
A History of the Sabine Realms of Assyria, Scythia, and Etruria

Once, long ago, these were barbarian lands, ruled by nomad tribes and conquered by a steady string of foreign horse-lords and fortress-barons. The Sabine people, such as they were, were little more than landless and ragged wanderers, beholden to the whims of the brutal armies and warlords who ravaged their barren realm. Then, many centuries before our time, the tide turned against the savage invaders. The rulers of an oasis kingdom at the heart of the Sabine chaparral mastered the art of divination magic, enabling them to distinguish between truth and lies, ensuring the loyalty of their vassals and defending them against the treachery of their foes. The wisest of their number could even tap into the currents of the future, revealing prophecies not meant for mortal eyes. With this power in their hands, they unified the scattered tribes of the Sabine heartland, rallying warrior clans and city-states into the seeds of an empire that would endure for generations, based at the city of Lavinium.

When these founders of the Sabine Empire finally passed into eternity, they handed down a token of their authority: the fabled Diadem of the Sabines, an enchanted artifact that endowed its wearer with immense magical power. The longer a royal of the Sabine bloodline wore the Diadem, the more their power increased - yet if a usurper without true royal blood dared to place the artifact on their brow, it would inflict a terrible curse upon them. Yet even an empire of such legendary power could not endure forever. Boggled down by a ponderous bureaucracy, outbreaks of rebellion, and economic stagnation, the only way for the Sabine states to survive was for the Empire to die. And so, 300 years ago, the decision was made. The Sabine Empire, crippled by its own girth, carved itself into the three smaller nations that survive to this day: Etruria in the west, Assyria in the east, and Scythia in the center.

Yet even the division of the Empire could not resolve every tension that had plagued the Sabine lands. The provinces that became Etruria and Scythia had been bitter rivals even in the empire's heyday, and their relations swiftly devolved from simmering tension to outright hostility. Bloodshed was never far from their minds, and the history of the two nations has been fraught with brutal feuds and petty grudges ever since. The first queen of Scythia, a bold warrior and hoarder of emeralds named Smaragdos, vied continually with the new Etruscan king over the fate of the legendary Diadem. Neither of them could maintain control of the contentious relic - a series of heists, battles, and bargains meant that it changed possession almost constantly. Eventually, it disappeared from the Etruscan treasure room for the last time; some say the aging Smaragdos presided over the theft herself. That was the last anyone saw of the Diadem, or of Smaragdos: her convoy disappeared at sea under suspicious circumstances, and both the queen and her prize were widely mourned.

Naturally, the blame for Smaragdos' death fell to Etruria, heightening the aggression between the fledgling nations. Retaliation on both sides was continuous and ruthless, until the rulers of both nations had forgotten what had sparked the feud in the first place. Skirmishes, petty duels, corporate espionage, sabotage, piracy, robbery, and embezzlement ravaged both nations, stifling their development. In the centuries that followed, Etruria was beset by a string of voracious plagues, famines, and earthquakes (some say it was the gods' revenge for the murder of Smaragdos), leaving the nation proud but poor. Though Scythia fared better, it remains only moderately wealthy. Assyria, on the other hand, is a realm of luxury and wisdom: unharried by the internecine disputes of its neighbors, it dedicated itself instead to social and educational advancement, crafting a democratic meritocracy that swiftly grew rich off of foreign trade. The universities and academies of Ashur and Nineveh are renowned for their scholarship and rigor, and young Sabine royals of both families often attend Assyrian schools until they come of age - though Felicia famously chose to remain in Etruria for her education instead.

Yet passing between the nations and putting down new roots is a complex and laborious process. Though the customs agencies and border guards of each nation behave differently, the procedure for immigration is almost always incredibly frustrating, requiring a massive fee (to enter Etruria) or the signature of a monarch themselves (to enter Assyria). Scythia, in fact, requires both. The alternative, however, is just as inconvenient. Without proper citizenship, it's nearly impossible to get a job more comfortable than exhausting day labor, and all non-citizens must return to their home country and renew their paperwork once every

year. Nor is forging such a document easy - important contracts, including immigration agreements, are themselves magical and cannot be forged or copied: the paper itself is tinted red with arcane dyes, and will only turn green once the true individuals whose names are required have signed.

