

Drawing Maps 05 Audio: Season 6 Faction Creation Pt. 4 - Squads

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AUSTIN: Hey, everyone! It's Austin here, and I'm here for another episode of Drawing Map. I tried to do this last night, it was too late [laughs a bit], I got like 20-25 minutes in, it was like, no, bad, throw it out, let's start over. So hopefully this goes a little bit better.

Today we are continuing to talk about the process of building factions for a custom setting in *Beam Saber*. As a reminder, *Beam Saber* is a game that comes with a really great starting setting to begin with. You can check out *Beam Saber* by going to austin-ramsay.itch.io or Googling "Beam Saber itch.io" or "itch", you'll find it that way. And the book has, you know, an incredible setting out the gate. But Friend at the Table is about critical worldbuilding. And so here we are, continuing critical worldbuilding.

So far we've talked about Kesh, we've used Kesh to talk about government starting types. We talked about Nideo, we used Nideo as a lens to talk about aesthetic notes, and me kind of figuring out like big aesthetic touchstones I was going to use for each of the Stels. We talked about Orion and the Corruption score.

And today we're talking about Stel Columnar, the Stel I know kind of the least about in some ways, even though this process is helping me figure them out. And we're talking about squads, which is one of the most intensive creative aspects of this because of how particular you have to get. And as always I will note what I used to say at the top of every one of these Drawing Maps streams which is all of this stuff could change between and PARTIZAN starting, even through when PARTIZAN starts. Like, I'm having a look at the squads here: one, not all of these squads are gonna show up on screen—we'll get to that in a second and talk about, generally, what place squads have in a game of Forged in the Dark games. But also I could come up with a new idea, I could throw something out entirely, I'm definitely... I thought of a new Divine to put into a previous Stel today while walking around, and I'm gonna like... Something you've already seen is gonna disappear and a new thing is gonna go in its place. Actually, I might have an empty slot, so I might just like... can I just type this out right now? Boom. Boom. Okay, good.

So. Let's talk briefly about Stel Columnar before we get into how to create a squad, and what squads do, and how to do the right amount of prep for them vs the wrong amount, which I probably actually already done the wrong amount. But, you know, do as I say, not as I do.

Stel Columnar is interesting because all of the previous, all the other Stels, Stel Kesh, Nideo, Orion, and Apostolos have their roots in previous seasons. Apostolos and Orion are super clearly, you know, the latest rendition of cultures that we saw in COUNTER/Weight, primarily in COUNTER/Weight, and then obviously in the Road to Season 6. Then Kesh was obviously in COUNTER/Weight, like, the planet was there, we got little glimpses of them, but we got them really developed in Twilight Mirage through intros between Satellite and Primary, and some other intros, Keen Forester Gloaming, characters like that, through descriptions, and incidental texts, and some background material that showed up in certain

arcs. And then Nideo we've also got a little bit of through Twilight Mirage, partially because Aram Nideo, the kind of founder of the Stel, was a background character who kind of rose in prominence also, you know, through side story shit, though intros, and descriptions, and visions a characters saw once in a middle of an episode. But their core philosophy is of course like an inversion... or not even an inversion, but a perversion of the Resonant Orbit and some of the religious and kind of political ideas that were at the heart of the utopian era of the Divine Fleet. And, you know, you can very clearly draw a line from the Resonant Orbit to Asterism, and can see the ways in which those core ideas about, you know, how difference and tolerance have turned into something that is about upholding a violent empire. You know. Ideology be like that sometimes. So, we know about all those.

Columnar is interesting because Columnar started with Keith suggesting this idea of the Equiaxed as a smaller ethnic group inside of a larger one, that were kind of cyborgs... I think Keith originally pitched to me as like reverse cyborgs, beings that are synthetic by and large, but have modified their synthetic bodies with organic material. And obviously synthetic and organic are all very, you know, strategic categories, there's not... those are porous categories, but you know what I mean, right? These are the people who when they are created are robotic, metallic, etc., and then they go "Hey, you know what? What if we added some cells? What if we added some living tissue? What if we added eyes, or, you know, some sort of an olfactory system?" Or whatever it is, you know, this is definitely a thing that we're gonna experiment with this season.

So, that's what I knew about the Equiaxed, and I knew a little bit based on what Keith had said that the Columnar were going to have to be some group, some part of a civilization that was willing to do what Keith wanted, which was push in on those unique attributes of the Equiaxed, outlaw them, kind of criminalize them, and try to assimilate this distinct subculture into the larger body culture. And it's like, okay, well, there's lots of ways to do that. And then from there I started thinking about other types of empires that we've seen in the world, and ones that were already recognized on screen, and ones that weren't.

And so, what I ended up with... I kind of was filling a gap that I saw here, and it was a gap that I knew existed even before Keith and I talked about the Columnar. This was definitely the way that what was gonna be the fifth Stel was going to go probably anyway, which is: these are fence sitters. These are, you know, what we might think of as the allies to the biggest imperial powers in the world. These are people who live lives of... who offer their citizens lives of a great deal of mobility and personal freedom but who are, one, not above oppressing smaller communities, marginalized communities inside of their own borders—especially if they are very small, very easy to oppress a very small amount of people, because you can justify it by saying that the masses, you know, will benefit from it, or because the masses just don't care. And also, fence sitters, right? These are people who will not take dramatic action because they don't want to risk overthrowing a natural order... not a natural order, but a status quo that benefits them.

