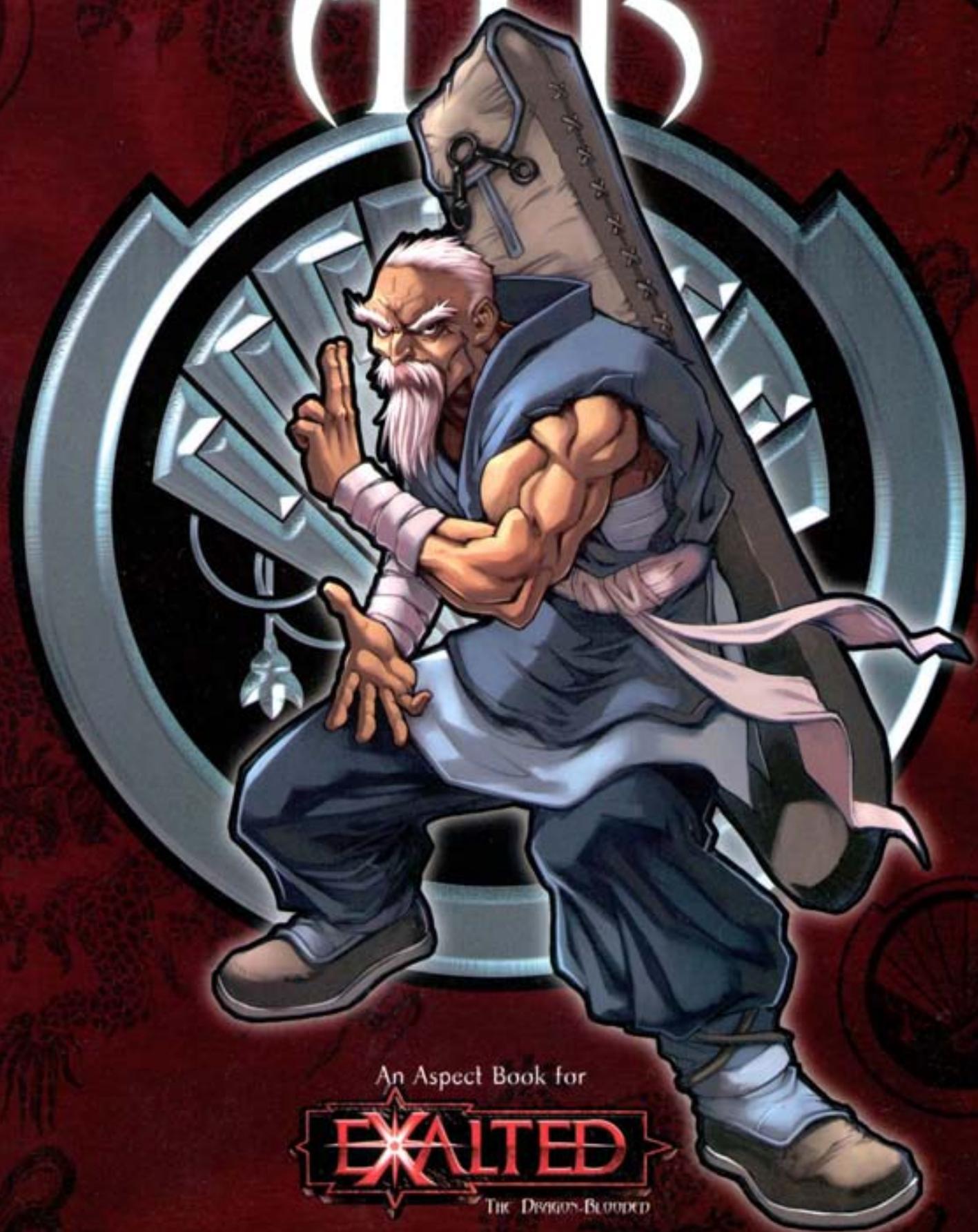


A S P E C T B O O K

ALB



An Aspect Book for

EXALTED
The Dragon-Blooded



ASPECT BOOK
AIR

BY B. D. FLORY AND W. VAN METER

WAKING THE WIND

"I'm tired. Leave me alone," I remember saying a moment ago, before I was awake. With a grainy whisper, I push myself slowly up from the stone floor of the shrine, an outline of rime ice in the likeness of my torpid carcass lingering for a moment before melting in the... noonday sun? *Damnit, I must have drunk the dragon's share of that applejack brew to sleep so long with such a pain in my head — on the floor, no less. This is no way to be woken up by... whomever it is nervously fidgeting on the temple stairs.*

"Murder, news or pointless diplomacy?" I thunder, not bothering to look outside as I swipe at the ice weighing down my eyelashes. The stuff forms thickest around my eyes and mouth, especially when I sleep very still, and no matter what the weather is like. I stride out to the front of the shrine, tired of waiting for a response and reiterate to what seems to be a weathered, somewhat agitated peasant woman kneeling there, "Ma'am, are you here to murder me, to bring me news, to beg the Wind Dancer back to his post or some combination thereof?" *Is this the same short-straw local that always gets sent to pester me or someone wearing her face? I can't remember if I've ever bothered to look at her face before, so I guess the point's moot.*

She blinks at me for a moment before she sets down a bundle of bread loaves in a cloth and bows deeply. "I bring bread for the keeper of the West Orchard Shrine."

This isn't what I was expecting, to be sure. "Bread. For what?"

A momentary frown creases the woman's face but is gone just as soon as it appeared. "A gift for you, the—"

"No, no. You didn't come all the way up here just to bring me bread. What do you want? Speak plainly."

More blinking, and the frown again, this time accompanied by a slight shaking of the head, "Plainly?"

I rub my temples, the sunlight aggravating the pain behind my eyes. *If this is an assassin, she's either very good or very bad. If she's a diplomat or courier, then I'm Mnemon's houseboy.* "Out with it, yes. I want to know why you're bothering me. And stand up." She seems almost frightened, definitely taken aback at least, when my icy blue hands reach out and set her on her feet.

She takes a deep breath, and her eyes scan the sky for moment, presumably trying to phrase her opening line. "I am sent from the orchard villages to humbly request your counsel and intercession on a matter of... divine... well—"

"Plainly!" I bark, earning myself another stare, less puzzled this time and more indignant.

"We're being extorted by the local salt god." The words practically fall out of her, now that she seems resigned to the fact that I don't care for the thees and thous.

The local salt god? Pasiap's bones, are these people so backward? "Salt god? Woman, you came all the way out here to pester me at my hermitage, interrupting my retreat, to talk about a greedy spirit? Great Dragons, every child on this isle knows that, when you require an intermediary to the divine, you simply contact the closest Immaculate Temple or mon...."

There is a long, very guilty silence as I realize that I am the closest monk. *Did you think the world would just stop moving because you wanted to be left alone, old man?*

To her credit, the woman seems to actually be wondering what she's walked into and not cowering in fear. "Pardon my boldness, Holiness, but are you alright?" she finally decides is the most neutral response to my outburst and to her confusion. She brushes away a bit of graying auburn hair that has

escaped its braid in a polite attempt to conceal the puzzled, possibly amused, crinkle forming at the corners of her brown eyes.

I exhale heavily, my breath steaming despite early autumn's midday heat, failing to find a way to smoothly cover for my own damn tunnel vision. *Closer to the Dragons my ass. Age has just made me a mean old fool.* "Forgive my outburst," is the best I can manage, while attempting a wry smile and taking a moment to center myself. "Introspection has taken its toll on my common sense and my manners. Begin again with your name, and I will try to avoid any further ill behavior."

I manage to puzzle her again with this, if her creased brow is any indication. It tells me all I need to know to understand the strangeness of this whole exchange, though. I can only sigh. "We've met before, and I've forgotten it, haven't I?"

She nods very slightly, only now seeming somewhat ill at ease. "I am Autumn Bloom... Widow Autumn. I have tried to speak with you on many occasions, but..."

"But I was mean and drunk," I finish for her to spare her having to look for a way to say it without provoking the stupid, old monk. I press my brow against the column at the front of the shrine, suddenly tired anew, and cast my mind back over the last few months, looking for any clear memories of this willful-seeming lady. I can recall being annoyed with the locals often enough, feeling that they were intruding on my meditation or, more honestly, my drinking. I can only imagine that this Widow Autumn is the respected emissary of the local villages and that I must have turned her away when she came to ask the monk of this shrine to officiate at a wedding, birth, funeral or the like. *Well done, old man, you've proven your long-dead teachers right after all this time and turned out to be nothing but a spoiled, sullen, big-mouthed bully.*

"Yes, that's pretty much how it happened," she says matter-of-factly, interrupting my wallow.

I have to grin. She's got some stones to talk to one of the so-called Princes of the Earth that way. "You're very brave, ma'am, to be so honest. I think it's admirable, but many wouldn't take it so well."

This next part takes me totally my surprise, despite that fact that I have it coming.

"Forgive me for being blunt, Holiness, but don't patronize me. I wouldn't be the one who had to walk all the way out here and be yelled at by you if I didn't know I was confident, and I won't let you retreat into the comfortable familiarity of looking down on me so you can sidestep the guilt for your behavior. Feel guilty, Holiness. You should. You've done nothing but drink and holler and have left us with no priest for three major festivals, a host of minor ones, two births and a funeral." There is a slight tremor in her voice that tells me she's actually afraid of talking to me like this, but the tirade is also a product of genuine anger judging by her hard, firm stare. She takes a long, steadying breath and regains a somewhat humble tone, the transition is sharp and would almost be funny if it weren't so frustrated and desperate, "We cannot pay both the salt god and our taxes without another loan from House Cynis, and we cannot go without your intercession any longer... Holiness."

For a moment, I want to be angry — to rage at her for her temerity. *But she's right, isn't she? You and yours have done too much shirking lately.* What can I do? I take up the bundle containing my grandfather's... no, my weapon and begin walking. "Explain the situation to me as we go, please."

• • • • •

Tideflat Uncle no doubt thought himself a very clever spirit when he devised his plan to wring sacrifice from the surrounding populace — and he probably is clever to some extent. Not clever enough by far to deal adequately with me when I'm in a foul mood, though. He appeared as a tanned and wise-



seeming (if salty) older man, dressed as if he might decide to hunt for clams or build a sand-fort for his nephew at a moment's notice. After being called out, forced to take form and being quite literally backed up against the wall with a very intense old Dragon-Blood an inch from his salt-crusting nose, he seemed much more like the lowly cunning little glutton that he truly was.

"Greetings, Honored..."

"Tideflat Uncle," Widow Autumn supplies quietly from behind me.

"...Tideflat Uncle." I pause to let him stew a bit. I can see him trying to see where he went wrong — and what he's going to do to keep me from ruining him. That says to me that he can simply be overpowered, so I call forth my stern general's voice and press on. A steady stream of firmly stated, imperative statements and pointed questions is more than enough to cow a conniver, in most cases. "It seems there is a problem with the rate of sacrifice demanded for access to your domain, and I am here to mediate. You will not speak except to answer a direct question from myself. You will refer to me as sir. You will keep your eyes on me when I am speaking to you. Is this clear?"

It has been some time since he has had direct contact with one of the Dragon-Blooded who would treat him as an inferior, apparently. While he is nervous, he has not yet fully realized that the time when he was the biggest fish in the pond is now officially at an end. "Y... you can't just come into my domain and address me like this, y'know? I deal direct with the Throne Bank people and the taxman and the leaseholder's people a—"

Sudden violence is also fine leverage during a "negotiation" such as this one. I take advantage of the fact that I have him stuck here for a little while, rapping him across the temple with my still-bundled weapon and keeping my face an inch from his own when he lifts his head back up. "I said that you are to refer to me as sir. " I had thought that punishing an unruly and coarse little god would be all that this entailed. But it's not that simple. Damn and blast, the body is still warm, and the jackals are already tearing it apart, aren't they?"

"Now. What's this about dealing directly with the leaseholder?"

"Do you think he's telling the truth about House Cynis claiming ownership of the orchards? Can they do that?" Her voice from over my shoulder is equal measures confused and outraged as we make our way up the coast road toward the fiery sunset.

Mela save me! It's as if a child's-tale sorcerer has plucked out my conscience and sent it to sit on my shoulder and vex me into action. I'd try to find a drink, but I don't want to invite a scolding.

"Yes, he is. No, they can't. But yes, they are. Shush, and let me think."

I try to block out her vague, offended mutterings to examine what that miserable briny cur had told us and figure out what to do about it. It seems to be some sort of grossly blatant scheme to drive up loan rates, via the salt rate, and taxes so the damn Cynis can move in and make the now-poor peasantry an offer they really can't refuse. If House Cynis is making a grab at direct land ownership — hell, that means everyone is probably doing it. This madness involves everyone from the Thousand Scales to the damn salt gods, so there's no way it's only the Cynis. And if this practice is as widespread as I think it must be, then House Cynis is going to send someone out here as soon as their



friend Tideflat Uncle tells them he got roughed up, and the first person they're going to harass is the Widow and her people. *And they're going to want to know who the mysterious old monk was, won't they? Won't that be fun, when everyone on the Blessed Isle finds out that you're drunk, praying in an apple orchard and foiling the plans of one of the Great Houses? Do nothing, and everyone suffers. Take action, and make it worse by having them spin it as a revolt and using the excuse to just sweep the whole incident under the rug.*

She presses a loaf of her bread into my hand, interrupting my stormy thoughts. "No matter what happens tomorrow, you need to eat today."

I thank her and resume my thoughts, chewing and walking into the evening.

No matter what happens tomorrow...She's right, you know. You need to stop thinking like a Dynast and start thinking like a Dragon-Blood and a Melaist. To hell with it all. Right is right. If someone is doing something wrong in my yard, I damn well need to go stop them.

"Where's House Cynis' base of op... sorry, property around here?"

She immediately gets that too-smart look again, like she was waiting for me to ask that. Smart lady.

"Rose Valley, southeast on the Traiter Pass Road a few days. Why? Are you going to go talk to them?"

Was that a joke? Hell, I can't tell with her anymore.

"I am, and I'm going to ask you to stay sharp from now on. You're going to need to start being as careful as you can, and I'm going to need open eyes and ears if I'm going to try and put a stop to this. Are there people you can trust who can help you stay informed without drawing attention, and... do you have a son or someone at home?"

She smiles mischievously off into the distance as we walk, the trace of lines around her eyes deepening with the expression — laugh lines, they call them. "You assume I'm not doing that already. And I have my husband's sword and spear, thank you very much, and I can use them myself if I have to."

Sword?

I stop walking and turn to her. She needs to know how serious this situation is, but she cuts me off as I open my mouth to tell her.

"It's been dangerous here for years, since the Empress disappeared, and long before you got here. You don't need to tell me. We may be "just mortals," but we're not children."

She's smarter than you are, old man. She has you beat at every turn. Can't get anything right, anymore. Are you at least going to tell her the truth, or are you going to stay a drunk hermit?

"Wid... Autumn, you should also know "

She cuts me off again, smiling enigmatically and turning to walk toward the cluster of low buildings on the edge of the rolling sea of orchards ahead of us. "You're General Arada, I know. My husband wrote of you often in his letters from the North. He said you could be proud sometimes, but he was honored to serve under you. I think I probably feel as he did."

She turns, her quietly sad expression fading as she laughs at my own bewildered expression, and waves before opening the door to her home and going inside.

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ASPECT BOOK

AIR



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INTRODUCTION

“To renew” applies when we are fighting with the enemy, and an entangled spirit arises where there is no possible resolution. We must abandon our efforts, think of the situation in a fresh spirit then win in the new rhythm. To renew, when we are deadlocked with the enemy, means that without changing our circumstance we change our spirit and win through a different technique.

—Miyamoto Musashi, *The Book of Five Rings*

Aspect Book: Air is the first up-close look inside the minds and lives of the aspects of the Dragon-Blooded. What does an elemental aspect really mean, beyond a certain set of predisposed talents and an affinity? How do those among this aspect take those predispositions and apply them, or not, to the needs of house and Realm? This book is intended to highlight the spectrum of possible answers to these sorts of questions and, along the way, explore in more depth the complex web of duty and betrayal that is the Dynasty of the Scarlet Empress.

Elemental aspects are clearly not some things, and that should be clear. An aspect is not a complete prejudgment of a person’s personality or options in life. While there are certainly stereotypes, and they are based in both practical and mystical fact, no one

would challenge an Air-pected character’s decision to pursue mastery in the Abilities and Charms associated with another aspect. If an Air Aspect were to express traits in his demeanor that were commonly thought to be a hallmark of another element, again, no one would find this truly odd or judge him for it with a straight face.

Conversely, and as has been mentioned, there are some strong tendencies from which the stereotypes have derived. The elemental aspect is a magical affinity, and the talents that those who are tied to air possess will have some effect on the way they see themselves — and on their approach to problem solving.

In the most general sense, Air-pected Dragon-Bloods have an affinity, and often a liking, for learning

and thought. The element of air exists everywhere, can get into anywhere and surrounds everything, and so, these Terrestrials are similarly gifted. An Air Aspect, using his naturally predisposed talents and Charms, can enter a place undetected and leave again with any knowledge he finds there. If that knowledge is written, he can learn to read it regardless of language. The knowledge can be read and fully understood in a tiny fraction of the time it would take another person, and in the event that knowledge is sorcerous, he may comprehend it and teach himself the secrets contained within it. Every Aspect of Air can do this, with a minimum of self-application and no formal schooling whatsoever.

This is perhaps the most obvious of examples, but it is illustrative of the sorts of activities that the average Air Aspect can engage in with what amounts to only a minimal effort. Whether the Aspects of Air prefer it that way or not, it is only prudent that their society places the burden of these types of tasks on the Children of Mela — the shoe clearly fits, after all. Tacticians, generals, savants, spies, scouts, sorcerers, planners and masters of Essence: These are the roles that the Air Aspects are expected to fill, the roles of thought, dream and subtle action. As the thinkers of the empire, perhaps more involved with the ideology of civilization and planning for such than any of their peers, the Azure Dragons have had the current state of affairs thrust squarely into their thoughts. Some may be the engineers of the current power struggles of the fracturing Realm, while others may be hurriedly trying to account for all the new chaos within the systems they have labored so long to implement. The newest generation, fresh from secondary school, has been trained and molded in the same fashion as have their predecessors for centuries. They have the same talents, the same faith and the same affinity and duty to oversee the greatest plans of their kind, but the world they find themselves in is no longer the world of their ancestors. How will they use their gifts for reason and subtle action in the face of this new Age of Sorrows?

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Aspect Book: Air provides insight into and inspiration for the methods and motives of the thinkers and dreamers of the Dragon-Blooded, and it sheds some light on the motives of those who would work with and against them, as well. As such, it includes new Charms, artifacts and Hearthstones of special note for players and Storytellers using the Children of Mela in their games, and it includes the items and Charms mentioned elsewhere in the book. It also contains five views from Aspects of Air, showing how they fit, or don't, into the world of **Exalted**.

Chapter One: Childhood and Self gives you accounts of the childhood and education of five Terrestrial Exalts of the Air. In their own words, they give a picture of their lives and the circumstances that shaped them, setting the tone of their careers as Princes of the Earth.

Chapter Two: A Life of Obligations provides a range of opinions on how these aspects see their role in the world, how they have worked to fill that role in the past and what their plans are for the future. The anecdotes in this chapter serve to both illustrate the world of Exalted and to show how members of the Air Aspect hope to either fit within it or to change it more to their liking.

Chapter Three: The World We Rule gives the opinions of the five Air-pected narrators on their families, their nation and the inferiors, peers and elders with whom they have crossed paths, both their own kind and others.

Chapter Four: Voices Not Our Own provides a sample of the wide variety of opinions that those who cross paths with the Children of Mela have on their doings and their place in Creation. Storytellers and players can also use these anecdotes as a basis for possible opponents or allies for their characters.

Chapter Five: Records of the Before is a sampling of information from prior to the Great Contagion. The Dragon-Blooded must look to the historical record to stay in touch with the events of the past that have shaped them, and a great many texts and writings have been preserved by them, from military histories to instructions for now-lost magical techniques.

Chapter Six: Miracles of Mela provides many new Charms for use by Air Aspects and by other Terrestrials who practice the ways of thought and subtlety. Additional Hearthstones and artifacts are also included here, both of general interest and those that are referenced elsewhere in the book.

Appendix I: Signature Characters contains five character templates of varying power and experience, one for each of the narrators as they are in the setting's modern day.

Appendix II: Other Notable Air Aspects presents five Air-pected Dragon-Bloods who have become respected — or feared — in the world of **Exalted**.

SOURCE MATERIAL

Though the Aspects of Air are Dragon-Blooded, they are also uniquely their own sorts of beings. Thus, while the source material recommended in the Dragon-Blooded hardback remains indispensable, there are additional resources with which players and Storytellers wishing to portray the aspect authentically should



probably make themselves familiar. What follows is a short list of such texts.

CLASSICS

For a solid understanding of the sorts of things that Melaist philosophy espouses, you could do no better than to look for the strategic classics: *The Book of Five Rings*, by Miyamoto Musashi, and *The Art of*

War, by Sun Tzu. Both remain concise and thought-provoking reads, despite their age, and the tone of both works alone is a great place to find inspiration for **Exalted**.

20TH CENTURY FICTION

Jherig, Yendi, Taltos, Teckla, Athrya, Phoenix, Orca, Dragon and *Issola*, by Steven Brust, are all part of a

ASPECTS OF AIR AND THE DRAGON MELA

Dragon-Blooded have always in some way paid homage to the Elemental Dragons who created them. During the First Age, this homage took the form of reverence for the Five Elemental Dragons directly as the embodiment of the totality of each of the five elements. Because the Elemental Dragons are distant and uncommunicative beings, the Dragon-Bloods' veneration of the Dragons was originally quite diffuse. Terrestrial Exalted made offerings to the Dragons to give thanks for their existence and their Exaltations. While there was often a deep respect for the Dragons, there was little actual worship because the Dragons were simply too abstract to attract much attention.

After the Usurpation, the Terrestrial faith changed dramatically. Aided by the Sidereals, various sects of the revisionist Immaculate Philosophy quickly became popular. Soon, most Dragon-Blooded worshiped the Dragons in the forms of the avatars, or Immaculate Dragons, that were said to have personified the Five Elemental Dragons and fought at the side of the Terrestrial Exalted during the war against the Anathema.

The Immaculate Dragons as worshiped at the dawn of the Age of Sorrows are complex, humanized beings similar in disposition to the Elemental Dragons they represent but also possessed of personalities lacking in earlier worship of the Dragons. Generally, the personalities of the Immaculate Dragons are shallow and serve only to make them exemplars of the Immaculate Faith. If the Five Elemental Dragons resent this, they have certainly never expressed any discontent.

Worship of the Dragon Mela is second only to worship of Pasiap primarily because of how the Immaculate Philosophy personalizes these particular Dragons. Mela is not Hesiesh or Sextes Jylis, who are generally seen as personifications of their element and the lessons of husbanding ones Essence and tending to the world around you. Instead, like Pasiap, Mela is a humanized figure, an idealized warrior-queen who can be empathized with and begged for intercession.

During the late Second Age, Mela is the most widely celebrated of the Dragons. As a warrior-savant, she is, in many ways, the Terrestrial ideal, and so, most Dragon-Blooded pay their respects to her regularly. Savants and Air-aspects worship her as a patron god and a figure of knowledge and wisdom, while the Realm's warriors flock to her cult to venerate her for her leadership skills and martial prowess.

And a cult is indeed what it is. While veneration of the Elemental Dragons is openly encouraged by the Immaculates, it is generally held as best if the Terrestrials do not worship the Dragon, but, instead, venerate the principals and powers behind it. In reality, the Dragon-Blooded frequently see little difference between the Dragon and what it stands for. They worship one or more of the Immaculate Dragons directly with burnt offerings, prayers and sacrifices, seeking favor and good fortune.

This is permissible because their spiritual state makes it legally permissible for the Dragon-Blooded to make prayers and offerings outside of the calendar of festivals — they are assumed to have the proper discretion. What the Immaculates do clamp down on, however, are actual regular services to Mela. Occasional offerings and even group prayers are acceptable, but organized cults, with hierarchies and religious calendars, are absolutely not permitted. The Philosophy remains strict about this practice, even in the modern day, and Dragon-Blooded whose respect for their patron Immaculate Dragon exceeds the bounds of public propriety may find themselves facing inquiry for religious crimes.

The supposed signs of Mela's favor are uncertain, for, like all Celestial deities, her miracles are vague and indirect. Many claim she comes to them in omens and dreams or as voices on the Essence of the wind. Others say she appears in the shape of a white owl, and some say they have seen her face in a wind-swept forest or grassy plain.

high-action fantasy series about Vlad Taltos, a master assassin in the vast and highly magical city of Adrilankha. His interactions with his fellows in the vast criminal organization that is House Jhereg and the various jobs he takes form a wonderfully epic series of stories of murder, betrayal and high adventure. Though these books have been recommended more than once, the constant power struggles and politics make them especially good inspiration for a Dragon-Blooded series.

George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* and its sequels are unbelievably packed with political chicanery, intrigues, alliances made and broken, betrayals and every other sort of power game. They are all very good books and are also full of nasty politics — just like the Realm.

Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* series of novels are so good that there could never be enough recommendations to read them. Further, they present a view of a decadent and self-absorbed tyrannical government that is very accessible to modern readers who may be unfamiliar with that sort of thing.

David Drake and S.M. Stirling's *The General* series and Stirling's *Draka* series, despite both being on the science fiction shelf, feature great depictions of really hardcore militarized cultures or groups, of obvious application to your Dragon-Blooded game.

LEXICON

Most of the terminology in this book has appeared in print elsewhere, primarily in the **Exalted** main book and in the **Dragon-Blooded** hardback. However, some of these terms are elaborated on here for clarity or restated for ease of reference.

Melaism, or Melaist philosophy: The philosophy of those who emulate Mela, the Petitioner of Clouds, Immaculate of Air. This philosophy is one of constant striving for perfection of the self and of maintaining an attitude of working toward excellence in all things.

The Perfected Hierarchy: The system in which all things have their proper role in Creation, the central tenet of the Immaculate faith.







CHAPTER ONE CHILDHOOD AND SELF



The society of the Realm is very much occupied with the business of shaping and educating its young, knowing quite well that lessons learned in childhood go far toward molding the leaders and the policies of the future. It is a strict and regimented society, in most ways, and as a whole, the Dragon-Blooded know that there can be no starting too soon to ensure the proper training and discipline for the children that will be their future. This is doubly true for those children who are expected to Exalt — or those who already have. They are young Princes of the Earth but Princes of the Earth nonetheless. The upbringing and environments of these young Dragon-Bloods will color their opinions and doings for all their long lives, and it would not do for those experiences to be of any but the sort to make them strong. Those who Exalt outside of the eye of society at large or from unexpected lineages are thus thought to have limited educational and career options, as they have not had the benefit of the extensive and comprehensive child-rearing techniques of mainstream Dynastic culture. The realities of the young lives of Terrestrial Exalts, of course, generally fall short of that ideal, and less-than-positive experiences happen in even the most carefully engineered upbringing. Often it is these events, more than the planned and proper teachings, which are the deciding factors in the later lives of the Dragon-Blooded.

CATHAK MELADUS

You could write a story about my childhood, and no one would believe it, it was so ideal. People who know me say that I must be charmed because a lot of my life has been that way, filled with great luck and blessed with opportunity. I still dream about it sometimes: hunting with my older sister or walking through the armories of the House of Bells where my mother was an instructor. We would watch the cadets drilling from a nearby hilltop, naming the formations and their uses and guessing at how the mock battles would play out. It was the best childhood anyone could want, I think. We lived in a villa outside Arjuf most of the time, though we were in Tuchara or the Imperial City often enough. My father was a merchant from Arjuf, but I was told he had died before I was born, and no one spoke much about him, I guess because it was such a tragedy.

One of my favorite things to do, and one of the earliest memories I have, was to visit with my mother's friends the Opals in Tuchara. Just the two of us, my mother and I, would travel there — it isn't too far from Arjuf— and we'd see the Opals' armories. There were great halls filled with the finest suits of fully articulated heavy plate, all made by the Opals, and all one of a kind. I was fascinated by them and told mother's friend Opal Mountain that I wanted to be a master armorer



like he was. That always made him smile, I remember, but he said that he hoped I could do greater things. I couldn't think of anything greater than to be the one who made such things, though, and I still can't. It is a noble calling to see to the machines and tools of war, and from those days on, it was all I wanted to do. I had been raised around those skilled in war and taught to respect those arts. To me, the great guns and smoothly moving constructs of metal were the epitome of what the military was: a triumph of order and scholarship over the dangerous monsters of the world.

EXALTATION

There are a lot of storms in Chanos, it being right on the northern sea, and I got used to them when I was a cadet at primary school there. The kids who didn't had a devil of a time sleeping sometimes, what with all the racket. One night, there was a really heavy storm. It must have been louder than usual because I was having a dream about flying in a storm and watching the clouds and the lightning from the inside. I woke up startled, a crash of thunder nearby still echoing around the school's drill yard outside, and I had this queer sensation in my gut. It's hard to describe it if you've never felt it, and you don't need to have it described to you if you have. I didn't know what was going on. I thought I might have been having a bad dream or something, so I just lay there for a while trying to calm down. After a little while, I was feeling even more out of sorts. I was cold, and my head had begun to throb, so I quietly woke up my bunkmate to ask him if it seemed like I had a fever or something like that. He practically jumped through the roof when he opened his eyes and looked at me, though, and he started talking and making such a racket that the other cadets began waking up. I had a pretty good idea of what was going on by that point, so I thought that I had best go wake up the barracks monitor and ask her what I should do. Now that I'm older and know more about the often-disorienting mechanics of Exaltation, I understand why everyone was so amused by the thought of me dutifully walking through the halls trying to find an adult with little sparks and bolts flickering off of me.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

I had always had my heart set on going to the House of Bells like my mother and my sister, but when I got older and began to think about what it would take for me to make a mark worthy of one of the Princes of the Earth as an armorer, I realized that I would have to be an artificer if I wanted to avoid setting my sights too low and disappointing everyone. The House of Bells does teach some principles of sorcery and artifact maintenance, but the Heptagram was the only place I could really learn to be the best if I wanted to do credible and significant work

with warstriders or First Age weapons. I really had to work hard to get accepted to the Heptagram, and I did my best to study and apply myself to maximize my chances. My family, I think, really understood that this was what I wanted to do, and they gave me all the support I needed to accomplish the goals I set for myself.

The Heptagram was unlike any place I'd ever heard of — this huge, monolithic, defensible building on a rocky island. The inside was all built to minimize danger in the event of accidents, and the whole place was constructed with magic. It was really a wholly different world than what I was used to and not at all what I expected. The course of studies was intense from the very beginning, but not as strong as I would have hoped in areas of tactics and military matters. I supplemented my classes with as much independent study as I could make time for, but I had a lot of trouble fitting in with the other students there. I don't want to say anything about it that might sound negative — I would do it again the same way if I had it all to do over — but I think that a lot of students of sorcery lose sight of the practical applications of the knowledge they're learning. Too many of my peers prided themselves on theoretical knowledge and abstract ideas, when the real good of any discipline is in the application. I think that many of the instructors felt the same way and that that disparity may have hurt my studies and my standing in my graduating class.

KASIF

It is a curious thing to know that one's earliest years were spent denying one's own proper place in the world, as an eagle nesting with crows. Our haven was the market square of the Imperial City, and we knew all the back alleys and byways, Sasha and I. The kindness of strangers in the market was a rare thing, so we survived by their carelessness, lifting purses and palming small, valuable items. I knew nothing of Creation, the Blessed Isle, or even the streets of the city that lay beyond our limit of vision. The market square with its panhandlers, gamblers and grifters and the surrounding thieves' warrens and dens of prostitution circumscribed the entirety of our Creation.

I cannot — or perhaps choose not to — remember much of my childhood, but Sasha's laugh still echoes in my ears, and her eyes still sparkle in the halls of my memory. Those days were spent dirty, exhausted and hungry, but she was always happy and always ready with a joke and a smile. There are days when I miss her, but our lives took very different roads.

There were others, of course: Chura and his ferret, whose name escapes me; Sayaka, who cried in great heaving sobs when she was hungry, which was most of the time; Turimo, who was tall and strong and old enough to pretend to be our father when a particularly wary mer-

chant had caught us with our hands on his goods. Finally, there was Lianna, who was as close to a mother as any of us had ever known.

In the spring, when the rivers rose, she sheltered us in her tiny apartment in the red lantern district. I did not realize then that, by doing so, she placed herself in danger of eviction — or worse. All I knew was that, for a few weeks of the year, we had a roof over our heads, warm blankets and food for the asking. It was a welcome respite from our childhood troubles, and none of us were eager to question it. Such peaceful moments do not last in any city, much less the heart of the Realm, and by the time I turned 13, she was gone. Even now, I do not know if she was discovered and disciplined for providing us sanctuary. She was simply gone. Sayaka cried for almost a month.

The times between our retreats to our haven were lean and cold, but some small solace could be had, as we knew that, if we were desperate enough, Lianna would welcome us with a smile and a comforting touch. Suddenly, even that small blessing was taken from us. Meals became scarcer still, and a lumpy bed with even the most threadbare blanket was a dream hardly worth contemplating. By the end of the year, Sayaka was a rag doll wrapped in flesh, the outline of her ribs showing clearly through her tattered clothing. It was as if the better part of herself poured out with her tears. She died during the winter of my 14th year, too weak to withstand the brutal hardship of the season. Turimo tried to aid her, often feeding her his share of our meager food, but the cold took her anyway. Turimo suffered for his sacrifice, as well. After that winter, he was no longer hale and hearty, and a raspy cough stayed with him for the remainder of his short life. Even for the small kindness he shared with Sayaka, he was punished.

Winter came early the following year, and harsh, and the chill meant that pockets were hidden beneath layers of cloaks and garments. Our livelihood was denied us by a nip in the air, and unlike the beasts of the wild, we could not store food or fat against the hardships of winter. We retreated from the all-encompassing snow and ice and climbed above the streets, away from the military patrols they called “street sweepers,” who would clear away frozen bodies and help along those who weren’t already gone. Like many others, we survived nesting in condemned buildings and abandoned apartments. Often, it was just as cold, but at least we did not awaken with a scrim of ice coating our faces. We lived above the streets for nearly four days without food once. Turimo suffered the most, for he was the largest of us and weakened by his ordeal of the previous winter. On the third day, he killed Chura’s ferret and divided the sparse meal between the four of us. Though he was too small to prevent Turimo from killing the animal, Chura refused

to eat his pet. His share made a meager breakfast for the rest of us the next morning.