Scarcely a century ago, Etruria seemed on the brink of collapse: its economy in shambles, its borders harried by foreign invaders, its court plagued by civil strife. The nation managed to survive, but its ruling dynasty, House Serta, paid the price: a distant cousin, Hyperion Coronus, seized power in a bloody coup and put the last remaining Etruscan royals to the sword. Now his son, Hiems, rules the nation - his dicta are brilliantly effective, but his morality is rumored to be nonexistent. Citizens whisper of the dreaded prison camps - horrible dungeons where those who dare to question his reign are sent to rot behind the iron grates. They say you're lucky if the gangrene gets you before the rats do, or if the rats kill you before the torturers. But these are only whispers, and no one knows the truth. Every so often some ragged half-mad beggar will claim that they've escaped from the camps, but their stories are hardly given credence by more rational members of society. Short of an outright coup, however, it is impossible for a king or queen to lose their royal status. Nevertheless, their power is not absolute: their expenditures are carefully controlled by the royal treasuries, and they are required to justify any needless expenses beyond a strict budget. Embezzlement, even royal embezzlement, is strictly punishable by life imprisonment under all circumstances.

One thing is certain, though: bad blood still runs between Scythia and Etruria, and they now stand on the brink of war. It all began with the death of the Etruscan queen, Cerintha, a sweet and caring queen who was much-loved by her people. Her habit of paying surprise visits to impoverished border towns, feeding and clothing all those who dwelled there, made her the idol of every poor Etruscan. But on one such visit, to the village of Hero, her convoy was ambushed by a Scythian phalanx, and she was killed by accident in the chaos that ensued. Etruria demanded vengeance. So when Princess Thoesi of Scythia, the ten-year-old daughter of King Cryseon and Queen Meizon, disappeared from her bed one night and was declared dead by the Soulblades soon afterwards, it was Hiems who took the blame, though he never admitted that her blood stains his hands.

Meizon, Scythia's queen, has been full of heartbroken rage ever since her daughter's death. The tensions between the nations have not been defused since - border clashes have continued to claim hundreds or even thousands of lives, the hot-blooded Etruscan princess Salo knocked out half a Scythian diplomat's teeth with her bare hands to great Etruscan cheers, there are hints of an Etruscan spy in King Cryseon's court, and no one is willing to back down. This wedding is not a mark of mutual respect or admiration. Instead, it is driven by a fear of divine vengeance.

Less than two years ago, the reclusive Cumaeen Oracle emerged from her temple after a pair of devastating hurricanes ravaged the coastline, uttering dire warnings in a prophetic trance. The will of the gods is clear, she said: the old blood feud must be reconciled. An Etruscan noble and a Scythian noble, no more than ten years apart in age, must be bound by matrimony or the wrath of Olympus will tear the nations asunder and the rivers will run red with blood and flame. Six months ago, a decision was made. Dreading the prospect of civil war without end, the monarchs of the two kingdoms desperately agreed to arrange the marriage of their heirs, though whether either will follow through on this promise remains to be seen. The announcement spread like wildfire through the Sabine kingdoms: a Scythian prince was to marry an Etruscan princess.

The divination magic that once ran through the veins of the Sabine emperors still empowers the scions of the three kingdoms. In some, it manifests as a powerful ability to compel others to speak the truth: once you see a king bathed in the light of magic, piercing your soul with their ashen gaze, you cannot resist answering their questions and answering true. In a few others, this power appears as the ability to tell the future, gleaned bits and pieces of the fortunes of others. Although truth-telling magic is passed down by blood alone, it is possible for even a lowly commoner to master fortune-telling magic given years of intense training and a healthy dose of luck. Indeed, the process of learning divination is so time-consuming and agonizing that few royals these days even bother. Some people, though, have a natural talent for fate and empathy, and it is these gifted few who often serve as the fortune-tellers present at royal weddings.