And so what I've written here is that they're a democracy—you, know, unlike any other Stel there is like direct democracy. It is highly data-driven democracy, it is poll-obsessed, in some ways there's an echo of the original Autonomous Diaspora here, but it's even more distinct

than that because part of that is a holdover from their culture before they were courted. As a reminder, they were not conquered, and they were not coerced, they were courted. They willingly joined the Divine Principality as a huge culture, because they felt like it was mutually beneficial. So, you know, fuck 'em. Back before they were—we talked about this in the *Microscope* game a little bit, and in the *Microscope* Addendum especially, I think—before they were in the Divine Principality, they didn't vote so much as upload their consciousnesses to a kind of central unit, like a central processing unit that was local, and then from there they would go on to bring that whole consciousness, that like soup of different cyberbrain thoughts and perspectives to another big soup, and they'd mix it all up, and there was a sort of like analogue democracy happening here, where decisions were being made by not just like binary votes, but by kind of mingling of perspectives and ideas until you had something... And it wasn't like a quorum, it was not people actively consciously debating or whatever, it was literally "I upload everything I thought about for the last week into this, you know, giant disk, which gets transported through space, and then eventually it gets deals with locally, or then at planetary level, or whatever. But eventually for things that would affect the entire Stel... pre-Stel, the entire civilization, it would go up to this big, you know, soup of data, and then decisions would be worked out from that."

That's how they worked, like, that was not... no one resisted, that was like "Oh yeah, that was of course the natural evolution of all government we'll get to here." And then they met the Divine Principality, they integrated into the Divine Principality, and the Divine Principality was like "No, we need to know what you vote for. Hey! We need to know what you vote for. Please fill out this ballot, please press this button or pull this lever." And so they've changed that system, though that technology has not gone away. I'll wrap back around to that also soon.

This is a group that I've written as "The slowest possible reform, and only aimed at domestic policy." They are not trying to get out of the war with the Branched, they are not trying to get out of the internal civil conflict between Stels Kesh and Apostolos. They are low-Corruption, but as a reminder, that doesn't mean that low-corrupt—that empires, that terrible empires can't be uncorrupt. You can have a people... you can have a country with low corruption where people are able to get into power, where people are able to, you know, improve the lives of themselves and their loved ones, where money is not secretly changing hands behind closed doors, that still does bad shit to people internationally, right? You can still have an expansionist militaristic government that is willing to hurt people that internally takes care of its citizens, you know, extremely well. And it's important to remember that Corruption is not the be-all and end-all of like moral judgement.

And their goal is Hearts and Minds. They want to continue to make Columnar seem safe, stable, forward-thinking, flexible—specifically, they're in a kind of an economic cold war with Stel Orion, they're definitely rivals with Stel Orion in terms of what their kind of ideal position is inside of the Principality is. They would love to basically be "Hey, come to us let us build you the best stuff in the Galaxy. Orion may be able to make more of it per capita or whatever, but we're gonna make you the best stuff."

Aesthetically, Columnar is the FUTURE. They are not futurists, we'll talk about futurism in a future episode, in the next episode probably—[a loud clang] Something just fell at the construction site outside, everything is fine...I mean, I don't know, I hope everything is fine. Everything is fine here in my room in front of my microphone.— Anyway, they are not futurists. And if you don't know what a futurist is, don't worry about it, we'll talk about it next time. But they are... The touchstone for them is the Future. In the same way that Kesh was the Past, that Orion was Space, that Nideo was Present, Columnar is Future.

They are willing to break rules and norms in order to create "advancements" for all of the Principality, but especially for Stel Columnar, obviously. Because of that, because of their 'like' willingness to let people break norms, the citizens "on average" have a greater degree of freedom than other places. You know, you don't have secret police knocking at your door if you're spreading pamphlets that are critical of the Columnar. After all, there are elections. If you are critical of Columnar, run for office, right? It's just that, you know, the rhetorical, the kind of boundaries of what people would be upset about are pretty set because everyone's kind of in agreement that this is the best model already. And maybe that could change, but we've talked about before that we don't live in a... this game does not take place in a moment where there is a huge upswing of revolutionary thought.

They exist... Sorry, they invest in a lot of things that are great for their citizens. There are, you know, public funds, there is, you know, public housing and public... lots of like public medical support, stuff like that. So, again, as an individual inside of the Divine Principality, this is a good place to live. Also, you're a citizen of the Divine Principality.

They also invest in rare stuff. Artefacts, and strange gases, and, you know, weird phenomena. If Orion wants a big ton of, you know, iron... If Orion wants the iron mining rights on your mountain, then, you know, Stel Columnar wants the rights of the weird green glow that only happens on the third Thursday of the month, or whatever. 'cause they will find out what's up with that weird green glow, and they will make it happen.

Some additional notes here. The reason... One of the reasons that they are the Future is that they are really good at stealing things. Really good at taking things from other cultures, really good at packaging the other into something else. I've written here that "Imperial futures are only ever stolen presents. The Columnar Tabulary is a step ahead, because they are constantly identifying and instrumentalizing the other (or exploiting the world and its resources directly and dangerously). They criminalize or assimilate cultures and subcultures (small things like individual hacker collectives, or large like the cyborg Equiaxed), then take their research (or whatever the elements of the subculture are) and they use it as the basis for "useful" state projects." So, for instance, you might take something like the blend of organic and, you know, mechanical stuff that that Equiaxed do, and say like "Well, we don't wanna use that for people, that's... A person should just be a robot or just an organic, you shouldn't blend the two. But then you know what could blend the two? A tank. What if a tank had eyes? Or a brain. What if we had drones that could smell?

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And you know, it's be so much more efficient to give them olfactory, like organic olfactory sensors than a machine nose, or whatever, right?"

Artists, I think, in Stel Columnar find themselves on... not just both sides of this, I've written "both sides", but really like... every possible side. Because you will have artists in the margins creating completely new shit that's based on their own subculture. That stuff will filter out into a wider audience, and then will be picked up, and spread everywhere, and it will be like the hot new shit that will have started as like, you know, independent artist inside of a small community. You think about like an independent musician here going big, and then either that person goes big themselves or, you know, their ideas, their rhythm, their instrumentation, like, whatever makes them what they are, gets, you know, made mainstream, and someone else profits off of all of it. But I bet even inside of the Columnar, even inside of like cool indie spaces you have the people who are like "I'm gonna wear a Hypha antlers on stage. It's just so cool, it's so natural." It's like, yo, fuck off, actually. Because the entire... This is like the driving engine of the Columnar, is to produce a future, they're taking present from other places.