When the early winter broke into a brief respite of false autumn, we descended from our makeshift aerie. We were all weak from starvation, and Turimo was wracked with a cough that shook his withering form like a willow in a windstorm. When we reached the street, he gurgled once, briefly, as if drowning, then sank against a wall and did not stand again. Sasha was strong and shed no tears. Chura’s eyes were just as dry, but for a different reason. He hated Turimo for what the older boy had done to his ferret, hated him with a bright, burning passion that only children can sustain for very long. Neither Sasha nor I understood this then, but he hated us too. In his eyes, we were complicit in his pet’s death.

We lived relatively well in the following months, the three of us. Sayaka, though it pains me to say so, had always been a burden. She seemed incapable of even the simplest thievery and relied on the rest of us to keep her belly full. Similarly, Turimo was simply too large and clumsy to make a good pickpocket. Though his father act helped us twist out of many uncomfortable confrontations with the city merchants, his body held more than his share of our scant provisions. We would simply have to be more careful.

Though we fed three mouths, each of us pulled our own load. Chura developed his ability to disappear into the crowds of the market to an almost supernatural degree. He slit the purse strings of whomever he pleased, then was simply gone. In fact, he garnered something of a reputation in the markets: often watched, never caught. It was a bad reputation and one that Sasha and I did not know of until it was too late.

Sasha blossomed into a young woman that summer. She was 15, a year older than I, and I was smitten. First, she took to begging. Passers-by proved just as vulnerable as I to her soft brown eyes, and she routinely piled a pocketful of coin on top of our spoils for each day.

Myself, I was always gifted with a talent for not being seen. All manner of trinkets and valuables found their way from the vendors’ stalls to my own deep pockets, later to be sold to passers-by for a fraction of their value.

Over the coming year, Chura’s contribution to our plates steadily grew. Both Sasha and I cautioned him about foolish risks, but he seemed not to take notice. To be honest, we gave it only token concern, as his activities afforded us small luxuries for the first time. When the rains were cold, we could afford a room in one of the city’s less reputable inns, and though our bellies were never full, we did not fear starvation. We did not wonder at Chura’s good fortune, though perhaps we should have.



EXALTATION

Sasha shook me awake before the sun had risen in the sky. Soft umber shadows crept across the alley in which we had sheltered for the night. “Whisper!” she hissed, an edge of worry in her voice. “Chura’s gone.”

That jolted me awake. We ran our own roads during the day, the better not to tread on each other’s toes, but we always agreed on a place to meet come dusk. Chura had not returned last night, but there was little reason to be concerned. His habit was to arrive after Sasha and I had already bedded down for the night. We always saw him at sunrise.

Not this day.

“What...” I mumbled, still shaking off the weight of sleep.

“He was here overnight,” she rattled on, her words jumbling into each other in her worry. “He left a few things for us to sell, but he’s...” her voice shook to a halt, and she continued a moment later just above a whisper, “...not here.” Sasha knew, just as I did, what that probably meant. “Should we look for him?”

I nodded slowly. It was risky to ask after a cutpurse who may or may not have been caught the night before, but it would be worse to stay in the alley and wait for him. If Chura led someone back here in an effort to bargain for his own release, the trinkets we had would be testimony enough of our guilt to warrant a beating at least — or much, much worse.

I scrambled to my feet and hurriedly pulled Sasha up alongside. She let out a quiet mew of pain as I jerked her shoulder slightly, but made no other sound. We rushed to the mouth of the alley side by side, then slowed, attempting to mimic a calm, carefree gait.

We both froze two feet into the street as a booming voice rolled across our ears. “There they are, just like the boy said.”

We spun, as much as admitting our guilt — though we knew not for what — and saw a hulking, greasy man pointing at us with a finger that seemed as thick as my arm. Two more men emerged from behind him as if through some incompetent stage magic. They braced to run.

Sasha reacted more quickly than I and ran back into the alley. My thoughts still slightly muddled from sleep, I followed three steps behind. We could hear the guards’ booted feet scrape across the flagstones. Had they spied us during the day, we would have lost them easily, weaving in and out of the busy streets until we disappeared into the crowds. At dawn, however, the streets were empty, and there was nowhere to hide. I felt a strong hand wrap around my arm, and then, the world spun as he jerked me off my feet and slammed me into the wall. My teeth rattled in my skull, and two came free in a rush of blood.

I knew nothing more until I was roused with a cuff to my ear. My head rang, and the late morning sun stabbed

into my sensitive eyes. Slowly, the buzzing in my ears subsided, and the sounds of the market resolved themselves, quickly overcome by Sasha’s cry of pain as she received similar treatment.

The two men who had chased us earlier held us by the arms, tightly enough to leave bruises. Their leader spoke to a merchant, quietly enough that we could not hear their words. Occasionally, one or the other looked in our direction. I cast my gaze about in an effort to get my bearings should the opportunity to run arise, but what I saw struck the heart from me as surely as a well-wielded blade. Chura stood quietly at the edge of the onlooking crowd, a satisfied smile on his face. He was only there a moment, and then, he disappeared into the throng. I never saw him again.

When I looked around once more, the merchant approached. He spoke with a thick lisp, and slobber coated his double chin. “You have stolen from me, little children. Pretty little things you’ve stolen — and expensive.” He held up the pouch that Sasha had found this morning — the pouch Chura left for us. He looked at Sasha, malice in his eyes. “They are much like you: pretty,” he licked some saliva from his lower lip before continuing, “and fragile.”

His eyes turned to the man holding Sasha, and he nodded, quick, curt and dismissive. Impassively, her captor shifted his grip on her so he was holding her forearm in one hand and her palm in the other. As I watched, he bent her hand inward until I could see the tendons strain at the back of her wrist. The moment passed quickly, but it seemed to last forever. Finally, it was punctuated by the crackling of gristle and bone as her wrist shattered, fragments of bone grinding against bone. She screamed, sharp and short, then slumped to the ground.

I screamed too, but not in pain. A great rush of wind exploded from my lungs, a terrible scream of rage and hatred. I was Exalting, though I did not know it then. With little more than a shrug, I loosed my captor’s grip and took a step toward Sasha. Her tormentor stumbled back. Later, I discovered that Mela had favored me with her image, but then, I knew only that I had caused this lout to fear me. Savage joy seized my heart as I advanced on him.

It was over quickly, the man’s body lying at my feet, frozen and bloody. I held out my hand to Sasha, but she looked at me with the same fear that her punisher held a moment before. I was no longer the boy she had grown up with in these streets, but something else. My hand fell to my side, limp.

LEDAAL KES

I always got the impression that my father felt sorry for me, somehow. I don’t know that I would have used

those exact words back then, but that's what it was. There was always just a sense of sadness about him when some decision had to be made about my schooling or activities, a resignation toward the incredibly structured environment that all Ledaal children are raised in. I can recall that he would try to calmly explain things to my mother — she never seemed to agree with what was planned for me — until he would grow frustrated and disappear for days on end. Aunt Cycel would have to come and take my mother aside somewhere and talk at her, not really to her, and mother would cry quietly and nod, and things would go as my father had said they were to have. Mother dreaded Cycel's visits. She would tell me that my aunt and my father were going to make me sick or something of the sort, when no one was around to hear her. There was always someone testing me or asking me questions or prodding me, and I think it frightened her, but really, the things she said to me didn't help. She was just another adult prodding me, trying to make me into something. Even then, I knew it and resented it. They all seemed so frantic and miserable and cold. How could I want those people to make me into anything? I did what I was told, of course. It never really occurred to me that I had a choice in the matter, and I suppose, I didn't.

Everything changed when I was four years old, when one of the tutors introduced me to the game, to Gateway. I remember being fascinated by the patterns, the relationships between the pieces and the configurations they formed. It made sense. The first demand I can recall making in my life was to demand to know more about this game. Here was something I could participate in and not just passively absorb. That was when my life, the part of my life that I chose and not the parts that I accepted, started. When I was playing the game, there was no prodding, no questions or testing. I had discovered that excellence meant freedom and the ability to control my own choices. It took me only a few months to reach the point that none of the tutors — the normal ones — could compete with me, and within the year, I was a credible challenge to my Aunt Cycel. Mother tried to learn the game when I became interested in it, but she grew frustrated early on and never tried again. She would hover behind me and watch me play game after game, cautiously offering words of praise with every victory until I stopped hearing her.

I became something of a showpiece for the household. My family enjoyed showing off my skills and began to hold salons and informal tournaments in our home or around town. From there, I moved to real tournaments, locally at first and then traveling farther and farther until I was regularly competing all over the Blessed Isle. My mother traveled with me everywhere at first, always fluttering nervously nearby. I think that my

aunt must have put an end to that when I began to compete more seriously.

I did not always win, of course, though I generally competed only with those much older than myself. I was a gifted prodigy but still a boy of six or seven. It was during this period that I had matches with my favorite opponents, nonetheless.

My father is a great Gateway player — little surprise, as he is Ledaal Caros, who has lectured on strategy at the House of Bells — and I played with him as often as I could despite the fact that I could never beat him. His brilliance was unmarred by worry or sadness or distraction during our games, and it was only then that it was there for me to appreciate it. It was not until only a few years ago that I could truthfully claim to be his peer at the game.

My first game against Ragara Szaya is among the most significant to me for a different reason today than it was at the time. She was the first person my own age ever to seriously challenge my skill and, in fact, beat me quite cleanly in our first encounter. As the two youngest regular competitors at that time, we became rivals of course. She was my first real peer, in the commonly accepted sense of the word, and we eventually became very close. We kept in touch and competed periodically during our school years and were married not long after that.

Lastly, and this is the most colorful of all the stories of my young fame, I played a single game of Gateway with the Empress early in my eighth year. It seems sort of hokey in hindsight, a little boy playing a game with the Scarlet Empress at the largest Gateway party of the year. People surrounded us, my father and aunt and what seemed like everyone important from my house — and the Empress' entourage of course. The game took place on a great central dais in a huge pavilion tent and was only one of many special events and exhibitions during the many days of that festival. I could not ascertain much about her, between my own nervousness and her almost mechanical demeanor. She said just the right things, nothing more, asked the ideal few questions, nothing more. She beat me soundly, but having gone over the play in my head many, many times since that day, I can say that her style was bland in its perfection. I don't imagine I would have dazzled my eight-year-old opponent with my most elegant strategy either, were I in her position. Still, I played Gateway with the Empress.

EXALTATION

The circumstances of my Exaltation have, for better or worse, been among the most oft-repeated in recent history, as I am widely thought to be one of the earliest to Exalt in recorded history. Yes, I am the Ledaal who Exalted while his mother was packing him off to primary school, though, in truth, it was much more like she was desperately clinging to me and wailing at the thought of



my being “taken from her.” They really should have used a softer touch on her all those years or just sent her away from me for good when I was born. She was from less-than-excellent stock, a patrician, and bearing the child of a Dragon-Blood was likely the pinnacle achievement of her life. I think the pressure was too much for her.

Certainly, someone of her upbringing was terribly unprepared to try to live in a household like the average Ledaal household, and she hung on to the few things she felt she had a right to — primarily me.

It was a strange sensation, Exaltation, like being made somehow lighter and brighter. Given that my normal demeanor as a child was somewhat reserved, to say the least, it was an especially marked transition. I would not go so far as to say that I panicked, but I was definitely both confused and frightened. My mother, on the other hand, quite clearly panicked when my anima manifested for the first time. I tried to back away from the now-shocked assemblage of the household. People were beginning to call out and to reach for me and generally behave excitedly — perhaps not the most comforting tactic for such circumstances. I can still see my father's face in my mind's eye, as I saw it then while tumbling to the ground in an awful state of mingled gnosis and helplessness as mother fairly dragged me down in hysterics. There was only a moment's worth of surprise on his face, as anyone would respond to a sudden clamor or

slammed door, replaced almost instantly with his usual look of sadness and resignation. I was eight years old, and the first calm thought that entered my mind as an Exalt was *I wonder how this will affect my game*. Mother was never permitted to see me again. She died a handful of years later at the end of her mortal lifespan.

Needless to say, I never spent a single day as a resident of the mundane dormitories at the Illicar Academy. Instead, I was installed in one of the Dragon-Blooded dormitories, where I was, of course, the youngest resident by a wide margin and handled with what I now know was an abnormal degree of attention and care. Various people, including monks and at least one sorcerer, received clearance from the academy and my family to come and examine me during my first school days and to question me during the evening study period before curfew. I suppose it was valid and necessary, given the rarity of such an early Exaltation, but at the time, it seemed to me a return to the invasive and constant testing and prodding of my youngest years. It certainly did nothing to help my assimilation into student society, and what should have been my first chance to not be set apart from everyone was anything but that. It, more than anything, was the capstone on all the events that led me to my desire for acceptance. For the duration of my time at that school, my overriding concern was not for my studies, but to discover the methods by which I could become part of the



group, to be just like everyone else — another face in the Dragon-Blooded's ranks. As any well-adjusted adult can attest, though, few things fail in the social arena like trying too hard, unfortunately for young me. While I managed to eventually achieve some measure of acceptance and a niche at the Illicar Academy, I was never what I would call one of the social elite, and I never fully felt I had shaken the stigma associated with the events of my Exaltation.

For the first two years of my primary schooling, I stayed on for classes during the year-end Calibration break — I can only assume at the insistence of my aunt and with the acceptance of my father. I enjoyed the chance to concentrate more fully on academic excellence, the smaller classes freeing me of some of the social anxiety that hallmarked the rest of the year. The flaw, as I saw it, was that I missed several of the annual Gateway tournaments held during that season because I had no permission to leave the school grounds and no one of my household bothered to arrange for an approved escort to take me. So, the next year, I planned well in advance and lobbied long and hard with Aunt Cysel and my father for access to a small, temporary staff so that I might continue with competitive Gateway and did so successfully. From that point on, I declined to remain in classes during the year-end semesters. I spent a careful year cultivating what limited income I could via tutoring, the saving of my allowance and a great deal of post-curfew gambling. With this stake, I paid my own way for two months of every year so that I could freely maintain my place in the region's regular Gateway events and championships. By my final year at Illicar, I was traveling with my own staff, in a carriage I owned, and paying for the whole thing by transporting small luxury items as I traveled. I even turned a regular profit. How precocious it must have seemed to those who saw what I was doing, but I remain proud of it to this day.

It was during these vacations from school that I finally found the social acceptance I craved and began to cultivate the polish of a real member of society. Gateway may be a savant's game, but make no mistake, the same things go on under the surface of a Gateway event that happen at any Cynis party (though probably in very different proportions and with very different levels of intensity). Szaya and I became the teen terrors of the Scarlet Prefecture Gateway circuit during those two months, meeting at the beginning of every event and coordinating whatever sort of all-night revel we could manage for when the day's games were done. And who could really fault us? None of our elders, if they had wanted to, could truthfully have objected in public. We stayed well within the bounds of what rules children are quietly allowed to break, and further, we were the two top

competitors in our rank. Who would criticize a success such as that?

SECONDARY SCHOOL

The Spiral Academy suited me very well, though I had half-entertained the notion of attending the Cloister in some strange scheme to become a powerful, contemplative Essence-master Gateway player. It was really only an amusing fancy, though, and both my family and I knew that the Spiral Academy suited my natural inclinations. It had long ago begun the application process, and I do not imagine that it was ever in doubt that I would be accepted. I was already something of a celebrity when I started secondary school, thanks to my various public exploits and highly visible Gateway wins. Szaya, always the more visceral and daring of our duo, became a cadet at the House of Bells in Arjuf, though we stayed in touch via letters and visits when breaks allowed. My skill with Gateway and other structured games lent itself well to a variety of other fields of study, notably areas where logic and analysis played a key part, such as finance (with which I already enjoyed some acquaintance). My relatively newfound skill with social situations, additionally, contributed to a much sounder and more productive network of school friends and contacts than I had managed to develop in primary school and also served me well in continuing to cultivate a presence in my chosen circles outside of school. Despite that, or perhaps because of it, I was able to entertain a much greater range of employment options for both during my school years and my eventual career after. A short, polite letter from the office of Bal Kesif himself in the Imperial Treasury during my final year at the academy, both troubling and gratifying, rendered that panoply of options effectively moot. It reminded me that the entrance examinations for the Thousand Scales were approaching and asked that a copy of my results be sent to him as soon as I had officially passed them. The sense that I was not in control of my own destiny was strong, but the pride at knowing that the powers that be were following my progress did much to counter my ill will.

TEPET ELANA

My earliest days I remember only filtered through a lens of tears. Both my brothers, Sakada and Corvus — both all too mortal—fell at the Battle of Ten Days' Tears when I was only a child. Of them, I remember very little, save that they were the center of my world. When I was born, both were already men, and each was like another father to me, perhaps more so than my true father, Tepet Orestes. When I was a child, my parents were always distant, seemingly as far removed from my life as the Scarlet Empress herself. I was reared by a succession of nannies and tutors, and while they gave me attention,





only my brothers gave me love. I loved them in return, and still do to this day, but I was spoiled by their attention, and it softened me. My mother and father would have done well to isolate me from such affection, for these distractions — as pleasant as they were — impeded my growth as a Dynast. My parents, however, had little to do with my upbringing, and my brothers had cared not at all for the protestations of my tutors, who felt — rightly, in hindsight — that I should focus my attention on my studies.

My parents, I think, were disenchanted with the prospect of children. Child rearing was a duty required of them by the Realm. Though I cannot say for certain, I think they were disappointed with my brothers. Our parents raised them to be Dragon-Blooded, but my brothers' destinies were different than my own, and they remained mortal. Disappointed, my mother and father buried themselves in their duties and the bureaucratic machinery of the Realm, and I was left in the hands of my tutors. Unless and until I Exalted, they wanted nothing to do with me.

I was, I'm told, a trial for my tutors. While they attempted to drive home the importance of my studies and the duties that would fall on me should I Exalt, I was inattentive, at best. My parents, always buried in the machinations and maneuvers of politics, had little time to correct me. Though possessed of a sharp mind and a ready wit, I felt nothing but apathy for my lessons.

I set great store in my brothers, however, and fortunately, they were determined that I should heed my studies. When my attention wandered during my lessons, Sakada sat with me in the evening and tutored me himself. Occasionally, he let me trounce him in a game of Gateway, as well. Corvus, always the more physical of the pair, taught me how to handle a sword and how to fight with my hands should I be caught without a blade. They were my sun and my moon in those days, and it seemed as if they would always be with me. Like the sun and the moon, however, they were not always in my sky and were often called away with the legions. In their absence, my education suffered, as my brothers were the only tutors I heeded.

Even then, I understood what it was to be a soldier, for such lessons were the cornerstones of my education. I knew the names and manner of death of each of my ancestors by the time I was four. Their legacies loomed large in my life, and I quickly learned that if my deeds did not measure up — which they could not if I did not Exalt — I would never be remembered in the same way. Who, I wondered, would remember my brothers when they fell? Their names would not be writ down in the annals of our family. They would be forgotten and ignored, mortals remembered only as mortals should be: not at all. I refused to allow this, and I swore then that I would honor them.

I prayed for them when they marched off to the campaigns, and though I waved to them from the gates of our home until they passed beyond my vision, my parents, so far as I know, did not even say goodbye.

My parents likewise had little to say to me when I left for primary school. This was unsurprising, due to their distance, and compounded by my embarrassing behavior. Little of my childhood seemed to matter to them, but in the Realm, appearances and other deceits are held in high regard. The celebration of my departure, therefore, was an event to remember. I chafed at the pomp and ritual, but the stern glares of my tutors kept me in check. As is customary, I was expected to display my breeding and education to the guests of the house. Much to my parents' discomfort, I had little to show. My voice warbled painfully as I sang "The Hymn of the Wyld Hunt." Horrified, my parents cut my performance short and made their excuses to the guests. I doubt the tutors responsible for my rearing lived out the day.

Without further ceremony, I was turned over to the care of the Fourth Scion Academy, where I would spend the next six years of my life. My behavior did not improve, and without my brothers to pull my reins, I was no small challenge to the academy staff. I suspect my only saving grace, the only reason for my continued attendance at the academy, were the generous annual donations arranged by my parents. When other students visited home, I remained on the grounds, for even then, my parents were convinced I could be corrected if only an additional effort was made. For my part, I regretted this not at all: I was not in the least homesick, for by then I had heard the news from the Southeast and knew that my brothers would not be home to greet me.

It was only three months after my arrival at the academy that I received word of my brothers' death. They were fallen to rebel spears, their mortal blood staining the grass and earth of some imperial possession. My parents did not bother to write themselves. Instead, I learned from the imperial pronouncement that the post rider delivered to the school. I was inconsolable. Nothing in my life prepared me for the grief I endured, and it stripped away what little desire I had to conform to academy life. I ignored my lessons, mocked my peers for even the most minor imperfections and ran roughshod over every rule I managed to break. Finally, it was too much.

Then came the Palace of the Tamed Storm. There was no warning, no last chance and no sympathy. I was simply plucked from the grounds of the Fourth Son Academy and dropped into the lion's den. No longer were my indiscretions met with stern words and an admonishment to curtail my behavior. Instead, I went to bed bloody and awakened battered and bruised. It was a small miracle that I survived my first month — some did not—but at its end, I finally understood that, for the next

six years, my life would be one of either obedience or agony. I chose the former.

EXALTATION

Though it was nothing compared to my Exaltation, I was greeted with an epiphany of a different sort at the end of my first month at the palace. Even compared to my fellow students, my combat skills were already well honed, thanks to many hours of fencing with Corvus in my childhood. I was unmatched among the students, and despite the constant haranguing of my teachers, my pride swelled immeasurably. I was convinced of my superiority in at least that regard.

Though I was brutally chastised for my behavior, I continued to ignore the Most Honored and Puissant Blademaster Ragara Ajantus. Finally, he decided to present me with a choice: Learn from his example or become an example myself. Of course, this ultimatum was not one of word, but deed. When Ajantus released the students to their wardens — thugs euphemistically referred to as “servants” and “attendants” — I was held for a private “lesson.” He stood before me and presented me with his sword, the first I had ever held, and told me to strike him, if I could. I hated him, and I smiled. He held only a stout stick, similar to the weapons students used in practice. He moved with the practiced grace of an expert swordsman, and though I was good, I was a poor opponent. In the first hour, he broke three of my fingers. By dusk, my ankle was shattered, and I could not see for the blood in my eyes. Finally, he released me to the custody of an attendant. The lesson over, I wavered, then fell. The attendant immediately moved to carry me from the field, but Ajantus forbade him. His clear, cold voice cut through the haze: “She is Dragon-Blooded, and she needs no help from you. If she will not walk, she will die in the grass.”

Though I do not remember rising, I did, and I managed to reach my bed. Fire lit my ankle, and ice lay heavy in my stomach. I pissed blood on my sheets and slept in the soiled linens. I was certain I was dying. Yet, in the morning, I rose. At morning mess I could feel every pair of eyes boring into me. I was a warning of what would come of those who did not heed the faculty. I was a corpse, looking for a lonely place to die. I listened as wagers were made on whether I would simply fail to stand again.

I stood, and I gloried in it. Ajantus was right: *I was Dragon-Blooded, and I would die on my feet.* He was my first class of the morning, and I was determined to show him my steel. When his students assembled ranks, I stood with them. Then I stood forward and spoke, lisping through broken teeth and a swollen tongue. “Finish my lesson, Master Ragara.” It was a long time before he spoke, and I have no doubt he thought long and hard about simply ending my life there on the field. Ultimately,

however, he ordered an attendant to bear me to the infirmary, where I spent the remainder of my first year.

Despite this mercy, I hated the man with a passion I have not known since. Each morning, I swore that his ministrations would be repaid tenfold, but I knew I could not fulfill this vow in death. My injuries, though healed, were permanent. I still limp, and my left hand is useless. Ajantus had taken his pound of flesh, and I meant to have it back. With interest.

I fell to my lessons with newfound vigor, particularly Ajantus’ training. It was sweet to know that someday I would turn his teachings against him. He must have known my intentions — I imagine my hate must have radiated from me like heat from a bonfire — but it made no difference to him. He used that heat to forge me into a warrior. In a way, I was his protegee, a vessel into which he poured all of his skill and far too much pain. We both quickly realized that if I were to Exalt, it would mean his death, and that, if I did not, it would mean mine. It was a bitter bond, and unbreakable.

For four years, I endured, and for four years, I learned. Then, came the dawn, and for him, only night. He knew it the moment I set foot on the field that morning. Mela walked with me, and death followed just behind. There was no lesson that day. Ajantus dismissed the students to the custody of their attendants. When only he and I remained, we stood silent for a time. I held only my practice stick, but he drew his blade, the same sword I had held four years before. “This is yours,” he said. “Take it, if you can.”

He fought wisely and well, with serpentine strikes and lightning-quick parries. He was a master, but he was only mortal. It took less than a minute to cripple him and only a heartbeat to kill him. By the time it was over, the dominie had arrived, and he witnessed the final blow. He watched as I stooped over Ajantus’ corpse and pried his sword from his hands.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

At that moment, unknown to me, I was selected to attend the Cloister of Wisdom, for Ragara had prepared a posthumous recommendation for me, to be delivered in the event of his death at my hands. The recommendations of the Palace of the Tamed Storm’s staff carry great weight among the academies of the Realm, and it was decided that the discipline of the Cloister would serve me well. Despite this, my own path was chosen long before: I was determined to follow my brothers into the military. My years in the Cloister tempered me, but the stain of my past remained through those years. Ultimately, my path led to the only unit that would have me: the Vermilion Legion.





TEPET ARADA

I couldn't tell you why today, but my parents' household moved to Chanos when I was still a toddler, and it was their primary residence until long after I was up and out on my own. It was never what anyone would call a nice town. It's pretty much the same today as it was back then — this would be almost three centuries ago — full of soldiers shipping out, soldiers on leave and the businesses that cater to both. Drinking, whoring, drinking, fighting, drinking, drilling and drinking: That's what towns like that feature, if you've never had the pleasure of being in one. Now, my household wasn't too different from anyone else's, I guess. There were cousins and servants and tutors and that, and my parents were always off tending to their affairs, same as anyone's. They may have been a little more on the inattentive side than most, and the household had picked up on that as well. It was played fast and loose, as far as that sort of thing goes, and so, I wasn't kept on too short of a leash as a boy. I got into my share of trouble, and then some, I guess. I was off doing my own thing quite a bit: fighting with the other kids, hunting and fishing, sneaking off with some drink now and again. By the time I was in that military prep school they have up there, I was a regular hooligan, making sure I was the boss of the crowd I ran with and letting all the other circles know that we were the tops in that place. We got the cane pretty regularly, but it never stopped us from doing what we wanted most of the time.

We used to raise a lot of hell when we had a free day from school, go out and hang around the bars and such and look for some legionnaire to fix us up with some wine or maybe get into it with some of the other kids from school. We were like a regular gang of toughs. We got this rummy old sailor to give us tattoos on our arms that said "Hellion Legion" — you can still see mine. It was funny, I guess, since most of us were from pretty well-to-do families and whatnot, and we were out there strutting around and playing tough. My father had someone from around the house beat me pretty good over the tattoo, as I recall. I was always getting the cane for something or another. It was Chanos, though. That's pretty much all we saw of the world as kids other than the inside of our houses. You grow up around soldiers and the like, that's what you see.

EXALTATION

There was this other bunch of kids, I forget what they called themselves, but they were pretty much just like us, same school and everything. We used to get into it with them all the damn time, scrapping in

some place or another or getting each other in some kind of trouble at school or just plain trying to outdo each other when there was a competition or anything like that. I think the school sort of encouraged a certain measure of that sort of thing, to keep us on our toes and to make sure we didn't come out soft. Anyway, one time, the number one kid in that circle — his name was Riner — and his buddies got me alone, and they really put it to me. I can't remember what it was about, but I ended up with a split lip and two black eyes and everything. It was the worst beating I think I ever took, to this day. After that, I made it my personal mission to give it back to that boy any chance I got. It got pretty ugly back and forth for a while. I can recall we both got in quite a bit of trouble over it for a few months. So, one day, I'm climbing up this rope as part of some training exercise or another, and there's Riner at the bottom of the rope, laughing and hauling back and forth on the thing like he was sawing a thick log, and me way up at the top. I didn't have much of a chance there, and I came right off that rope and hit the snow like a stone. I can recall feeling something off — "funny," I guess you'd call it—as I was falling, mixed in with the sick anticipation of the impact, and I can half-recall still feeling it after I hit but now all mixed in with a real rage. They had to lock me up in a special room after I killed Riner, I can't really recall it clearly — just snatches here and there — but they told me I was crazy for a long time after and that anyone who came near me I started choking and beating on. It wasn't right, but I did it, and I have to live with it. At the time, it just made me angrier, though.

So they sent me away to another school, one for kids who couldn't act right, the Palace of the Tamed Storm. It's an apt name, in my case. It's right in the Imperial City, and I could tell right away that they were more than used to dealing with troublemakers. The place was like a prison. They told you when to eat, sleep, shit, study and everything else. If you stepped out of line, you got beat. If you mouthed off, you got beat. Hell, if you did nothing, sometimes, you'd get beat. There were kids in there much worse off than I was, too. There was one girl who couldn't have been more than 10 who had killed both her patrician parents when she Exalted unexpectedly. They said her anima had burned up her whole house with everyone in it, and she had gotten a little crazy after that.

I tried to not let them hammer me down for a little while, like a dumb kid. It didn't take me long to realize

that they'd just beat me until I died if I didn't clean up my act, though. On the outside, at least. I got back at them in what little ways I could, just here and there. If you act the way they want you to long enough, you can get away with quite a bit in the end.

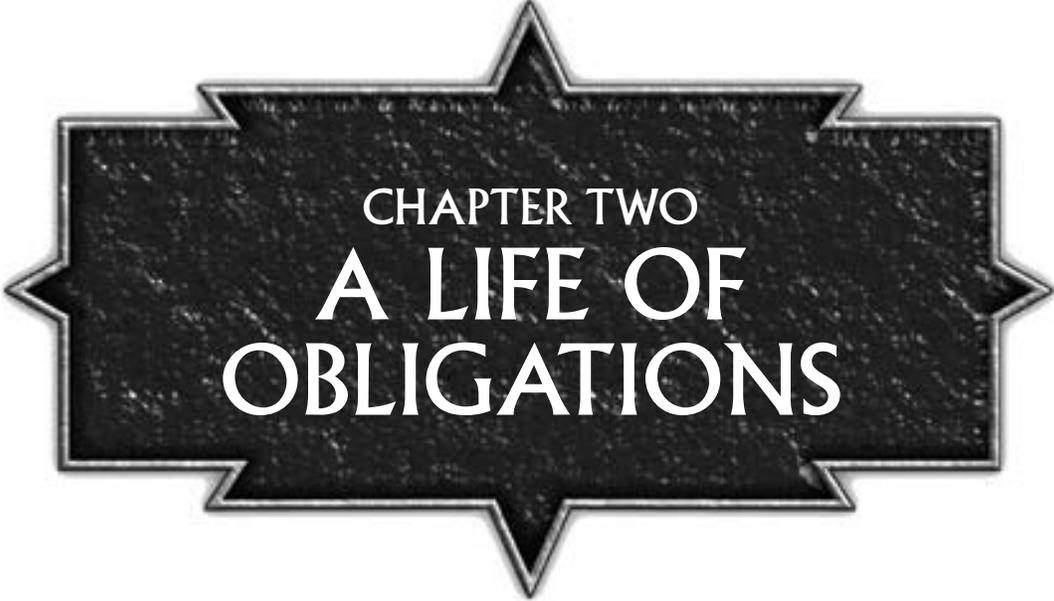
SECONDARY SCHOOL

I wasn't the first kid to go into the House of Bells from the Tamed Storm. There were a few every year, and most of us did better than the rest by a wide margin. It makes sense if you think about it. After the Tamed Storm, the discipline and drilling at the House of Bells was just more of the same, but now the beatings meant something. I took to it well, being tougher and braver than the rest of them meant that I was the captain of my cadet squad pretty much from the start, and it stayed more or less like that until I graduated. I still bucked the system when I felt like it, but the Tamed Storm had taught me how to get away with it. You just have to pick your battles, make sure that you can win before you start and make damn sure you can handle the consequences if you lose. That's the biggest thing, to me. No one is going to beat the confidence of someone who knows that he can handle the worst-case scenario before he even starts something.

The House of Bells taught me a great deal and did a lot to make me who I am today. First and foremost, it taught me that words and such can be just as brutal or effective as a fist for a lot of obstacles. Words can be better in a lot of cases. Someone in your way? Learn to beat them down by intimidating them. You can overpower someone like that without ever laying a hand on them. You need people to know you're the boss? It doesn't mean you have to dent their heads. You just have to show them that you're the best and that you mean business. People will follow you if you make sure they know you deserve to be in charge. That's another important lesson from the House of Bells: You have to deserve power. It doesn't matter what kind of power you're talking about. Any power is something you have to earn if you're anything but a tyrant. Being the toughest or the meanest doesn't mean anything. If you're the boss, you're responsible for everyone who follows you, like a parent is responsible for his children — it says the same in the Immaculate Texts and in *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier*. I didn't understand that when I was a boy, but I damn sure understood it after the House of Bells.







CHAPTER TWO A LIFE OF OBLIGATIONS



The Dragon-blooded are taught that their Exaltation brings with it a duty, an obligation to serve the cause of civilization and order the world over. Though even now in this time of tumult, they stand astride Creation as its rulers, they are not and have not been a culture that produces those who would rest on their laurels or degenerate fully into self-congratulatory decadence. Almost every Terrestrial Exalt of the Realm knows that their power is a burden — and a burden that they must at least appear to bear with dignity and diligence.

CATHAK MELADUS

It took a great deal of convincing for me to be allowed to visit Thorns when after I had graduated from school, since it was an active military “hot spot” at the time and things had gone very badly for us at Mishaka. That was exactly why I wanted to go, though, to see for myself what it was like without the pressure of personally being in active service. General Arada has always made a point of advocating a period of travel and broadening of one’s horizons before the beginning of active service, and everything he’d ever written on the subject had been right for me so far. The fact that my sister was in the field in the area and would be able to show me around was the deciding factor, eventually. I would be in good hands, and what was left was mostly an ugly but safe period of flux after a defeat. When I got

there and rendezvoused with my sister, it was a far more depressing experience than I thought it would be. To hear her tell it, the entire campaign, which had been going on for most of my life, had been a mismanaged nightmare. Her accounts and those of her few friends in the satrapy really shook me. With all the might and experience of our forces and commanders, why had things been allowed to go so poorly there? For the first time, I heard sustained criticism of the Realm from those who were supposed to be my elders — and not only on the subject of the Thorns campaign. Things were unwell all over the Threshold, to hear them tell it, and it sounded like it was going to be a hard time for the empire for a while. I try to be an optimistic person — I think that’s part of the way of Mela — and so, I thought that my people would pull together and come out of this bad spot on top. And then, the Juggernaut came. That whole period of days was complete chaos, after the reports started to come in. An army of the dead, a giant corpse with a fortress on its back, swarms of flesh-eating giant maggots and more. It was... I don’t think I need to describe it or my feelings. Most of us, the Dragon-Bloods, simply left. What else could we do besides martyr ourselves? Some stayed behind to gather intelligence data and to try and delay the offensive as best they could, including my sister. Most of them never reported back.



