

The Southlands

The inhabitants of the Dragon Empire know the lands beyond the Red Desert only from rumors, legends, and vague travel reports, and in ignorance of their diversity, they simply call them "the Southlands."

In the west, the magma-spewing Magma Keeps and the cloud-crowned peaks of the Giant's Stair block the way, while in the east, the primeval forests of the Wild Wood make passage seem impossible. Between these lies the Red Desert, scarcely less impassable—a merciless wasteland, created by the ravages of the Red Dragon and the fall of the Great Golden One.

In the stories and legends told about the Southlands, there are tales of golden, jewel-encrusted towers built overnight by djinns for powerful sorcerers, of sun-drenched grasslands stretching as far as the eye can see, and deep jungles where man-eating beasts prowl. Children play with diamonds and rubies, and the simplest farmer seasons his soup with the finest spices. But the kings and princesses are cruel and capricious, and the lives of their servants are worth less to them than those of their housecats.

It is said that, in times past, caravans and travelers occasionally crossed the desert along the Lost River, offering their marvelous treasures in the cities south of the Midland Sea. But for decades, no such visitors have been seen, making the arrival of such a caravan in Horizon an event that draws great attention.

The Icons and the Southlands

The **Diabolist** has a great interest in the lands of the south, where she can escape the watchful gaze of the Dragon Emperor and the Archmage, and where the iron fist of the Conqueror does not immediately close around every new hellhole. Here she has a playing field that is unexplored and caters to her curiosity and passion for chaos.

The **Dragon Emperor** would certainly take a cautious but benevolent interest in the southern neighbors if he were not preoccupied with the Great Invasion of the Orc Lord. All the empire's forces are mustered to resist the wild hordes of the greenskins in the north.

Of the **Three**, the Blue is tied to Drakkenhall and the empire, but what about the Red and the Black? The Red keeps away from the protective spells of the Archmage, but is there similarly powerful magic in the south? The Red Desert was his battlefield even in ancient times. And what of the Black and her assassins? There has been little word of them lately in the Dragon Empire. Has she found a new field of operation?

The **Elf Queen** speaks noticeably little of the lands in the south. It almost seems that any mention of lands south of the Wild Wood causes her great displeasure. Could it have something to do with her daughter Perido's rebellion long ago and the banishment of her

followers, the Thorn Elves, to the south? At least, mentioning them at the Court of Stars is equally unwelcome.

The **Conqueror** has more than enough to deal with in battling the demons in the Dragon Empire and cannot afford to concern himself with the southern lands. Or perhaps he can if he learns that the Diabolist is turning her attention there? After all, he cannot allow his arch-nemesis to establish a base behind his back.

The **Archmage** is a busy man. Djinnns, summons, and ancient magic beyond his spellbooks—of course, all of this interests him, but it could also upset the balance of his carefully calibrated forces and spells, potentially leading to a catastrophic collapse. Perhaps it would be better if there were no active exchange with the Southlands?

The **Great Gold Wyrms** are everywhere. His focus is on the entire world and its fabric, not just one region. Whether demons claw and tear at the world from the north or the south is irrelevant. What matters is that there are brave women and men who help him hold back the endless flood beyond the walls of the world.

The **Orc Lord** is throwing all his strength into a final desperate assault to breach the defenses of the Dragon Empire. What comes after? Who knows, but his gaze has always been turned southward. Perhaps he will drive hordes of refugees ahead of him.

The **High Druid** calls the Wild Wood home, sitting at the threshold between the north and the south. In the Dragon Empire, most believe her attention is entirely focused on the works of the Archmage and the chains in which he binds nature. But they underestimate the foresight of the young Icon, who also has her eyes on the ancient jungles and vast grasslands of the south. Do not old legends say that somewhere down there stands the First of all Trees?

The **Lich King** stakes his claim to the Dragon Empire, drawing his power from its ancient history. In the Southlands, there are strange death rituals and other powers that claim control over the realm of the dead—powers with which he has yet to contend.