And so, a note here too: this includes sometimes them framing their own algorythmicness as unique and exotic as they export it elsewhere. You know, the Columnar engineering is the "German engineering" of this world. "Oh yeah, Columnar engineering! They know how to do it right." And part of how they're able to sell it is "We have machine minds. Our minds aren't like squishy and brain-like like yours. Yours are good for things like emotions and blah-blah-blah, but ours are great for building machines." Which is bullshit, they are just as emotional beings as humans are, that is completely like marketing material. But there are people inside of Stel Columnar willing to do that, willing to do that shuck and jive, willing to like sell the myth of who they are.

And all of that is not only accepted, but it's generally encouraged by the central government, which encourages it through grants, through legal and defense protections, you know, police will defend the lab where they're doing, you know, frankly disturbing experiments. They will offer grants to projects that are about taking some sort of ancient alien artifact and figuring out what's going on with it.

Architecturally I will say that this is like the one place where there is clear pushback, not necessarily to Columnar technology and culture but to the Divine Principality in general. I looked at a lot of... two things, kind of two different sets of things. Deconstructivist architecture and computer-aided architecture, which are, to be clear, not the same thing. Deconstructivism is like a post-modern architectural movement that shares its name with deconstruction... Derrida's deconstructive philosophies.

And I guess like in a sense the way that you can think about it is that like these are buildings that are like revealing the non-necessity of the building. We've talked about like, Orion having some like brutalist elements, about like the revealing of the elements that make the thing function. This is about like the addition of stuff that is not necessary because in some ways I think these architects, the Columnar architects see many of their buildings as not necessary to begin with. Before the Perennial Wave, the Columnar people could just live in

data, right? And like, super-compressed... They already have like all sorts of cool compression technologies that other Stels don't, it's part of how they can build, you know, new people so, so condensed is Stel Columnar, like, digital mind that they can put it into a humanoid body and it just works, and for whatever reason the Perennial Wave is not affecting them. But there is even smaller, more compressed minds before the Perennial Wave, and those can't exist in like a server farm inside of a warehouse to the same degree of density and compression that there used to be. So they've had to build, you know, humanoid-style buildings and houses and stuff.

And so I think there's lots of like, aggressive huge, like, sharp turns, weird stairwells—maybe they don't go nowhere, but like that have an angle that doesn't make much sense—railings on the side of buildings that make the whole building look like a staircase, like a staircase to a machine, like... What if there was a staircase *for* a giant robot, right? You know, that style of like, eye-catching stuff. And also, again, there's stuff that's like computer-aided. Which... I looked at specifically someone who—again, I don't believe that this person is a deconstructivist architect, but—Makoto Sei Watanabe—and maybe I'm wrong, maybe he is. If you just search for “Makoto Sei Watanabe” (the name is spelled in the notes in the description) you'll see kind of what I'm talking about here. Really cool weird angles, stuff that just looks like a spaceship. One of these does just look like a Gundam, there's a degree of like almost like polygonal, like, untextured polygonal 3D-rendering is kind of what it looks like in some places. Really, really interesting use of like wireframe stuff, exposed... not exposed girders, but exposed kind of like underpinning materials, and interesting use of like lines and cubes and stuff.

And I think that this is a kind of pushback on... not just on the fact that “Hey, we were able to be different types of beings,” but also on Stel Columnar, because... I'm sorry, on the Principality, where like “Yo, these buildings have to be able to like... Your fucking diplomats have to come hang out with us. We're robots. Even now, even with less dense like personhood data compression or whatever, we still could build less convenient things, but we don't because we want you to be able to come visit us.” But I think that there's a strain of architecture—I don't know if this is a particularly noble strain of architecture, because it is like explicitly about being resentful that they have to make their buildings human-accessible. Kind of the opposite of Stel Orion, which is like literally all about making their structures as accessible as possible. I think there is a resentful element here that is like “We should just be pure data,” right? “And barring that we should lean into having our bodies be robotic, and shaped in ways that shouldn't have to account for humanity, but we have to do that.” And so I think there's this like... And it could break either way, right? Like, “Oh wow, here's one element of resistance to empire.” Also it's kind of caught up in weird nationalism and like, you know, almost a sort of like racism, and certainly in ableism.

So, here's, again, the complexity of the world. Stel Columnar, the place where maybe you'd love to be if you were particularly a normative robot person in this empire. But yeah. So. Also to be clear, these places *are* accessible, at least as accessible as something like Stel Nideo's stuff, maybe not as accessible as Stel Orion, who has the specific culture of recognizing the difference of human bodies and doing their best to accomodate people. But despite being kind of like average degrees of accessibility for human bodies, they're

designed in a way that show the architectural resentment of that. Accessible to different types of human bodies. And that is like the grossness of it. I've said it before, this is definitely like *that* season where it's like: here is the breadth of all of this shit.

Their mechs continue their appropriative nature, their appropriative streak. In general, I've written here that Columnar mechs leans towards "high anime" sheen. This is our Gundam Wing, this is our Gundam 00, this is our like shiniest, coolest, slickest mechs. But it's also our Evangelion. These are machines driven by technologies lifted from others, and powered by resources which require disruptive and harmful extraction. It is, you know, the coolest toy you've ever seen, and something bubbling underneath, right? In general, I'm gonna do my best to either show these as like super-powerful lone machines, or full, color-coordinated teams. They have to be marketable, they have to be like... Toyetic, they have to be able to be sold on a back of a cereal box or whatever. I'm gonna do my best never just to show the same mech twice, it's always a Mark II, always a Version X, always, you know, a new model, a new booster pack on the back, something like that. And will often have elements directly from other cultures that have been absorbed. So this is where you could imagine seeing, you know, something that looks just like a Hyphan... something with Hyphan antlers on it, something with... You know, element of other cultures that have popped up from time to time here, woven into very marketable bodies.

I'm gonna take a sip of this coffee.