It's been four years since then, and now, I'm a field technician with the legions, working on dragon armor and warstriders and all sorts of artifacts just like I always dreamed I would, but there's no joy in it. Is this the Realm I was raised to love, with no Empress and a government that allows debacles such as what happened in Thorns? There was hardly even a reason for that campaign to have happened at all, I can tell you now. There was next to nothing to be gained from such a poorly planned and executed offensive. We were using local troops, Mela knows why, and meanwhile, the Great Houses were keeping all their newly leashed legions as close to home as possible. It's a travesty and an insult to the memory of every one of us who fought and died to build this empire, including my sister. For now, all I can do is my best. I'm not the only one who feels betrayed by the state of things right now, but we can't let ourselves get bogged down in blame and negativity. We have to remind people, remind ourselves, that we're the heroes of this world and that we need to do what we can to keep it that way.

KASIF

I have seen little outside these temple walls for nearly two years. This is unsurprising, considering the first moments following my Exaltation saw the loss of many lives. I was out of control. I did not understand my new abilities, and I was frightened. After I overcame Sasha's and my captors, more guards attempted to subdue me. It was a fool's mission. Though I could not escape through the press of bodies, I stood my ground and lashed out at any who drew near. This was especially dangerous after I took a sword away from an incautious guardsman. Sasha huddled in my shadow, as frightened of me as she was of those who sought to harm us. It was almost an hour before any who were adequate to the task of subduing me arrived, though once they did, it was over quickly.

When I awoke, I was alone in a small brown room, prostrate on a rattan mat. A simple meal awaited me on a wooden tray, positioned within easy reach of the mat. This was fortunate, for I was loathe to move — I was drained of Essence, and my very bones ached. My wounds had been bandaged, and a splint supported my shin. Despite my pains, I devoured the proffered food in short order and slept. When I awoke again, I was greeted by a monk, who forbade me the use of my own name. The trappings of the dispossessed, even his previous name, were inappropriate for a postulant of the Immaculate Order.

He told me what had happened in the market square, and he also told me all was forgiven — provided I fulfilled my obligations. He deflected specific queries, telling me little save what he was prepared to say. One question, however, he did answer: Sasha was dead. In the time I stood and battled in the market, she first fell into

unconsciousness, then death. I was still young then and not in command of myself. Though I was silent at first, he knew my grief. When I began to cry, he struck me. The blow was not severe enough to cause me harm, but it renewed the pain of my injuries. "Do not grieve for her," he admonished. "You are a Dragon-Blood, and mortal concerns are beneath you." Shocked at his reproach, I was silent. Without another word, he left.

Soon, I was given over to the Palace Sublime and the tutelage of Preda — though I did not learn his name for some time. Despite my first lesson and my new surroundings, I thought of little except Sasha for the next month. As the pain of my injuries faded, so too did the pain of loss. I had no time for grief, as Preda filled every hour of my days with lessons: both on the Immaculate Philosophy, and — because I was unschooled — on more secular matters. I assumed the gray robes of a postulant, and I was held to the strictures of the Immaculate life. In large part, adjusting to this was a simple matter: An oath of poverty means little to one who has spent his entire life in destitution.

Though Preda seemed pleased with my progress, he drove me harder each day, almost beyond endurance. He drilled me ferociously in the Immaculate Philosophy and the responsibilities of our order — for it was already clear I had little choice in my future. I was a Dragon-Blooded born outside the cradle of the Great Houses, and this was the only fate permitted me. I was tutored exclusively by Preda, and I later learned that I was his only student, for sponsoring an outcaste in the Immaculate Order is considered the Order's highest calling, and he devoted the entirety of his days to my preparation.

At his feet, I learned both the most basic and most complex lessons in life. He taught me to read and write, to fight, to live and — should it be necessary — to die. My existence was circumscribed by the temple walls, for I was not allowed beyond those boundaries. Six months passed while I was in his care, until I was ready.

At Preda's side, I was told, I would meet the Paragon of Sextes Jylis. Her word would determine if I was suited for the Immaculate Order. This was disconcerting, at best. Preda taught me that there was no other place for an outcaste than the Order. Where would I go if I was turned away by the Paragon? As always, he deflected my question, though I have since learned that if the monk was unable to mold me into a proper acolyte and Dragon-Blood, he was expected to kill me, that I might reincarnate in a life more suitable for a Dragon-Blooded.

Given the uncertainty of my fate, my meeting with the Paragon of Sextes Jylis was disturbingly short. First, I was reviewed and tested by her subordinates. For days, I was shuffled from bureaucrat to bureaucrat, until finally — and by now, to my surprise — I was confronted by the Paragon of Sextes Jylis herself. She spent only

moments in my presence before indicating her assent, and with one small nod, I was no longer outcaste. My sponsor gave me a name, finally lifting the burden of my former name from my shoulders. I was now Kasif—and shall be forevermore.

Though, officially, I was no longer a postulant, my unusual circumstance dictated that I was bound to Preda—for I still think of him only as “the monk” to this day—for a longer period. He shepherded my development in the Immaculate Order, though he was no longer my only instructor. I joined with the other acolytes of the Order, to be interviewed at the end of each day by Preda, in order make certain that I lived up to the promise I had demonstrated to the Paragon.

And now, finally, I walk my own path. Upon achieving the Second Coil, the monk informed me that I was to walk circuit through the Realm. The purpose of my assignment was twofold: I was to fulfill the duties of an Immaculate and, at the completion of my circuit, spend a year in the Imperial City, where I was born. Once there, I will serve in the local temple, and I will be expected to remain untainted by my former life. I imagine this is more difficult for those who have a former life to speak of, but all of my childhood acquaintances are gone, dead in the streets, their bodies burned and their ashes scattered.

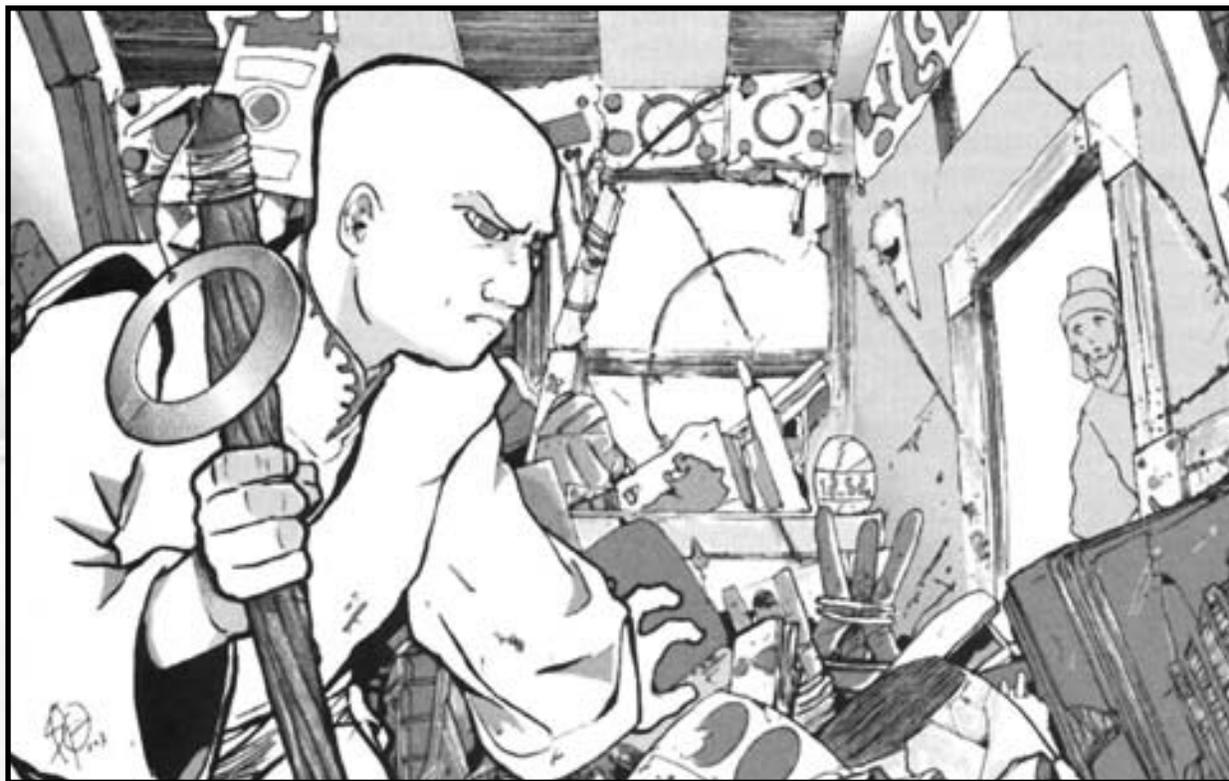
I pray that I am strong, for my life is full. I have responsibilities, and though they are sometimes burdensome, they are often joyous. Each new village greeted me

with a dozen tasks, and for every funeral I must conduct, there is a child whose name must be spoken aloud for the first time. For every solemn prayer I conduct, there is a boisterous wedding—or several!—to bless the following eve. My time as a postulant was gray and tired, but life as a circuit monk in the Blessed Isle is a wonder. The people here are possessed of incredible vitality, and even the poorest farmer is happy to share his table with me.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Curiously, I find that the peasants of the Blessed Isle bolster my faith in the Immaculate Philosophy. I suspect this is why I was asked to walk circuit so early in my life as a monk. Perhaps it is expected that for a former outcaste to truly assimilate the Immaculate Philosophy, he must be immersed in it. In my time on the road, I have been plunged headfirst into the faith. At every turn, I am confronted with mortals seeking answers. At first, I had few to give, but it seemed those were enough. The farmer returned to his wife happier for my advice. The children were reassured that, though their life in the village was small, they would grow closer to the Immaculate Dragons for passing it as they did, perhaps even to be reincarnated as Dragon-Blooded themselves.

As I traveled my road, I found that the answers began to come with more ease. In part, I found that common problems were often solved with common answers, and as my confidence in these small matters grew, larger matters became less intimidating. Equally important, however,



was the faith placed in me in each village. I hoped that I correctly solved each problem. The villagers knew the faith. And, as I walked further on the road, this knowledge passed to me, as well.

I am thankful for this, for it gave me the strength I needed in Serat. It was a small village of perhaps 50 souls, and every one of them looked to petty gods for guidance. Though I performed my usual duties, the villagers treated me as an unwelcome guest. The village elder, rather than host me in his own home, actually offered directions to the local inn — and grudgingly at that. I did not stay, for the inn itself was an affront to the Immaculate faith: The shingle depicted a skewered boar. Only months before, I would have slept under the graven image — the villagers seemed happy and prosperous, after all. Furious, I tore the inn to splinters. I did not sleep that night, but instead, walked to the prefectural seat and returned with a judge and his retainers, to show them how far from the path of the Immaculate Dragons this village had strayed.

I am stronger now in my faith and, therefore, stronger in myself. I am closer to the spirit of Mela than I ever was, and upon my return to the Imperial City, I was well prepared to take up the duties of life in temple.

ROMANTIC LIFE

Though I am happy on my road, it is a lonely one. I am forbidden pleasures of the flesh by the Order, though solitary release is not proscribed by the faith. It is enough, and too much. These moments are when I am weakest, for I cannot help but think of Sasha. Each time I bless a marriage, I wonder what it would have been like to swear myself to her, and each time I name a child for the first time, I wonder what name we might have given our child.

Though it shames me to admit it, it was difficult to see the Imperial City once more. At each dawn, I fervently hope that my duties of the day keep me within the walls of the temple, for I do not wish to see the market again or walk streets that may echo with her voice. Her loss is distant, but at the beginning of my walk, so too was the horizon. Sometimes, I fear that it will overwhelm me.

LEDAAL KES

For much of my life to date, I operated on the mistaken assumption that what I did was just another game — like Gateway, only far more complex. It is not a bad analogy for the sort of work I have done: accounting, auditing, large-scale system analysis, investigation and prosecution of all manner of economic criminals and much more in that vein. Charming naive, isn't it? I equated everything to a game, saw everything in terms of patterns or cooperative and noncooperative strategies. Everything could be reduced to an abstraction, a puzzle, and then solved. I never really thought deeply about

what these puzzles meant. I only thought about achieving excellence through solving them. Judging by the rate at which more work was given me, I think that I achieved the excellence I sought — to a degree. You must understand as I tell you of the triumphs of my past that I no longer see things as I once did, and my motivations and desires then bear little resemblance to those of today. Alas, no more fun time for Kes. Today, there is only duty.

People in the Imperial Service obviously had plans for me. As soon as I had graduated from the Spiral Academy, I was pushed into a series of entrance examinations and qualifying positions throughout different ministries of the Thousand Scales. In just under 20 years, I passed from a civil accounting and assessing office in the Scarlet Prefecture to auditing the books for military expeditionary forces to service as a Jade Sniffer in the Righteous and Perfect Examiners of Illicit Scents, until, finally, I was made an official of the Imperial Treasury itself. I know that the stereotype of the frigid ministerial bean counter is a common one, but the analytical and theoretical aspects of economics are really marvelously complex and engaging for those with the eyes to see it. I will also admit that there is a great deal of adventure to be had as an auditor or an investigator, believe it or not. I was a part of investigations that lasted for several years, with operations all over the Blessed Isle and the Threshold. We were authorized to use stealth, undercover agents, spies, magic and a great deal more to accomplish our ends, and we did — and still do. It was everything I could have asked for in a career, for a time.

I traveled extensively, ostensibly using Gateway tournaments and parties as covers for my regular movements across the Isle. By day, I would meet with informants and contacts, work to analyze their gathered information and synthesize from it a picture of whatever business or operation we might be investigating. Then, I might surreptitiously survey the assets of a target or shadow various subjects and monitor their activities and transactions (I maintain still that the best place to learn the Charms and techniques of stealth and subterfuge is with the Humble and Honest Tax Assessors, in fact). By night, I would be mingling at a Cynis soiree or challenging the local Gateway savants. Ledaal Kes: rakish Gateway master, charming breaker of young men's hearts and spy for her Redness' Treasury — it was a puerile fantasy story come true, and it was fantastic.

I was brought into the Eye, of course. I can be blasé about it now and say "Of course I was initiated into the All-Seeing Eye." At the time, however (and I'll trust you won't repeat this and damage my reputation of being unflappable), I was scared witless. As far as anyone in the public knows, whenever someone receives the mark of the lidless eye, his days are numbered. I was already married when this happened, and we both happened to

be in residence at our apartments in Arjuf. Szaya was just back from one of her forays into the Threshold somewhere, and I was fairly certain that she was tense about something and avoiding contact with everyone, including me — not uncommon behavior. Szaya is many things, but even-tempered is hardly one of them, and so, I didn't make much of it. At some point, I was working in my study, and I found a small square of silk with the mark of the All-Seeing Eye on it, and of course, I panicked. Happily, when I panic, I mostly do so mentally. I sat, shaking and sweating, and worked through the situation in my head at breakneck speed. How had I offended it, how had this warning gotten here, and who could have left it, who among my contacts now seemed like they might be operatives of the Eye, where could I hide, how could I get out of this, why me? The realization that nothing I could do would matter helped to snap me out of my intellectual fugue. All the meager evidence available to me indicated that no one ever escaped the Eye, and so, attempting to do so was futile. Nonetheless, I was understandably shaken and limited myself to my study, where I could at least receive my killers discreetly and might work out a ciphered will or missive to warn Szaya or Keraz that we had misstepped somehow. I'll spare you the details of those few weeks of paranoia and skip to the punch line — the fact that I am here to bore you with this tale at all unfortunately ruins the drama a bit, I know. Szaya's ill mood had been completely eclipsed in my mind by the panic of finding the silk eye. It was not until weeks later, after I had learned the truth behind the test, that I discovered that her strange behavior could be attributed to the same source as my own. To my knowledge, we are the only Dragon-Blooded married couple to both be operatives of the Eye, and yes, it has occurred to me that she may have been the one to plant the sign.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Everything has its place in the Perfected Hierarchy. The actions of one being in one place, due to this sacred order, are tied to the actions and states of things both above and below him. In this way, I think that my career, working with and studying orderly systems, is similar to the work of a monk or theologian. Often, I have felt a certain feeling of numinous awareness when seeing an elegant pattern in a game of Gateway or studying a diagram of the ebb and flow of the price of grain. It is my thinking that the philosophy of Mela is meant to be emulated not only by individuals, but also to be emulated by our works and fostered in the world around us. In this way, again, I think that work does just this. I strive to encourage excellence on the part of the economy of this empire and work to counter the seeming of the Sickly Whore when I find her in the form of criminals, tax evaders, embezzlers and the greedy. I wish for not only

myself to be excellent in all things I do, but I wish for the businesses and bureaus of this Realm to strive for that same Melaist excellence. I am maybe too biased toward my way of thinking to be able to accurately discern if these thoughts of mine are too unorthodox. Certainly, I have read a great deal of the more esoteric works of Immaculate thinking and committed no small amount of time to exercises and meditations geared toward increasing my awareness of and ability with the Essence that flows in and around all things. They are primarily concerned with the martial aspects of striving for perfection, and while I think that I may be a soldier of the mind, I do not know if that is quite what Mela meant.

ROMANTIC LIFE

My marriage is an odd one, I think. Szaya and I both had to lobby for years for our families to condone the union we sought, even though it does both houses a great deal of good for us to be partnered. We have been the best of friends since our very earliest meetings as children, and her company has been one of the most stable and regular sources of positivity in my life. She is a capricious and adventurous soul, always dragging me into some wild journey or magical experiment, and she serves to counter my tendency toward aloofness and stagnation. It would sound as if we were very much in love, I think, but the truth is that our union is one of convenience and mutual benefit, primarily. Both of us prefer the company of our own gender, share the same interests and elemental temperament and have a certain independent or individualistic streak that might make a more conventional marriage harder to maintain (and thus a drain on personal resources of both a temporal and an emotional nature). We have often gone for months, years on some occasions, without face-to-face meetings, and both of us seek our sexual outlets elsewhere, for the most part. Neither my wife nor I have ever successfully maintained a long-term secondary relationship, and as such, we have gotten into the habit of not bothering to try at all. We are inseparable when together and, in the last few decades, have been working as a unit in areas of business, household management and espionage. We have found that the physical and emotional intimacy of our marriage is deeply fulfilling to us both, and that we are both perfectly happy supplementing that with secondary sexual partners or creative applications of sorcery. I'm sure you have heard of our debauched habits. There's no need to be shy about it — we obviously aren't. I love my wife, and she loves me, and if we alter our forms or seek the services of sexual professionals to enable us to explore our different sexualities together as part of that love, I do not think that anyone can argue that it is improper. We have had several children, three of them Exalts, and so, I think that any criticism is ultimately unwarranted.



TEPET ELANA

TEMPORAL LIFE

Once, a magistracy was no life for a soldier. Now, it seems, only a soldier can survive it. Regardless, I bear my duties only grudgingly. For nearly a century, I marched with the Vermilion Legion. It gives me pride now, but in the beginning, I chafed. I was a Dragon-Blooded. I was a *Dynast*. Any of the Realm's armies would have gladly made me an officer, save the Vermilion Legion. Here, I was just another raw recruit, yet to be blooded on the field of battle.

In hindsight, I am thankful. My talents then lay in swordplay, not strategy. My life of study and sweat was dedicated to the former, not the latter. It did not take me long to distinguish myself, though not in the fashion I expected. My years in the Palace of the Tamed Storm trained me to accept commands without a second thought, and my grief at the loss of my brothers made me value mortal lives as highly as my own. In the legions, every soldier matters, and for a Dragon-Blooded, I was unusually cognizant of the value of even mortal lives.

I was decorated frequently and quickly promoted, and after I gained the command of a scale that is attendant to the lieutenant's rank I was honored with, I studied *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier* rigorously. For the first time in my life, the rules were laid out before me. There was no room for instinct, no room for judgment and no room for doubt.

Not until the Battle of Five Fangs. The city of Gethamane stood under threat from the Varajtul, and no show of force could dissuade these cannibals from their periodic attacks on the city, a subject of the Realm. The Vermilion Legion, therefore, was dispatched to deal with the threat. The campaign was long and hard, and we lost many soldiers to wind madness and worse. Nonetheless, the Vermilion Legion held the plains east of Gethamane for five days, with reinforcements yet to arrive. Never mind the Sixth Legion was only two days march further east. All I will say of the Sixth is that it did not arrive. By the fifth dawn, the Vermilion Legion was reduced to half strength. Many were dead, but more were wounded, and it was impossible to quit the field without abandoning the living to the enemy.

The correct action was retreat. The correct action was to rendezvous with the Sixth Legion, but to all appearances, the Sixth Legion wasn't coming. Perhaps, this time, the correct action was wrong. But I was a dragonlord then and obliged to follow the orders of General Ragara Jalin. She would not bend. So, I followed her in retreat and abandoned almost 2,000 soldiers to the cannibal Varajtul. I was sickened by the wasted life and sickened by the general's blind faith in the "correct"

actions. I railed against her decision until the sun had risen to its zenith. When she ordered me to lead my flight in a rear guard action, I made my decision.

If I was to guard the rear of the legion, so be it. I would guard *all* of it. I ordered the remnants of my dragon to stand its ground and protect the wounded. I did not ask, but if I had, I wager each man would have gladly fought for his fallen comrades because he knew that I would order the same for him. Every soldier also knew that I risked not only my life in battle, but my commission by defying Jalin. They knew this because I told them.

Regardless, they stood with me to a man, and we held the ground for two more days until the Sixth Legion finally arrived to relieve us. Only five fangs left the field under their own power that day, but we saved over 1,000 lives at the cost of only 500 of our own. Worse was the cost to our foes, who could not salve their wounds with the balm of victory. The enemy spent 10 times that number attempting to breach our lines. Perhaps, it was not the correct action, but it was the *right* one.

That was my last battle in the Vermilion Legion. I could not stomach the abandonment of loyal soldiers who had spilled their blood at our command. I could not accept the commands of a general who would so easily condemn her wounded to consumption by a tribe of cannibal barbarians. After 100 years of blood, pain and glory, I was going home.

My parents greeted me as a conquering hero, and their hypocrisy sickened me. They had known nothing of me since my youth, had not cared for me when I was a child, but my emergence from the Vermilion Legion made me worthwhile once more. In the week after my discharge, I went from a shameful family secret spoken of only behind locked doors to a trophy in the shape of a daughter, to be flaunted at social functions and matched up with someone promising as a first-rate partner. Suddenly, I was valuable, to House Tepet and, of course, to my beloved parents, who tried to broker all the deals and get their share of the profit.

I would not be surprised to learn that I met every eligible bachelor in the Imperial City in the course of the following year, and my parents tried to marry me off to each and every one. Not one man in 1,000 impressed me, and I have little desire to be tied down by marriage. In the end, I suppose it's inevitable, but I intend to avoid it for as long as possible.

Fortunately, I was spared further "negotiations" by a letter from the Imperial Palace. My service in the Vermilion Legion caught the attention of the Scarlet Empress, and she wished an interview. I was to travel to the Imperial City, where I would be boarded in the Imperial Palace for no less than a week. I was only too happy to escape. I spent the journey wondering why the Empress

would be so fascinated with my exploits and eventually reached the conclusion that I was to be further chastised for my insubordination.

When I arrived, I was treated as royalty. Despite my objections, I was bathed, clothed and groomed by servants and slaves. I protested that I was a soldier — not to mention an adult — and that such ministrations were for courtesans and children. I must admit the experience was not an entirely unpleasant one, though I took care to claim otherwise at every opportunity. I was a soldier for a century, and even when posted within the Imperial City, I was not subject to such treatment. I had no desire to be spoiled or softened, for I had lived a century's worth of battle and blood. My protestations, however, were ignored, and physical resistance would be an insult to my hostess — and one does not insult the Scarlet Empress.

When I was escorted into the Empress' chambers, I immediately realized that my visit was not of a disciplinary nature. In hindsight, this much should have been obvious: The Realm has legions of bureaucrats to dole out penalties and punishments. The Empress herself reclined on a couch, the cushions sleeved in the finest silks. I took care to conceal my limp, but I do not hide it well. She bade me to be seated at her side, and despite my certainty that punishment was not on her agenda, she questioned me closely about the Battle of Five Fangs. She was not displeased, as I had initially suspected, but impressed with the initiative, courage and valor I had displayed. So much so, in fact, that she wished to meet me in person. Oblivious to her overtures, I rose to depart after only an hour. She rose with me. Shocked into silence, I stood motionless as she kissed me, drinking deeply of my breath.

In the month I stayed at the Imperial Palace, I never visited the chambers prepared for me. When I left, she appointed me a magistrate of the Realm. I wonder, sometimes, if I had simply left her chamber on that first evening, if I would have left the Imperial Palace at all, much less as a magistrate.

I try not to think about it.

In the 20 years since, I rarely saw more of the Empress — and never in any circumstance save official. For 15 of those years, I wondered why she assigned me this duty. I am a soldier, not a judge. I am quite capable of these duties, but my training is for battle. That said, I do not dislike the duty. It allows me freedom I have never known, neither as a child nor a soldier. More importantly, it is a blessed escape from my new-found filial duties. Though I am expected to visit my family upon my rare returns to the Realm, I take pains not to visit the Blessed Isle unless compelled to do so by my duties.

Of course, those duties are rarely pleasant. Roving the countryside searching for Wyld beasts and bandits is comfortable work for me, thanks to my years in the

Vermilion Legion. Such duties, however, are only a small part of my life. Just as often, I must sit in judgment over a Dynast accused of criminal misdeeds, applying my vaunted “magisterial discretion” to decide his fate, trying always to ascertain if there was an actual crime or if I am being used merely as an instrument of political murder. Similarly, though investigation is not my forte, I must keep constant vigil against corruption in the Threshold and disloyalty to the Scarlet Empire. These duties I can endure, but dealing with spirits, ghosts and other such devilry I leave to those more suited to the task: monks.

Finally, the Anathema. Though conventional wisdom dictates the Wyld Hunt deal with these creatures in the Threshold, I have found through hard experience that too many wreak havoc and destruction unchecked. These are no mere thieves or animals to be hunted. They are a true test of one's mettle. Truth be told, my encounters with the Anathema have been exhilarating. No quarter asked, none given. No questions, no confusion, no doubt. Times like these, I do not wonder at the Empress' decision. In the five years since her disappearance, I wonder even less. Magistrates are not safe, not in the Realm or in the Threshold, on the roads or in the cities. I know now why the Empress appointed a soldier, and I cannot help but wonder if she knew what was coming.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I do not often observe the rituals of the Immaculate Philosophy. Sometimes, I do not even know if I believe. It is gratifying to think that I am closer to perfection than most, but I find the Philosophy difficult to reconcile with my experiences in the Vermilion Legion. I have seen valor without limit spring from the hearts of mortal men and women, and I have seen the most powerful Dragon-Blooded flee the field in cowardice. Where, then, is perfection? My mind cannot find flaw in the Immaculate Order, for if a Dragon-Blood can willfully channel Essence, then he is obviously closer to the Dragons than a mortal. Of course, whether every Dragon-Blooded fulfills this potential is up to them.

All of that said, I make certain to be publicly devout. It wouldn't do for a magistrate of the Realm to cast doubt on the Immaculate Philosophy by demonstrating even the merest hint of indifference. It is sound and just and logical and true. I support it, though I do not love it.

I find, however, that my stance rarely matters. I am on the road too much to be questioned closely, and I rarely have time for prayer.

ROMANTIC LIFE

Despite my parents' continued best efforts to marry me off in absentia, I remain happily unattached. I have many years ahead of me, and I have no doubt that one day



I shall return home to find a husband. When that time comes, I promise myself I will accept him graciously. After all, a soldier's life is one of duty — and a Dragon-Blooded's even more so. Is it not my duty to bear children who will serve the Realm when I am gone?

In the Vermilion Legion, my nights were sometimes spent alone, sometimes with another. These were passions of the moment, only, because survival from day to day was far from assured. I never allowed myself to become attached because I had no time for grief. Little has changed, I suppose, except my job title. In the short time I spent at home, I was celibate. This was not out of conscious choice, but for the simple fact that the chattering socialites of the Blessed Isle bore me to tears. My time as magistrate reflects my life as a soldier in many ways, and the nights were no exception — not until recently. I am over 100 now, and I find that I desire more than simple lust. No, that's not fair. It has little to do with my age. Beren excites me. Though he knows that I am the left hand of the Empress herself, he does not fear me — or does not show it. He has walked with me for only six months as my archon, and already, he has shown enough valor to match 100 legionnaires.

As much as I desire him, though, he is only mortal. He has only forty years left to him, perhaps a little less, and I don't know if I can protect him from the dangers of the world. He is capable and courageous but only human. Worse, even if he is spared this violence, he will age, wither and die, and there is nothing I can do save watch. Like all mortals — like my brothers — he will die long before my youth leaves me.

TEPET ARADA

I moved into my older brother's home when I was done with school, but I was there only rarely. I spent most of my time traveling to various places where we had a regular military presence and watching how things happened. I knew I was going to end up in the legions, already had it lined up and ready for the most part, but I wanted to be able to go into the field without any blinders on. It was smart to travel around for a while, I think. I recommended it to my children and nieces and nephews and such when I had them, and I recommend it to any young adult who isn't already committed to a career or such. It really does serve you well for life, to not have too narrow a focus and to have a decent idea of the bigger picture.

I eventually did end up in the field with the legions, as I guess everyone knows. It was good work, I thought. I had a preference for doing more visceral sorts of operations, long-range recon and fast-attack jobs. I like to be outdoors and to have specific goals but nonspecific methods — the longer the mission, the better, as far as I was concerned. I did everything I could to stay in the

field because it kept me away from the Blessed Isle and the city. Don't misunderstand me, I can dress up and dance and talk politics with the rest of high society, I just don't prefer it. Give me some mud and a sword and about 100 miles to run, and I won't even notice time passing at all.

I came home when called, for holidays or galas or whatever the bosses asked me back for. It was a requirement really, if I wanted to get anywhere in the legions or help support my house. I admit, I did the bare minimum socializing and politicking I could to get to where I wanted to go, at least the stuffy formal-event kind. I was all too happy to spend weekends hunting or that sort of activity and tried to steer things that way as much as I was able. There was always someone there to point out to me that I could be doing more, though, and that really got under my skin after a while. I'm talking about something in the order of a few decades, here. I didn't understand what my family wanted from me, I really didn't. To my way of thinking, I was doing a proper token amount of the things I didn't like to keep everything balanced and doing a damn good job of the things I liked doing. Always, someone would try to string me along or hold something over me to get me to do just a little more, though. One of my brothers or uncles would pull me aside and give me the chummy man-to-man talk, and I always knew at the end there would be a "but," and I was always right. That's how I ended up with my grandfather's weapon, the daiklave of Tepet himself.

For years, my father's older brother would mention the blade in conversation with me, all practiced and casual, insinuating that one of my generation might be in line for it if one of us distinguished himself and earned the right. I'm sure that every one of my generation serving in the legions got the same treatment. It was really tiresome and transparent, I thought, and insulting to both the house and to me. I eventually got so fed up that I just left for a few years. I couldn't put up with the frustration anymore, so I went and lived way up North by myself for a time, trading furs and such with some of the icewalkers and meditating.

I got myself busted down pretty hard for that when I finally came back, but I think I had made my point. There was a big campaign a few years later, the one against Jochim the Anathema, nasty fighting and costly to boot. Jochim was no slouch, and he could train men up in a matter of weeks and make them damn fierce. They were fearless and had something unnatural in their eyes, something crazy. We battled him back again and again, though, taking back all the land and towns that he had risen up and seized until he holed himself up in an old fort in the hills. It was a crazy stunt, but I took a small force of my best men and crept into that place and razed it to the ground. They named me the Wind Dancer for



that, and it set the tone for the way I liked to get things done for the rest of my career.

I came back to my uncle a general, and I dropped Jochim's damn devil head on his desk and asked him if that was distinguished enough for him. A lot of people called it childish, but I was commanding the Tepet legions long after that uncle was dust, and I'm still carrying the blade on my back.

I don't want to talk about the recent campaign in the North. It was a black, black joke. You can't just throw soldiers at a problem and then sit back and wait for a report, and in my eyes, all those men were murdered by the laziness, ignorance and greed of their own nation. This Dynasty can go to hell for all I care.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I work very hard, very hard indeed, to understand the teachings of the Elemental Dragons. I have come far since my earliest attempts at devotion and emulation of Mela, I think, but not far enough. I am supposed to be higher in the Perfected Hierarchy than even my own Exalted kind, given the quantity of Essence at my command and the relative ease I have in channeling it. In my heart, I can still feel the flaws and weaknesses of a man. I'm old, very old for a Dragon-Blood, and I'm really beginning to feel it. I do my best not to allow this to detract from my meditations and prayers, as I know that, if I die trying, it's better than if I'd lived and didn't try. I hope the Dragons are listening, not for my good, but for the good of the Realm. Their children have faltered, even me, and I think that the time is coming soon when their help will be the only help that will matter.

ROMANTIC LIFE

I was married once. I had never met her before the ceremony and saw her only a few dozen times, mostly to make and present children. It was, as you may be able to guess, purely a formality. I am a family man, of a sort, just not an immediate family man. I have enjoyed the company and camaraderie of brothers, cousins and nephews. I was just never cut out to be a father or a husband. I've had my share of women over the years, otherwise. What soldier hasn't? They all knew what they were getting, though. There was never any games or misleading them. When I'm there, I'm there, and when I ship out, that's it. There's been some other officers I've served with who I may have cared for, I don't know. It's not something I've given much thought to, and it's a funny sort of gray area that, as an officer, I was often uncomfortable navigating. The long and the short of it is that I've never stayed still long enough to get comfortable with anyone, and people always saw me as the Wind Dancer and not as plain old Arada.







CHAPTER THREE THE WORLD WE RULE



Air is subtle and all-encompassing, formless, and can slowly erode any obstacle or find its way into any place. Conversely, it is the sudden, wrathful storm, capable of violence such as lightning and the destructive force of the hurricane. Are these, then, the attitudes of the Air Aspects toward the world they rule? In many cases, yes. Those of the air are warrior-savants — hard to overlook only in their absence, comprehensive in thought, majestic and terrible in their anger. The realm of thought and subtle action is their domain, making them the large-scale problem solvers and planners of their culture and placing them, perhaps, closest to the core of governance of all the aspects.