Divination magic is not the only form of secret power to be found in the Sabine kingdoms. In Scythia can be found the ancient order known as the Soulblades, renowned healer-priests who inhabit the Soulblade Quarter of the Scythian capital. These

scholars and arcanists dabble in the art of “Soul Magic,” which many have condemned as the practice of necromancy. Their most powerful spells, which are said to tap into the souls of the dead, are volatile and dangerous, and even the most controlled ritual can backfire suddenly and send its practitioner to meet Hades before their time.

But the Soulblades were not previously allowed to indulge in these practices unchecked. They have been opposed for centuries by the mythic Blackguards, fearsome assassins who considered Soulblade magic far too dangerous for these reckless dilettantes to indulge in. They dedicated themselves to stamping out Soul Magic wherever it appeared, using ingenious but entirely nonmagical methods to kill the Soulblades and stifle all knowledge of their magic. The Blackguards protect their secrets jealously, and to discover the identity of a Blackguard is said to be certain death.

After the collapse of the Sabine empire, the Blackguards lost their imperial patronage, and the Soulblades consolidated their power exclusively in Scythia. They rebranded themselves as healers and took root in the Scythian court, where they took vicious pleasure in eliminating any Blackguards who remained. While they now profess to be devotees of harmless healing magic, there are still rumors that some among their number continue to experiment with necromancy, desecrating the remains of the dead in their attempts to speak with - or even resurrect - the spirits of the deceased. Though the Soulblades understandably claim that these rumors are baseless accusations, there are those who still worry. Queen Meizon, in particular, is legendary for her hatred of the apparently harmless Scythian Soulblades: in a fit of rage, she had Memnon, one of the most famous Soulblades of modern times, imprisoned and flogged for “violating the will of nature” - alleging that he and his compatriots were still delving into necromancy behind her back, and dragging out the macabre evidence to prove it.

The Blackguards and their Deadly Arts

You are a Blackguard - one of the last remaining members of a hidden order of assassins that has endured behind the scenes for generations. Although the Scythian branch of your order was purged by the vicious zeal of the upstart Soulblades, the Blackguards remain a powerful force in the affairs of both Etruria and Assyria. Rather than submitting themselves to the fickle whims of magic, the Blackguards put their faith only in their own, human abilities. Highly trained in the arts of stealth, deception, and covert killing, they are assassins without equal, and some of the feats they perform would seem like magic to the untrained eye. Not all of these skills are murderous in nature - for example, to improve their ability to mislead others, fledgling Blackguards spend long hours practicing the game of Bluffmaster, and many become quite skilled. Blackguards are traditionally indoctrinated from a young age, growing from children into fully fledged assassins over the course of decades. After they completing several years of rigorous training, acolytes are initiated as Half-Blackguards; a few take on the burden of extra missions and training to become full Blackguards. Given the deadly nature of their work, Blackguards are supposed to abide by a rigid code of honor, which states that incurring collateral damage while carrying out a mission is the worst possible shame.

The Etruscan Blackguards, led by the mysterious Full Blackguard known only as the White Rose, serve the Etruscan royal family with a grudging loyalty. This is a great humiliation, to serve at the beck and call of an arrogant monarch who barely even knows they exist, much less what they are truly capable of. Despite this humiliation, they hold as strictly to tradition as possible, and obey the commands the White Rose gives without question. The Assyrian half of the order, on the other hand, generally take a looser approach to tradition. Ever since the collapse of the Sabine empire, the Assyrian have become something of a loose cannon, lurking in the shadows, assassinating targets to serve their own inscrutable purposes. Their order lacks the rigid hierarchy of the Etruscan Blackguards, and an Assyrian Blackguard may be far more unpredictable than their Etruscan counterpart.

Blackguards prefer poisoning and subterfuge to unsubtle combat and possess several esoteric means of administering venom. The most notable of these are their ability to infuse textiles, food, and ordinary sewing needles with doses of poison, allowing them to use these mundane objects to incapacitate or kill. If someone trained in the manufacture of poison observes a poisoned object closely, they may be able to discern its deadly nature.