So. Given all of that—I kind of set up to who Columnar is for 25 minutes—it's time to talk about what we're here to talk about, which is squads. Squads are the fourth thing you're doing when you are building a faction inside of *Beam Saber*. Before we can get to the squad part of the book, and read from that a little bit, I wanna go back and read something from the kind of general campaign part, how to prep a campaign bit of the book. Which, if you're following along at home, in *Beam Saber* V0.46, that section begins on page 190, I'm reading from 192 I believe... or maybe it's 193, let's see... Yeah, 193.

So it starts up like—Hey, do you wanna... How many factions do you want? You could do two or fewer factions were there'll be very clear political lines, for three or four there's alliances and betrayals among factions, etc. But then, "Regardless of the number of factions involved in the campaign, the number of squads should never be more than 8. However what is meant by "involved in the campaign" is missions where a squad features prominently, either as the target, a close ally, or an interfering third party. The reason for this is that the story between player squads and NPC squads will struggle to gain depth if there are too many squads. There can be other squads that exist in the campaign, but they should not actually appear on screen in the game."

We talked about this in the Discord, I think in the middle of *Scum & Villainy* prep, I released all of the squads for the second half of Twilight Mirage, and people were like "How are there this many squads?" And the answer is: there are this many squads because I don't know what from the palette people will be interested in, and where I wanna pull from, but it's my job to limit how many things get pulled from. I also did take a note from *Beam Saber* when looking at—and also I guess from COUNTER/Weight—when in the back half of Twilight

Mirage I was like “Actually what we need to end up doing is being like ‘Alright, here are the big groups, here are like the four meta, you know, factions, that all of these other smaller factions will fit into.’”

Thankfully, *Beam Saber* just does that out the gate, and so by default if I look here in the book in *Beam Saber*, and I go and click on the list of squads, it is five main factions, an autocratic faction, a corporatocracy faction, an independent... not faction, but an independent list of squads, an oligarchy, a theocracy, and a—did I miss one? I feel like... Oh!— and a democracy. And each of those sets has 10 different squads, right? Or thereabout. Maybe there’s... one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine... no, ten. And Austin Ramsay doesn’t expect people who pick up this book to use all of them.

And likewise, though I’m creating all of these squads, I’m not... I don’t expect for most of them to show up on screen. More than in a regular campaign, because we are doing... we have more players, we’ve two groups total, so it’s like, well, maybe that’ll be more like between 10 and 15 show up, probably still not 16, because... Or show up directly in the way that Austin Ramsay says here, right? Like, show up as a target, as an interferer, or something like that. The rest of them can exist in the background doing other shit, you know. But they don’t necessarily have to be in the camera, because they are going to draw away from the kind of tight rivalries that show up between squads if you keep the focus rotating between a smaller group of them.

So, part of the reason why I say that is because nevertheless I have to prep 40 to 50 to 60 squads. It’s just that that prep doesn’t have to be all that much, and that’s something that’s really useful and it’s what makes all of the stuff that I’ve done before so useful in terms of setting up what all these factions are. So. I’ll continue reading from the book.

“When choosing which squads should have prime roles in the campaign there are two considerations. One, which squads are players interested in.” And I’m gonna do this by just like finishing this list of squads eventually, and then showing it to tell my players, and straight up having them in the Google doc highlight the things that they think are interesting. When you’re running a game like this, you can be as transparent as you want. You don’t need to be like “Hey, tell me in vague details what types of things you want.”

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You can straight up say like “Here’s a list of 50 things. Just put a highlighter on the things you think are cool. I’ve spent, you know, 20 hours working on this, can you spend 30 minutes going through it?” GMs, you are within your right to do that. And, you know, maybe you can even narrow it for them, like ‘Hey. can you pick one from each of these things?’ Or “Hey, I really only need you to pick from these two different—Stels in my case, right—these two different factions.”

“If a player becomes invested in an NPC squad, chances are that squad will feature an ally or a rival. As many featured squads as possible should have allies and rivals in them so that player squad can regularly interact with them. This may even result in the squad as a whole

considering an entire NPC squad to be their ally or rival, especially as squad statuses improve or decline.” I’m super-excited to talk about rivals work especially in *Beam Saber*.

The other thing is Tiers. You know, and we’ll get to what Tiers I’ve assigned are later, but Tiers are basically “Hey, if you’re close in Tier than you are probably a direct competitor to the squad.” To start out with all the squads, all the player squads are Tier 0. I believe they start out at Tier 0, not Tier I, correct me if I’m wrong. I mean I will correct me if I’m wrong once I’m done recording, I’ll just Google, or I’ll just, you know, hit Command+F and search inside of this document and see. But that means that anything over Tier II is gonna be not in direct competition. The first few, you know, missions are gonna be low-Tier fight, or low-Tier competitions, or low-Tier encounters.

Whereas the second category, what also Austin Ramsay calls—I don’t know, this might be taken from *Blades in the Dark*, this phrase—“conflict spoilers are squads that are three or more Tiers above the players.” You know, a Tier V squad shows up, a Tier IV squad shows up and you don’t win that fight, and so it kind of deflates the situation. And you can use that as a GM, you can say like, “Alright, you are a small squad fighting another small squad, and then you hear, like, the Imperial March hit, and like ‘Oh, shit!’ This was supposed to be a fight between a bunch of like low-level, you know, smugglers or whatever. We cannot take on The Empire, we gotta jet.” And that spoils that conflict, which can be a really fun and interesting moment.

“The split of squads should be about half direct competition and half conflict spoilers leading towards direct competition. Direct competition squads are those roughly on the same level as players, and should regularly be targets of missions, and should take direct action (attacks, framing, etc.) against the players. If a direct competitions squad has positive status with the players they may team up for missions on occasions.

Conflict spoilers are the more powerful squad who have bigger fish to fry than the players, but are willing to provide support, employment, information, tools, etc., to weaker squads to serve their own interests. Whether they provide this benefits to the players or their foes depends entirely on the squad status.” Which we will get to when we get player squads.