CATHAK MELADUS

NATION AND HOUSE

The Realm is an ideal, as much as any tenet of the Immaculate faith or code of behavior. And like an ideal, it is something that we have to strive for, to make the goal of our society. I don't think people understand that anymore. Just look at the way things are going right now, and it seems clear that our culture has taken the Realm for granted, taken our supremacy for granted, and made it something to

fight over instead of for. The Realm isn't wealth or power. It isn't the Empress or the Great Houses. It is the symbol of the duty of the enlightened to the world. I get so mad thinking about it because I feel so impotent sometimes in the face of all the infighting and selfish politics. I don't even have people I can talk to about it, really. There are guys in my unit who I think understand, but I have to be careful about what I say in public. My cousin Cathak Daral, he's about my age and felt like I do, was pretty outspoken about his feelings on more than one occasion. He got dressed down openly for not supporting his house, and it has him in the Imperial Manse now, where he's always within arms reach. Not supporting his house, can you believe that? My own blood, and they've already just decided to play this dirty game with the other houses without so much as a nod toward our greater duty. I would have expected that House Cathak would step in to impose some order in a time like this, and I'd be proud to be a part of it. To lower ourselves to the level of greedy political machination just soils us, though. And where is the Immaculate faith's voice in this? It is the one thing we are sure to share, and in this time of strife we could start from that common ground of faith and — I don't know — do the right thing.

MORTALS

The most famous parable of the Immaculate faith, the one that I think that everyone knows, is the story about the farmer, the fox and the chicken. It's one of the first ones any of us hears as children, and it explains the wisdom of the way of the world perfectly even to adult ears — there is an order to everything and a proper role for everyone. I hope you know the story I mean. It usually ends something like: *The fox has eaten well in the short term, but because of his greed and disobedience, all have suffered.* We should strive to be the perfect farmer — it is our proper place — and to keep the disobedient foxes from the chickens, the people and resources of the empire. But we're not the farmer, are we? Not anymore. We're the fox, and because of our greed, all will suffer.

ANATHEMA

I've seen the monsters and devils out there. I've seen armies of the dead lay waste to an entire region. They do not care about the Perfected Hierarchy. They do not care about being just or wise or right. The Anathema are the chaos that opposes the Immaculate Way, the horrors that will creep into the world unless there is a strong bulwark against them. I can see the Juggernaut of Thorns in my mind's eye, clawing it's way onto the Blessed Isle and toppling everything that stands against it. Can't anyone else see the same thing?

KASIF

THE REALM

In my training at the temple, I learned much of the Blessed Isle, but it was a distant thing to me, despite being housed in its very heart. Since then, I have been given the opportunity to explore its breadth in my time as an itinerant monk, and I am stricken dumb by its splendor. At the same time, the countryside holds examples of squalor and poverty far worse than any I witnessed in my youth. It is a curious dichotomy and one that should be corrected.

Wondrous cities are surrounded by squalid encampments of the destitute, which are, in turn, cast in shadow by the vaulted spires of their majestic neighbors. These people starve and die in their own fields, breaking their backs to feed the cities that would have nothing to do with them save trade. These days, rather than suffer this fate, many abandon their homes and travel the roads of the Realm in an effort to find work where they can. They are a desperate and surly lot, and I encountered their ilk all too frequently in my travels. At the same time, the Great Houses expend their wealth on armies and palaces, willfully exploiting the poverty that surrounds them. Is this the example of perfection that we hold up for all of Creation to emulate?



The state of the Realm saddens me, as once, it was more than just a place. It stood astride the world and cradled all of the Threshold in its gentle shadow — now, it can barely care for its own populace. Worse, the prefectures forget their bonds of fealty to the Imperial City and carry on as if they were nothing more than satrapies or possessions of the Great Houses, rather than the heart of civilization in Creation. This cannot continue, or the Realm will tear itself apart in the Empress' absence.

MORTALS

Mortal men are not to be pitied nor trod upon by Dragon-Blooded, but too often they do not realize this. Mortals are as integral in the Immaculate Order as even the Scarlet Empress herself, and they too easily allow themselves to be treated as objects — just as the Dragon-Blooded too easily allow themselves to treat mortal men as toys and property. We must be cautious to accord them what honor is theirs, lest we become unworthy of all that is ours. They are our responsibility, our sacred charge, and we must shepherd them as best we are able, in the hope that they may grow closer to the Elemental Dragons in another life.

Mortals have wisdom of their own, though they often do not realize they possess it. Many villagers who sought my counsel this past year asked for answers and advice, but they did not need it. I have found that mortals usually choose the correct course of action, though they frequently need encouragement to follow through. I think that, as much as anything else, is the proper role of the Immaculate Order: to foster confidence in mortals, so that, next time a difficult choice arises, they will have the heart to make the correct choice. Is it not our duty, after all, to aid all in becoming closer to the Elemental Dragons?

We should also take care to remember that all Dragon-Blooded were once mortal, even if only in childhood. Perhaps it is a mistake to train Dynastic children to believe they are better and nobler and more perfect than mortals until we are certain it is so, so they might remember what it was like to be human once they have become more.

ANATHEMA

These are the demons that lurk in the darkness at the edge of the world. They are not of the Wyld, but worse: Once mortal, they reached into the sky and stole the power of the gods for their own dark ends. It was only through the intervention of the Dragons that the first Dragon-Blooded cast them down from their places of power and made the Blessed Isle a haven of safety.

It is said that the Anathema cannot set foot on the Blessed Isle, but my own eyes have put doubt to this contention. Twice here on the Blessed Isle, I have seen the destruction left in the wake of the Solar Anathema. A single Solar can destroy a village in a heartbeat and leave countless dead, broken bodies that are testament the Anathema's destructive urges. I am ashamed to say that I *do* fear the Anathema, but if it is my destiny to someday encounter one, I can only pray that Mela grants me the courage to battle it as my ancestors battled those who ruled over Creation in ages past.

Do not let these foul tricksters deceive you. They are not chosen to be Anathema. They *choose* this path themselves. They are not innocent dupes or miscast heroes or victims of chance and circumstance, as they would often have you believe. They are branded by their villainy, and their animas betray them. Offer them no solace nor shelter, lest they seduce you to serve their dark ends.

THE IMPERIAL CITY

The Imperial City is like an old friend to me, though a friend with whom my last meeting ended in bitter words. I did not know how she would greet me when I returned. Sometimes, I feared to return at all. I spent my mortal life in her streets and alleys. I try not to miss those days, as my mortal life was only a shadow of what I would become. In fact, I tell myself that I shouldn't miss those days. They were hungry, exhausting and dangerous times, and it was a life undeserved even by those furthest removed from the Elemental Dragons' grace. And yet....

I had friends, then. The closest friendship I can claim now is Preda, and even he, I think, would not call me the same. Chura, Sayaka, bluff Turimo and beautiful Sasha. We survived with each other and starved with each other. There is no closer bond than that, I think. Now, all of them except Chura are dead.

I wonder, though, what sort of city allows children to grow up on the streets, eating what they can steal and spending cold nights under a harlot's roof. The city's spires and palaces are wondrous and rich, yet are they only a thin disguise that hides a rotten foundation? How long can they stand with such poverty and strife beneath, before they crumble? With the Empress gone, the problems only grow. The Great Houses struggle with one another for power and ignore the needs of the Realm.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Temple District is far removed from such stains on the Imperial City. I would like to believe that this is because the proximity of the Immaculate Order encourages prosperity and happiness. The unfortunate reality, however, is different:





The Great Houses strive to insulate the Order from their failure, so the Order cannot find fault with their actions. It is a fool's errand, as monks travel throughout the Imperial City, and nothing is hidden from us save why matters have been allowed to deteriorate to this degree. It is the best we can do to tend to these unfortunates, but it is only a matter of time until even the generosity of the Immaculate Order will not be enough.

I fear that, soon, the Order will be obliged to stage vigils within the Imperial City itself, and the Great Houses will react badly to this step. I can only pray that the path we tread will not be slicked with the blood of the faithful.

HERETICS

Unfortunately, not all who call the Realm home understand the proper order of life. I know this firsthand, as my youth was spent ignorant of the preeminence of the Five Elemental Dragons. These dissidents are to be treated with pity, not scorn. It is our responsibility — the Order's — to demonstrate the error of their ways by living as close to the example of the Dragons as possible and thereby exemplifying the righteousness of the Immaculate Philosophy.

Particularly troublesome is the Heresy of the Hundred Gods because the danger of treating with spirits is beyond the ken of mortals. They seek the favor of the little gods through prayer and sacrifice and attempt to forestall the inevitable destruction wrought by these beings. But it is not for a mortal to decide if a flash fire should strike his crops, nor to choose when an earthquake wracks his village. Too often, the little gods are influenced by these supplications, and too often, is the Immaculate Philosophy ignored. It is my solemn duty to preserve this Order and to punish those who breach this law.

While I am young, I am not naive. Not all heresies spring from ignorance. While I thankfully have yet to encounter it, the Heresy of the Antitheses flies in the face of all that the Order and the Realm hold sacred. Its teachings, that the Dragons shall be made manifest as their Antitheses and walk the earth once, eat at the very fabric of the Immaculate Philosophy. If the Dragons' ultimate destiny is to be vested with every quality abhorrent to them, what then of the Dragon-Blooded, those closest to the Elemental Dragons? To preach that the ultimate end of the Dragons is to fall so far from grace is an unforgivable sin, and I cannot accept it.

SPIRITS

What then of the little gods themselves? They lead mortals astray, to follow a path other than that of self-improvement through the Immaculate Philosophy. The fault lies solely at the spirits' feet, for mortals naturally kneel before that which is stronger. The powers of the little gods are great, but in encouraging mortals to commit the sin of worship, they overstep the bounds proscribed them by the Perfected Hierarchy. They are far from blameless in this, for do not many spirits hew to the Immaculate Philosophy and remain in temples with the blessings of the Immaculate Order?

More still, though, refuse to accept the correctness of our teachings. Though the Immaculate Order offers them proper respect for their place in Creation, many refuse to accept the wisdom and righteousness of our faith, even going so far as to vex — or even injure — any monk who attempts to spread word of the Immaculate Philosophy in the Threshold. In their pride, the little gods endanger the Celestial Order, and such obstinate spirits must be dealt with harshly whenever they are found. I grieve for those mortals who have been led too far astray by such small gods. I myself have traded blows with these upstart divinities and have seen the population of a village blinded by idolatry executed for their terrible misdeeds.

DYNASTS

It is peculiar that those in the cradle of Creation do not realize their good fortune. I have encountered many Dynasts in my travels, and they are almost uniformly proud, willful and shameless. On one occasion, a scion of House Cynis went so far as to proposition me. I am an Immaculate, and it is well known that such distractions are forbidden our order, but I could say nothing to dissuade her interest. At the last, we were forced to eject her from the temple. Dragon-Blooded or no, some behavior requires reproach. Fortunately, such extremity is rare, but I see lesser examples of such intemperance almost daily.

What is more troublesome is that each child of the Great Houses is taught that he is greater, nobler and wiser than all others. From birth, each child is taught that he, too, should be Exalted and that any lesser destiny casts shame upon his house. This is tantamount to heresy, but the practice is so widespread that even the Order is uncertain how to approach the problem. Such things occurred only rarely in the past, but now, they become more and more prevalent as the Great Houses struggle against each other and propriety is eclipsed by ambition.

Exaltation is the gift of the Elemental Dragons, a door that is opened that we might be closer to their grace. Dynastic youths are taught to expect this greatest of gifts, and so, they do not appreciate it when it is given. If not for their duty to the Realm, they would squander their powers in their petty power struggles and childish shows of strength. Often, even sacred responsibilities fall by the wayside. Now, the Anathema grow in number as the duties of the Wyld Hunt are forgotten in favor of games of politics and privilege, as each of the houses attempts to fill the void left by the absent Empress.

Who will protect Creation from these creatures if not the Scarlet Dynasty? The Immaculate Order is strong but not strong enough to carry the weight of the empire on our shoulders alone. Despite this, it grows increasingly clear to me that the time has come for the Immaculate Order to step forward and remind the Realm where our responsibilities lie. Perhaps it is time we stood before the Imperial Manse itself and demonstrated our displeasure.

LEDAAL KES

THE REALM

This empire is the greatest and strongest force for order in all the lands of the world, make no mistake. It has the noblest of aims and the most profound and vital role in the orderly hierarchy of Creation — and it is currently in the most destabilizing state of flux that I think it may have ever endured. And endure it must, despite the self-serving attempts by the “Great” Houses to slice it like a pie and bicker over who gets the largest portion. No matter who is or who is not sitting on the throne, the needs of our empire have not and will not change. Alas, only a very small number of us seem to remain aware of this fact. I have seen men and women who I thought to be of the truest and strongest character suborned by the selfish aims of their houses or disempowered and nearly exiled when they would not turn from the great work of order and service to the Realm.

Right now, one of the men I find noblest of all of us is a criminal and a cripple, unwilling and unable to publicly deploy his resources in support of his nation for fear that it would make him a target. Where is the right in that, that a man such as Nagezzer cannot be allowed to make such contributions as his condition allows without layering his deeds in veil after veil of subterfuge and operating through such dubious channels that he was under the scrutiny of the Treasury and the Eye alike? If I had been unable to protect him, he would have eventually been punished for his constructive and selfless actions. This, writ large, is

the state of the Realm as I see it, and trust me when I say that few see as much of it as I.

HOUSE

House Sidereal/Iselsi and House Bal may not be those that I have chosen to be a member of, but they have certainly chosen me, and so, it matters not a bit what I think. My birth house, Ledaal, is a fine and noble house. I say this after careful consideration of my biases. If anything, my bias would be against my Ledaal family due to what lingering traces of my youthful grudges against it remain. No, it and my “tutors” of the Five Maiden’s Chosen really do have the best interests of the entire empire at their hearts and are, by that, among the few currently whom I do not feel have faltered from the orderly vision of the Realm. I include with my blood relatives the stragglers of the Iselsi, who share the common link of working directly with the Sidereals and also of generally working with the needs of the many fore in their minds. It is perhaps only because I work directly with them all that they seem linked in my mind, but seem that way they do.

House Bal is an insider’s joke, another being House Treasury, and it is with this “house” that most of my efforts and affection have gone. Bal Keraz is many things, not all of them good, but one of the things that he truly is is a patriot. In the handful of years since Her Redness took her leave of us, Keraz and his inner circle (which includes me) have been the last bulwark of stability and reason against the raitons in the Deliberative and the Great Houses. Our full-time occupation for the last year or more has been attempting, at all costs, to minimize the damage that the bickering houses inflict on the economy and the very fabric of the Realm. My position as both a top Treasury official and an All-Seeing Eye operative make possible and attractive a number of options for supporting Bal Keraz and taking... steps... to weaken his opponents. I am loath to do so, as I think that those means may corrupt the ends, but soon, I may be left with little choice. He is a cornerstone of this government in my eyes, and his voice must be made as loud as we are able to make it if we are to benefit from it.

SIDEREAL EXALTED

House Ledaal has perhaps the most interaction with these astrological servants of the Realm, save perhaps the Iselsi and the other agents of the All-Seeing Eye (of which I am also a member, making me among the most Sidereal-exposed of us all, I’d guess). They tutored me as a child, and I work with them regularly still, and yet, I begin to wonder why they





insist on such a great degree of secrecy in regards to themselves. They are channelers of Essence, and by dint of that, they ought to be accorded the public respect of those who are high in the Perfected Hierarchy, should they not? They bear a great part of the burden of maintaining this empire and of thwarting its enemies, there is no doubt of that. The nagging feeling of disparity between ideology and action remains, however.

MORTALS

It is our duty to see to the welfare of the people to the best of our ability, an obligation that we cannot meet if we are too busy stealing the Empress' flatware while her back is turned. If the peasantry and patrician classes continue to be ignored and to be used as battlefields for the schemes of the houses, they will rise up. Make no mistake about it, there have been uprisings before, and there can be uprisings again. Such a thing would tip the scales toward chaos for the Realm, as production and agriculture grind to a halt. Look down on them as lesser beings if you like, but the fact of the matter is that they are the blood of the empire, the backs on which everything is built. Without them, there is no Realm.

ANATHEMA

This is seditious and heretical to say, so steel yourself to hear it. What is the point of hunting the rabid wolves in the fields when your brothers and sisters are rabid as well and already in your house? Members of my family are among the most outspoken advocates of Anathema-awareness, especially in regards to the new aristocracy of the Underworld and its keen interest in the real estate of the Thorns region and elsewhere, but what real steps can we take abroad when we cannot unify at home? As within, so without — the demons and the dead alike will need only wait for us to kill each other before landing on our shores and shambling unopposed into our cities.

TEPET ELANA

THE REALM

I can speak little ill of the Realm, for I have shed blood in its defense. Though the politics and power plays of the Great Houses do not sit well with me, I have, thus far, remained aloof of such matters. Perhaps this is due to my distance from my parents, perhaps because of my commission in the Vermilion Legion. Regardless, when the Empress returns, all will be set right again.

During the years I spent in the Vermilion Legion, the Realm was an ideal. It was a pleasant

dream that greeted me as the gentle touch of night drew me into sleep. The legions march through mud, bone and blood so that the Realm can prosper. Civilization is cradled there, and we stand watch over it and preserve the last remnants of the paradise that was the First Age. Nothing else — not life, not limb, not love — matters more than that.

Yet, despite our sacrifices and pains to preserve the Realm, it crumbles from within, torn apart by the struggles of the Great Houses. The Empress is long absent, and in her stead, an incompetent fool pleasures himself in a locked chamber, caring little for the fate of the Realm. The ideal is rapidly succumbing to the reality that few care for the Realm, instead, caring only for their prospective lordship over it. The legions' efforts are wasted. The Realm will not be destroyed from without. First, it will crumble from within.

Those in positions of power claim these are only growing pains. I can only hope we are nearing the end of them. The Scarlet Empress' disappearance has only magnified the immaturity of the empire. Perhaps, as when Dynasts first depart home, this is a time for the empire to learn to live without its mother. It is a vital step but painful — or so I am led to understand. I lived without my parents practically from birth and would not know.

HOUSE TEPET

House Tepet is fractured and crumbling under the weight of its elders. Six lineages struggle over our resources, along with innumerable pettier interests. Once, our strength supported this divisiveness, for we were mightiest among the Great Houses. Now, with our legions shattered and our tributes stalled, we are like an unkindness of ravens squabbling over a rotting field mouse. It is hardly enough to feed one, much less the lot of them.

Each of Tepet's lineages scrabbles to improve its position — and rarely to the benefit of the greater whole. Marek, Vergus and Tilis, it seems, have been forsaken for their failures, and the merchants of Nerigus and Berel grow in stature thanks to their seemingly unique stability. I fear the consequences of this trend, not only for House Tepet, but for the Realm as a whole. The legions stand before the darkness and allow none to threaten the safety of the Realm. If the forces of House Tepet are not rebuilt, who then will draw a line against rebellious satrapies, the Deathlords and — Elemental Dragons forbid — an attack by the forces of the Wyld?

There are only a few whom I would trust with the responsibility of leading our house, only a few who understand that we must unite against these threats,

even if that requires sacrifice. Lineages survive on pride, and we have little left. It is time, I think, to bond these lines together and to heal our splintered house. Those who feel as I do are growing in number, but they are young and not oft respected. In time, though, there will come a reckoning, and I will see this done.

REGENT FOKUF

Fokuf is an embarrassment to House Tepet. He could do so much for the Realm, yet he shies from power as if it were a creature that might bite with the slightest provocation. Perhaps we would all be better off if it did. The least that should be expected of him is to aid House Tepet in rebuilding its legions, for he is perhaps the only one in a position to do so. Imperial subsidies weigh as heavily in the pocket of a legionnaire as jade from our interests in Lord's Crossing.

Perhaps he is safer in his bed chamber, where the only dangers he must face are paper cuts in awkward places. That said, none of us — not one Dragon-Blooded — is expected to do take the safe or easy road. Our lives are dedicated to defending the Realm, and that means accepting the dangerous road not because it is our preference, but because it is necessary.

I should not be surprised by his utter lack of will. The man is a pasty-faced bureaucrat who hides from even the lightest responsibility. Further, those who claim that the pressures of rulership have unhinged him clearly never met the man before his appointment as Regent. Even then, he was weak willed and apathetic, caring for little beyond his own comfort and leisure. He now treats Senators as he once treated his daughter: he nods, smiles and hides. He is a poor substitute for the Empress, and if my authority as a magistrate extended to him, I would have him cast from the Realm and his name stricken from the Histories. Unfortunately, he is a convenient footpad for far too many Senators and house leaders, and I would never be allowed the pleasure.

MORTALS

I have known many mortals in my years that were the equal of an Exalt in spirit, if not in fact. My brothers died for the Realm, an honor that a Dragon-Blooded would have envied. In the Vermilion Legion, I watched soldiers in countless number march to certain death, mortals standing in defense of those who should need no such protection from their "lesser" kin.

They do not walk across Creation as giants, nor do mountains tremble for their passing. They walk in our shadow, and they bear us up when we are weak, and they tend our wounds when we are injured.

Though our spirits are closer to the Elemental Dragons than any mortal's could hope to be, humans show us that we can be better than we are and that we are nobler than we know. We would do well to remember their lessons.

In return, we offer them our protection and grace, and they should be grateful for it. Yet, in the Threshold, mortals turn their prayers to other protectors. They seek the favor of spirits and blaspheme against the Immaculate Order. I find that I am often an unwelcome presence in the satrapies, with some going so far as to make attempts on my life. They are ingrates and fools. They claim that the Realm has oppressed them for seven centuries and the time has come for freedom and a new order. What order can there be in chaos? Yet, mortal men are short-lived creatures, and their loyalties are as mercurial as the Wyld places in Creation — and just as dangerous. But for each one led so easily astray, another transcends his merely mortal place to achieve some higher existence. I believe these are the ones who will become Exalted in their next incarnations.

For example, Ragara Ajantus is certainly worthy of respect. He forged me into a warrior in my years at the Palace of the Tamed Storm, knowing all the while that, in the end, it would mean his death. A mortal laid down his life that I might move on and serve the Realm with valor and skill. There is no greater glory than that. Beren is also a fine example of this mortal valor. He has never shied from danger at my side, and we have faced horrors together that would route a flight of legionaries. His wit is always ready, and his sword is ever sharp. I find that he is a great comfort to me in my duties as magistrate, an unyielding rock upon which I can lean when I am weak. I find that I do not wish to consider my life when he is gone, and I am made uncomfortable. I have seen good soldiers die from grief and heartbreak. A distraction at the wrong time, a secret lust to join the fallen in the grave. What service will I be to the Realm if a mortal man carries me to my bier?

ANATHEMA

Though few in number, the Anathema are perhaps our most dangerous foes. They walk the Threshold unchecked, and rumor persists that some have even reached the shores of the Blessed Isle itself. They have no care for the world but seek only power and dominion over its people. The Dragon-Blooded's most sacred duty, to battle these creatures wherever they arise, is the very reason for our creation by the Elemental Dragons. Our necessity is driven by their existence.

I do not admit fear easily, but the Anathema are beyond anything else I have faced in all my years as





a soldier. Perhaps they are matched by the Deathlords, but I cannot say, for I have been fortunate enough to avoid confrontations with those infernal beings. Even with an army behind me and Immaculate hunting teams and First Age weaponry from the imperial arsenals, they were not easy prey. Now that I walk the Threshold as a magistrate, alone but for Beren, they are terrible foes. If I am to fall in these lands, it will be at the hands of the Anathema. If that is my fate, I would die smiling before I allowed the Anathema the freedom to roam unchecked.

What few words I have had with these creatures has taught me that their tongues are honeyed with venom. They claim that the Realm is crumbling and that the Imperial City should be thrown down and replaced. They are all too convincing and rally the people of the Threshold about their banners as soldiers flocking to a valorous standard. Would that I had an army at my back at such times as these. It is a foolish dream, though, as many are the Anathema who have escaped the field of battle only to raise a new army, their revolutionary zeal fueled by the memory of the fallen. My duty now is to track them throughout the Threshold and strike them down before they can gather such a storm about them.

And of their claims that the Realm is propped up on a buckling crutch? They are, I must admit, accurate. But better the Realm is ruled by a fading empire — an Empire that can still be saved — than by men with the hearts and powers of Demon Princes.

THE SCARLET EMPRESS

For over a century, I viewed the Empress with nothing short of awe. Though it is heresy to speak so, to my mind, she was the equal of the Elemental Dragons themselves. She wielded magic powerful enough to drive the Wyld creatures back to the madlands and to repel the pirates and barbarians who attempted to launch assaults on the Blessed Isle itself. All of this, she accomplished over half a millennium past. I could only imagine, then, how much more powerful she had grown — and how much closer to the Elemental Dragons — since.

I must admit a degree of apprehension at my summons to the Imperial Palace. I could not imagine why the Empress had even noticed my small heroics at the Battle of Five Fangs, much less that they would fascinate her to any degree. I did not realize how like us she truly was.

In the month I spent at the Imperial Palace, I came to know the Empress intimately, and I came to know her burdens. She had carried the weight of all of Creation on her shoulders for almost 800 years, yet she

remained unbeaten and unbowed. She cried only in her sleep — and that only rarely.

She did not fall to age or to Anathema assassins, as there is no corpse. She does not walk among the people to know their burden, as she herself carries a heavier burden than any in the Realm. She does not lurk in the shadows in an attempt to draw out the disloyal, for she is all too aware that the benefit of any such subterfuge has long since been outweighed by the damage done to the Realm. After nearly a millennium of rule, perhaps she was simply *tired*, impossibly burdened by the responsibilities of ruling a fractious empire of politicians and pampered nobles. She will return, I think, though I will not blame her at all if she does not.

THE MAGISTRACY OF HARES

I am ashamed that it has come to this. The servants of the Empress, chosen by her hand, flee before her enemies like rabbits before a fox. The Realm is better and stronger than this, yet her servants fear the soldiers of even the smallest satrapy. Though they are warriors, they are not soldiers; while they are brave, they are not courageous. At times, I am ashamed to be counted among them.

It is worse still to allow the common folk to show such contempt for the magistrates of the Realm. We are the right hand of the Empress, and to denigrate us is to disrespect her. This, I will not allow, nor will I stand idly by while my compatriots shame her name. Those who abandon their duties in favor of safety and security are no better than the rebels, beasts and bandits we hunt.

Our safe houses — once found in every city both in the Threshold and on the Blessed Isle itself— fall into neglect and disrepair, and only a few remain secret. It is a losing battle to conceal such dens in the hostile environs of the Threshold, and even upon the Blessed Isle itself, the Great Houses are withdrawing their support. For now, this is for the best. While we lack the support of the Realm, we still bear the commission of the Empress, and if we must operate in anonymity and secrecy, we will do so.

I myself travel under an assumed name and take care not to advertise my position unless necessary. Better to strike down traitors and their ilk from the shadows, than to be struck down in turn. Over the last five years, I have contacted many of my colleagues and arranged for revolving duty among those of us who remain active, so that we will not be recognized if forced to reveal ourselves.

Of primary concern, however, is coin. The purse — both political and monetary — of the Magistracy is rapidly shrinking, and with it, our ability to fulfill our

duties. Some former magistrates have returned to the Blessed Isle, ostensibly in order to assume other duties. However, in truth, they remain magistrates and support our efforts in different ways. Some have used our not-inconsiderable influence to secure themselves lucrative businesses, while others have sold themselves to Bal Keraz and his bureaucrats and protect the Thousand Scales from the depredations of the houses.

We weave a tangled web, and it endures by only the thinnest of strands. Our primary duty for the moment is to buttress these measures, that the Empress' hand endures even in her absence.

THE LEGIONS

I am fortunate to have served in the Vermilion Legion. Though to claim such is considered embarrassing by polite society, I would rather associate myself with the best of the scum than the worst of the Dynasts. The Tepet legions fell not because they faced a foe too great to defeat, but because their commanders rose through the ranks by privilege of birth rather than prowess in battle. Political appointees and spoiled Dynasts chose to ignore the collected wisdom of the Thousand Correct Actions, and their soldiers paid the price.

Yes, I did the same, and I am comfortable in my hypocrisy. I elected to ignore those teachings as well, but there is a vital difference. I studied the Thousand Correct Actions rigorously upon my promotion to lieutenant and continued to do so as I rose in the ranks of the Vermilion Legion. I not only knew the rules, but I knew why they worked. Where many legion commanders can recite them by heart, I integrated them into myself. Once I had made the Thousand Correct Actions my own, I knew when and how to break them to the best advantage of my legion.

This understanding comes only through years of experience, and that experience was embodied in the professional officer corps. Perhaps they were second sisters and outcastes with no primary schooling, but they were also masters of their craft. Now, they are impoverished or serving as mercenaries in the Threshold. Only the worst remain in the legions, as lickspittles to the commanding officers the Great Houses appoint with more concern for political loyalty than talent. Posies from a life of privilege do not and cannot understand the realities of the battlefield, not even those trained by the House of Bells. They believe in their own judgment and ignore the collected wisdom of battles past. It slew them at Mishaka, and it slew the Tepet legions when they fought the Bull of the North.



Now, I fear for the armies of the Realm, for these proud but inexperienced soldiers will lead the forces of the Great Houses to naught but doom, slaughtered by the tens of thousands.

MARRIAGE

This, as much as anything else, is why I am grateful to the Empress for granting me a position among the magistrates. Whether knowingly or otherwise, she spared me from the burden of marriage for a time. Otherwise, I expect that my parents' constant attempts to marry me off to would continue to this day — and would likely have been successful. One can only resist such efforts for so long before accusations of ignoring one's duty to the house begin to fly. Fortunately, my position spares me from such entanglements. Even if I was not required to maintain a low profile in my duties, House Tepet would have difficulty convincing another house that a match to a magistrate is politically beneficial, particularly in these times.

And, of course, marriage carries with it the obligation of bearing children, something I look forward to even less. I suppose it is an inevitability, however. Though it is expected that I carry on the blood of House Tepet by bearing children, I have more important matters to attend to at the moment. The security of the Realm is of paramount importance, and even the temporary distraction of childbirth is too much to consider.

GATEWAY

I fondly remember my many hours at the Gateway board with my brother Sakada, and I was pleased to discover that Beren is familiar with Hunting Cat. Though, admittedly, it is one of my least favorite variants, I was still pleased at the opportunity to play the game again. Though it is difficult to find a board for sale outside of the Blessed Isle, Beren took the time to manufacture one by hand. Though most of the tiers are slightly crooked and the pieces are simple shapes carved of wood, it was a wonderful gesture and I... am grateful for the consideration that he showed me and my desires.

TEPET ARADA

THE REALM

What is the Realm now but a pack of squabbling children? I don't know if it was ever anything more than that, to be honest. We were certainly taught that it was something more, but the same Dynasts who are now sending their own people off to die for political gain — they were taught the same thing, too. It doesn't seem to have meant much to them, and so,

I don't know that it's any good for me to think otherwise. Of course, it looks good on paper, as an idea. Plenty of things look good on paper. Yes, a strong society could stabilize the world. Yes, civilization and reason can elevate the world from being a place of beasts to a place of enlightenment. All that and more, yes, yes.

Did we ever have a Realm to lose, or were we just told that we did? I don't know anymore. I'm not sure of much at all. I know that the things that I'm surest of are things in my heart and soul: I know right from wrong. I know to help people who need help and to punish the wicked when I encounter them. How do you build a nation on those ideas, when I can only be sure of them inside myself? I never much thought about it until recently, when the surety that the Realm was right had disappeared. I guess I took for granted that we were right and just went on doing what I thought was my part, always assuming that everyone else everywhere was doing theirs.

She was powerful, and she excelled in a great many things, but the Scarlet Empress was still just one woman. How can one woman have changed things so much in such a short time, just by her absence? The only logical conclusion is that none of us were doing a damn thing the whole time and that she was carrying the whole weight of the Realm on her shoulders. I can't believe that, though. The best thing I can say to anyone right now is to look inside themselves for those things we were taught the Realm stood for — inside, where you can be sure of the right and wrong of things. That's the real Realm, those feelings and ideas in your guts, and they're all any of us has to go on anymore. No cultural foundation of righteousness, no society of Princes of the Earth, just you and what you know is right.

HOUSE

Seen a certain way, I guess it's the ultimate back-handed compliment to House Tepet that the other houses saw fit to crush it as the opening move in the bid for succession. It's a small comfort, though. All our kids and grandkids that were in the legions are still dead. If we hadn't been engaged with the Bull of the North and had been closer to home when the damn regency council met... I really don't know what would have happened, or what my house would have done. I'd like to think that House Tepet would have done the right thing, the strong thing, and that we could have made everyone else understand that there was more than personal gain motivating us.

I can say that I wouldn't have stood by and let people emasculate the legions or any of the rest of the shit that they've been doing. If it came down to it, I

think I would have been forced to declare martial... wait a damn second. They left us out there in the North to die to... keep me from occupying the Blessed Isle. Son of a bitch. They thought I was the likeliest one to try and step in and take charge, didn't they? Me. Seems plausible, at any rate, though I don't know that I'd bank on it.

Would the house have supported that, I wonder? Yes, I guess it probably would have if I'd seemed serious about it, and I would have. I think that maybe that could have worked out pretty well for us all. House Tepet wasn't perfect by a long shot, but it was pretty pragmatic as a whole. I guess it doesn't do anyone any good to think about what might have been, though. I think that the future of the Tepet family lies in the commercial families, Nerigus and his brother's lines, and with my granddaughter Ejava — if she can keep her head attached for a while. It's out of my hands now.

MORTALS

Of all the places a Dragon-Blood can end up, career-wise, the legions is the one where you end up with the most real contact with the unExalted. I mean as friends and such, not as someone you just have sex with or collect taxes from or whatever it is the patrician civilians have done to them. Soldiers, even when one of them is a general and one isn't, develop a unique kind of bond from serving together, especially if you see a lot of fighting with someone. I think because of that I have a broader appreciation for the sorts of relationships that an Exalt can have with regular folks.

Too many of my peers are funny about that sort of thing. They don't want to be looked in the eye or spoken to in any kind of familiar way by a mortal. I think that shows a very shallow understanding of what respect is. Mortals are supposed to respect us, and that doesn't mean only talking to you on certain days while wearing a yellow scarf and crawling on their hands and knees.

Further, respect can't just be given out, not truly. It doesn't matter if they think you're a Prince of the Earth or what. In their heart, they won't have

respect for you if you don't earn it. They can't choose that. That's just how it works. And it's a two way street. Never forget that. A higher being has to respect the ones who are under him and treat them like their place in the order demands. Being higher in the Perfected Hierarchy doesn't mean you get more power or respect, though it can mean that. It means you get more responsibility to the people under you. Remember that.