You can kill one of your victims by pricking them with a specially coated needle, waiting at least two hours, and then feeding them a special blue substance— though neither the needle nor the blue liquid is poisonous independently, they are deadly in combination. Pink poison instead knocks its victims unconscious. The Soulblades are able to concoct potent remedies for these poisons, but you must thwart their meddling. Fortunately, if you knock a Soulblade out, they cannot attempt Soul Magic rituals for twenty minutes after they wake up. If you see any suspicious Soulblade activity, you should endeavor to halt it immediately - their brand of magic is too dangerous to be allowed in Sabine lands.

The secret symbol of the Blackguard order is the rose, and the Blackguards attending the royal wedding have arranged to leave any covert messages by the bouquet of roses. Blackguards traditionally use a simple cipher to communicate, disguised as the gibberish of a Soulblade incantation: only every third letter of the message, beginning with the first letter, should be read. Traditional Blackguards have a strict agenda:

- Avoid collateral damage while assassinating your targets.
- Keep your identities secret, even from one another.
- Keep all Blackguard technologies hidden from the common rabble.
- Shut down Soulblade magic if at all possible.

The Rituals and Beliefs of the Sabine Nations

The three nations of the former Sabine Empire are marked by a curious set of shared rituals, beliefs, customs, and prejudices, many of which date back to before the Empire's schism. One of the most ritualized elements of Sabine culture is the wedding. Scarcely anything takes place at a royal wedding that is not traditional. Ever since the first Sabine kings and queens married off their descendants to neighboring tribes, weddings have occurred exclusively on the first day of summer, the Ides (13th) of June. These marriages are almost always arranged, for the mutual prosperity and peace of the nations involved - although some reckless couples marry for love before their wiser companions can stop them, these unions are considered foolish at best, and self-destructive at worst. Nevertheless, most partners in even the most political of marriages eventually grow to appreciate and even love one another.

If two people from different nations are married, they both become citizens of the older partner's homeland, allowing heirs to cement political allegiances. Ill-advised matches are difficult to undo, however: the concept of divorce is nonexistent, and adultery is strictly forbidden. Scythia, a more conservative nation, also forbids sex before marriage, which Etruscans rarely bother to condemn. The gender of those being married matters not at all - an alliance of two kings or two queens has happened before, and heirs adopted into the line of succession are just as legitimate as trueborn ones, provided they still carry noble blood. Moreover, royals need not marry other royals - they are free to tie themselves to whoever they choose, though most dedicate themselves either to another royal or to a non-noble individual of prodigious renown or talent.

Drinking and gambling are universal: the siblings of the betrothed traditionally organize games of Bluffmaster. This is a bluffing game played at an elegant triangular table, where the assembled nobles can vie against their rivals for pride and profit, fortifying their spirits with alcohol as they play. The wedding cake provided more closely resembles a hearty bread, made of ground spelt harvested from the homelands of both bride and groom. Representatives of the common people - interpreted today as the wealthiest merchant of each nation - are invited to attend, and bring lavish gifts for the bride and groom. Common gifts include jewelry, musical instruments, and rare food delicacies; the representatives traditionally ask the happy couple to wear, play, or taste the gifts upon receiving them. Fortunetellers, generally commoners with an innate knack for divination who have spent decades mastering their craft, also frequent the festivities, and those who are skilled in the art often learn a great many secrets over the course of the ceremony. A bouquet of roses traditionally graces the venue. There will always be some light refreshments offered, usually including "Wedding Bread," a type of spelt cake.

Who's Who in the Sabine Kingdoms

These are the commoners and nobles attending the wedding of Princess Felicia of Etruria and Prince Eidolos of Scythia. They arrived at the island of Cos on six different vessels. Scythia and Etruria each sent two ships, one bearing commoners and the other royals. The first ship sailing from Assyria was populated by servants who would prepare the villa for the ceremony, as well as the diplomat Sirasu - the second carried the rest of the Assyrian delegation as well as Maxene and Salo, who are currently studying in Assyria.)

Commoners:

Prymnesie is the young steward of the Scythian court, tasked with ensuring that the wedding festivities go off without a hitch. The ascension of one so green to such a prestigious position is unprecedented in a Sabine court. It is rumored that she carries ties to the Scythian order of Soulblades and their esoteric magic.