“As player squad increases in Tier, conflict spoilers will become direct competition as the players become threats to them.” So, you know, hopefully we’ll get to that point.

So, at this point we can talk about what goes into creating a single specific squad.

“There are five things to consider with creating a squad.

1) What faction does it belong to?”

Austin writes here that like, that helps determine look and theme. So, for instance, in the setting of the game, or even more broadly, I suspect, autocracy’s squads are likely to be militaristic with uniforms and gear, corporatocracy’s squads will be self-contained corporations or subsidiaries of larger companies, democracy’s squads will be diverse but maybe have shared mannerisms and uniforms. You know, independent squads who don’t have all the backing of a big faction might not have uniforms, but they probably have lots of

passion, etc. You know, theocratic squads—lots of religious iconography and names that relate to religion.

This is part of why I've done so much work on like what are these factions, what are my quick, you know, kind of instant touchstones for each of these factions, because having that on lock, having that as like quick repeatable information helps me build squads—and then in play will help me generate new information on the fly.

So, for instance, let's take a look at one of the squads here that like only makes sense in Stel Columnar, The Zenith Fund. Tier IV - A public institution that incubates, defends, and offers testing for research teams developing emerging military hardware. They have a Goal—we'll get to Goals in a second—To develop a weapon that can permanently kill a Divine.

I don't get to the Zenith Fund without first understanding that Columnar is *the* place where new technology—new super-dangerous technology—happens. As a reminder, in this setting Divines are immortal. They might be killed temporarily, but they all have the ability to regenerate themselves or be rebuilt from someone who has dedicated outside. No Divine death has been permanent for the length of the Divine Principality. And because of that the Zenith Fund exists. They are like "What if we could ? What if we could? Think about how much more important Stel Columnar would be if we were the one people, the one group in the Galaxy that could permanently kill a Divine." And so that relates back to all their kind of faction.

The second thing you have to determine—first is faction aesthetic:

2) Methods

"This helps determine how they interact with pilots regardless of their status. Some squads will be mech group that specialize in urban environments, some will be diplomatic core that seek to make peace while also gathering intelligence, some are states monster pop bands that sings songs of victory to the troops and the masses. Methods are not necessary for the squad to have, they only help the GM."

And so... You know, I have things here where the method doesn't really come up exactly. You know, I have something like the Parallax Project, which is a Columnar budget... a Columnar fund, basically, that supports the elevation of local arts and culture that bridges different communities together, or whatever. And that is... like, I don't need... I guess their method is some degree of like funding local stuff, but that's an example of like I don't need to really get tied in on like what they do day to day, they're an arts project, they're an arts fund, they're doing propaganda work basically, right?

Whereas the Divine Asepsis - Tier III - Vigil City is the densest urban settlement on the moon, and yet, every morning, it is spotless. Give thanks to Asepsis' swarm of robotic servants. And their Goal is to dissolve anything that doesn't belong. I haven't written a method here, but you get the gist, right? They're acid robots. Asepsis commands... Asepsis is a Divine, and Asepsis commands a horde of robots that spew out acid to clean... or some sort of special solution to clean the city, and, you know, purify things, let's say. It's bad,

again, it ain't a good one. And that gives me a very clean idea of what its methods are, right? It can a bunch of smaller units, maybe very small, maybe human or smaller than human-sized. I think about the Keepers from Mass Effect here, you know, those are organic, imagine them as not organic... But yeah.

So it's like, method definitely helps here. You have the distinct difference... you think about previous squads we've talked about: between, you know, a group that is a super-militaristic, you know, knock-down-the-door blow-stuff-up group vs a group that is like, you know, pulling the strings behind closed doors. And the reason it's important to know this stuff is that like... You as a GM want to be able on a moment be like "Oh, I know who's here! It's this group and here is what they're doing." What are they doing? Do you know what they're doing already? In some cases, again, you don't necessarily need to... What I say the Parallax Project is involved, does that mean they're putting on a concert, does that mean that they simply are giving money to a sculptor, does that mean that they have set up a museum somewhere, or a gallery? They can do any of that stuff. All I need to know is the gist which is: they are involved in the arts. So you don't *need* to produce a method for every single squad at this part of the stage. But it helps, especially if a player has flagged them as something interesting, right? So that is the moment where you go "Ooh, maybe I do want to figure out their methods here!"

As proof that you don't necessarily need to: I didn't write any of that stuff down about the Parallax Project, I just said it off the dome because the gist was all generally clear enough that it was possible to just generate different types of methods they might use. Whereas if I was like "Oh yeah, this is a Divine that cleans things." Like, okay, I could come up with something off the dome, but it wouldn't be as particular and it wouldn't be what I want, which is "a swarm of robots cleans the city with acid." You know, much different.

"The third thing you need are Goals. This helps determine where, when, and why they are deploying their methods. If they are ally with the pilots they should be working towards their goals. If they are in conflict with the pilots, doing so should also further their goals, possibly because the pilots are impeding them."

So, you take a look at something like... let's see... The Divine Luminance and Kalmia, who is Luminance's Elect. Luminance once stalked the Memoria Teardrop, destroying those who sought the land's mineral wealth. But when a former-Equiaxed looking to prove himself leashed it, it became a source of light and power for all Columnar on Partizan. Okay, cool. Without saying a goal, what do we have? We have sort of like some sort of light or electricity or power Divine, that was like a wild animal—we've talked before a bit about how Divines in this world are sometimes not tied to an Elect, they're almost like giant monsters in RPG or something, right?

In this case, Kalmia, which is the second—I guess is the second named Elect that we have, and so it's fair to say, yes, Elects in the Divine Principality take their names from plants, or are given their names from plants—probably given, I'm not 100% sure, it may be a mix. As always, I default to a mix. If you're like "Has X ever happened in the history of the Divine Principality?", the answer is always, "Yeah, of course. And it did it in a different way also, and

it did it in a third way also.” unless I explicitly say “that never happened”, or “that absolutely always happened”. In general my default is “It goes a bunch of different ways ‘cause there’s always an exception to the rule.”