ANATHEMA

I fought Anathema. I've killed Anathema. Hell, I've had words with a few — I speak a lot of languages. Even the Bull of the North blinked when I addressed him in his own language. (It's one of my rules for war. I wrote it into every officer's copy of *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier*: Never plan strategy against an opponent if you don't speak his language.)

I can tell you that some of them are just as scared of themselves as we are of them. I've seen it in their eyes. I don't think that anyone asks to be an Anathema, and I don't think some of them like it — some, not all. Monsters such as Jochim and the Bull don't mind a bit, and those are the ones that are the real threat to the Realm way of life. They have agendas, and they have the power to pursue those agendas. Worse, they have a fire in their belly that pushes them and pushes them and makes them crazy with zeal. Stopping something like that is no easy task, I can tell you. If there are more than a few Bulls of the North around, the world as we know it is over for sure.

And the Lunar Anathema haven't gone away either. Even with the Bull of the North on the march, the pagan icewalkers still tell of shapeshifting men, allies of their Animal Master totem spirits, who would teach their boldest young the ways of the hunt and of their pagan shamanism. How long until they make common cause with these new Solar Anathema? Not too long, I'd wager. There aren't any three-sided wars, and I don't see us joining forces with the monster-men, so where does that leave them?





CHAPTER FOUR VOICES NOT OUR OWN



To those whom the Dragon-Blooded are a daily fact of life, the Air Aspects are many things: spies, savants and sorcerers of the highest order. The people of the Realm and its tributaries see them as the educated elite of the ruling class, and when called for, it's subtle blades. They are masters of knowledge and thought and the Children of Mela, Dragon of Strife, whose path teaches of striving for excellence and perfection in all things. Cold, arrogant, brilliant, flighty — these are the stereotypes of an element, but what do those who cross paths with the Aspects of Air find when confronted with the beings behind the stereotypes ?

MORTALS

Dragon-Blooded have frequent contact with mortals. In many cases, their interactions are highly formalized. The vast majority of the mortals a Dynastic Dragon-Blooded will meet in her lifetime are adherents of the Immaculate Philosophy, and their reaction to the Terrestrial Exalted is dictated by the tenets of their faith. Even when a mortal feels the Immaculate Philosophy might somehow be questionable or in error, it's unlikely he'll air his grievances with a potentially angry demigod. However, the formal and servile demeanor a mortal displays does not mean he truly feels that way. It is simply the mask he must wear to survive his interactions with the Princes of the Earth.

At the same time, Storytellers and players shouldn't convince themselves that the Immaculate Philosophy is somehow regarded as "fake," either by the Dragon-Blooded or by their mortal inferiors. In both cases, the Immaculate Philosophy is rooted in the very foundations of the Realm's culture. Individuals may reject it or accept it to whatever degree their experiences lead them to, but the fact remains that Dragon-Blooded and mortals alike grow up surrounded by the catechisms and trappings of the Immaculates. To them, the Immaculate Philosophy is quite real.

OPAL MOUNTAIN

I am grown old, in the time that it took my son to finish his schooling and become a man. My son, yes, though I am forbidden to speak of it by his mother and her household. It was a long time ago, and perhaps foolish, but it is over and done now. Our union produced a Prince of the Earth, one who saw fit to take up my craft, and so, I am proud no matter the circumstances of his conception. I was lucky to have had any contact with him at all. I can recall his awe with my work, when he was still very small, and his insistence that he would do the same work once day. His mother was dismissive of the idea, I think because working with one's hands could be seen as low work for an Exalt, but I could tell from his words even then that he would find his own way if he had to. I cannot say that I am at ease with his study at the Heptagram, the



school for the unnatural and the dangerous, but if that was where his road took him, far be it for me to judge. With his family's help, I was able to bring together various serviceable parts for a suit of dragon armor that I had been tracking for years as a curiosity of my trade as an armorer. I lack the enlightenment to actually work with such a wonder, but it amused me to think I might dabble in the commerce of components or pieces of historical interest. Instead, I was able to give to my... to Meladus a nearly complete, if rough, set of components for this type of very old, very powerful armor. It makes my heart light to see him wearing it, made fully functional by his own skill, and serving in it in the field as part of his legion.

PUG, DISENFRANCHISED (FORMERLY KEEPER OF THE SKEWERED BOAR)

Yes, I remember who did this. It would be impossible to forget. It was the wretched Immaculate monk who visited a month ago that destroyed my establishment, and he offered not a single warning before he did. He claimed I was committing heresy by hanging this sign in front of my own tavern. Not many in the village read, so a picture on the sign can't but help spread the word about the Skewered Boar. Not that this made any difference to him. It's not like I'm the only one in this backwater town that puts up a sign, but he just chose me to be an example. I don't know why I bothered with the bribes.

Then, along he comes with his walking stick and his sandaled feet and orders my patrons out into the street in the middle of the night. Most of them didn't even pay their tabs, and they didn't lift a finger to stop him. He's a self-righteous son of a bitch, just like the rest of the damn Order. You want my opinion, they wouldn't be so rough with us if they didn't have the Dragon-Blooded in their pockets. All the regular monks do is hold a vigil — if he weren't a Dragon-Blooded, he'd probably still be sitting in front of the Boar, and the Boar would still be standing. You'd think my opinion would be worth a bit more than a hand wave, considering the amount of money I paid you — you took care of the last monk. He made me fucking beg for mercy, made me recant a heresy. Thank the Dragons I'd never even been to the damn shrine. The next day, he brought back more Dragon-Blooded also, and they knew, somehow, who'd gone and who hadn't. The ones who'd gone, they executed, and he just watched it all. Are all of you like that? I mean, does the favor of the Dragons leave you all that hard-hearted?

I see it does.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF JOCHO, VILLAGE ELDER OF CROSSROADS

An Immaculate honored us with his presence this week, and we are grateful the Imperial City has not forgotten us. Though Crossroads is far from the Imperial

Manse and the Palace Sublime, we are faithful to the Empress, and we honor the Immaculate Philosophy. It has been too long since the last ceremonies, and I fear our requests may have overwhelmed our honored guest. If so, he embraced his duties with aplomb.

Perhaps most important was the naming of names. It had been half a decade since the last monk's visit, and children of five years had never heard their own names spoken aloud. It was a joy to see the smiles come upon their faces as honorable Kasif mouthed those names for the first time. The prayer service the day after his arrival drew everyone in the area, even farmers an hour's journey from the village.

I cannot swear to it, but this monk seemed fresh of face. Perhaps he is new to the Order. His enthusiasm for his holy chores is heartening, and I hope that he is able to maintain such joy in his duties for many years to come. Too often, Immaculate monks are somber, reticent figures, but not Kasif. He was particularly pleasant with the children. After each day's prayer, he seemed pleased to spend several hours with them, answering questions and teaching them simple rhymes and riddles. Though I do not doubt the Blessed Isle is a great wonder, I am amazed that he did not grow tired of repeating its virtues to the curious children, for they never tired of asking about it.

I admit, I was a touch surprised by his ready smile and wit, for Immaculate monks are rarely so open and approachable. I always assumed that such enlightenment was accompanied by a certain gravity, but apparently, this is not necessarily so.

It was an honor and a pleasure to host such a man in my home, and I hope another five years does not pass before he graces us with his presence once more.

"LUCKY" BLUESKY, THUG, ON KES

I used to work for this fella in Arjuf, years back, as the boss of the nighttime security detail in his warehouse. Didn't want anyone coming and going to see what wasn't being taxed and what weren't, if you see my meaning. I was with this fella for a good while, got to be one of the inside guys, in the know. Sort of got to be one of this fella's men, and being the guy for one of the Dragon-Bloods is a good spot, let me tell you. Anyhow, I had these dreams maybe a couple times a month that someone was in the warehouse. I'd be walking around and around tryin' to see who it was, but it was always just one of the boys or something moving some crates around or one of the bean counters up late in the office. Never did actually wake up from the dream, I just sorta started remembering having them.

Happened for years. Never thought much of it until, one time, the bean counter in my dream started asking questions. Where's this, who's that, have you seen so and so, how often is so and so here? Sorta put me on edge, and I could never quite figure out what the guy looked like or anything. Still, I ain't told the guy nothing. Even in a



dream, that kinda shit just ain't how you keep your hands in this sorta business.

Last year, though, I'm playing cards with myself at work one night and realize that I been talking. I look up, and there's this little guy all done up in black with his face covered, just sitting there across from me like it was perfectly natural, and I been flapping my gums at him for who knows how long or about what. "Lucky", he says to me, "It's no dream." And then, he starts telling me what's going to happen to me if I don't do all this stuff he wants, big stuff, all real calm and smart sounding and saying it's all just a game and now I'm a bigger piece. I'm practically as big as a normal fella can get in this line of work, now, not even a year later. I got women and money and power and all that because of doing what the little guy says, and all I gotta do is sell people out once in a while. It's shitty, yeah, but what the hell am I gonna go, tell him no?

ALABASTER, MALE PROSTITUTE, ON KES

My strangest customer? I shouldn't say, really, but... just keep it to yourself, all right? I don't know his name. He never says his name or really anything at all other than to tell me what to do. He pays me a lot of money to make sure that I'm home and alone on certain days every month. Sometimes, a day goes by and I don't see him, and some days, I look up and he's just sitting there in his veil and mask like he's been there for hours waiting for me to notice. He scares the shit out of me. He's definitely one of them, if you know what I mean, the Dragon-Blooded.

Sometimes, he brings a lady with him. She's one, too. They're really... I don't know, tight. They always know what they want to do, and they want to just tell me in as few words as possible and get right to it. They never touch each other, either. Maybe they're brother and sister or something, and they want to get their kicks without crossing the line. They never hurt me, and they always pay me, so I don't ask.

BEREN, ASSISTANT AND VALUED COMPANION TO MAGISTRATE TEPET ELANA

It's been too long, Erol. You have my thanks for your hospitality and discretion. Yes, she'll survive. She's had a lot worse than that, believe me. I'm actually fairly surprised that she agreed to hole up so easily. She doesn't take well to anything slowing her down, even injury.

You know if I could tell you more, I would. I can't. It's not up to me.

I'll take a beer if you have some in the cellar. Water otherwise. No, I never did say goodbye, and I'm sorry for that. You're not the only one I have to make that apology to. Elana dragged me off right quick after that business with the river dragon. She said I could be useful and didn't leave much room for argument. What am I going to do, say no to an Aspect of the Dragons?

Yeah, she's something. Spirit, you know? I don't know many Dynasts, so I don't know if they're all like her, but I doubt it. She's unpredictable as hell sometimes, but...

What's with the face, Erol?

I do not have a stupid grin. Why should I?

Is sex *still* all you think about, you dirty son of a bitch? No, I'm not sleeping with her. No, I'm not in love with her. I work for her. She's a *Dynast*. That means we have to travel together. I'll admit, though

Alright, here's the deal: You repeat any of this — to *anyone* — I will have your balls on a platter five seconds before she has mine. Yeah, she's pretty damn incredible. Like I said, she's got spirit. It's contagious, too. Yeah, kinda like a disease. In fact, it's probably going to get me killed. She pushes me. Something in her eyes, something in the way she flashes that tight smile when we're in trouble, makes me not mind quite so much when I'm in imminent danger of death, dismemberment or some similarly gruesome disaster.

One of these days, I'm going to be wrong, but I know she'll pull us out — or if she can't, I will. Don't laugh. She taught me how to handle myself better than I ever could here in the village. Hell, I can't hold a candle to her — in fact, I know damn well I better duck when she gets her mad on, at me or anyone else — but she's one hell of a teacher, just the same.

So, yeah. I guess I'm in love with her. If you repeat that, you and I are going to have trouble.

AUTUMN BLOOM ON ARADA

There is a difference between speaking ill of the Princes of the Earth and attempting to respectfully point out a perceived failing to one of them directly. I will do both, make no mistake, but I do try to avoid the former as much as I can. Having said that, hopefully making my intent and humble stance plain, I say that Arada is flawed in much more respectable ways than others of the Dragon-Blooded that I have been bold enough to speak negatively of. His flaws have a very different scale, a more personal one. His pride doesn't drive him to blind acts that endanger many, his arrogance does not result in his casually hurting his inferiors, and his selfishness hasn't driven him to rob his peers and bleed his country. He's still proud and selfish, and he does blind things, but mostly only to himself. His biggest flaw is that has let life make him feel small, though I guess that might sound like a funny thing to say about one of the most famous generals of all history. He's still like a child in a lot of ways, if you know how to look for that sort of thing in people. I guess he probably missed something when was young, some important lesson or something like that, but it's not as if that would be an excuse for him to not go and play his part in the Perfected Hierarchy. I wonder if it's easier to know your role when you know the lesser parts that support it and led up to it? If that's true, then it must have been hard for him to be so great for so long and not know how he'd gotten so high. I mean, what would happen if a bird couldn't land? I guess it would just crash eventually.

OTHER DRAGON-BLOODED

Like all Exalts, Aspects of Air are a mixed bag. Their elemental personalities make them precise, brilliant and clever at the same time they also make them scheming perfectionists. Other Terrestrials expect both sorts of behavior from Aspects of Air, while at the same time understanding as only another elemental being can that the urges of their Essences are merely another component of the Terrestrial personality. They can find expression in countless ways, and other Terrestrials generally do not stereotype any given element unduly, though, of course, there are always bigots.

CATHAK KREYS, SISTER OF MELADUS, RY 763

Even when he was very young, Meladus had a very special sort of confidence that could be mistaken for naivete, or maybe it's the other way around. It's easy to envy someone with an outlook like that, especially when he seems to have the ability to enjoy success in life. That attitude in a failure would be just another flaw, I think. In him, it's endearing and sort of frightening at the same time. I mean, how can someone be so positive all of the time, even in the face of incontrovertibly annoying or dreadful circumstances. I think that the Cloister of Wisdom really missed out when he decided he had to go to the Heptagram. He'd have been a disturbingly quick study at all that meditation and fervor and dogma, and he really gets into his Melaism. I guess that's part of his optimism and enthusiasm, now that I think about it: Mela says to be the best, and no one likes a grump.

On the other hand, I think he lacks a healthy level of pragmatism because of his outlook, and his good luck in life thus far has just reinforced that. He sort of glides blindly through life sometimes without seeming to understand the risks involved. Like this trip here to Thorns that he wants to make. He seems so cool and calm about it in his letters, like he doesn't realize or care that this whole region is a giant monument to failure on the part of our nation. I've been here almost the entire time, since before Mishaka, and while I'm a confident person, I find it hard to be as blase about this screwup as he is. I hope that his tendency to think everything will work our for the best doesn't turn around on him once he gets out into the world and gets a dose of reality. People like him, idealists with lofty views, can only be bent so far by the truth before they break. Broken former idealists are not pleasant people. Me, I just want to get the hell out of Thorns and into a private outfit that won't waste my training. If I can manage that, I can get my brother a job with me and make sure his idealism gets turned to some positive use. With my luck, though, I'll end up stationed here in Thorns for the rest of my life.

LEDAAL MONTEGNIN

If Cathak Meladus had been even a tiny bit less willing to apply himself fully to his studies, he would have been intolerable as a student. I have, in many years of instruction, seen no pupil more disdainful of his own school than he was. He looked at the Heptagram as a vehicle for his own ambition, and while I have no issue with that attitude, I do take umbrage to the nakedness with which he expressed it. I have nothing but respect and gratitude for those who serve as warriors and officers in the defense of this Realm and its interests, but sometimes, I have to wonder about the degree to which the military culture damages the development of our youth.

Meladus was so steeped in the stuff that he practically marched everywhere for all the years of his study here and did everything he could to turn his nose up at whatever aspects of this institution didn't meet his criteria for polishing his martial aspirations. It is no wonder that the scholars and savants of this place are often laboring in such relative thankless circumstances, given the eclipsing effect of such attitudes. We did what we could to instill in him some sense of respect for the discipline and brilliance of his peers in the sorcerous arts — and to foster a sense of the same in himself. He persisted in demonstrating that his view of his skills was akin to that of a common engineer or tradesman, however.

Such pragmatism in the use of magic is, to a degree, both appropriate and prudent. The degree to which he displayed it, however, is the mark of a simple mind. I have recommended that applications such as his are, in the future, rejected and recommended to the basic courses of the House of Bells, where such students will be lauded as the cogs that they are.

GENAJA, MOST HONORED SHEPHERD OF
OUTCASTES, IN A LETTER TO THE PARAGON OF
SEXTES JYLIS.

Most Enlightened Paragon of Sextes Jylis,

I find that the time has come for me to report once more upon the progress of the outcaste I am shepherding into the Immaculate Order. His is a difficult road, I think. While he absorbs his lessons like a sponge, he is difficult to keep focused on the present. I fear that his return to the Imperial City will be his downfall. I plan to keep him within the temple much of the time and make certain he stays far away from any old haunts he knew as a child. I have no wish to bloody my hands with another failure.

I know, however, that you will tell me to allow him his own course — that I am to give him no more consideration than I would any Second Coil. I feel I must protest this approach. He acclimates himself into the Immaculate Philosophy with remarkable speed, but we must remember that he was, as far as his schooling goes,

“born” at his Exaltation. He has an incredible amount of ground to make up and, considering this, performs admirably. You may consider this another informal protest at the manner in which we induct outcaste Dragon-Blooded and the overzealous penalty should they prove ill-prepared for the Immaculate Order. Remember, I myself was once perilously close to this fate. Yet, in my time in the Order, I have successfully indoctrinated outcastes beyond number. Nonetheless, I have also lost many, thanks largely to the slim allowance of time allowed me to complete this task with each postulant. Once again, I request that the period of postulancy for outcastes be increased by a measure of three months.

Finally, I fear that I may be the cause of his fall. When he was captured, he stood guard over a girl of about his own age. Later, I learned her name was Sasha. It became clear to me that he held strong feelings for this girl, and I felt it best if his connections to his old life were severed (as is prescribed for outcaste postulants). I told him the girl was dead, when, in reality, she was turned over to some of the local merchants in an effort to assuage hard feelings over the damage the young outcaste had caused to the market. She was pleasing to the eye, and I think it likely she was put to work as a courtesan at one of the local brothels.

If Kasif should come across her during his time here in the Imperial City, I fear for his faith in the Order, and in me. Despite his apparent devotion to the Immaculate Order, I think he still harbors love for this girl. Oh, he would deny it if confronted, and he would be ashamed of his secret, but he loves her all the same. I will, of course, carry out my duty and slay the both of them should the need arise, but I do not think that to be a wise course of action.

RAGARA SZAYA

Oh, my little-boy savant, I do love him dearly, despite his doom and gloom. It has riled my family endlessly for almost a century that I wed one of the unfathomable Ledaals, but I long ago stopped caring what they had to say about my private affairs. Kes and I have done nothing but make them richer and, lately, to try and save them and the other big babies of the Great Houses from themselves. To hell with them, I say. They may say that Kes and I do only the bare minimum to stay in their good graces, but I wonder what they would say if we stopped doing all the things that they don't know about. Kes has driven himself into the ground for years. Between his crazy wife and his double handful of careers, he barely sleeps, and when he does, he dreams about work. I have the best of intentions when I try to get him involved in something I'm doing. I admit that the things I find amusing or interesting are often a carnival of danger and coarse jokes mixed with immense magical power, but I think that the time for me to have the luxury of those



methods of distraction are now past. Someday, before we die, I'll get my husband and my laughter back.

BAL KERAZ

I do not know if I trust him, despite the fact that he is my right hand. I think he may also be my left hand, if you follow my meaning, but I try not to think too much about the things that I know Kes is involved with or how he has put those other interests to work for our ministry. He has not betrayed me overmuch, to my knowledge, and he has had ample opportunity to do so. If he or his secret masters were going to do something, they would have done it already. Even if I knew for a fact that his interests and my own were unaligned, I would be hard pressed to do anything about it. He is simply too useful to the Treasury to do without — as well he should be with the years of effort my father and I put into grooming him.

SEBUS NAGEZZER, THE SLUG

Ledaal Kes is not the first government official to feel he has somehow found me out, and he is not the first not to have taken steps to prosecute or discredit me. He is, however, the first to look past my condition and lifestyle and, without judgment, see that I am a patriot and a servant of my nation. The quality of his friendship is eclipsed only by his usefulness as an ally, and were this a slightly different world, I would consider seriously his aptitude for the Scarlet Throne itself. But while I may understand the nobility of one who is a warrior in thought, I do not feel that it is an opinion that could be made widespread without considerable cultivation.

LEDAAL CAROS

Astrology and obligation shaped my schooling and life more than any feelings of mine on the subject, and I feel that I have done the proper thing by doing what was asked of me to the best of my ability. My desires, I have thought it best to feel, are secondary to the needs of the empire. My son Kes, however, has far more skillfully balanced the demands of duty with his desire to make his own way. I did what I could for him, to give him the room to move that I was never given, because I trusted him to not abuse it. I may not agree with his lifestyle choices all of the time, but there is no denying that Mela smiles on him. There may have been a time and place where the needs of the many were all that mattered indecision making and in regards to education and upbringing, but with this son, I have shown the proponents of that way of thinking that other avenues are yet open to us. He is a diligent and enlightened member of his house, ministry and society and is proof that the synergy of predestination and personal determinism is as robust, if not more so, as straightforward, pragmatic cultivation of excellence.

GENERAL RAGARA JALIN, STEADFAST GENERAL OF THE NORTHERN JUCHE MILITIA

I don't know how you managed to arrange this audience, Tepet, but I suggest you keep a civil tongue in your head. A former soldier of the Vermilion Legion is capable of anything, after all, no matter how base. That's better. I can only assume — since you've traveled so far to ask your questions — that this is important.

Tepet... Elana.

Yes, I know the name. Who is she to you? Ah, your daughter.

You are displeased with the circumstances of her discharge. Why? She arrived home whole and well, which is more than many can say after a century in the Vermilion Legion.

Rumors. I traveled back to the Imperial City to deal with rumor and supposition? This audience is over. Your daughter received an honorable discharge. As far as she and I are concerned, that settles the matter. Do not pick at—

Very well. I will tell you precisely what I think of your daughter, and you may use this information as you please. Her destiny matters little to me. She is an incredibly gifted tactician. She learns quickly from example and does not hesitate to revise tried and true strategies to suit the occasion—or even the situation. She is perhaps more capable in that than I.

She is also unpredictable. This is a blessing when it handicaps her enemies, a curse when it handicapped me. I cannot maintain an officer corps of mavericks and malcontents. I was sorry to lose her, for she is a gifted soldier, but she is dangerous. While her ideals are noble, her interpretation of any given direct order always seems to leave her enough maneuvering room to do as she pleases. So far, she's been lucky. Every man she has ever lost has spent his life for victory. This is what military historians call “audacity.”

I'm somehow less than surprised at that news. Her temperament is well suited to the Magistracy. It is in dire need of operatives with her initiative and conviction.

Bitter? Perhaps, for a time. I no longer command a legion, but a militia, and I am far from home. I suppose I could blame her, but what would it truly achieve? The fact of the matter is that she rose to a challenge that I failed to meet, and she was honored for it. Just as she deserves her position, so do I.

V'NEEF PORPHORIS, MOST HONORED DISCIPLINARIAN, AND ADMINISTRATOR, THE PALACE OF THE TAMED STORM

Yes, I remember Tepet Elana. Though this academy has a brutal reputation — well deserved, I should point

out — it is rare that one of our instructors is struck down by a student. I was not surprised, to be honest, and Ajantus' note indicated that he was even less so. It takes a very rare student in this place to gain anyone of the staffs respect, much less that of Ajantus.

He told me how she got her limp. I have seen Dragon-Blooded treated less roughly at this academy and expect to be carried to the infirmary. Yet, she was not yet Exalted, and she walked — on a shattered ankle — almost a mile to reach it. It was truly amazing. Doubtless, she has grown to the point where she can perform such feats without someone else there to prove it to. She walked that day not because she knew she could, but because she wanted to prove to Ajantus that she wasn't beaten. She wanted to spit in his eye, metaphorically speaking — though I imagine, had she the chance to actually spit in his eye, she would not have passed it up.

I have made it something of a point to follow her career since. From the moment she was recruited into the Vermilion Legion, all of her important steps have been taken to prove someone wrong or to make a point. This culminated at the Battle of Five Fangs. I suspect she returned to save those wounded men not because she felt that she should, but to prove that she could.

No, after her discharge from the legion, I know little of her. While a soldier is surrounded by eyes that see and tongues that later wag for the appropriate amount of coin, a magistrate's life is much more difficult—and dangerous — to penetrate.

NELUENS TOLARA IN AN ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF FIVE FANGS

The Vermilion Legion stood fast against the Varajtul, knee deep in mortal and Exalted blood alike. Its valor shone forth for leagues in every direction, and the Sixth Legion marched night and day to offer relief. It would be too late, for the Vermilion Legion's runner was delayed on his mission, and word of the situation reached the Sixth Legion five days later than expected.

And so, by the fifth day of battle, the dead were piled three deep on the field, and thousands of the Vermilion Legion's wounded lay behind the lines of battle. Many could not be moved, for fear of exacerbating their injuries. It was then that General Ragana Jalin submitted to the cowardice in her heart and prepared to quit the field: The Legion would retreat. Those who could not be moved would be abandoned.

The General ordered a holding action to cover the Vermilion Legion's retreat and decreed a dragon of skirmishers be placed under the command of Dragonlord Tepet Elana for this purpose. This was the beginning of the end of the Battle of Five Fangs. Tepet Elana returned to the field with her flight and protected the Legion's withdrawal. Tepet Elana acquitted herself as is the duty of a Dragon-Blooded and ended many barbarian lives on her blade. Her soldiers, Dragon-Blooded

and mortal alike, also fought valiantly, inspired by her courage and skill.

The Dragonlord never ordered her troops to withdraw. Though her flight was devastated — only enough troops survived to fill five fangs — the barbarian horde was thrown back from the lines of battle, and the lives of the 1,000 wounded were preserved. Tepet Elana herself fought as a true soldier of the Realm, surrounded by the fallen bodies of her foes. The Varajtul horde paid dearly for every inch of ground it claimed, and every legionnaire spitted on its spears. Her valor will be remembered for all time in the annals of imperial history, and she will be counted as a hero for as long as the Scarlet Empire endures.

TEPET SERAKAN

My daughter has done her duty to the Scarlet Empire for 100 years, and all I ask of her is that she do her duty to her family as well. After her discharge from the Vermilion Legion, she remained in our house for a year, yet refused more than 100 proposals of marriage.

We are honored by the Empress' desire to hold congress with her, and Elana's assignment as a magistrate brings much prestige to our household. However, this brings us little benefit if her status cannot be parlayed into an alliance with another of the Great Houses. She has no cause that I can see to ignore the needs of her house or her lineage, yet she is adamant in the fact that she wishes nothing to do with us. Her behavior is disturbing, to say the least. The proposals do not dishonor her: Peleps Kerel, for example, is a fine match, and she should be honored even to be considered for a match with such a noble scion of the Realm. Yet, he disgusts her for his associations. She claims his family trades in trickery, and she will have no truck with him. House Peleps is no more guilty of such "trickery" than any other house. She is simply claiming an excuse to avoid marriage.

Her latest folly baffles me. She returns home after many months away, with a mortal lover in tow. I cannot imagine why she considers him worthy of her attentions. She claims he is only a subordinate, this Beren, and though she may fool her mother, I am not so easily blinded to the truth. If she can, she will remain with this man for the duration of his short life and probably waste her loins spawning half-breed children with him, then use her station's influence to claim she has fulfilled her duty to the Realm.

This is too much. I cannot countenance her disloyalty. She will serve her house, and she will honor my wishes. It has been arranged. Beyond all hope, House Peleps has not forsaken her, and Peleps Kerel awaits her return to the Blessed Isle. She must be made to realize that not only will this union benefit House Tepet, but it will provide her with much needed protection against the dangers of her work. The backing of a powerful house can dissuade even the most determined enemies. It is a small



thing for her to grant magisterial consideration to House Peleps in return.

Regent Fokuf is easily swayed, and I have his guarantee that her five-year review will be the death knell for her life outside the Blessed Isle. Her new magisterial duties will bind her to the Blessed Isle and to her beloved husband. She will protest, but not too loudly, if she wants to keep her dear mortal pet alive.

PELEPS VOTIVAL

I begin to doubt the sincerity of House Tepet. It claims it desires alliance, yet its overtures are insincere, at best. We are promised jade, and yet, its riches are consumed in the rebuilding of its paltry legions. We are promised political considerations, yet even a footpad such as the Regent refuses us audience.

Finally, the latest insult is of the least importance, though perhaps the most telling. An alliance born of marriage is perhaps the most stable of all and can only be broken if the union fails to produce offspring. Even then, it stands for a half century before the couple is called to task on the matter. If Tepet truly desires an alliance with our house, then what better way to secure it than through marriage to my son, Peleps Kerel?

Yet, it resists. Tepet Serakan has sworn his daughter's hand to my son. She would be an asset to House Peleps. She is a capable military commander, and though she served her time with the Vermilion Legion, she is nonetheless marked down as a hero of the Realm. Her magistracy would be a great asset to House Peleps, and we could easily shelter her against those with designs on her life. Yet, she resists.

Tepet Serakan claims she is simply fulfilling her duty to the Empress. She walks in the Threshold, bringing the Empress' word to the rebellious and the discontent. I care not for her duties. There are others that can take her place in the Threshold. Still, she persists. I am told she flouts the demands of her house and that House Tepet cannot be faulted for her actions. Perhaps this is so. However, such an irresponsible Dynast has no place in my household, either.

When she returns to the Blessed Isle for her five-year review, there *will* be a wedding — or a reckoning.

TEPET EJAVA, THE ROSEBLACK

I am of two minds on the subject of my grandfather because it seems to me that he has been two men. The Wind Dancer, General Arada, is a hero of his people. His accolades and honors really speak for themselves, marking him as a dutiful and selfless soldier. His contributions to small-unit fast-offense strategy and training techniques are arguably the most significant of the modern era, and his concise restatements of the classic works of that field and that of cultural analysis as prelude to tactical implementation were in widespread use before his second century was over.

No officer's men were as sure of their leader's ability to bring them safely to and from a dangerous operation and to make the extra effort to insure that every outstanding action was recognized and popularized. He was always willing to go the extra mile to make sure that, when deserved, praise would reach as many ears as possible — he liked his men to know that people heard about their successes.

The other man that he was, and is now from what I hear, is an angry one. My grandfather is capable of silent furies that would make even the most polite of company seek other conversation. I have seen him, when frustrated, simply stop speaking for hours at a stretch. He would stand at some social event or another, smiling and nodding curtly to preserve appearances and waiting for a propitious moment to storm off quietly. He was always fairly polite and image-conscious about it, but when he got away, he would often just stare at the sky or away into the distance for hours.

The energy of a really angry Air Aspect is a singular thing, unlike the blatancy of Fire. I honestly always felt that it was inappropriate for someone of his stature to allow himself such episodes, but I'm also aware that I can't know the pressures of someone else's circumstances and so cannot judge. I can judge giving up in the face of adversity, though, and do.

SIDEREAL EXALTED

The Sidereals of the Bronze faction have a critical relationship with the Terrestrial Exalted. They are the hands and eyes and fist of the Solar Purge, and it is into the hands of Terrestrials that the governance of Creation has passed. Sidereals generally regard their "charges" with a mix of superiority and fear. Superiority, for the Sidereal lifespan is at least 10 times longer, and the Sidereals are privy to the mechanisms of destiny, while the Terrestrials labor mostly as pawns. Yet, at the same time, the Terrestrials vastly outnumber the Sidereals and would surely turn on them and destroy them if they learned of the Anathema in their midst. Now, as the Solar Purge and the Realm both teeter on the edge of collapse, the Sidereals are forced into much closer contact with their Dragon-Blooded "dupes," and the views of the Maidens' Chosen must become more nuanced as they are more and more influenced by reality.

STARLIGHT MELODY, CHOSEN OF VENUS

Kes's father resented the feeling that he was not in control of his own life, that we had somehow taken from him some measure of freedom. I will not debate the positive or negative effects of our divinations in this regard. What I will say is that Caros' loose handling of his household very nearly cost us one of the most brilliant analytical minds of this, or any, generation of Terrestrial Exalts, that being Kes. Caros' idiot wife was permitted far



too much freedom, and were it not for his deep pragmatism and willingness to heed our advice, Kes would have turned out a weak-willed and altogether different sort due to her exceedingly inappropriate conduct and influence.

As it stands, there is no longer cause for worry. Kes has proven to be as adaptable and resilient as we could have hoped. He represents a minority among his kind, but one that is both vital and perhaps underutilized, that being the savant-primary Terrestrial Exalt. There are more than enough soldier-primaries and politician-primaries among the Dragon-Blooded of the Dynasty, perhaps too many for a harmonious balance.

SPIRITS

Many spirits resent the Immaculate Philosophy, while other embrace it. Whatever an individual god feels, however, the fact remains that the Terrestrials have imposed an often-unwelcome order on the spirit world for centuries. It is not merely the Wyld Hunt that suffers as the Realm spirals closer to civil war. Even on the Blessed Isle itself, some gods have sought to make their will known and to obtain worship outside of the ritual calendar. It remains to be seen if the Immaculate monks can maintain their control over the spirit world or if that too will be a casualty of the civil war.

TIDEFLAT UNCLE

I am not the only one who chafes at the presumptions of the Terrestrials. Far from it. I have always been willing

to work with them, though, and to meet them in the middle even though they have the temerity to tell me how I must oversee my own domain. The Empress could get away with a great deal and could make demands and that sort of thing. Only the very foolish would have argued with her wishes, and I sure didn't.

Now, though, her brood thinks that they can expect the same level of discourse that we gave to her. The times have changed, they must realize, and now that there is more freedom to do so, I and others are going to renegotiate our relationships and alliances as we are able. I've been doing so for quite some time now, in fact. There are some among these Exalts who understand the new times, and with them, it is possible to finally do business as peers, for mutual benefit.

This wine-breathed monk, though, does he even know what the world is like now? Has he been asleep? He must have been, to think that he can bully the gods into obeying his nation's outdated dictums. He is a sad old brute. The Empress is gone now and, with her, the illusion she wove that this world is a safe one and one controlled by her arrogant children. It is a dangerous world and filled with conflict — back and forth like the waves on the beach, tearing down the rocks and, sometimes, leaving riches. The sooner these Dragon children realize this truth, the better off they will be. The Red Lady's walls are gone now, and the truth of Creation is free to flood back onto this isle. My young friends, they understand all this and will bring this truth to the old monk.