The **Priestess** seeks to unite the worship of all the gods of light under her temple's roof, not just those of the Dragon Empire. Unnoticed or ignored by most other Icons, her missionaries have long since found their way through the Red Desert or the Wild Wood, wandering along the caravan routes and jungle paths of the south, preaching in tents and bazaars about the light of the Priestess and how it holds the salvation of the world.

If the Great Gold Wyrms are everywhere, then the **Prince of Shadows** is nowhere, yet he has his fingers in every pie. Where a die is cast or a coin changes hands, he is not far. And whoever believes it is any different in the south probably also believes that the tooth fairy only takes fallen teeth when she visits you at night.

The **Dwarf King** has other concerns than the Southlands, as he is deeply embroiled in the defense against the orcs alongside the Dragon Emperor. But if he had a moment's peace, he would think of his ancestors, who dedicated themselves to the eternal fire instead of ore and migrated south to be closer to the sun. Isn't it said that the Magma Keeps are actually the forges of fiery dwarves?

The Lands of Sun and Moon

But what does it look like if we turn south, follow the Lost River upstream, cross the Red Desert, and speak with the inhabitants of the Southlands themselves? If we asked them about the "Southlands," they wouldn't know what we were talking about, as they know their homeland by different names. The name we would most likely hear is "The Lands of Sun and Moon," though this actually refers only to the great twin kingdom of savannah and forest, not all the surrounding lands. For simplicity's sake, however, we will stick with it.

The Red Desert

The Red Desert is also red in the south and known by the same name, but the inhabitants here associate it less with golden and red dragons and more with bandits and marauders. For many years, the Bandit King had his hideout here and terrorized the surrounding regions with raids and plundering until the Consortium of Merchant Princes hired the Condottiera, who put an end to the bandit king. Not least because of this, for the first time in a long while, a caravan dared and succeeded in making the journey north to the Dragon Empire.

The Golden Savannah

South of the Red Desert lies the vast, flat grassland of the Golden Savannah, one half of the twin kingdom of Sun and Moon, of Grass and Tree, of Fire and Water, of Lion and Leopard. The Lion Queen has her home here, and when she is not ruling, she resides in the Temple of the Sun in the center of the savannah or travels with her retinue from tribe to tribe, sometimes in human form, sometimes in her lion guise.

The Silver Forest

The counterpart to the realm of the Sun is that of the Moon, the Silver Forest, south of the savannah and beyond the Twilight River. Here dwells the Leopard Queen, when she is not seated on the twin throne in the Temple of the Moon at the heart of the forest, watching over her people or prowling in her panther form through the shadows beneath the trees.

Juanamwezi

Where the Forest River meets the Dusky River lies Juanamwezi, the twin city, the capital of the realm of Sun and Moon, spread across dozens of islands in the river and along its banks. Here, the Lion and Leopard Queens alternately sit on the Blossom Throne, each for twelve years, determining the fate of the joint kingdom.

The Jewel Cities

To the east of the realm of Sun and Moon stretches the Jewelled Coast along the Warded Sea. It is a rich and fertile land, with its power and wealth concentrated in four cities: Al-Zumarud, Al-Almas, Al-Yaqut, and Al-Rwby. The official rulers and governments change frequently, but the true power lies in the hands of the Consortium of Merchant Princes and its leader, the Magnate. Once, the Jewel Cities were part of the realm of Sun and Moon, and the twin queens still claim sovereignty over them, but their gold and wealth long ago made them practically independent.

The Parched Ocean

To the west of the Golden Savannah, separated by the Giants' Stair mountain range, lies an endless expanse of sand and dust, known as the Parched Ocean. Here, and at the far edge

of the savannah, the Tabaxi have withdrawn—a feline-shaped people who once shared the Golden Savannah with humans. They are subjects of the Lion Queen, and some say that the nobles of the realm of the Sun gained their ability to transform into feline forms by intermingling with the Tabaxi. But if this is true, they received little thanks for it, as their rich hunting grounds have largely been taken over by humans, and they have been pushed into inhospitable areas.

