, others would see it crushed.

A Faltering Economy

Key for centuries to the treasures of the West, Fajad is the last port of call for deep-bellied Northern ships traveling to the Coral Archipelago. The wealth of half a Direction once passed through its wharves and warehouses, making its merchants — and its prince — fabulously rich. Queens, pretenders, crusaders, and adventurers from the Coral Archipelago and the White Sea have raided and even conquered Fajad, but it always shook off the foreign yoke until the Realm came a century ago. The city was wealthy enough to weather even the Empress' tribute, but when the Wu-Jian route opened shortly thereafter, Fajad's economy began to founder.

With the Empress' disappearance, House Cathak's tribute demands have further increased. Sea captains withdraw from the city, fall into bankruptcy, or take up piracy. Dockworkers and other city folk go hungry, as do their kin; many of those unwilling or unable to find passage elsewhere turn to petty crime. Even the manors of the rich grow dark, dingy, and hollow, lost behind overgrown gardens and unkempt hedges.

Wealth now flows primarily from below. The Taraq consortium, in service to Aqadar, has long held a royal monopoly to mine the vast, entombed body of Pyre vein. Tanks of boiling, syrupy behemoth blood; smoldering brazen hairs as thick as a man's thigh; steaming sheets of many-colored membrane — these things find their way into the sorcerer's workings, or are purchased by traders from distant climes for obscure purposes.

Fishing, whaling, and sealing remain gainful, if not lucrative, and merchants labor to market preserved seafood in distant ports. Farms nearest the city fare well, their soil warmed by Pyre vein. Farther out, farmsteading grows difficult, with arable land scarce and dangers numerous; hillfolk have no qualms about raiding lowland neighbors, while wild beasts and stranger things haunt the boreal forest. Fortified tower houses spring up in the countryside as locals take defense into their own hands.

The Abhari Creed

For centuries, Fajad's citizens have followed the Abhari creed. They believe in a transcendent God, beyond name and gender, who welcomes the souls of the righteous to Paradise, and whose truths are revealed to the Fajadi people by its prophets. The long-dead mystic Hari of Fai-Yasar, first of the prophets, wrote the *Atzal Shekinta*, foremost of the Abhari scriptures and key to the faith. Other prophets have emerged since, each providing new insight into divine truth.

Today, all living prophets are spirits, served by lesser spirits as messengers. Marabouts lead the Abhari in prayer to God and its prophets in Fajad's sprawling Grand Mosque and several lesser places of worship. Each prophet also commands a mystery cult. Spirits that reject the faith — or who delve into apostasy, becoming fallen prophets — are left to the Immaculates' mercies. The Abhari acknowledge

the Immaculate Dragons as ancient prophets whose time has passed, their message superseded by the *Atzal Shekinta*, their souls passed on to Paradise.

So zealous are the Abhari that the Empress, recognizing the difficulty of holding such a distant city against religious rebellion, kept the Immaculate Order leashed. Immaculate monks can only proselytize; they've made little headway, though Fajad's growing economic troubles have brought a handful of new adherents. An Immaculate temple, the Pagoda of Mela's Righteous Blade, stands near the prince's palace, and nearer still to the satrap's townhouse. Its Exalted abbot spends much time visiting each.

The age of grand heterodoxies is seemingly past, but the proscribed un'Atzali heresy — rejecting the prophets to worship God alone — still lingers underground, breaking out in times of trouble like this one. Meanwhile, heterodox Fajadi colonies acknowledge local spirits as prophets without confirmation from the Grand Mosque; such heresies lead to war.

Questions of Faith

Immaculate monks argue that the Abhari creed, like every form of direct spirit worship, exploits mortals and upsets the Perfected Hierarchy. Abhari adherents disagree, finding meaningful moral guidance and inspiring wisdom in its tenets. It may be that some prophets take advantage of their devotees, but others genuinely seem to believe in the faith and their duty to care for their flock.

The Prophets

Amku of the Lunar Egg: A pale woman with nacreous hair and robe, her face always hidden in shadow, escorted by birds that guide the soul in dreams. An inveterate meddler; irredeemably cryptic. Patron of avengers, lovers, lunatics, musicians, and mystics.

Cherast-Arat, the Prince of Harrows: A gaunt figure whose head is a ram's skull, clad in a straw coat, bearing a grimscythe dripping with sea buckthorn. Kindly to those in need, but proud, prickly, and quick to take offense. Patron of cooks, farmers, midwives, philanthropists, and soldiers.

Ennu Resplendent-in-Silver: A salmon-headed man dressed as a sea captain, adorned with jewelry of silver and gemstones, commanding a ship with nets for sails. Cordial but lugubrious, he tests the faithful with bargains they should know better than to accept. Patron of explorers, fisherfolk, merchants, scholars, and sailors.

Metsa'an the Edgewalker: A tiger-sized black hound wearing a mask of mossy stone, wild greenery springing up in her wake. Concerned with society rather than individuals, and notoriously unforgiving. Patron of bureaucrats, guardians, hunters, jurists, and landowners.

Nir-Netari the Underworld Sun: A black-skinned woman, unarmed, armored in white and gold, dwelling in the House of a Thousand Lamps in the Underworld. Compassionate, yet melancholy; the most human of the prophets. Patron of diplomats, funerists, mourners, orphans, and students.

Uqbal Storm-Chisel: A white-bearded man in a tattered gray robe and mantle, his mattock a stormcloud, his chisel a thunderbolt. Fussy and meticulous; obsessed with the artistic process. Patron of architects, artisans, the elderly, manual laborers, and sculptors.