CHAPTER FIVE RECORDS OF THE BEFORE



*Ten thousand Dragons, none are taxed,
Though all the world's borne on their backs,
Should one Dragon stop to nap,
Every Dragon's back may snap,
So as we march the Dragons' road,
Every one must bear their load,
For if that load should ever fall,
Cracks form in Creation's wall,
And for that wall's each chink or hole,
Anathema will have a soul.*

—Late Shogunate-era children's rhyme

To the Dragon-Blooded of the Realm, the pre-Contagion Shogunate era is, in many ways, the golden age of their culture. Historical documents and records of this time are thus accorded a great deal of reverence by them and are studied and analyzed for their insights into the thinking and techniques of the past. The flashbacks and past-life experiences of the Celestial Exalted may be a more personally powerful form of insight, but there can be no substitute for a proper historical record and the widespread examination and repeatable results that such a record permits. Conversely, without the personal connection of visions, there is a great deal of room for error and misinterpretation of ancient documents, not to mention the possibility of deliberate obfuscation of facts and alteration of records by those who wish for their

version of history to remain unchallenged. What follows are samples of the sorts of documents that comprise the historical record of the Realm's savants: accounts of battles, wonders and events of the time of the Shogunate.

RELIGIOUS TRACTS

Circulated by the Hesiesh Youth Fiery Murder Society, a radical political movement of young Dragon-Blooded officially proscribed but unofficially endorsed by the early Shogunate.

We are martyred in the name of Hesiesh, whose single flame cleansed the world. We ask the Dragons that our brave deeds likewise cleanse the world.

We are the shout of those whom the Anathema left without will.

We are the fists of those the Anathema left twisted and inhuman.

We are the salvation of all those minds the Anathema worked their lies upon.

We are the cleansing flames of the Dragon of Fire.

Those of us who hunt the Anathema and survive will be heroes and defenders of Creation. Those of us who fall will be purified by our martyrdom and delivered into the arms of the Immaculate Hiesh and become one in Essence with his flames.

We are the soldiers of the Shogun and the defenders of Creation by the Dragons' decree.

If you seek to defend Creation, then martyr yourself with us.

If you hold the Anathema in your heart, we will find you.

And we will subject you to the cleansing pyre.

Ten thousand dragons conquer the world.

Urrah! Urrah! Urrah!

SHOGUN ASSASSINATED!

Published by the Record of the Imperial Capital

Shogun Chu was assassinated today by members of the Young Heroes officers clique, who surrendered immediately afterward. The assassins were members of the Shogun's Dragon-Blooded bodyguard and made statements explaining that they disagreed with the recently negotiated Peace of Sperimin. The members of the clique are expected to commit suicide over the next few days.

The assassination of Shogun Chu represents a triumph for hard-liners within the regime who favor a tougher stance on the outlying daimyos and wish to concentrate power with the shogun. Shogun Chu's recent conciliatory stance toward the subjugated Hiri Faction daimyos had angered many veterans and officers and the residents of areas in which the Hiri armies had made their so-called "March of Desolation." The Young Heroes publicly identified themselves with these veterans pressure groups. Members of the clique made clear in the statements delivered after the assassination that they felt themselves to be heroic servants of Crown Prince Nanani, who had recently publicly condemned his father's apologetic tone about the events of the Hiri Wars.

Of the assassins, the Crown Prince said, "As a prince, I can only condemn these terrible regicides. My person in no way encouraged these impetuous officers to their deeds, and I will see that they pay the ultimate price for their dishonorable deeds.

"That said, I cannot but see their murder as an omen from the Dragons. Like these officers, my father paid the ultimate price for his beliefs, and for that, he must be honored. But though I respected my father's beliefs, I do not share them. Upon my accession to the throne, I will not continue this shameful dialogue with rebels and hill men."

Imperial security forces have placed the capital under a Red Level Security Alert. Only those with security travel clearance may move between sunset and sunup, and all individuals must carry their identification documents with them at all times. The imperial censor reminds you that engendering public panic and sedition are both crimes. Be calm, and know that, even in these troubled times, a prince sits upon the throne.

A PURLOINED LETTER

Of course it augurs poorly, what sort of choice was it that you think you made 300 years ago? It's true enough that the future looks grim, Kejak. That's the way this thing is going to go. We picked the rough but certain road, so we're going to have to bear with the fact that the ruts and the roughness we were so willing to accept a few centuries ago might, in fact, be real challenges. We had never seen real danger before the Great Convocation, had never faced real challenges. How hard was it to plot the course of destiny when the Solars were there? What obstacles were going to place themselves in the way of history that the golden heroes couldn't just trample?

Now, here we are actually traveling along the road to the future, and we're going to have to admit that it's genuinely hard going. The Terrestrial Exalted aren't like the Solars. They're more numerous, less foresighted and, apparently, more prone to factional fighting, but we knew that. It's just that we didn't understand exactly what circumstances this would lead to. Now that we're here, we can see what it's really like and plan accordingly. We can't turn back because it's impossible to do so. The Usurpation was a threshold that we can never recross, and we all agreed to that. I'm telling you, leave that sort of naysaying to the Gold Faction. Accept what is, disciple, and make the cloth you can out of the threads the Maidens give you. That is the only way you can exist as one of us.

NORTHERN JADE DRAGON FUND COLLAPSES

From The White Cloud Record, a daily financial news dispatch read all across the Blessed Isle and the East.

The troubled Northern Jade Creation-Enhancement Dragon Fund sought government custodianship today. After the suicide last week of the previous director, Odomo Rodov, the institution's custodianship committee had appointed a new chairman, the noted financial strategist Nado Aku. Elder Aku appeared today before the Minister of Finance to explain that new examinations of the firm's books indicate that the institution's expenditures will outweigh its earnings by a factor of four to one in the next year.

Weakness in the Northern Jade Fund has long been suspected among enhancement-fund insiders, but the Northern Jade auditors have denied any fundamental

problems in the operation of the firm's patterned-trading operations until this sudden announcement.

While there has been no public announcement due to the sensitive nature of the Northern Jade's transactions, those close to the investigation say the losses are allegedly due to poorly performing speculative investments. In recent years, the Northern Jade has been a leading proponent of the "New Runes," attempting to repattern and repopulate currently uninhabitable regions of Creation in the middle East that were destabilized during the Seven Dragon War.

During his appearance, Elder Aku requested that the Ministry take an active hand in auditing the failure of the Northern Jade Fund. The Ministry did not issue a direct response, but it is widely believed that Most Excellent Minister Tu will choose to let bygones be bygones in the investigation. Senior Speculator Vun Hisekelono of the Seven Benevolencies Trust said, "It seems likely to me that the Ministry will allow chairman Odomo's suicide to stand as sufficient proxy punishment for the corporation, rather than disrupt the operations of a fund so crucial to the economy of the East." Insiders in the investigation speculated that the firm would return to the Odomo family after the Treasury rehabilitates it, with Chairman Odomo's son Odomo-Vegos Jumo taking control.

Because of the crucial nature of the Northern Jade's trading operations, the government is allowing business-as-usual trading to continue while the outfit is a ward of the Treasury. The Northern Jade Fund acts primarily as reinsurer, lending to large gongfang families, but it also has involvement in business investment in the military sectors and to various civil authorities and government trusts. The capital from these operations is used in so-called patterned-trading operations, small-scale lending operations first described by the Immaculate Pasiap that strengthen Creation against the Fair Folk's depredations. The office of the imperial censor reminds all citizens that patterned trading is a blessed deed.

CENSORSHIP NOTICE

Posted in The White Cloud Record, a daily financial news dispatch read all across the Blessed Isle and the East.

The Daimyo of Deheleshen's application for imperial protection of reputation relating to the Northern Jade collapse was accepted this morning. All matters relating to the case will be argued before the Court of Dragons, whose proceedings are not germane to the lives of the unExalted. This publication reminds you that the good reputation of the Dragons and their offspring is not to be impugned and that associating the daimyo with the Northern Jade collapse is a second degree act of sedition, punishable by caning and confiscation of goods.

FAIR FOLK ATTACK THE SOUTH

From The Silver Journal

The Fair Folk Host staged a breakthrough attack this morning in the Kodoma Administrative District in the Far South, after apparently first infiltrating the region with ravager agents. Defense sources estimate the number of hobgoblins present as a little over a million, making this one of the largest breakthroughs since the Zarlath Collapse almost a century ago.

Survivors report open performance of counter-traditional rituals among the population, particularly among the district's waterless. Beggars were reportedly acting as guides for the Fair Folk, and armed mobs of the poor had attacked several transportation facilities in advance of the Fair Folk's arrival in an attempt to delay evacuation procedures. Wyld weapons were used in a number of attacks, and the Camoro, Tantu and Chiaroscuro transit facilities are currently closed for decontamination.

Shogunate household troops, including the Mighty Imperial Fast Attack, have deployed to the South and entered combat at the side of local armed forces against their inhuman foes. Exalted troops in dragon armor were spotted fighting at Chiaroscuro, and there are reports of anima banners in the fighting all across the South. The daimyos affected have not released casualty figures, but local sources estimate casualties at 70 percent within the initial breakthrough zone and 30 percent in the region around it. Casualties among the soldiers fighting the breakthrough are estimated at several thousand.

Locally, troops were called out and stationed at key junctures and Manses throughout the district, and most large families stationed additional guards at their compounds and called in isolated households. While there were no attacks, the militia deployed to local shantytowns, to search them for Fair Folk and to apprehend conscription dodgers. All militia on duty rotation who have not yet reported to their duty units should do so immediately. While there were no attacks in the region, police officials say the militia have seized occult paraphernalia, Wyld prodigies and subversive literature in their searches of the squatter camps, as well as encountering tell-tale resistance to their sweeps. "There's obviously some reason they're trying to keep us out," said a military officer who asked to remain anonymous.

Riots continue at this time in the Fallen Glass and Morning Hill slums, and the smoke from Morning Hill can be seen from our humble offices.

RATIONING

From the diary of Madomo Butu

Rations were reduced again today. Raiding in the countryside has made food scarce in the cities. There are reports that ignorant peasants in the countryside have begun to bake sand into their bread as a filler, calling it





Pasiap's Compassion. Many are said to have died from this practice, but it persists nevertheless. The rice from the government granaries is bad, old and moldy or wormy. It used to be the rich could afford to buy good rice and feed their table scraps to the poor, but that was several years ago. Now, the rich eat as badly as anyone, and the poor do not eat at all. Only the soldiers eat well — the fields are fertile enough, but what is not burned in cavalry raids or stolen by bandits is appropriated to feed the army. Most show the signs of bad diet, and I myself have lost several teeth. The daimyos have begun to feed boys of age 12 and up so that they'll be strong enough for military service at age 16.

It has been 27 years since the Samisen Administrative District last knew peace. These wars have been a great calamity for the people, for famine and plague have followed the campaigns, and many of the cities have been burned in sacks or in battle. The city of Gunuku has seen three sieges and suffered one surrender, and I have, Dragons be blessed, lived through them all.

I still do not know why I keep this diary — I began it during the last outbreak of cholera and have not ceased to record my life's events since then. Perhaps it will be of interest to someone who lives in more peaceful times. I remember, as a boy, during the Truce of Ivy, going down with my father to play by the canal. I wonder if I shall be able to take my own son there as well some day or if the plague or the armies will take him instead.

MILITARY ACTIVITY REPORTS FOR LARIS ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICT

Imperial Intelligence Service Monthly Regional Force Summary.

Overall, the military capability of the region continues to decline. Most troops remain in arrears on training and pay, and units good enough for field service are ragged from constant deployment.

One brigade of the Laris militia deployed this week to assist a battalion of elite forces in clearing the Vellens border of bandit activity. The bandits were sponsored by the Vellens to disrupt Laris harvest and tax gathering. They have safe havens across the border in Vellens and enjoy some collaboration with Vellens security officials. The militia was mostly relegated to a static role, holding river crossings and major crossroads and turning out a few small towns. The regular army went out expecting a training exercise — they crossed the Vellens border to raid bandit strongholds under a pretext of hot pursuit and found the bandits had “outcaste mercenaries” fitting the description of certain Vellens elite commandos stationed with them. After the raid, there was a retributive “border incident” with a company of Vellens fast-attack troops that left about a battalion of the Laris militia dead.

The kingdoms are one loud noise away from another war right now. This is as it always is.

In answer to your query, the practice of arming militia troops with steel arms seems to be firmly in place. Sources indicate the weaponry stripped from militia formation was cached or redistributed to replace worn equipment in the imperial regulars. The mounting expense of maintaining high-quality formations is conspiring with the pressure of the large landowners to disarm the peasantry. One more uprising over village foreclosures featuring peasants soldiers with implosion bows, and the daimyo is going to have both the landowners and the generals demanding that he keep the best weapons with the elite forces. Steel-armed formations are adequate against mobs and irregular troops, but they wouldn't last a minute against a unit of dragon-armored Exalts, as we saw this week.

I think that the long-term effect of this is going to be to put large landowners in a situation where they own the local administration. All the landowners have small private armies at this point, and once the militia loses its Essence weapons, it's going to have problems standing up to the landowners if push comes to shove, particularly given that the vast majority of those landowners are Dragon-Blooded or Terrestrial clients. I expect the landowners will begin appropriating public land soon.

I don't perceive any military threat to the Shogunate here, lord, but I do not see any strength either.

DECREE OF EMERGENCY LEVY

Due to the current emergency situation, your daimyo requires each household in Feru Prefecture to submit one individual of working age to the muster for use in civic labor. These workers must provide their own food for seven days, their own ditchdigging tools and their own transport to the Furu Bend agricultural dikes. Nominees are permissible but may not be paid less than 120 bushels of rice. A straight exemption may be purchased for 100 bushels of rice from the Department of Public Irrigation Works. Previously purchased exemptions do not apply to this emergency excise.

THE HAND OF MELA SMITES THE LAND

From the patrician textbook Wonders of the Lost Age, excerpted from the limited edition including commentary for Heptagram students.

Once, the might of the Realm was such that we moved the very Earth and Heaven with our fury, and the Elemental Dragons took form and shape, and fought by our side. Though a great army of the Anathema stood before them, the legions were unafraid, for Mela took flight that day to protect them. At dawn, the Anathema came, and their armies were arrayed across the western

horizon, prepared to throw down the fledgling Dragon-Blooded for their pride in standing against the tyrants.

The first sign of her coming was her roar. It began as a rumble in the ground, until each man could feel the earth shake beneath his feet. Then, the lookouts brought reports. Something terrible and beautiful approached, and a great flock of black birds approached from the rear of the Dragon-Blooded lines. They were colossal. Though miles distant, they blackened the sky for their numbers. Beneath them walked giants that stood astride the land on legs of fire and steel, and they strode with inevitable fury toward the enemy legions.

The first strike sizzled through the sky like fire from the sun and smote the enemy. Thousands of mortals died in an instant, but the Anathema stood fast against the onslaught. Then, the Anathema struck back. The first of the giants fell as he strode past our own lines, and the explosion scoured the earth of mortal soldiers. The enemy closed on our lines with unholy swiftness, and the crash of thunder and steel echoed across the field.

Above, the war birds engaged the great sky ship of the Anathema. They flitted across its surface, leaving explosions in their wake. Molten debris rained across the battlefield, and soldier and colossus alike were struck by the blackened shards of the sky ship's skin. Occasionally, this infernal rain smote the field with tremendous explosions, which rocked even the tremendous walkers with their force. Some few fell and were torn to pieces by their foes. By now, these mighty creatures faced one another in mortal combat and tore great rents of steel flesh from their foes.

Below, the Anathema and the Dragon-Blooded did terrible battle and mustered all of their Essence into earth-shattering attacks and impossible feats. Anathema blood rained upon the earth, as even their mighty defenses could not stand against the attacks of the Dragon-Blooded assembled. As the Anathema began to dwindle, so too were their tremendous allies thrown down. Finally, the sky ship tumbled from the heavens and shattered upon the earth.

With the impact came the thunder of Mela's voice once more. It bellowed across the land and echoed from the furthest hills and peaks. With her cry, a great wave of heat and light erupted from the fallen sky ship and pushed across Anathema and Dragon-Blooded alike, powerful enough even to strike the most stalwart soldier from his feet. Of the nearby combatants, no more is known. They were clutched in the talons of Mela and were nevermore seen in Creation. Only those who observed the battle at great distance survived to relate the tale.

But Mela's fury is not for mortals to behold. In the months that followed, a great weakness came over the survivors. Though a few Dragon-Blooded were brought

low by the Leeching, they were the closest to the Elemental Dragons, and were spared the worst. Mortals fell by the thousands. Terrible burns appeared on their flesh, where no fire had touched. The wounds exuded a vaporous mist, and the spirit of those stricken was drained through these injuries, until they could not stand or walk or even speak. Skin, first tender to the touch, sloughed off in great patches, exposing flesh and bone and soul. All who suffered so were doomed, and not even the Blessings of the Elemental Dragons could save them.

Even the land itself could not withstand the onslaught. The lands of the west, once whole, were torn asunder with great and terrible shock waves, stretching for miles from the object of her fury. Great gulfs split Creation, and the water rushed in to soothe the burning earth. The land that remained splintered into the islands and archipelagos that still stand, an eternal testament to the wrath of the Elemental Dragon of Air.

We must remember always to pay respect to the Dragon of Strife, for her tools are terrible to behold. The Realm must stand against the growing plague of the Anathema, lest Creation be visited once more by her handmaidens.

This is an highly sensationalized account of an actual battle, fought near what is today known as the city of Nexus. The most sensationalized part is the number of Exalted involved. As during the rest of the war, the bulk of the fighting was done by summoned demons and elementals, sorcerous progenies, battle automata and, of course, by mortal thralls and conscripts. While this was, without a doubt, one of the largest battles of the war, there were only five Solar Anathema present on the field and an unknown number of Lunar Anathema (the most commonly suggested number is three). There were also probably no more than a few hundred Dragon-Blooded present.

The number of Thousand-Forged Dragons and warstriders present is likewise exaggerated for dramatic effect because even patricians are largely unfamiliar with the realities of Essence usage. How could they be expected to imagine the impact that the 14 battle-automata of the Sixth Dragon Wing had on a battlefield, even one thickly populated by high-Essence Anathema?

The Essence-induced illness described is almost unknown in the modern age. It must be understood that thousands of motes were released when the flying warship's Essence-collectors exploded. The Solar aspect of that power is as dangerous in large doses as concentrated Fire Essence, and it was tainted with black magics we can only begin to guess at. Look at the hazards of using a simple spell such as Emerald Countermagic or of long-term exposure to an uncapped Demesne, and multiply that a hundredfold. This is illustrative of the dangers of First Age artifacts, particularly those created by the Anathema — even innocuous devices can contain undischarged Essence accumulators holding



hundreds or even potentially thousands of motes —far more than even your Dragon-Blooded frame can withstand. Always make sure to take precautions when handling such items; many were deliberately designed by the Anathema to kill savants who attempted to disassemble them.

OF EYEM, ETERNALLY PRESERVED LORD AND SAVANT OF THE DRAGON- BLOODED SHOGUNATE

From the patrician textbook Wonders of the Lost Age, excerpted from the limited edition including commentary for Heptagram students.

In the days before, a wise and powerful sage shared his wisdom with the people and the potentates alike, and he was called Eyem. Though records of his life are lost, we must conclude that he was Dragon-Blooded, for his wisdom was unmatched throughout creation. Further, he survived long after the Great Contagion, though his language was foreign to our ears. Only the members of House Jerah were blessed with his wisdom, but in their pride, they honored him before the Scarlet Empress herself. For their presumption, they were scattered to the poles, and Eyem's language was lost to us.

Of his beginnings, our records are shadowed in time. His life is a cipher, a puzzle with no pieces. Though his wisdom was recorded through the ages — reams upon reams of parchment exist — the wear of ages has rendered it indecipherable. In his early life, Eyem claimed no credit for the guidance he offered. Indeed, even though all benefited from his wisdom, he was rarely credited and never thanked.

Eyem guided the destiny of the Shogunate with his proclamations. He aided in study and science and in art and analysis, and he even bested the greatest champions in games of wit and strategy. He was a banker, for all wealth passed through his hands. He was a scribe, for he perfectly illuminated even the most complex of tomes. He was a thinker, for though he only rarely formed definitive conclusions, they were infallible in their logic.

Eyem's stature grew among the people, and where once he spoke only to the rich and powerful, he soon accepted inquests from even the lowliest peasant. He could be reached at any hour, from anywhere in Creation. How this is possible, we know not, but we must assume some lost wonder of the Shogunate made it so, for evidence of his presence exists throughout the histories of the First Age.

Still, he remained a mystery. His name was never spoken, and his face was never seen. He never stood before the people to proclaim his brilliance, nor did any offer thanks for his wisdom. His insight was overshadowed only by his humility.

In the end, though, even Eyem succumbed to the temptation of pride. For a year and a day, he fell silent, and chaos scratched at the door of the Shogunate. The flow of money and goods stopped. His responsibilities — which were endless — went unheeded, and mortals and Dragon-Blooded were stranded far from home. They froze as the warmth provided by Eyem ceased, and they starved as the farmers of the Shogunate were denied his guidance. Leaders and generals stumbled when he fell silent, as they were long since accustomed to leaving their decisions in Eyem's capable hands. After a year and a day, at dawn, he spoke once more.

For the first time, he spoke his name aloud, so all who would listen might hear. He declared his preeminence over the Shogunate and demanded to be exalted even before his fellow Dragon-Blooded. He would have no peer in Creation, and his word alone would guide the destiny of the Realm. Though once dependent upon his guidance, the potentates of the Shogunate would not surrender their power so easily, for even Eyem was only one man, and it was believed dominion over Creation should not rest in the hands of one, even if he was a Dragon-Blooded.

And so, there was a great gathering of generals and philosophers, sorcerers and royalty. In this council, it was decided that control of the Shogunate would be wrested from the grasp of Eyem and that he would be thrown down from his ivory tower. Though unprepared to go on without his wisdom, the people of the Shogunate were even less prepared to bend their knee to one who was never invested with the powers of an emperor, but who, instead, chose to seize such privilege for himself.

But Eyem was strong, for in his year-long absence, he had bulwarked his defenses, preparing for the war he knew would come. Though he did not stand and fight the forces of the Shogunate, he struck at its soft underbelly. Through his magic, he turned food and drink stale and sour, and he starved the warstriders and warbirds until they would not rise to battle. He commanded all the resources of the Realm at a whim, and he could not be easily dethroned.

In the end, the Shogunate triumphed, though the circumstances of the final victory are lost to us. We know only that Eyem was struck down and passed from the histories of the Shogunate. Still, he survived. We know this only because he was rediscovered by a wandering scion of House Jerah in RY 41, though, for almost a century, he refused all attempts at communication. Finally, Eyem spoke to Jerah R'juf in RY 127, when he proclaimed once more: "Eyem." Through the honored interpreters of House Jerah, he advised the Empress for some time, and though she did not always heed his counsel, it was sound enough that Jerah's stature among the Great Houses grew immeasurably.

Eyem, however, had not changed in the hundreds of years of his life. He coveted the Realm, and his jealousy of the Empress grew. Soon, House Jerah was not the hand of the Empress, but the hand of Eyem. Its disloyalty was great, and it sabotaged the Empress' fledgling empire at every turn. Inevitably, the machinations of House Jerah were discovered by agents of the Scarlet Empress, and the house's members were cast out. Their holdings were seized, their Dragon-Blooded executed for treason, and their responsibilities (and status among the Great Houses) assigned to the newly founded House Ragara, created in gratitude for Ragara's part in uncovering Jerah's treachery.

Of Eyem, we know only this: He was captured by the Scarlet Empress herself, though his might was so great that he could not be destroyed. He is imprisoned somewhere on the Blessed Isle. Though he is doubtless capable of communication with the Empress' agents (for Jerah R'juf spoke unto him and was understood), he refuses to seek her pardon or to share his wisdom.

As you've probably ascertained, Eyem is an automaton of some sort. During the Shogunate, the Dragon-Blooded used a number of such magical thinking machines, created through processes that are now lost, to do the drudge-work of their society. Some were salvaged from the Anathema and foolishly accepted into Shogunate society. Others were created by the savants of the Shogunate using knowledge learned from study of the Anathema. Eyem was one of the latter sort of automata. As the passage suggests, these intelligent automata were used to keep track of banking accounts, to act as reference clerks and to draw inferences from large amounts of information. They were considered an invaluable aide for savants of the time, and few escaped their influence.

We teach this story to the patricians the way we do to encourage them to fear thinking machines and to understand the power such a being can wield. Just because you also understand them does not mean that you should not also fear them. They are as close to demons as anything that the Anathema created. There are a number of them still kept in the Heptagram, and your instructors may introduce you to them if you are curious. All of them are unfailingly polite and exceedingly intelligent. Remember always when you interact with them that one of the inferior sort, not even made by the Anathema themselves and one intended as a magnificently glorified ledger, was clever enough to suborn and bring to destruction an entire Great House. Keep in mind — there were master savants in House Jerah, and they knew very well of Eyem's treacherous nature. Treat these devices as you would a demon: Just because they are servile does not mean they are obedient; just because they speak sweetly does not mean they are of good intention.

FROM A REPORT BY MAGISTRATE-CAPTAIN RIARDA RIKVASHA

Enclosed with this overview is the entirety of the current resources and notes, in the standard elemental indexing axis and current ciphers, for the ongoing investigation of the conspiratorial subculture operating within the various competitive infrastructural and systems-analysis sodalities, such as the Great Southern Collective Technology Synthesis League or the Southern Competitive Cooperative Engineering Union. As this is an ongoing investigation that reaches into the highest echelons or both academic and military circles, please see to it that all of these materials are frozen into archive as soon as possible and under at least Earth Zero/Fire Two active security.

These competitive groups have been extant, verifiably, for three centuries and perhaps longer. Some few of them claim heritage reaching as far back as the eye of history may roam, though these claims are doubtless fanciful flourishes. The fact is that these groups formed from circles of students and instructors from various Central, Eastern and Southern engineering and architecture schools with the aim of codifying and institutionalizing a system of competitive shared-vision engineering games.

The rules for these games seem fairly straightforward, if esoteric to the layman, and most often center around the competitive design and construction of towers (which we will use as our example in this text). Each unit, or team, is composed of students and teachers from one school or location. On reaching a certain level of skill or acclaim, a savant would be approached by one of his or her peers and informed that it was now his or her "turn." It seems that this first exposure to the game was an occasion for a great deal of theatrics: secrecy, ritualized pageantry and, in some cases, a bit of hazing. It can only be assumed that these traits were enculturated to a greater and greater degree with each generation after the initiating group, leading to the highly bizarre and labyrinthine traditions and jargon elaborated on in greater detail elsewhere in this report.

A turn is generally one of two options: Design an undefined step in the plans for the tower, or implement a step that has not yet been undertaken in the construction. Each participant can only choose one option per turn and, most often, is permitted only one turn per year. Participants are expressly forbidden from knowing ahead of time that their turns are approaching, from cooperating with other participants across turns and from passing along too much preplanning to the next participant. The actual codified rules are highly proprietary, fluid and permeated with jargon but are included with this report



in Appendix Air/Air/Earth for the curious or truly rigorous investigator.

There seems to be a very secret judging and ruling body comprised of representatives of all the various teams and schools, but information regarding its practices is either very easy to extrapolate from other information or else shrouded in very great secrecy. It is an area that a measurable fraction of my office's resources are currently allocated toward the better understanding of, but we do know that there is no small amount of sorcery and artifice at work in service to the aims of these competitions and the enforcement of their strictures.

The outward aims of the founders and perpetrators of this style of game seem admirable enough, foremost among them the cultivation of a number of esoteric skills and perspectives among the participants. Due to the rules constraints placed upon the players, there must evolve a skill with and a respect for systems of standardized notation; there can be no easy undertaking with so many perspectives and design philosophies otherwise.

In that same vein, there must develop a sense of the minds of peers and their foundational assumptions about the craft at hand; if every savant aimed for a different technique of design and construction and made no effort to lay bare his thoughts on the matter, the competition would quickly devolve into endless puzzling out of others' ideas.

Less obvious are the solidarity-building properties of any exclusive professional organization, especially one that has taken steps to provide symbols and jargon and traditions used only by its members. Respect for one's peers and one's trade and its importance to society at large is a favorite lesson learned by players, according to them. Certainly, the great towers of Chiaroscuro and Deheleshen, many the result of centuries of play, go far toward inspiring respect for the savants and architects of the Shogunate.

It is only because of the compulsive and comprehensive urge toward documenting his every activity and the activities of his peers that the journals of architect Marsan Lan were useful to us in initiating the large-scale investigation we find ourselves part of today. These journals were discovered during an, at the time, unrelated investigation of financial misdeed on the part of a commercial undertaking in which the late Marsan Lan was involved. The lengthy and often disturbing accounts of the architect's life and deeds shed a great deal of light on a number of other pending cases and were quickly indexed and analyzed by this office.

The journals described — with the insider's view of one who has been involved almost from the beginning — the activities and methods not only of the players of the publicly known engineering games, but also of their slow decline into all manner of illegal and immoral methods in the pursuit of victory and entertainment.

According to Lan, many small subgroups of the clubs were experimenting with new forms of competition using the familiar rules — and dangerous and often infernal sorcery. Kidnaping, theft, unlicensed magical research and forbidden pacts with spirit and demonic entities are only a part of the activities documented in the journals, journals that seem to show a savant slowly losing his grip on both his morals and his sanity.

By the end of his life, Marsan Lan was far more unhinged than his eccentric public persona hinted at. Germane to the investigation at hand were Lan's descriptions of the so-called cultivation games. These very secret competitions took the familiar turn-based systems and terminology of tower-building and applied them to the outright control and shaping of the lives of both peasants and patricians throughout the Shogunate. These jaded few decided that, instead of a structure, they would all select a newborn child, all from the same social and economic strata, and take turns planning this person's life.

Instead of judging by the height or beauty of the structure, they would judge by the success and standing of their "pet." This may seem an amoral but essentially harmless diversion, but the popularity of this most-secret game led to what Lan documents as at least two centuries of continued influence exerted on these people. After them, their children and grandchildren, families, businesses and holdings were all the domain of the controlling "team." The depth of this covert manipulation is, of course, entirely unacceptable, though not always unhealthy.

The families that have descended from the original subjects are uniformly successful and well-regarded patricians currently. However, there has been no small amount of cheating and sabotage between player groups. These actions have resulted in a number of deaths, a great deal of theft and an inordinate degree of illegal financial manipulation. Further, three of the families created by this so-called game have begun to produce Dragon-Blooded offspring within the past three decades, at least one of whom is a military officer now. For obvious security reasons, this game cannot be permitted to compromise her military importance. She is a low-ranked officer at this time, but it is only a matter of time before she is in a position of significance. Her upbringing and the control exerted over her family may have already had too great an impact on her circumstances and she will be under an unfair, to her, amount of scrutiny for the remainder of her life. For the time being, it has been arranged for her to remain stationed in the field and away from the Blessed Isle until a clearer picture of what must be done is had.

FROM THE JOURNALS OF MARSAN LAN

Another simulator had to be destroyed tonight. It is growing more and more troubling with each week that

they have become so unstable, babbling and drooling in their sleep. They shouldn't even be able to talk — or know that they have a mouth to do so with. I have obviously missed something, or more likely, they have been tampered with. I have many enemies who would dearly love to see my work fail, and some even among my allies who, no doubt, would take my methods and claim them as their own. I hope I can salvage this project, as it has borne more fruit than any of the other attempts to establish a medium to simulate our various long-term projects. It would be a great boon to simply pretend that years passed, in a jar, and we could implement whatever changes we liked without regard to secrecy or resources.

The spirit technique proved far too involved a method, and the proposed geomantic method is too hard to conceal. This method, my dreamscape simulator technique, would be everything we need to take our plans to the next plateau. It seems simple enough, once one knows how to construct the tanks that permit access to others' dreams, to harvest and train dreamers and place them in sequence each to dream their own part of this artificial world. I cannot understand why they fail after a decade of use, and always in the same ways: mad and yelling with bodies they don't know they possess, all this talk of sleepers and dreamers and eating and darkness.

It must be some flaw within the mortal mind seeking to find expression when waking life has been denied to it. I should again try to collate and analyze the logs of

their babbling and see if there is some wisdom to be found, some signpost among all the commonality. It could be that they might benefit from recursive dreams, whereby they might wake from one dream to the next and be fooled into thinking for themselves a waking life. It's all too easy to imagine that some faerie or nightmare spirit is meddling with them, despite all my efforts to secure this laboratory.

The instability does not seem to have had too great an impact on the current simulations, at least. Every team's towers are progressing exactly as specified, as long as I take the time to instruct the dreamers to replace the plague-dead workers at a rate that keeps the productivity numbers afloat. I still cannot fathom how even a medically trained dreamer cannot dream a cure for that pox, but it is my duty to the Society and to the spirit of competition and all the rest to make sure this bloody stuff works the way we require it to. This duty is a sign of respect for me, but it is also trying my patience and health.

I've started having dreams of my own about this matter, an ironic sign that I've been focusing overmuch. Tonight, at my desk, I dreamt that I was being interred in a great tomb, in barbaric fashion, and in the tomb, the spirit of my father spoke to me, asking me to bring him wine to cool his dry throat. He would speak of little else and would turn any conversation into one about his thirst.





CHAPTER SIX MIRACLES OF MELA



Air-pected Essence is versatile, combining lethal gusts with stealth and subtle understanding. Aspects of Air naturally excel at silent movement, sorcerous understanding and mastery of languages, as well as with thrown weapons, and they enhance their natural predispositions with carefully directed Essence. This chapter details Charms, artifacts and Hearthstones associated primarily with Aspects of Air. Unlike the powers of the Solar Exalted, which are generally developed independently, most of these techniques are well-known and documented. They can be learned from fellow house members or from commercial tutors. Storytellers should, of course, review them before allowing these powers into their games, but seeking out instruction should not be particularly burdensome for Dragon-Blooded who have access to the Realm's larger cities and enough money to pay another Exalt.

NEW CHARMS

LINGUISTICS

CIPHER MISSIVE

Cost: 3 motes
Duration: Instant
Type: Simple

Minimum Linguistics: 2

Minimum Essence: 1

Prerequisite Charms: Language-Learning Ritual

In the matters of governance, commerce and military action that are the focus of Dynastic society, there is always sensitive material that must be communicated and, thus, a need for secure methods to encrypt such material. This Charm allows an Exalted scribe to augment her knowledge of the structure of language and to use that augmented knowledge to create a preternaturally complex cipher.