The Sheltered Sea

In the east, the Southlands border the Sheltered Sea, providing a safe transport route between the Jewel Cities (though not as safe as the Midland Sea). To the north, it is shielded from the storms of the Iron Sea by the Shield Isles, and its sea monsters—stirred by the Archmage’s magic—mostly hurl themselves against the seawall of the Dragon Empire and do not venture south. A voyage north to the Midland Sea, however, is more suicide than sea journey due to storms and sea monsters.

To the south, the Spice Islands mark the boundary of the Warded Sea, from where the Jewel Cities receive precious cargo that they trade northward and westward. The Corsairs of the Free Isles, located far to the east, also cast greedy eyes on these treasures.

The Eld

South of the Wild Wood and east of the Red Desert, beyond the Owl Barrens, stretch the bottomless swamps of the Eld, into whose depths few humans venture. Snake and lizard folk, frog people, and other remnants of ancient peoples have found refuge here, and it is said that the Black Dragon occasionally returns to the heart of the swamps to her old lair.

The Icons of the Southlands

Not all icons of the Dragon Empire have the influence, reach, or interest to be considered icons in the Southlands as well. Other powers take their place, though their goals and powers are certainly not the same.

Where the Dragon Emperor represents rule and order in the north, in the south, those roles are filled by the **TWIN QUEENS** of Sun and Moon, Savannah and Forest, Grass and Tree. Every twelve years, they exchange places on the Blossom Throne and thus the rule over the kingdom. The home of the Lion Queen, who currently sits on the throne, is the Golden Savannah. The Leopard Queen comes from the Silver Jungle in the south, where she now waits in the Temple of the Moon for her turn to reign again. What the queens have in common is that they and the elite of their kingdom can transform into big cats.

High Elves, Wood Elves, and Dark Elves rarely wander through the Southlands, and accordingly, the influence of the Elf Queen is limited. However, in hushed and fearful tones, people speak of the **PRINCESS OF THORNS**, who slumbers in the Palace of Contemplative Regret, and whose cruel servants, the Briar Elves, seek ways to awaken their mistress and make her the true queen.

The Conqueror has shown little interest in the south so far. However, it is said that the **CONDOTTIERA** is a general and warrior from the north, who rivals him in toughness and discipline. She has built a powerful mercenary army, the Golden Company, and has earned a

position of power in the petty wars of the divided Jewel Cities. The Golden Company has inspired many imitators, all of whom look up to the Condottiera as a role model.

The power of the Lich King is strongly confined to the territory of his old empire, so thankfully, his undead nobility, composed of revenants, vampires, and similar horrors, is rarely found in the Southlands. Perhaps this is also because the dead have their own icon in the **SPIRIT SPEAKER** who advocates for them, mediating between the world of the living and the ancestors.

A kind of counterpart to the Archmage in the Southlands is the **MASTER OF GENIES**, who allegedly resides on an island in the Warded Sea in a tower that reaches all the way into the Overworld. It is said he knows the true names of all the djinn except one, and they obey his every word. They slay his rivals, build structures overnight for his allies, and carry him wherever he wishes to go. Some claim he is the first of all djinn himself, while others say he is "only" a man, and should he ever lose control over even the smallest djinn, they would tear him to a thousand shreds.

Dwarves rarely venture into the Southlands, and few here have ever heard of the Dwarf King. But there are enough people who rival him in their love of gold, precious stones, and magical artifacts. The most powerful among them is the **MAGNATE**, the richest of all the Merchant Princes. However, some voices argue that the position of an icon does not actually belong to one individual but rather to the **CONSORTIUM**, and it doesn't matter who exactly leads it at any given time.

The place of the Orc Lord as a threat and scourge at the borders was, until recently, taken by the **BANDIT KING** from the Red Desert, but he has now been defeated, and his place has not yet found a successor.

The Great Gold Wurm, the Three, the Prince of Shadows, the High Druid, the Priestess, and the Diabolist are also regarded as icons by those in the Southlands.