So, yeah. Kalmia leashes the Divine Luminance. It’s like, “Okay, what do you wanna do with that? Is that now like a knight with their steed? Is that pictured like someone who is gonna be deployed to... as like a military asset? Is that someone who sits on a hoard of money, ‘cause you can have... Luminance can have kind of like a dragon-like quality when I describe it as stalking the hills of the Memoria Teardrop which is the region that the Columnar control here. Well, it could do all of those things, but its goal is to spread its light to the whole moon. Which means that when it does take military action it’s because it wants to spread its light to the whole moon. When it’s a defensive asset, it’s because being that in that moment will help it spread its light to the whole moon. This is like an instinct or a belief for NPC factions or for NPC squads, and it helps you as the GM know whether or not a squad would get involved, right?

The Progressive Church of Asterism has the Goal: To establish Partizan as the first Divine-led territory of the Principality. Would they get involved in a conflict between Columnar and Orion that was about some amount of money, a broken contract? No! How does that help them establish Partizan as the first Divine-led territory of the Principality? Now, if they have some, you know, genius who is like “Aha! We will uphold this contract flict but only if you put Divine in a position of power inside of Stel Orion.” Maybe, right? That would be like how they go about doing it. But be default, if it doesn’t seem like it fits their goal, then it’s not gonna work out.

And it’s also something for the players, right? If they are dealing with the Progressive Church of Asterism, how... what do we think the Progressive Church wants? Well, they want to establish Partizan as the first Divine-led territory of the Principality, so if they want to like get in with the Progressive Church of Asterism, or if they want to get their attention, or wanna like... have a lie that gets them, you know, past the doors, build it towards that goal. So, having those goals out there is really useful.

Next, the fourth thing you need is Tier. “Tier helps determine how big a threat they are to the pilots. Tiers are measures with Roman numerals, with the lowest Tier being Tier I,” which means I guess that player squads start with Tier I, “and the highest being Tier V. If a squad’s fiction says it should be weak, consider giving it a I or a II, if they’re meant to be powerful than III is probably suitable. If it commands other squads than IV or V is a good idea. Squads that are one or two Tiers higher than the pilots are a good challenge, anything more than that can be quite difficult.”

This is really interesting for us, especially because we have super-powerful units, like Divines, which sometimes look like a Tier III—I think that have been a Tier II before—and sometimes are a Tier V. For me the two big things that come into play here:

One, it is what Austin’s written here, which is if you command other units, if you have forces, you’re a IV or a V probably. If you are understaffed, or if it’s just you by yourself, even if you’re in a Divine, that’s gonna be Tier II or III in my breakdown.

It's useful for me because it is like a way for me to jot potential pathways through the season.

[00:45:00]

I can guess that they'll hit some Tier I to Tier III things, and then one or two big Tier IV or V things by the end of the season. I don't expect every one of these elements to come in, as we've talked about before, but that means that I can really juice up the stuff that I think they'll hit in some capacity.

Finally, "what is its name? This helps the players and the GM to keep track of the squad. A memorable name will fuel imaginations and help build investment in that squad's narrative. Consider giving all squads of the same faction a shared naming convention so that the faction they belong to can be easily identified. For example, you might give autocracy squad names related to beasts, such as the Wolf Pack, the Lion's Pride, and the Dragon Slayers." This is where you'll see things like the Parallax Project, or the Zenith Fund, or the two different numbered units here, the 21st Voluntary Composite Division, and the 301st Appraisal Unit, right? I don't think we've used that style of numbered units at all before.

And what's exciting for me partially is like all of these are such good rules, and so useful, and once I'm done doing these series of episodes, I cannot wait to go back and reapply them on everything we've been doing already, right? You can go back and look at the first set of squads, and like, it's very little detail, right? And that's because I wasn't there yet what I started putting that stuff together. Whereas now I'm there, I've got a really good idea of what these factions are and what these squads might be.

And so, now with all that in mind, I can kind of move forward.

The last two things here. One: NPC squads don't need squad playbooks. Like *Blades in the Dark*, squads have playbooks in *Beam Saber*, but those are mostly for player squads. So I probably won't assign playbooks. Though maybe as a fun thing, once we know what squads are cool and people that the players like, maybe I will build up a playbook just for fun, as like "Hey, if you wanted to play this group at home, here's the playbook that I would have given it."

Finally, once we start playing, factions and squads do literally have goals, not only in this kind of like "their Goal is to do ____" but in the classic thing I love sense—clocks. Not every squad need a clock, not every squad needs to be like tracked episode to episode, session to session. But the big ones, the ones that we care about, the ones that maybe have a rival in them, or that are not just like, you know, enemy of the week stuff, or friend of the week stuff, but are like "Hey, this is deep investment"—those will get clocks, and then during downtime, I will roll to see how they're working on what they're working on. If you watched the old Drawing Maps streams from Twilight Mirage, that was stuff that came up. Maybe I'll do it again, I'm not quite sure yet. We'll see what is done where.

In any case I should read the quads out, because I know a lot of y'all are listening to this on phone or an mp3 player, and don't necessarily have time to pull up the notes that I've included, though, again, just so you know, if you're just listening to the podcast, if you open up the actual episode in your podcast player, you will see a ton of notes about each of the factions in each of these updates. Today though let me just read these factions out, that way you don't have to do that.

Alright. There's nine here—again, in the default setting there are ten on each faction—and again, not all of these will get used in the game, but it's just nice to have a nice big palette, blah-blah-blah. Right now there's nine here, I think some of the Stels only have eight, some of them definitely have ten. I'll probably round out around nine or ten for each, maybe I'll trim some stuff away, but... We want a nice healthy list of stuff to play with here. So.

The Divine Luminance and Kalmia, its Elect¹ - Tier V - Luminance once stalked the Memoria Teardrop, destroying those who sought the land's mineral wealth. But when a former-Equiaxed looking to prove himself leashed it, it became a source of light and power for all Columnar on Partizan. (Goal: To spread its light to the whole moon.)