Aphorisms from the *Atzal Shekinta*

"Pray to the prophets for the concerns of this world; pray to God for those of the next."

"It is nobler to warm your enemy by your hearthfire than to cast them into the snow."

“The false gods of this world are wayward and selfish, serving themselves rather than God. If they grant your prayers, it is only so that they can further exploit you, not out of any interest for your soul.”

“Wealth is no virtue, but it paves virtue’s road. Without it, there is neither charity nor sacrifice.”

“On their own, mortals cannot escape the labyrinth of reincarnation. Only the prophets can lead them into the light of Paradise.”

Fajadi Politics

Prince Aalani, a pious and scholarly young man, finds his authority constrained. The palace guard is loyal to his family and the treasury, and the people respect his office. But each prince is elected by a religious council comprising the Abhari Grand Marabout, the prophets’ own high priests, and — since the Realm conquest — the Immaculate abbot. Aalani is in their debt; and should he offend their sensibilities too deeply, any assassin would be solemnly absolved of his murder.

While the prince holds authority in matters of state, juridical authority, vested in the qadis, derives from Abhari scripture — albeit subject to interpretation. Qadis assess the legitimacy of princely edicts, arbitrate financial and personal disputes, and determine defendants’ guilt and sentencing. The Grand Marabout can call a council of nine qadis to determine whether a spirit is a prophet — or whether a prophet has fallen. A would-be qadi must be Abhari, pass a test of legal and theological knowledge by a council of marabouts, and have 100 fellow Abhari attest to her character.

Still, many seek the prince’s ear. Merchants and landowners press for suppression of pirates and brigands — matters wherein the state has grown dependent on the Realm — along with a bewildering array of desired changes in fiscal policies. They’re alternately led by or at odds with Yasimin Taraq, first among the city’s optimates; where their accounts dwindle, she’s rich beyond avarice and intends to remain so. Court officers seek increased funding or authority, or support for policies ranging from expulsion of non-Fajadi families to conquest of heterodox Abhari settlements. And Grand Marabout Kevurah converses regularly with the Prince to remain assured of his continued piety.

Satrap **Cathak Mei**, a former dragonlord, finds the Fajadi religious obsession troubling. Though her house’s focus is on extracting every last obol from the prince’s treasury, Mei has considered — with gentle nudges from the abbot, Breath of Spring — relaxing tribute demands in exchange for giving the Immaculates free rein to suppress the Abhari creed. This puts her at odds with charismatic garrison commander **Mnemon Senesh**, whose fascination with Abhari philosophy leads her to spend her off-hours at the Grand Mosque in dialogue with marabouts and qadis, rather than with a garrison whose numbers have diminished sharply, the majority having been recalled to Myion.

Aqadar, the Sorcerer

From time immemorial, the sorcerer Aqadar has practiced his art atop the Needle, a thousand-foot basaltic spire whose upper reaches sprout clusters of turrets like toadstools, and from atop which he showers curses and invective upon the Realm and its representatives. Strange spirits and flying beasts visit the Needle. These include known Lunar Anathema, and it’s rumored that he counts among their number.

Aqadar doesn’t meddle in war or politics. He won’t stir to protect one of his own guests beset by foes on the streets below, but he’s deadly when roused to his own defense, destroying Wyld Hunts against him with demonic servants and sorcery. Doubtless a greater force could slay him, but the Empress didn’t wish the city destroyed in the conflict.

Fajad disquiets visiting thaumaturgists and others with mystic gifts. Most associate this influence with Aqadar's sorcery, or the behemoth pinned beneath the Needle. They are mistaken. The far Northwest beyond Fajad's borders is a seething cauldron of weird forces, and Aqadar may be the satrapy's only bulwark against them.

Neighbors

Taiga, marsh, and tundra cover much of the great island Jazrafel that holds Fajad, and the long island Jazmir to the west. On the peninsula to the north, there's more taiga for hundreds of miles, rising into alpine tundra — home to the caribou-herding **Pyanda nomads** — and barren snowy peaks. Still farther north, legend says a dark queen with many lovely sons and daughters holds court beneath the Tree of Moonless Night. She holds the mythical treasure Oumrala's Cornucopia; once the source of all health and good fortune, in her hands it now disgorges plague and ill luck into the world.

Fajadi civilization is receding here from its high-water mark. Homesteads and villages huddle in the ruins of towns destroyed in war or by wild things. The Realm garrison and Fajadi soldiers patrol against beasts, bandits, and hill-folk raiders. Farmer-militia posted at the edge of settled territory to gather intelligence and stop raids are now inadequately supplied and insufficiently paid, and extort or steal from Fajadi settlements to make up the gap.

Many of the region's other cities and peoples have withered or been destroyed over the centuries. The satrapy **Crocus**, at the southeast tip of Jazrafel, is still recovering from bitter war with Fajad over its devotion to the false prophet Za-Ishat, the Burning Blade, and the V'neef satrap is throwing money at expanding its docks to compete with Fajad. The **Rodla-clan towns** of Jazmir are quietly rejecting Fajadi rule, refusing to pay tribute. And the shadowland of **Fai-Yasar**, the mother-city that once ruled Fajad until its destruction, remains populated by angry and jealous shades, who restock their numbers with the ghosts of those who die in shipwreck or war.

Fajadi Languages

Fajad's upper classes speak an obscure Skytongue dialect, as do much of the lower classes. Most fisherfolk and dockworker families speak a Fajadi creole derived primarily from the Coral dialect of Seatongue.