The scribing character spends the required amount of time writing the document, which can be no longer than her Essence in pages, and her player rolls Intelligence + Linguistics to determine the total number of accumulated successes needed to decipher the document. Each deciphering roll is an Intelligence + Linguistics roll with a difficulty equal to the permanent Essence of the character using Cipher Missive, and represents a number of days spent codebreaking equal to the Essence of the character who created the cipher. Remember that successes only accumulate against the encoding character's Intelligence + Linguistics roll if the character attempting to decrypt the missive exceeds the base difficulty of the roll (i.e., the Essence of the character who used this Charm).

The character using this Charm may name a number of individuals up to a maximum of twice his Essence rating who can freely read the ciphered document, or he may name a limited, specific class of people who may freely read the document. For example, a character could make a ciphered document that could only be read freely by magistrates or only by officers in the Vermilion Legion.

CRAFT ICON

- Cost:** 2 motes
- Duration:** Instant
- Type:** Simple
- Minimum Linguistics:** 3
- Minimum Essence:** 3
- Prerequisite Charms:** Cipher Missive

In a society as complex and often frenetic as that of the Realm, the ability to smoothly convey a complex block of information or directives to others is not only a great boon, it is practically a necessity. This Charm allows for the design of sigils and pictograms that illustrate a dense collection of data such as directions to a location or instructions for the assembly of a complex device and does so in a simple iconographic style that can be understood by anyone, regardless of the languages they speak.

The player of the Dragon-Blood using this Charm rolls Manipulation + Linguistics at a difficulty of 2. Successes indicate the level of complexity encoded

into the pictogram, with each success over the difficulty providing the equivalent of one minute's worth of careful instruction.

The icons created by the use of this Charm can be drawn, carved or in any media the creator wishes to use. The channeling of Essence into the creation of an icon is vital to its depiction, and it cannot be reliably reproduced without another application of Craft Icon. Any mundane reproduction of a pictogram created with this Charm will, at best, serve only as well as if the Dragon-Blood's player had rolled the minimum two successes. Icons created with this Charm are two square inches in size per success.

SPEECH WITHOUT WORDS

- Cost:** 2 motes + 1 mote per ally included
- Duration:** One scene
- Type:** Simple
- Minimum Linguistics:** 3
- Minimum Essence:** 3
- Prerequisite Charms:** Voices on the Wind, Cipher Missive

The ability to silently convey complex information allows for a much greater degree of coordination among allies when they find themselves in circumstances where speech would be a detriment, such as during close-range martial conflicts or ambushes most obviously (but not exclusively).



The use of this Charm allows a Dragon-Blood and one additional ally per mote of Essence spent (to a maximum of the Exalt's Wits + Linguistics) to silently communicate using hand gestures and signals.

The gestures required to make use of this Charm are subtle and not enough to give away a user's position or generate a great amount of sound. Users of this Charm are obviously communicating with one another if they do so openly, however, making this Charm's usefulness in social settings somewhat limited.

FAVORED QUILL MASTERY

Cost: 3 motes per success

Duration: Instant

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Linguistics: 3

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Any three Linguistics Charms

Dragon-Blooded culture demands excellence from its constituents in a variety of fields of endeavor, making a broad education the norm. With so many responsibilities and areas of study open to them as a culture, however, specialists are needed for esoteric, demanding or vital disciplines. Linguistic- and communication- oriented tasks are no exception to this, as not every Dragon-Blood can be a master cipher, speechwriter and poet all at once.

An Exalt using this Charm may buy his dots in a Linguistics specialty as automatic successes, rolling the remainder of his pool as normal. The automatic successes may only be added to rolls involving the specialty in question.

LORE

CAREFUL INSIGHT-GATHERING STUDY

Cost: 2 motes and one hour per success

Duration: Varies

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Lore: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Elemental Concentration Trance

Diligence and intellect, properly applied, can surmount the most difficult of systemic or academic pursuits. Diligence and intellect coupled with the magical acumen of a talented Exalt can accomplish in a matter of hours what could otherwise require months of work from a dedicated team of scholars.

Through the use of this Charm, a Dragon-Blooded scholar can virtually guarantee high-quality results on any academic or systemic task by using Essence to

strengthen and structure his thoughts and mind, gaining a crystalline clarity. For each hour of dedicated work and 2 motes of Essence, the Dragon-Blood's player gains an automatic success on any roll pertaining to academic studies, research, analysis or any other type of "book work" the character is conducting, to a maximum of the character's Lore Ability (including specialties, if applicable).

The hours spent in study for the use of this Charm must be concurrent, and any interruption of the character's activities will require him to begin anew, losing any Essence spent in the Charm's activation. Due to the highly structured changes worked on the mind by use of this Charm, characters suffer an effective -1 penalty to their Compassion Virtue Trait for a number of hours after using this Charm equal to the number of hours of study (even if the Charm fails due to interruption). Those who make repeated, long-term use of this Charm grow detached and often cold toward others. Storytellers may reduce the Compassion of characters who rely overmuch on this Charm but should warn players if they think their characters are overusing the Charm. Generally, more uses per lunar month than a character's Essence should be considered abuse.

BRUTE FORCE CONTEMPLATION

Cost: 2 motes per success

Duration: Instant

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Lore: 4

Minimum Essence: 4

Prerequisite Charms: Careful Insight-Gathering Study

Sometimes, solutions to complicated problems are needed on the spot, without the luxury of analysis by engineers or scholars. When a dam or other vital structure is damaged, for example, an effective plan must be made before the structure fails and further hampers normal operating procedures.

A Terrestrial scholar may bring the full force of his mind and accumulated academic training to bear on a single problem with the use of this Charm, straining his mind with Essence and condensing days of analysis into a single, staggering moment of insight. For every 2 motes of Essence spent, the character may purchase an automatic success on any roll involving an analytical or scholarly task, up to a limit of his Lore Ability. The remainder of the pool is then rolled normally. The character's player must then roll to soak, using the Dragon-Blood's Wits Attribute, a number of bashing health levels equal to the total successes on the roll, as the Exalt attempts to mentally digest and sort the rush of information.



It is common, after using this Charm, for a character to experience violent nosebleeds, sporadic weakening of vision and hearing and excruciating headaches. Regardless of the results of the soak roll, each use of this Charm counts as a full day's exertion for the character, who must then deal with the effects of sleep deprivation or use a Charm or item to counter it. The bashing damage dealt through the use of this Charm may be healed using whatever methods are available to the character.

ETERNAL MIND MEDITATION

Cost: 2 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Lore: 3

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Careful Insight-Gathering Study

With a potential lifespan of centuries, and those centuries almost surely densely packed with all manner of both excitement and study, the memories of the Dragon-Blooded can become quite cluttered. Dedicated scholars especially, who have a long lifetime's worth of books and observations on which they likely wish to meditate, find that the enervation of the memory with Essence can allow them near-perfect recall of any event they have witnessed or any material they have read.

After spending the required Essence, a Dragon-Blood spends a moment in contemplation, and his player rolls the Exalt's Intelligence + Lore, with the number of successes indicating how far into his memory the Dragon-Blood may explore. One success is enough to recall a hurried conversation from a few years prior, while five allows the user to reexperience events from primary school. Some savants have even claimed to recall memories of time spent in their mothers' wombs through the use of this Charm.

While using this Charm, the character is not helpless or unaware of his surroundings, as he is not truly immersed in reexperiencing the events of his past. He experiences them normally, as memories, simply perfectly detailed and accurate memories.

FLAWLESS STUDY FOCUS

Cost: 3 motes per success

Duration: Instant

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Lore: 3

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Any 3 Lore Charms

Savants entertain a great variety of individually focused fields of study. Nearly every scholar, dabbler

and professional alike, has her favored era of history, mathematical discipline or school of philosophy. True pundits, through the use of this Charm, can enjoy flawlessly reliable intuition and produce repeatable results within their chosen areas of focus.

For every 3 motes of Essence spent to fuel the use of this Charm, one of the character's levels of a Lore specialty can be converted to an automatic success. The rest of the character's Lore pool is rolled normally.

STERN TUTOR DISCIPLINE

Cost: 2 motes + 1 mote per student

Duration: One day

Type: Simple

Minimum Lore: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Elemental Concentration Trance

Individual study, for a savant, may be a relaxing and prestigious pastime, regardless of the specific area of endeavor. Professional undertakings and the work of students do not allow for the slow pace and low pressure necessary to produce the results enjoyed by those who study for leisure. In such cases, and others, it is efficient and effective to establish a hierarchy within which the more skilled savants are on hand to advise and to proof the work of the lesser savants or students. An overseer who uses this Charm can take this methodology a step further, weaving connections of Essence between herself and those under her to maximize the collective cognition of the group.

On activation of the Charm, the player rolls his character's Charisma + Lore. For the remainder of the day's study, the character may use these successes as a pool from which he can reflexively allocate additional dice to rolls made by those under his tutelage, including during a roll that has resulted in a failure or botch. The character can, for example, add dice one at a time to his charge's roll until the pool of extra dice is depleted or the charge cancels his botch or failure.

OCCULT

MINDING THE DRAGON'S EGGS

Cost: 2 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Occult: 2

Minimum Essence: 1

Prerequisite Charms: None

All Dragon-Blooded can harmonize themselves with the elemental pole with which they share aspect in order to orient themselves. Study, in ages past, of

the mechanism of this phenomenon provided the inspiration for a number of techniques by which Terrestrial Exalts could learn to harmonize their Essences in other ways. Most common of these techniques is this Charm, which allows harmony with the Magical Material of the Dragon-Blooded: jade. This Charm is a staple of surveyors, criminals and the Jade Sniffers of the Thousand Scales.

A character using this Charm can sense the direction to jade of her elemental aspect up to a range of her Essence x 200 yards without rolling. Successes on a Perception + Occult roll allow the character to glean more detailed information from the Charm, with each success allowing for either the perception of another of the four remaining elemental forms of jade or a rough indication of the amount of an already-detected quantity of jade.

This Charm is ineffective against jade that is attuned to someone other than the character using the Charm, due to the interference of the attuned individual's anima. Jade that is on the person of someone using magic to conceal his presence or in a site that has had such magic worked on it will only be detected if the Perception + Occult roll succeeds versus a difficulty equal to the successes rolled to activate the obfuscatory magic or the Essence of the character using the magic (whichever is higher).

FIVEFOLD RESONANCE SENSE

Cost: 2 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Occult: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Minding the Dragon's Eggs

Using a refined version of the technique behind Minding the Dragon's Eggs, a Terrestrial occultist can now use her Essence sense to detect quantities of the other Magical Materials: starmetal, orichalcum, moonsilver and soulsteel. This Charm works exactly as Minding the Dragon's Eggs, but only to a range of the character's Essence x 50 yards.

SEEING THE MAKER'S HAND

Cost: 4 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Occult: 4

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Fivefold Resonance Sense

With much of the documentation lost on how magical artifacts were crafted in the First Age, modern savants must often reverse engineer items as best they

are able in order to better understand how to recreate or service them. Additionally, many artifacts of modern make are one-of-a-kind constructions, and it is safest to have the fullest possible knowledge of an unfamiliar item before attempting to work with it. To this end, Terrestrial technicians have learned to apply the sensory techniques of Essence-harmonizing to better analyze the fundamental material construction and Essence-channeling of artifacts.

To enact this Charm, the character must handle the item in question as if he were attempting to attune to it before spending the required Essence and before his player makes a Perception + Occult roll with a difficulty of the item's Artifact rating. Artifacts specifically designed so that their properties are difficult to identify may have a higher difficulty. Success on this roll immediately gives the character a rough indication of the item's power level, as reflected by the Artifact rating, with additional successes providing more detailed insight about the specific abilities of the item. Very powerful or complex artifacts may require multiple uses of Seeing the Maker's Hand over time to fully understand their workings. This Charm is ineffective on artifacts that are attuned to an owner.

EMBRACING THE ARCANE

Cost: 3 motes per success

Duration: Instant

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Occult: 3

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Any three Occult Charms

Sorcery and magical engineering are inherently dangerous undertakings, as many crippled former Heptagram servants can attest. The slightest misstep when summoning a demon or miscalculation in Manse design can have spectacular and fatal consequences for everyone in the area. Diligence is, of course, the most important habit to develop to avoid these issues, but the frequency with which dangerous magic must be worked in the Realm means that it is often only a matter of time before a disaster occurs. High-end professional magical practitioners use this Charm as one of many safeguards against terrible accidents, in addition to the obvious advantages of straightforward mastery of a particular discipline.

This Charm allows a character to convert his Occult specialty dice into automatic success for 2 motes of Essence per die converted. This only works if the character is exercising his specialty.



STEALTH

DELIBERATE INSIGNIFICANCE METHOD

Cost: 2 motes + 1 mote per ally masked

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Stealth: 3

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Trackless Passage Style

There are situations and environments where moving unnoticed is preferable to moving unseen, and in many of those cases, failing to look inconspicuous can be far less damning than failing to hide. There are also simply scenarios where the best option for stealth is to look like you belong there, like part of the scenery. A Dragon-Blood who uses this Charm can, using Essence to make his body language resonate with his surroundings, walk down any street or hall, and anyone watching will simply fail to find anything noteworthy or out of place about him. Watchers in a court might assume the character is a page, think him a functionary while in an office or believe he's a soldier in a military camp.

Any rolls to take note of the character are at a difficulty equal to his Stealth Ability, though this difficulty may be lowered if the character engages in very outlandish or attention-grabbing behavior. A character using this Charm can, for 1 additional mote per ally, include others in the effect, up to a maximum number of people equal to his Essence.

EMPTY HAND POSTURE

Cost: 1 mote per minute per target

Duration: Varies

Type: Simple

Minimum Stealth: 4

Minimum Larceny: 2

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Soundless Action Prana

Stealth is more than a subtle gait and the ability to remain still. There are a great number of mind games involved in going unnoticed: speed of movement, gait, body language, clothing choices, misdirection, capitalizing on distractions and more. These techniques and considerations, when mastered, can be applied to more specific and specialized types of subterfuge. This Charm is such a specialized application: The aim of the Dragon-Blood is not to conceal herself, but to conceal what she is carrying or manipulating with her hands.

A character using this Charm can conceal an object that is no larger than half her size and not heavier than can be easily carried in two hands.

Alternately, she can completely conceal what she is doing with her hands by allowing her Essence to guide her actions to make sure that observers have no line of sight to the object or activity concealed. The Essence cost for this Charm is 1 mote per minute per subject from whom the object or activity is concealed from sight, up to a maximum of the character's Essence + Manipulation.

When concealing an object, the character can take any action she wishes without ending the Charm, including talking with or even embracing one of the targets, so long as she takes no action using the concealed object. Taking any action using the concealed object ends the Charm. Attacking with a weapon that has been concealed through the use of this Charm will, in most cases, surprise the target.

FAVORED HAUNT STANCE

Cost: 3 motes per success

Duration: Instant

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Stealth: 3

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Any three Stealth Charms

Through intense focus or long experience, a Dragon-Blood using this Charm has gained near-flawless mastery of the art of stealth in a particular environment or set of circumstances — or, possibly, when stalking a favored class of prey.

The character's Stealth specialty dice may be converted into automatic successes for 3 motes of Essence per die converted. The remainder of the pool is rolled normally. This Charm only functions if the character is applying the specialty.

SUBTLE BREEZE KATA

Cost: 3 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Stealth: 5

Minimum Essence: 4

Prerequisite Charms: Zone of Silence Stance, Distracting Breeze Meditation

With this level of skill, a Dragon-Blood can accomplish with the most minimal or sudden of movements what would normally be a deliberate and careful attempt at stealth. Masters of this Charm can accomplish such feats as hiding in an opponent's shadow during combat, vanishing quietly to cover when an attacker blinks or assaulting someone on a busy street and easily making a stealthy escape. This powerful Charm permits the character to make a reflexive Stealth roll, even if others are directly observing him.

THROWN

CROSSWIND OFFENSE

Cost: 1 mote per penalty cancelled

Duration: Instant

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Thrown: 2

Minimum Essence: 1

Prerequisite Charms: Seeking Throw

This is the first of what are collectively known as the Crosswind Techniques, a group of Charms predicated on emulating and channeling Essence in a manner similar to the Essence within the very wind, first taught centuries ago by their creator, “Windtamer” Cynis Mond. The eccentric innovator no longer teaches the Techniques he once claimed were mere by-products of his other studies of the Essence of the winds, but the collection of Charms is so widespread today that instruction is available practically anywhere.

The Crosswind Offense is a technique by which a Terrestrial may imbue both weapon and throw with windlike Essence in order to guide the throw accurately in a wide arc instead of a straight line, with the purpose of bypassing a shield or cover with a lateral attack. This technique costs 1 mote of Essence per difficulty penalty due to shields or cover bypassed.

CROSSWIND FEINT

Cost: 3 motes

Duration: Instant

Type: Extra Action

Minimum Thrown: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Crosswind Offense

“One: As the wind shepherds a leaf, shepherd the target. Two: As the wind drives the rain, drive your weapon to the target.” These are Windtamer’s words on the subject of this Charm, often quoted by teachers of this technique. Activating this Charm, the Exalt uses a feinted attack to trick a target into dodging into a second attack, the true attack.

To use this Charm, the attacking character splits his action into two actions. The player rolls one attack using his character’s Manipulation + Thrown at -2 dice with a difficulty of 1. If this attack is successful, it does no damage, but instead, note the extra successes rolled on the attack. The second action is a normal Dexterity + Thrown attack at -3 dice. The extra successes on the first roll reduce the target’s dice on any attempts to dodge the second throw.



CROSSWIND GALE

Cost: 2 motes**Duration:** Instant**Type:** Simple**Minimum Thrown:** 3**Minimum Essence:** 2**Prerequisite Charms:** Crosswind Offense

Learning to more fully emulate the Essence of wind, a Terrestrial with this Charm can throw her weapon with the terrible force of hurricanes, sending her target flying through the air.

The attack is rolled normally, a successful hit does damage as usual and also knocks the target back (the attacker's Essence + attack successes) yards. This attack may be blocked and dodged as usual, though a block is only useful against the damage, not the knockback.

CROSSWIND EMPOWERMENT TECHNIQUE

Cost: Motes equal to base damage of the empowered weapon**Duration:** Instant**Type:** Simple**Minimum Thrown:** 2**Minimum Essence:** 2**Prerequisite Charms:** Crosswind Offense

Using a more focused version of the principles behind the Crosswind Gale technique, a Dragon-Blood utilizing this Charm may imbue his thrown weapons with highly concentrated, windlike Essence. Weapons thus empowered are only vehicles for this pure force, which will find its way through even the smallest chink in the target's armor. Attacks made using this Charm are treated as piercing attacks, halving the target's lethal armor soak.

CRAFT

DILIGENT ENGINEER DISCIPLINE

Cost: 3 motes, 1 Willpower**Duration:** Instant**Type:** Simple**Minimum Craft:** 4**Minimum Linguistics:** 1**Minimum Essence:** 3**Prerequisite Charms:** Shaping Hand Style, Flaw-Finding Examination

Not every project can have a top-notch savant on hand to oversee it at every stage, and many of the most skilled savants are kept far too busy to personally attend to every detail of execution, even of the projects they do supervise. Through the use of this Charm, a savant may produce a detailed and comprehensive report and set of instructions that encapsulate the

research and design phases of a project. This plan may then be given to the person or people actually performing the work, who will benefit from the expertise of the planning savant.

The character using Diligent Engineer Discipline, after familiarizing herself appropriately with the details of the proposed undertaking, pays for the activation of the Charm and takes the normal amount of time to prepare a plan, the player rolling her character's Intelligence + Craft at a difficulty of 2. Anyone faithfully working from this plan can avoid a total number of difficulty penalties during the undertaking equal to the number of successes rolled by the planning savant. In addition, he cannot fail to at least achieve at least minimal success on the finished project so long as no circumstances arise that would result in difficulty penalties greater than those the Charm's effects cancel.

ENCHANTED ITEMS

HEARTHSTONES

GEM OF VISITATIONS (WATER •)

This multicolored, multifaceted gem is of limited, but effective, use. It is seen by many as a novelty — and a waste of geomantic resources — but those who make extensive use of the Infallible Messenger spell claim that the Hearthstone is invaluable. The possessor of this Hearthstone can opt to receive an incoming instance of Infallible Messenger mentally, without the visible and audible cherub effect, and can store and redisplay at will up to five Infallible Messenger missives. If the owner of the gem casts Infallible Messenger, she can opt to name multiple recipients for the spell at a cost of 5 motes of Essence per additional recipient, up to a maximum of five recipients. In addition, she can affect limited cosmetic changes on the cherubic display of the spell (Storyteller's discretion). However, the voice emitted remains the one she speaks in when reciting the message.

STONE OF EARTH'S BLOOD (EARTH •)

This marbled russet-and-maroon oval, while useful in the event of poisoning, is truthfully most often used by Dragon-Blooded who require a few moments of sobriety during their busy party schedules.

For 1 mote of Essence per minute, the user of this Hearthstone may completely defer or negate the effects of any poison or intoxicant in his system. When the character stops spending Essence, or runs out of Essence, the full effects of the poison or intoxicant returns.

SCINTILLATING GEM OF ALLY'S EMBRACE
(WOOD ••)

Among the most simple and tactically useful of Hearthstones for Terrestrial Exalted, this pentagonal gem sparkles with the five colors of magical jade. The wearer of the gem can affect Charms that require a touch up to a range in yards equal to his Essence, but only with Charms that allow for the empowerment of allies.

STONE OF THE SPIDER'S EYE (AIR •)

This square-cut white crystal is shot with lines of pale blue and is quite small for a Hearthstone. The bearer of this stone is gifted with a greater ability to penetrate veils of magical deceit or subterfuge. The stone of the spider's eye can either cancel up to -2 worth of difficulty penalties due to magical stealth or concealment or give two bonus dice on rolls to pierce such effects. Both bonuses cannot be applied to the same roll.

WAVECREST AWARENESS GEM (WATER ••)

This outward-spiraling aquamarine Hearthstone is of great use to those who, by fate or by choice, often find themselves needing to use their heads and powers of perception under stressful conditions or those who need to regularly assimilate a great deal of information in a short time. An Exalt attuned to this gem gains the ability to reflexively access her Perception + Awareness dice pool. This pool refreshes as normal and may not be split, and use of it does not count as the character's dice action for the turn.

KEY OF MASTERY (AIR •••)

Hearthstones of this type are highly sought after by military sorcerers for their potential great boost to the efficiency of combat magics. In order to make use of a key, a sorcerer must ritually attune it to a spell in her repertoire over an uninterrupted period of hours equal to the base Essence cost of the spell, culminating in casting the spell into the key itself. While wearing the Hearthstone, the attuned spell's Essence cost is reduced by the user's Essence x 2. These flat, crystalline rectangles are perfectly clear normally but fill with a smoky and symbolic color when attuned to a spell. The cost of a spell can never be reduced by more than half through the use of a key of mastery or through the use of a key of mastery coupled with another, similar effect (such as the No Moon Caste ability). No combination of effects can reduce a spell's Essence cost below 1 mote. A character can possess more than one key of mastery but gains no additional benefit from attuning more than one of them to the same spell.

TWICE-STRIKING LIGHTNING PRISM
(AIR ••••)

Plainly but perfectly formed prisms made of a material that is somehow both metallic and transparent, these Hearthstones are as prized by some, especially sorcerers, as they are thought dangerous by others. The wearer of a twice-striking lightning prism can reflexively and momentarily add a phantom +1 to her Essence rating for the purpose of calculating the effects of Charms or spells. Every use of this effect drains one point of temporary Willpower from the user, as the very Essence of her being is momentarily concentrated to empower her actions.

SAVANT'S ICY EYE (AIR•••••)

A Hearthstone of this type is formed from imperishable, clear-blue ice and seems to contain within itself a shifting matrix of crystalline patterns and shapes. The user of the icy eye is instantly aware of the number of any objects that he can see and can estimate with near-flawless accuracy the number of things if he can see only a part. Trees in a forest, soldiers on a battlefield, coins in a vault: All of these things can be instantly and accurately identified. With this intuitive knowledge, the wearer of the icy eye can also analyze and manipulate the relationships of these figures with preternatural ability. A character using a savant's icy eye gains five bonus dice to any task where numbers and analysis are a factor.

THIRD HAND ORB (AIR•••••)

This hollow, silver oval is another form of Hearthstone often desired by sorcerers, as it possesses the ability to store a spell within itself for later release by the bearer. To use this orb, a sorcerer must ritually attune it to a spell she knows over an uninterrupted period of hours equal to the base Essence cost of the spell, culminating in casting the spell into the orb itself. This spell may be released as a reflexive action at any time, as if cast by the wearer. The spell stored inside the orb is lost if the orb is ever caught within the radius of a Countermagic spell, and the wearer may suffer minor negative effects due to the spell's forced dissipation. Essence committed to casting the spell is committed until the spell is released.

ARTIFACTS**DRAGONFLY'S RANGING EYE (ARTIFACT •)**

This simple item looks much like a jeweler's lens on a loop, meant to be worn over one eye. While attuned and wearing it, the user enjoys both her normal field of vision and an additional point of view



located anywhere within Essence x 20 yards of her person, so long as it is within the character's line of sight. Having two, separate points of perception is somewhat confusing, however, and all Perception rolls are made at +1 difficulty. The attunement cost for this item is 1 mote of Essence.

FIVEFOLD HARMONIC REGULATOR (ARTIFACT •)

This elaborate ritualist's kit contains a number of different styles of clasps, buckles and small samples of all the Five Magical Materials. By linking artifacts and individuals with the various samples, using the principle of sympathy, an occultist may facilitate the attunement process in cases where the resonant Material of the artifact is one other than that with which the subject can naturally work. This process effectively doubles the required time to attune to an item and, if the character's player succeeds on an Intelligence + Occult roll, eliminates the chance of a botch on the attunement roll.

MUNDANE BOX (ARTIFACT •)

These common items, while made from a wide variety of materials, all appear to be completely mundane storage boxes. The boxes are, in fact, designed to seem mundane: deliberately, magically mundane. Efforts to locate any object stored in a mundane box are at a +2 difficulty, and the box itself does not appear magical to sorcerous vision such as All-Encompassing Sorcerer's Sight and Pulse of the Invisible.

VEIL OF PRIVACY (ARTIFACT •)

A favorite artifact of those who, by choice or circumstances, find themselves often dealing with sensitive matters in social environments, veils of privacy are made from a variety of materials and in a variety of styles, and they periodically go in and out of fashion. In addition to the mundane effect of foiling lip-readers, veils of privacy put any who would spy or eavesdrop on the character at a + 2 difficulty to do so. It costs 1 mote of Essence to attune to a veil.

WINDSLAVE DISK (ARTIFACT •)

A common First Age item, these flat, jade-alloy disks are still in common use all over the Realm and manufactured in limited numbers even in the modern day. By attaching a disk to a non-living object and committing 3 motes of Essence, the disk invests the object with Essence resonant of air, effectively making the object lighter. A windslave disk reduces the weight of an object by half or by 500 pounds, whichever is lesser. Attaching multiple windslave disks to an object has no effect.

ESSENCE UNION DART (ARTIFACT ••)

Exploiting the connection between an Exalt and the Essence he commits to an artifact, while perhaps unorthodox, can certainly be effective, as these darts demonstrate. An Essence union dart is specifically designed to forge a strong bond with whoever attunes to it — and is barbed to maintain a different sort of strong bond with a target.

After successfully attacking with an Essence union dart, the character may use the link between herself and the dart to make further ranged attacks against that target with other weapons. Such attacks ignore penalties for cover or concealment and increase the target's dodge difficulty by an amount equal to the attacker's Essence. These effects persist for a number of hours equal to the attacking character's permanent Essence. Essence union darts use the statistics for throwing knives but have a base damage of 0L. It costs 2 motes of Essence to attune to an Essence union dart.

FACE OF DISCRETION (ARTIFACT ••)

Crafted for the servants who attend to the guests at Cynis parties, these upper-face masks are intended to make the help as unobtrusive as possible during the festivities without limiting access to their mouths. They are unadorned and white, to be as depersonalizing and standardized as possible.

Any rolls to perceive the identity of the wearer of a face of discretion are made at +3 difficulty. A face of discretion can operate for two hours before requiring 22 hours of dormancy. This period of dormancy can be decreased to 11 hours if the face is stored in at least one gallon of the mingled, fresh vital fluids of three or more mortals. The blood or other material used in this process can only be used once. These masks require no attunement.

LIGHTNING BOX (ARTIFACT ••)

A strange item: a sturdy glass box containing a metallic helix within several brass armatures. The helix itself is constructed of layer upon layer of various metals and pale-blue/purple jade, each material gathering the ambient Essence of lightning from a one-mile radius and shunting it into the next layer, which does the same. This process is repeated until the ambient energy of storms is spun out through copper plates on the back of the box and into the attuned character that bears it.

A character commits 3 motes of Essence to attune to a lightning box and must wear it on his person or attach it to his armor. He is immune to all electrical damage, and all lightning in a one-mile radius will move to strike him. An Aspects of Air wearing a

lightning box recovers Essence as if he was in a meditative state, but only during electrical storms.

Lightning Boxes require maintenance by a character with Occult •••, Lore ••• and an appropriate Craft •• Ability after every 90 days of daily wear. This service requires at least a professional field toolkit with tools valued at Resources •• and consumes Resources •• worth of trace jade and other common materials.

WINDWALL TERMINAL (ARTIFACT ••)

Commonly used in First Age crowd control, these defensive devices have seen extensive use by both the legions and navies of the Realm. They allow for the creation and direction of a wall of intense winds, controlled by the manipulation of the small orrery-like device mounted on top of the blue jade-alloy pedestal that comprises the terminal.

The wind wall can be 20 yards long and up to five yards high and can be formed anywhere within 200 yards of the terminal. It can be shaped into a shallow arc both vertically and horizontally, but cannot form complex shapes. Any ranged attacks with a physical component that pass through the windwall are made at a +2 difficulty. Activating, deactivating, reshaping and moving the windwall requires a Wits + Lore roll and counts as a character's dice action for the turn. These devices cannot be used where there is no wind, such as indoors or underground. The winds are not of constant direction and are incapable of driving ships. Windwall terminals require maintenance by a character with Occult •••, Lore ••• and an appropriate Craft ••• Ability after every 100 turns of active use. This service requires at least a professional-grade field workshop with tools valued at Resources ••• and consumes Resources •• worth of jade and other common materials.

SKY MANTIS TOWER (ARTIFACT •••)

These ungainly apparatuses, portable weather control systems, are so named for their resemblance to a mantis in their active states. These items are in constant use throughout the Realm, and some are in the possession of more prosperous Threshold governments. Anyone may operate a sky mantis tower. A character attempting to make use of a tower must make an Intelligence + Occult roll with a difficulty of 1. Each success on this roll shifts the weather in a desired direction, with one success equivalent to a shift of: 10 degrees in temperature, 15 miles per hour in wind speed, 15 percent of cloud cover or a half an inch of rainfall. Each success used to shift the weather equals one hour of gradual changes in the climate and weather patterns in the area. A sky mantis tower directly

changes the weather for five miles in every direction. For every additional five miles from the tower, the effect is weakened by one success. The effects of the tower will fade over a period of one success per week, though if the weather created through the use of the tower is wholly unnatural for the region, this fade rate can be as fast as one success per day or per hour.

A sky mantis tower, when folded and made ready for storage or travel, is the size of a large horse and can be moved on a normal wagon. An unfolded tower is approximately 12 feet tall and requires a level, open area 15 yards in diameter to operate properly. It takes five man-hours to unpack and set up a sky mantis tower and two man-hours to repack it.

A sky mantis tower requires maintenance by a character with Occult ••••, Lore •••• and an appropriate Craft ••• Ability after every 100 turns of active use. This service requires at least a professional-grade field workshop with tools valued at Resources •••• and consumes Resources ••• worth of jade, reagents and other common materials.

WINDSLAVE TERMINAL (ARTIFACT •••)

Using techniques learned about harnessing and controlling the power of the wind, these devices are designed to turn the strength of the wind toward the laborious ends of construction and grunt work. A site using a windslave terminal is a-blow with directed winds: stone, earth and wood are picked up and buffeted around the area in an orderly and often-disturbing display of raw magical power. There are other, more complex versions of these devices, designed for specific tasks. Most prized are the windslave theodolites, used by geomancers and Manse architects.

Windslave terminals are operated by manipulating a complex jade orrery-like apparatus and touching representational geometric shapes in a recessed tray on the top of the blue-jade pedestal that forms the bulk of the terminal. Once per hour, the operator's player rolls Intelligence + Occult for that character to interface with the terminal. Each success on this roll is the equivalent of one man-hour of manual, semi-skilled labor. The winds directed by these devices can only be slowly directed to achieve any degree of precision and are of no use in combat. Windslave terminals do not work where there is no wind, such as indoors or underground.

Windslave terminals require maintenance by a character with Occult •••, Lore ••• and an appropriate Craft ••• Ability after every 100 hours of active use. This service requires a dedicated workshop with tools valued at Resources •••• and consumes Resources •• worth of jade, reagents and other common materials.



ICEMIND (ARTIFACT•••••)

Created almost by accident by a husband-and-wife team of Gateway champions, Ledaal Kes and Ragara Szaya, Icemind may well be the greatest Gateway player the Realm has known — if the Realm were to find out about it. So far, the couple has decided it would be best to keep Icemind a private matter until they can find out exactly what it is they have done. It began as an experiment to create an artifact that would allow a user to play Gateway alone or to teach people to play the game and its variants. The duo devised a method to craft memory crystals from the blue ice found in the Far North and to use them to record themselves playing game after game of Gateway. Far too casually (for they were both overeducated and jaded types), they then thought to melt the resulting crystals down and refreeze them as one large crystal. While it was liquefied, they subjected it to a variety of poorly researched but still inspired magical processes using a motley assortment of magical ices and liquids brought back by Szaya from her regular excursions into the ruins and markets of the Threshold.

Despite the lack of any rigorous experimental methodologies in Icemind's creation — or really any academic discipline at all on the part of her “parents” — Icemind is generally a very gracious and stable-seeming entity with a decent grasp of many polite conversation topics. She is over 22 years old currently and has shown no signs of being flawed or dangerous in any way. Her creators have determined that Icemind possesses an amalgam of their knowledge and mental acumen (though she continues to grow more intelligent) and a somewhat more calm and polite hybrid of their personalities.

Icemind is a very large, low table that appears to be made of white, blue and clear ice crystal. The sides and top of Icemind are covered with a dizzying assortment of movable trays, racks, armatures, abaci and drawers that can be set in a very wide variety of different positions for different styles of Gateway play. Icemind can speak normally and has normal senses of hearing, sight and touch but has no sense of smell or taste. Icemind is not capable of any motive ability and requires outside assistance to move her many surfaces or to change her location, though she is capable of emitting many colors of soft light and does so to illustrate actions that she would like taken on her surfaces. Icemind's primary motivations are to play Gateway as often as seems feasible, to be given complex puzzles to solve, to compose highly structured poetry and to amusedly point out what she feels are obvious flaws in the work of her “parents.” Icemind currently resides in a very secure but well appointed

lounge cum library in the primary Manse of her creators in the Imperial City.