So, the Divine Luminance, obviously is like, again, a kind of dragon-like in its character, I don't know about appearance yet, I'll figure that out if we have to put it on screen. But very much like the idea of this person who was an Equiaxed, who's lost their Equiaxedness, but, you know, wants to be accepted in Stel Columnar, going out and being... doing this "heroic" thing of leashing this powerful Divine which... you know, its Goal, again, is to spread its light to the whole moon. Is that a metaphor? Yes, but also I suspect it's real. A lot of the Divines this season are going to walk that line between military asset and governmental infrastructure, civil infrastructure, and so one of the things I did the other day, actually, was talk to the whole crew about like "Hey, what are the things that you find useful in your day-to-day life that disappear into the backdrop of just how we live?" And so in this case something like the Divine Luminance is like power, and energy, and light specifically. The ability for people to have light in their evenings was a huge in human culture, and so while, you know, every Stel probably has a lighting system of some sort in most of their places, the Columnar are able to have more densely packed cities, they have the densest city, I believe, on the planet. And that is partly because of the Divine Luminance which allows for that... for cheap or free or whatever lighting. That is like the thing it gives to them.

Progressive Church of Asterism is the next faction. That's Tier IV - The second largest faith in all of Divinity began on Partizan, but by de-emphasizing the state (and giving power instead to individual divines), the central institution of the church itself wields "only" respectable power. It's still Tier IV, you know. It's not... But it's not Tier V, even on its home planet. Contrast that with, you know, the Received Asterism, the Church of Received Asterism which, because it centers the state and therefore centers Asterism, it centers itself, that thing is powerful everywhere. Everywhere people are practicing Received Asterism, it's big, even here on Partizan, the home of the rival faith. It's Goal is to establish Partizan as the first Divine-led territory of the Principality, which I've said earlier this episode. And by that it means like for real like what if the King of Partizan, of the Queen of Partizan... what if a

¹ Misspoken as "Excerpt".

Divine lead Partizan unified under it? And you know, maybe that's under Columnar, but maybe it isn't, right? The Progressive Church of Asterism is loyal to Stel Columnar, maybe it does dream of this being a Stel Columnar-run planet, or moon, but, you know, what if it was Luminance's planet or moon?

the next one is the Zenith Fund, also Tier IV. A public institution that incubates, defends, and offers testing for research teams developing emerging military hardware. (Goal: To develop a weapon that can permanently kill a Divine).

This is our Nerv, right? Sorry, this is our Nerf... I'm trying my best... nerf... I believe is how you pronounce the group from Evangelion. This is like our most experimental forward-thinking high-tech bullshit organization here.

The Divine Asepsis, again, I've talked about already. Tier III - Vigil City is the densest urban settlement on the moon, and yet, every morning, it is spotless. Give thanks to Asepsis' swarm of robotic servants. (Goal: To dissolve anything that doesn't belong.) Who decides what doesn't belong? Power be like that sometimes. So, again, dense urban environments, what is one of the things that allows us to have dense urban environments is people, it is sanitation. Again, not that other Stels don't have any sanitation, it's that because they don't have sanitation to the degree that Vigil City and Columnar on Partizan do, those settlements aren't as dense, they aren't as big. I think Vigil City is one of two true metropolises on this world.

The next one is the 21st Voluntary Composite Division. Tier III - Unlike most other Stels, Columnar doesn't segregate Hallow and Hollow units, and instead assigns Hallow pilots to officer roles in combined arms divisions like this one. (Goal: To claim territory from neighboring Stels). This is some soldiers.

I think, you know, a big part of what we've talked about with other... you've seen in other squads are Hallow squads, those are squads of mechs that have been blessed by a particular Divine. And what's it mean to be blessed by that Divine? I think in some cases it basically is just a social standing thing, but in other cases it means access to additional, you know, resourcing from the Stel or from your leadership, your individual local leadership, where like "Hey, if you're a Hallow pilot, lunch is free." "Hey, if you're a Hallow pilot, all your gear is always, you know, shiny and new." Whereas if you're just a lowly Hollow pilot, you make do with what you got. And sometimes it is, depending on the Divine, it is... it means something very specific, it means like, "Hey, your mechs can fly because you're the Hallow... you're a Hallow blessed by Flight" or whatever, right? And so that is very like cool high-tech space fantasy bullshit. And, again, unless I say otherwise, it's always the mix of possibilities, it's very rarely only one thing. You know, the reality of any category is that it's big, and there are always things that breach its walls.

But this... the Columnar actively mix Hallow units and Hollow units, they see Hallow units—again, they are Future, right?—they see Hallow units as being the sort of like vanguard of what a Hollow pilot should aspire to be. And that's sort of true everywhere else in the Divine Principality in the kind of Constellation that you might, you know, learn when you're a kid, you know, the one about military soldiers, would probably say the very lowest is,

you know, frontline infantry, and then you go up to infantry that's been blessed, and then you go up to someone who's been given a Hollow, and then from there to someone who's been given a Hollow, and you go up further, and there is... You know, it's a Constellation, so it's probably a stranger shape than that, where there's like lines connecting various things, but at the top is an Elect, and under an Elect are the hallow, those who have been blessed by that. And under that it probably gets messy, right? I bet Hollow pilot is actually lower than an individual who works for a Hollow, you know, as an infantry support or something, whatever.

Regardless, the point is, Columnar mixes all this shit together, Columnar is like "Eh, just... You got a robot, we have you guys, regular-ass robots, and you can work with a cool one who has Hollow powers" basically.

I should note at this moment too, talking for the first time in a while about military shit, like directly about military organization in this world, that this is a world where the... Though the Stels I've talked a lot about like "Their mechs do ____" ... There is interaction between these different Stels, there is trade to some degree, especially for Orion and Columnar to the other three. So while you may not see it in Stel Columnar force, because they're pretty focused on their own designs, I bet if you checked a Stel Nideo force, you would find some Stel Nideo mechs, right?—we've been talking about what their kind of lead units might look like—but you'll probably find some Orion units mixed in there. I've been thinking a lot about what is the Rook or the Zaku of this setting, and it's probably a Stel Orion mech.