Delia is a fortuneteller traveling with the Scythian delegation, a young woman with the gift of insight chosen by the Scythian court to bless the happy couple. As the royal seers are chosen based solely on their talent for the art of divination, the woman carries neither lands nor title, and she is a curiosity among the guests for both her unknown heritage and for the fortunes she will reveal to them.

Fresi is an arms dealer whose status as the wealthiest commoner in Scythia got him invited to the royal wedding as a “representative of the commoners.” A cunning merchant whose services and products go without exception to the highest bidder, his military innovations have nevertheless proved effective - perhaps chillingly so - at securing Scythia’s borders against barbarians.

Leda is the chief steward of the Etruscan court, an elderly but dedicated attendant who has served the crown for decades without fail or complaint. Not a detail passes before her eyes that she does not sign off on, and with her in charge of the royal wedding, it will take a miracle to derail the Etruscan arrangements.

Moenia is a mysterious fortuneteller accompanying the Etruscan party, a no-name plucked from the ranks of Etruria’s commoners to share her prophetic knack with the gathered nobles. Her very talent for divination magic is an astonishment, however - fortunetelling blood traditionally runs in noble veins, and for a mere itinerant to prove the most talented diviner in all of Etruria is either a startling revelation, an unlikely stroke of luck, or a cunning hoax. Particularly surprising is the fact that two commoners, Moenia and Delia, are serving as diviners for the wedding.

Paldeen is a luxury goods merchant, salesman par excellence, and the wealthiest of Etruria’s small merchant class. He is the “ambassador of the common people” at this wedding, though as a rich Assyrian immigrant he little resembles the average citizen of that impoverished nation.

Izdubar is a well-respected Assyrian professor of astronomy and the brother of Paldeen, chosen to support the diplomat Sirasu in his peacekeeping efforts.

Sirasu Noon is a renowned Assyrian lawyer, diplomat, master Bluffmaster player, and brilliant political theorist. His scholar’s eye, talent for objective assessment, and incisive mind enable him to resolve nearly any conflict - whether it’s a territorial dispute, an academic debate, or a blood feud about to erupt in violence, Sirasu is the one who dials down the tensions and makes even the most entrenched opponents see reason.

Semirami is a young but distinguished Assyrian archaeologist, also chosen to support Sirasu as a peacekeeper.

Royals (From Eldest to Youngest):

Hiems is the king of Etruria, an icy and brilliant man whose intellect is matched only by his capacity for ruthlessness. The scion of an upstart dynasty that came to power when his father Hyperion overthrew the old Etruscan queen in a bloody coup, he cares about one thing and one thing only: increasing the power of Etruria by any means necessary. No matter who you are, he is

not a man to be trifled with.

Cryseon is the well-loved king of the Scythians. Ever since the kidnapping and death of his daughter Thoesi, it's been rumored that he blames himself for every life lost to the senseless feud between the two nations.

Meizon is the queen of Scythia and the wife of Cryseon. She is a stalwart believer in propriety, chastity, and temperance as the true pillars of Scythian virtue. After the death of her daughter at Etruscan hands, Meizon has made no secret of her desire for vengeance, and is also known for her grudge against the mystical Soulblades.

Felicia is the eldest child of King Hiems and the deceased Queen Cerintha, and the crown princess of Etruria. Rather than studying in Assyria like most royals, she chose to remain in Etruria, spending several years as an archaeologist studying the ancient capital of the Sabine Empire. Honest and upright, it's said that she'll someday make a competent but boring ruler.

Eidolos is the only surviving child of Cryseon and Meizon, and heir to the Scythian throne. He studied law at one of Assyria's finest universities. He is betrothed to Felicia, the Etruscan crown princess, and today's wedding will see the two bound together in sacred matrimony.

Salo is the younger sister of Princess Felicia, an passionate princess loved by the Etruscan people. She resembles the late Queen Cerintha in both looks and temperament.

Maxene is the adoptive son of Cryseon and Meizon, the child of a noble friend of Meizon's who was killed in a border raid by Etruscan troops. He has not been formally welcomed into the line of succession, and rumor has it he never got along well with his adoptive family. He is now studying something or the other in Assyria, as is customary for young royals.