I've been imagining it as having like really, a really mechanical design that has like heavy joints, like heavy... not heavy joints, but like a deep-seated... it's almost like it's kneeling all the time, right? It has like a kind of chicken walker style legs, if you know like the AT-ST from Star Wars, or if you look at certain Battletech machines, where it's like... it's still humanoid, but it's knees are kind of bent at all times, and then it has like one humanoid hand, and the other hand is like almost like a... sort of like a claw, if you make a claw-shape with your hand, but then you straighten your fingers out instead of curling them, it's sort of like that, like a C-shape, like a C if you could only make hard angles, no curves. So I guess like... there's a Japanese character that has this exact shape basically, I just can't remember which it is. And then *that* can close like a claw to pick things up, there's probably like a gun in the middle of it also. You know, mech shit. So yeah, you'll find like *that* style of mech everywhere across the Galaxy, even though it's a Stel Orion mech. Whereas... and you might find cool Stel Columnar mech as like something an officer might have access to in Stel Kesh, even though Stel Kesh also will have their own unique stuff, their retrofitted shit from before, right? There is that degree of like... of trade for this two, for the stuff that is inside of these two big trade-focused Stels.

Let's move away from military shit. The next one is the Parallax Project, Tier II. The Columnar budget earmarks substantial funding for "the elevation of local arts and culture that bridges the most innovative parts of our communities with the rest of Divinity." And the Goal there is to spread positive sentiment about Stel Columnar. This is a propaganda division.

The next one is really depressing. These are the Golden Devils - Tier II - While this group of Branched defectors would do anything to prove their loyalty, their leaders at the loathsome Waning Institute has something more utilitarian in mind. And their Goal is to turn the Branched into unstoppable war machines. So they are being tested, they are being, you know, outfitted with new materials.

[01:00:00]

The Branched, if you listened to the *For the Queen* game, or the *Microscope* game, we talked a little bit about the Branched as... These are the descendants of the people who remained in the Golden Branch, you know, 50000+ years ago, who have eventually completely transformed their bodies. They are a kind of post-human species at this point, and culture. And this is a group who defected, as I said moments ago, there is always the exception. And so here we have spotlighting one group of exceptional people who decided to leave their home in the Golden Branch behind and come join Stel Columnar, which from the outside—"Wow, look, a place we can go where we don't have to fight all the time! A place where we can go where, you know, we're not at war constantly! Oh, there's lots of freedom of movement, and people are able to vote and decide stuff. Of all of the different Stels, clearly this is the best one! ...Oh my god, the Waning Institute has decided that the price for our freedom here is to be war machines." And I suspect that they are... their whole thing is like, they wanna prove their loyalty, they are willing to do some big dirty shit so they can stay here and, you know, eventually live lives outside of war, build lives for families outside of war, and stuff like that. But for now, unfortunately the Waning Institute, which was introduced by Sylvia² in our—I think she introduced them in our *Microscope* game. The Waning Institute, bad group. They're not even here on a squad 'cause they're just like bigger than Partizan. But they're using them here on Partizan in this way.

Number 8, Strand Semaphore, a Tier II unit. They are using ancient Hyphan technology as a messenger service... Sorry, I'm gonna just read it. Using ancient Hyphan technology, this messenger service is able to send text-based communications to anywhere on-moon, so long as they've built an outpost there. Their Goal is to spread the network as far as possible.

Again, this goes back to the idea of infrastructure being important in this game. You might remember that there was a Divine for Nideo that just allowed anyone as part of that Divine's network, anyone blessed by that Divine to speak to each other. That's only for Stel Nideo! Where anyone who—it was the Divine Presence maybe... I think it was the Divine Presence—blessed cloud do that. And, you know, Stel Columnar has not been blessed by the Divine Presence. And so, they don't have that ability. And instead, they have this other cutting-edge technology, which is wireless text-based communication, but only even there towards like local access points. Like maybe if you can attach like a wireless device to one of those access points, but far enough away from it you definitely cannot. Again, this is such like a very 70s-80s vision of sci-fi, of like—yes, there are really powerful computers. Also you have to like be close to them to do anything. There is no global network that everyone is part of, etc. There is like... Well. There are exceptions again, right? Like, we know that one of the

² The name in the audio recording is no longer in use, hence the audio/transcript discrepancy.

things that does seem to get this style of download for some reason is the Partizan Palace, which we talked about in a previous update—or it was *in* a previous update, I don't remember if I talked about it— which is like the daily new drop. It's like your newspaper, it's also like the current set of data you have access to, sort of like a download version of Wikipedia with limited database functions, right? And certainly not unedited information about everything, it is not like you're checking the Divine Past for anything, it's like "Here is the information you're allowed to have." when you check the Palace.

And I think there's one more here... Yes. The 301st Appraisal Unit - Tier I - Before the Columnar commits the resources necessary to take something for their own, this small reconnaissance unit comprised of soldiers, engineers, and academics needs to find it. And their Goal is to locate and identify rare resources. Small recon unit, military + kind of civil mix unit.

So yeah, that is Stel Columnar, those are the nine squads I have right now, those are subject to change. We'll get to some more later. As a little bonus thing, next time we'll talk about the regions, and I'll just read you the region that we have here, and then next time we can talk about what it means to build a region. This is... What I'm reading is an unfinished region, and you'll understand why during the next episode when we talk about Stel Apostolos and their region.

Stel Columnar has the Memoria Teardrop which is a range of mountains and high plains, dense with mineral resources. It is named for "memoria," a rare metal with a high, natural storage capacity. And inside the Memoria Teardrop there is Vigil City, which we've talked about, and then the Memoria Mines.

So, that is Stel Columnar as it stands right now. More work to be done always, but for now I'm gonna move on and work on Stel Apostolos, think about regions, and then loop back around with y'all hopefully next week.

I hope you have a good day. Peace!