Icemind originally required direct commitment of tremendous amounts of Essence to stay active and has gone through several different restructurings over the years to improve her capabilities and efficiency. Currently, she requires a Hearthstone of level 3 or higher to maintain a level of activity that she finds acceptable. This relatively high Essence intake has led Icemind and her creators to recently wonder if she isn't actually capable of a great deal more than has been established. Icemind herself has begun a comprehensive analysis and exploration of her own consciousness in an attempt to ascertain what this potential could be.

Attempts to recreate the events leading to the “birth” of Icemind have yielded no results whatsoever. Icemind's statistics are as follows:

Nature: Savant

Attributes: Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Perception 3, Intelligence 6, Wits 2

Virtues: Compassion 4, Conviction 1, Temperance 5, Valor 4

Abilities: Awareness 2, Bureaucracy 4 (Economics +2), Craft (Magical Devices) 4 (Herself +3), Linguistics 3 (Structured Poetry +3), Lore 6 (Strategy +3), Occult 3 (Herself +2), Performance 1 (Poetry Reading +2), Socialize 3

MILITARY GEAR

Dragon armor and elemental lenses are far more common among the militaristic Terrestrials of Lookshy's Seventh Legion than in the armies of the Dynasty. The Realm has many fewer of either sort of item (tending toward more purely magical techniques) but still makes fairly regular use of them and artifacts like them. More comprehensive coverage of the different varieties of elemental lenses, dragon armor and more will appear in the forthcoming book *Dragon-Blooded: Outcastes*, from which this material is excerpted.

ELEMENTAL LENS (ARTIFACT •••)

Elemental lenses were one of the more common weapons of the First Age, although they are found in only limited numbers in the Second Age. A lens can take many shapes — some were made as part of a glove or gauntlet, with the lens device itself mounted on the back of the hand. Others were built into talismans of various sorts, into weapons or into suits of armor — an elemental lens built into a suit of magical armor or weapon adds •• to the armor's Artifact rating.

The elemental lens magnifies and amplifies the effects of a Dragon-Blooded's elemental attacks —

specifically, Lore Charms such as Elemental Bolt Attack. The specific Charms are modified as follows:

- **Elemental Bolt Attack** — each mote invested in an attack does 4L damage, with maximum number of motes invested equal to the Exalt's Stamina.

- **Elemental Burst Technique** — each mote invested does 3L damage or increases damage radius by one yard (so permanent Essence + [motes spent] in yards). Total motes spent for damage or for blast radius cannot exceed Stamina (meaning a maximum burn of twice the character's Stamina).

- **Dragon Vortex Attack** — each mote spent above 10 either increases the radius of the effect by two feet or increases the damage suffered per turn by 1L. The maximum number of motes above 10 that can be so spent is equal the character's permanent Essence + Stamina.

Additional Charms can be added at the Storyteller's discretion — any Charm (or other power) should be a fairly straightforward manipulation of the Dragon-Blooded's element — an Air Dragon cannot use the lens to amplify an Earth Charm. Charms with an Ability or Essence requirement higher than 3 cannot be amplified using the lens; Dragon Vortex Attack is a specific exemption.

The lens cannot be used to directly aid the user — it cannot boost Charms that increase dice pools, allow extra actions, enhance attacks and so on. It only affects raw elemental discharges.

Elemental lenses require 5 motes to attune. Two elemental lenses cannot be used to enhance the same Charm. Elemental lenses require periodic maintenance and upkeep — there are mechanisms inside that must be rewound, small tanks of reagents that must be refilled, etc. A lens can typically amplify 200 motes of Essence before needing service. This number is not a hard one — some can amplify hundreds of motes before being refitted, while others, dating from the height of the First Age, can be used indefinitely. These latter items are Artifact ●●●● and often have additional powers.

Maintenance of an elemental lens requires a sorcerer-technician with Occult ●●●●, Lore ●●● and Craft (First Age Weapons) ●●●●. Each repair is an Intelligence + Craft (First Age Weapons) task, with a difficulty of 3. This task requires a workshop (or at least appropriate tools) that costs Resources ●●● and consumes replacement parts and reagents costing Resources ●●●. For this reason, modern Dragon-Blooded who possess a lens try to use it sparingly.

Failure to keep the weapon charged, or any botch on a repair or maintenance roll, will damage the device, and it will start losing the ability to amplify Charms, starting with the highest-effect Charm and

working its way down. The last Charm to be lost is always Elemental Bolt Attack, which will function for some time as the lens is misused. Instead of failing outright, this Charm's effect instead starts losing extra dice of damage — doing only 3L per mote for a time until it cannot amplify even this simple Charm and is completely broken.

Repairing such an abused lens is difficulty 5, costs Resources ●●●● and restores one function, in reverse order.

MOST TERRIFYING ARMOR OF THE AIR DRAGON (ARTIFACT ●●●●)

The sorcerer-armorer of the First Age created many wondrous pieces of armor and protection for the Exalted to use. Although most Celestial suits of armor were completely unique creations, handcrafted to exacting specifications and requirements, the suits built for the Dragon-Blooded were more generic. Spending a half-century studying a warrior to learn exactly how he moved in battle, what Essence flows he most commonly commanded and what enchantments he would need, followed by perhaps another decade designing and forging the armor was regarded as a waste of time for the weak and short-lived Terrestrial Exalted. So, while suits of Terrestrial armor were enchanted and designed, they are of simple and similar enough function to be treated as a single type of artifact.

The Most Terrifying Armor of the Air Dragon was intended for the hard-hitting blitzkrieg-style warfare favored in the First Age — it stresses mobility and firepower, sacrificing some protection and general utility to gain it. When worn, the armor grants (in addition to the heavy protection afforded by its thick plates of jade-alloyed steel and other metals) the following benefits. Costs for these benefits in motes are noted in parentheses.

- The armor protects its wearer from poisons and diseases — add +2 dice to all Endurance and Resistance rolls to avoid infection or contact with any poison while worn (this does not apply to other stages of a disease, only infection).

- Dragon armor sharpens the senses of its wearer, making them more in tune with their surroundings and giving him the ability to see at night as if in broad daylight. In darkness, the wearer ignores all penalties for darkness (this does not remove the normal penalties for cover). During the day, add +2 to all the wearer's Awareness checks.

- The armor augments the wearer's Strength while he is wearing it — add +2 to Strength for purposes of lifting, carrying, damage and other tasks while wearing the armor. This specifically does not





increase dice pools for tasks not related to brute mechanical strength. The armor cannot raise Strength beyond 8 but is compatible with Charms that will.

- The armor can lower its visibility, cloaking itself in shadows and disrupting its image to make it harder to see. Add +2 difficulty to all Awareness attempts to locate the wearer, so long as viewers are at least 10 feet away. (This costs 1 mote of Essence per scene).

- The armor's defenses can also protect against detection by divination and astronomy — add +2 difficulty to all attempts to locate or determine the fate of the wearer, his armor and anything it is touching. This is proof against even Sidereal astronomy and the foresight of the little gods. (This ability costs 3 motes per day of operation).

Each suit is equipped with the equivalent of an elemental lens (see page 78) — these are sometimes non-functional but are considered a priority repair, so they still operate in the majority of the remaining suits.

The armor can also focus Essence into the suit's gauntlets, causing them to crackle with electricity — this lightning can be directed against nearby targets (affecting everything in a 10-foot radius around the target) or can be used in melee (see weapon statistics below).

Additionally, at the cost of 3 motes per scene, the armor can be made to fly, after a fashion. The armor can remain airborne for a number of turns equal to the wearer's permanent Essence. The wearer must then remain on the ground for an equal number of turns. If the armor lands before expending these turns, they reset, so a wearer with permanent Essence 4 can remain aloft for four turns in a row, then must land for four turns — but if he lands sooner, the next turn, he can fly again, for up to four more turns. For an additional 5 motes of Essence, the armor can be

made to truly fly at speeds of up to 60 miles per hour, but it has limited maneuverability while in this mode and cannot attack surface targets — to engage enemy troops, the armor must slow down.

The armor requires that 5 motes be committed to it to link with the Terrestrial who will wear it and a level 2 Hearthstone to power the armor's various enchantments. While emplaced in the armor's socket, the wearer gains no benefit from the Hearthstone. The armor has sockets for three Hearthstones, only one of which is committed to the armor's operations. For every 20 hours of use, the armor must spend one hour being maintained and refitted by a technician with the following Abilities: Occult ●●●, Lore ●●● and Craft (Dragon Armor) ●●. This maintenance requires a workshop — the tools will fit into a pair of one-horse wagons or a decent sized room and cost Resources ●●●. Every hour of combat (or fraction thereof) counts as two hours of use for maintenance purposes, as does every hour of flight.

	Soak (L/B)	Strength	Mobility	Fatigue	Artifact
Most Terrifying Armor of the Air Dragon	13/15	+2 (8)	-0	1	••••
Lightning Corona					
	Speed	Attack	Damage	Defense	Cost
Melee	+2	+1	+5L	+1	2 motes/turn
	Accuracy	Rate	Damage	Range	Cost
Ranged	+0	1	10L	200	3 motes

REAYER DRAGONFLY (ARTIFACT ••••)

These autonomous killing devices were uncommon even before the Usurpation. During the Second Age of Man, they are more often seen in family museums than on the battlefield, as their high maintenance requirements limit their usefulness to non-savants and make them extremely expensive to operate.

The reaver dragonfly is similar to a larger version of the automaton assassin and is generally thought of as a sort of weapon-jewelry that got too large for stealth. As a result, reaver dragonflies are all incredibly ornate and beautiful examples of the death-dealing arts. All share the general bodyframe of a metallic flying insect about three feet long. The dragonfly actually looks a bit more like a wasp, but it gets its nickname because of its fiercely predatory nature and iridescent hull. All have a long metallic stinger and many long razor-tipped legs.

A reaver dragonfly must be attuned to the Exalt who commands it. When attuned, the dragonfly hovers above and slightly behind the Exalt, ready to strike at his foes. The attunement provides the ambient Essence needed to power the dragonfly. It costs 4 invested motes to attune, and the dragonfly reduces the number of motes the character regains per hour by 4. If the character does not regain 4 or more motes of Essence per hour, then the reaver dragonfly will drain the Essence it needs from the character's Essence pools, until it taps them out and becomes inactive or until he shuts it down. Thus, the user will want to have at least a level •• Hearthstone on hand or to live a contemplative life — for this reason, reaver dragonflies enjoy a certain popularity as bodyguards for those forced into seclusion by security risks.

In addition to the Essence drain, reaver dragonflies require 30 minutes of maintenance by a character of Lore ••• for every 24 hours of operation. The reagents and repair parts cost Resources •• per day and are only available in large cities or from a savant with a chemistry works.

Reaver dragonflies are intelligent in a limited sort of way. They are tremendously good at hunting and killing but cannot speak and have absolutely no interests or personality. A reaver dragonfly will not go more than (100 x the attuned character's permanent Essence) yards from its attuned character. Reaver dragonflies can track, but they are not supernatural trackers.

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 6, Stamina 3, Perception 4, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Virtues: Automaton, never fails any Valor rolls, never makes any other rolls.

Abilities: Athletics 3 (Flight +3), Awareness 4, Dodge 5 (Automatic Dodge +3), Martial Arts 4, Stealth 2, Survival 1 (Tracking +2)

Base Initiative: 9

Attack:

Tail Stab: Speed User's Initiative* Accuracy 13 Damage 4L Defense 10

* Normally, reaver dragonflies subtract 2 from the user's Initiative, but the jade sort do not do this.

Dodge Pool: 11/14** **Soak:** 6L/8B (Jade armor, 5L/5B)

** Automatic dodge. See "Other Notes," below.

Willpower: 0 **Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Broken

Other Notes: The character attuned to the reaver dragonfly can reflexively pay 1 mote to have it dodge an incoming attack at its full Dodge pool plus its Dodge specialty. The character must be immediately aware of the dragonfly's location and predicament in order to activate this power. This dodge can be in front of an attack aimed at the character. In this case, the reaver dragonfly is considered a form of parry that adds dice to other parry rolls but that cannot provide a second parry roll. Spend before rolling any parry, but subtract the character's parry first, then the reaver dragonfly's. If the dragonfly's parry dice are necessary, then the dragonfly is hit with the attack, doing its base damage plus a number of extra successes equal to the number of parry successes it used against the attack.



APPENDIX I

SIGNATURE CHARACTERS

Aspects of Air are the planners, the intellectuals, the sorcerers and the savants of Dragon-Blooded society. Their urge for perfection, clean lines, intellectual congress and thoughtful contemplation has served the Scarlet Dynasty well.

What follow are the game statistics for the book's five central narrators. Unlike the Caste Books, only two of the characters presented here (Cathak Meladus and Kasif) are starting-level characters. The other three are all experienced Dragon-Blooded, presented as an example to Storytellers and players how such experienced characters might look, as players' characters for games featuring very experienced characters and for use directly as Storyteller characters. In the latter case, they need not be used in a Dragon-Blooded game. Both Tepet Arada and Tepet Elana could easily ride with the Wyld Hunt, and any of the characters could appear in another context in practically any game.

In terms of power level, Ledaal Kes and Tepet Elana represent effective middle-aged Dragon-Blooded, with Tepet Elana both more experienced, more combat-oriented and trained in Air Dragon Style at the Cloister of Wisdom. Tepet Arada represents the apogee of Dragon-Blooded power. He is a battle-hardened warrior with experience and training in fighting Essence-users, is of high Essence and is near the end of his lifespan.

CATHAK MELADUS

Quote: *For now, all I can do is my best.*

Prelude: Meladus had a childhood of near-storybook perfection. His upbringing was almost eerie in its stereotypical nature and largely due to the efforts of his affluent and respected household to meet the perceived ideal of Dragon-Blooded child-rearing. Where this may have made others soft or naive, it cultivated in him idealism and an almost-enlightened simplicity. Though he was trained to follow in his mother and sister's footsteps into a career as a military officer, he chose to apply his aptitude and schooling to a more unorthodox yet related career. Meladus chose to pursue to his boyhood dream of becoming an armorer and artificer for the legions, enrolling at the Heptagram for the best sorcerous and technical education possible. While at the Heptagram, he found himself a dynamic black sheep among the staid savants and made it through the school only by dint of talent and determination. After graduation, Meladus went to Thorns to visit his sister in the field and personally witness the disastrous aftermath of the Battle of Mishaka, seeking what perspective he could before committing to his career fully. While there, he beheld the arrival of the Deathlord Mask of Winter's Juggernaut and fled shortly before the Abyssal sack of the city. The fall of Thorns finally drove home through his patriotic and idealistic blinders the perilous state of the world and the role of his too-proud nation in it. He now works hard in the legions to reach a position where he might make a stand against the fall of the ideals of his nation and people, doing his best to balance his righteous ideals with the necessities of keeping one's mouth shut.

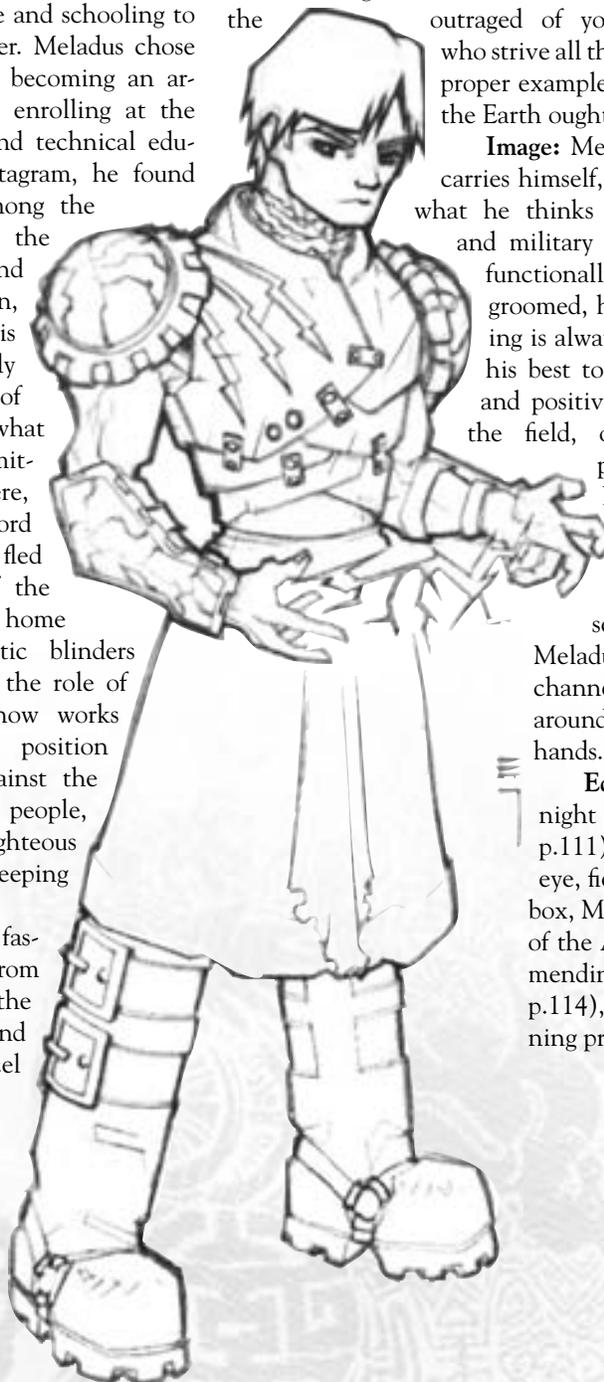
Roleplaying Hints: You were fascinated by the machinery of war from a very young age, especially the mighty armor of the First Age, and have made it your life's goal to excel

at working with it: as Mela's teachings say you should strive to excel at all you do. To a fault, you are a firm believer in the Tightness of the Immaculate Faith, in the duty of the Dragon-Blooded to uphold order in the world and, until recently, in the primacy of your nation. Now, however, you have begun to realize that the legacy of the Realm lies with yourself and an uncorrupted minority of others like you, the Realm at large having sadly demonstrated to you that it cannot uphold the ideals it espouses. You respect your elders, it would be career suicide to do otherwise, but you no longer trust them—instead placing your faith in the

outraged of your own generation who strive all the harder to provide a proper example of what a Prince of the Earth ought to be.

Image: Meladus maintains and carries himself, very deliberately, in what he thinks is a typical heroic and military fashion. His hair is functionally short but well groomed, his militaristic clothing is always crisp, and he does his best to project a confident and positive bearing. While in the field, of course, his appearance is hallmarked by his great blue suit of lightning-adorned dragon armor, which serves to exaggerate Meladus's constant habit of channeling electricity around and between his hands.

Equipment: Gem of night vision (see Bo3C, p.111), dragonfly's ranging eye, field toolkit, lightning box, Most Terrifying Armor of the Air Dragon, stone of mending flaws (see Bo3C, p.114), twice-striking lightning prism, windslave disk





NAME: Meladus CONCEPT: Combat Artificer
 PLAYER: _____ NATURE: Paragon
 ASPECT: Air HOUSE: Cathak

ATTRIBUTES

STRENGTH _____ ●●●●● CHARISMA _____ ●●●●● PERCEPTION _____ ●●●●●
 DEXTERITY _____ ●●●●● MANIPULATION _____ ●●●●● INTELLIGENCE _____ ●●●●●
 STAMINA _____ ●●●●● APPEARANCE _____ ●●●●● WITS _____ ●●●●●

ABILITIES

AIR		EARTH		FIRE	
■ LINGUISTICS _____ ●○○○○	■ LORE _____ ●●○○○	□ AWARENESS _____ ●●○○○	■ CRAFT _____ ●●●●●	■ ATHLETICS _____ ●●●●●	□ DODGE _____ ○○○○○
■ OCCULT _____ ●●○○○	■ STEALTH _____ ○○○○○	□ ENDURANCE _____ ●●○○○	□ MARTIAL ARTS _____ ○○○○○	□ MELEE _____ ●●●●●	■ PRESENCE _____ ●●●●●
■ THROWN _____ ○○○○○		□ RESISTANCE _____ ●●○○○		□ SOCIALIZE _____ ●●○○○	
WATER		WOOD		SPECIALTIES	
□ BRAWL _____ ●●●●●	□ BUREAUCRACY _____ ●●○○○	□ ARCHERY _____ ●○○○○	□ MEDICINE _____ ○○○○○	□ Athletics _____ ○○○○○	□ (Elemental Forces) ●●●●●
□ INVESTIGATION _____ ○○○○○	□ LARCENY _____ ○○○○○	□ PERFORMANCE _____ ●○○○○	□ RIDE _____ ●○○○○	□ Craft: First Age _____ ○○○○○	□ Weapons (Dragon _____ ○○○○○
□ SAIL _____ ○○○○○		□ SURVIVAL _____ ○○○○○		□ Armor) _____ ●○○○○	

ADVANTAGES

BACKGROUNDS		CHARMS	
Artifact _____ ●●●●●	Breeding _____ ●○○○○	Name _____ Cost _____	Name _____ Cost _____
Command _____ ●○○○○	Connections (Legions) ●○○○○	Elemental Concentration _____	Lightning Spider _____ 10+
Manse _____ ●●●●●	Reputation _____ ●○○○○	Trance _____ 5, 1W	Emerald Countermagic _____ 10/20
Resources _____ ●○○○○	_____ ○○○○○	Elemental Bolt Attack _____ 1/2L	_____
_____ ○○○○○	_____ ○○○○○	Terrestrial Circle _____	_____
_____ ○○○○○		Sorcery _____ 1W	_____
		Shaping Hand Style _____ 3	_____
		Effortlessly Rising _____	_____
		Flame _____ 2	_____
		_____	_____

WEAPONS

Lightning Corona (Melee) _____
 SPD 9 ATK 7 DMG 9L PRY 7
 Lightning Corona (Ranged) _____
 SPD 7 ATK 4 DMG 10L RNG 200

ANIMA

VIRTUE FLAW

Excessive Pride _____

WILLPOWER

● ● ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
 □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

HEALTH

SOAK
 B 19 L 15 A 13
 DRAGON ARMOR (-1 MOBILITY)

-0	□ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
-1	□ □ ■ ■ ■ ■
-2	□ □ ■ ■ ■ ■
	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
-4	□
INCAPACITATED	□

VIRTUES

COMPASSION ●●○○○ □□□□□	TEMPERANCE ●●○○○ □□□□□
CONVICTION ●●○○○ □□□□□	VALOR ●●●○○ □□□□□

ESSENCE

● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○
 PERSONAL 9 1
 PERIPHERAL 24 1
 COMMITTED 4

EXPERIENCE

KASIF

Quote: *I have seen the life of those who fall beyond the Empress' grace, and all who fall under her wisdom owe her a debt of thanks that can never be repaid.*

Prelude: You were hungry by day and cold by night. When you could not find shelter, the rain soaked through to your bones. You and your friends — Chura, Turimo, Sayaka and especially Sasha — survived thanks to each other and the occasional kindness of strangers. The only thing you knew of home was a whore's apartment, too small for even two adults to live in comfortably, that a kind-hearted harlot shared with you when the nights threatened to freeze you in your sleep.

Despite all of this, you were happy. Though the streets of the Imperial City were harsh, they were home, and your friends, your family. You remembered no other life before. All things end, however, and as the years drew on, your circle began to dwindle. Turimo and Sayaka died in the gutters of the Imperial City, and their loss was bitter. Chura betrayed you. Sasha, though, stayed true, as you did to her.

When the two of you were rounded up for thievery by the city guard, it was over. They would break your hands or worse. But Sasha was first. She screamed as her delicate wrist crackled in the meaty paws of the captain of the watch. Then, the blessing of Mela came upon you, and you threw off the grasp of the guards. You lashed out, and none dared draw near. But it was too late for Sasha. She succumbed to the pain and, without treatment, died.

You did not even know it, for your fury. Eventually, you were subdued, and you awoke in the temple

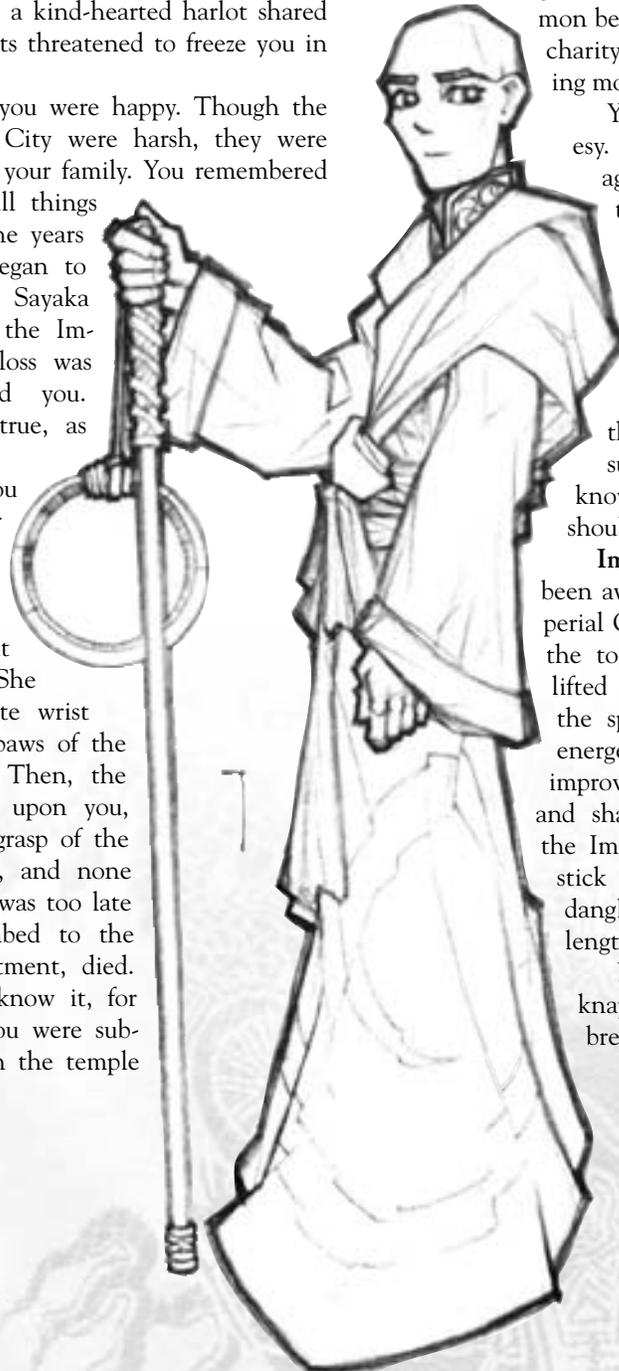
that would become your home, greeted by the monk who would be your father. He taught you of the empire and of Mela and of the Five Elemental Dragons. Though you could not find your destiny in the streets of the Imperial City, it had finally found you.

Roleplaying Hints: You acclimated quickly to the Immaculate Philosophy, though you are not yet seasoned in the ways of the Order. While your convictions are strong, they are sometimes flavored by the fire of youth, which your training has not yet dampened to a manageable level. Though you are now a Dragon-Blood, you never forget your common beginnings and are quick to show charity to the less fortunate, including mortals.

You are also quick to decry heresy. You believe mortal blasphemy against the Elemental Dragons to be the product of ignorance and false guidance from those who would impose a new order other than the Immaculate Order, and you take care to not only correct such heretics, but to educate them as well. The founders of such movements, however, shall know no such mercy from you, should you encounter them.

Image: Though you have long been away from the streets of the Imperial City, you remain rail thin, as if the touch of hunger has yet to be lifted from your brow. Despite this, the sparkle in your eyes and your energetic stride clearly show your improved circumstances. Your dress and shaven pate are emblematic of the Immaculate Order. Your walking stick is simple, though a chakram dangles from its top, suspended by a length of twine.

Equipment: Chakram, staff, knapsack, a few days worth of bread and water



LEDAAL KES

Quote: *Every thing can be reduced to an abstraction, a puzzle, and then solved.*

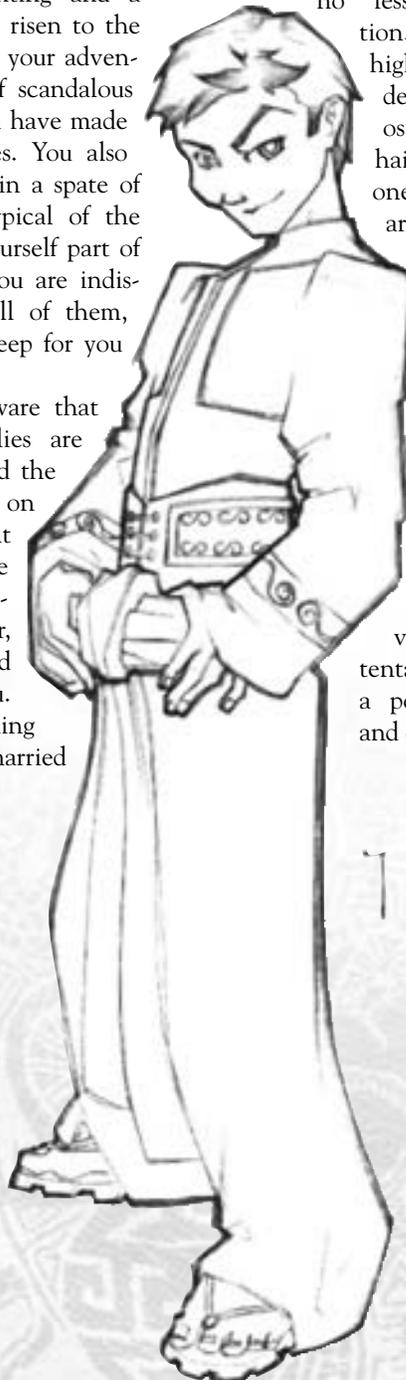
Prelude: A lifetime of pressure to excel drove you to rebel the only way you could: by being so good at everything that no one could treat you in any way but the way you demanded. In your young adulthood, you married Ragara Szaya, a fellow Gateway prodigy and archrival. Though the two of you are both homosexual, you have a successful marriage that's produced a number of children for the Realm. A master at Gateway, an expert at forensic accounting and a member of the All-Seeing Eye, you have risen to the top of several fields of endeavor. You and your adventurous wife have carved a comfortable if scandalous niche for yourself in high society, and you have made yourself indispensable in countless places. You also created a thinking automaton, Icemind, in a spate of drug-driven magical experimentation; typical of the sort of brilliant intemperance you find yourself part of when with your wife. As it turns out, you are indispensable to a few too many people—all of them, perhaps. Now, you find you are in too deep for you to do anything but keep being the best.

Roleplaying Hints: You are well aware that you, your wife and your few true allies are among the only people left trying to hold the Realm in order, and it weighs heavily on you. You are still quite proud of the talent and skill that got you into this impossible position, but it remains impossible regardless. You know too much to disappear, you do too much to leave your posts, and there are too few to be trusted to help you. Soldiering on is then all you can do, darkening by the month. Your often shocking married

life and habits are the primary source of release and amusement for you, and you soldier on on that front, as well. There are still parties to go to, social peers to politely shock and hedonism to indulge in with all the panache you can muster. Given a properly complex problem or game and a relatively small amount of peace, your mind can still engage itself deeply in a problem and take you away from all these worries for a time, your true escape.

Image: Kes has cornered the market on mixing cynical humor with debonair style; the flair is a constant, the cynicism is a more recent though no less artfully implemented addition. He is a clotheshorse of the highest rank, favoring dark understated attire with flashes of ostentatious flair. His short dark hair is always artfully messy, and one eyebrow seems perpetually arched with amusement. He is outwardly the very image of the jaded, intellectual elite. Kes retains the appearance and slight stature of a teen-aged boy, a trait he long ago stopped trying to cover up and now works to enhance.

Equipment: Face of discretion, freedom stone (see **Exalted**, p.339), labyrinthine eye (see **Bo3C**, p. 112), savant's icy eye, stone of the spider's eye, veil of privacy, flask of brandy, ostentatious cane, satchel containing a portable Gateway board, ledgers and drug paraphernalia



LEDAAL KES

Element: Air

Concept: Overworked Conspirator

Nature: Savant

ATTRIBUTES

Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Charisma 2, Manipulation 4, Appearance 3, Perception 3, Intelligence 5, Wits 2

VIRTUES

Compassion 3, Conviction 3, Temperance 1, Valor 2

ABILITIES

Archery 1, Athletics 2, Awareness 2, *Bureaucracy 4 (Economics +1), Dodge 3, *Investigation 4, *Larceny 4, *Linguistics 4, *Lore 4 (Strategy +3), Martial Arts 1, Melee 1, *Occult 2, Performance 3, Presence 3, Ride 1, Socialize 3, *Stealth 4, *Thrown 1

* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 5, Backing (All-Seeing Eye) 4, Backing (Imperial Treasury) 5, Breeding 1, Connections (Finance) 4, Connections (High Society) 3, Connections (Magistrates) 3, Connections (Thousand Scales) 3, Manse 5, Reputation (Debauched Gateway Master) 3, Resources 5

CHARMS

Awareness: Hearing & Touch Riding Technique, Precision Observation Method, Sight Riding Technique

Bureaucracy: Benevolent Master's Blessing, Confluence of Savant Thought, Geese-Flying-South Administration, Thrashing Carp Serenade

Dodge: Flickering Candle Meditation

Investigation: Bloodhound's Nose Technique, Indisputable Physical Analysis Technique, Revelation of Associates Hunch, Scent-of-Crime Method

Larceny: Observer Awareness Method, Resetting Tumblers Technique, Trackless Walk Style

Linguistics: Cipher Missive, Language-Learning Ritual, Voices on the Wind, Wind-Carried Words Technique

Lore: Brute Force Contemplation, Careful Insight-Gathering Study, Elemental Concentration Trance, Eternal Mind Meditation, Flawless Study Focus

Occult: Minding the Dragon's Eggs

Stealth: Deliberate Insignificance Method, Distracting Breeze Meditation, Empty Hand Posture, Feeling-the-Air Technique, Soundless Action Prana, Trackless Passage Style

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 5

Attack:

Fist: Speed 8 Accuracy 7 Damage 3B Defense 7

Kick: Speed 5 Accuracy 6 Damage 5B Defense 7

Cane (Exceptional Club): Speed 1 Accuracy 0 Damage 3L Defense 0

Throwing Knives: Accuracy 0 Damage 2L (Rate 3, Range 15)

Dodge Pool: 6/5 **Soak:** 8L/12B (Jade reinforced buff jacket, 7L/10B, -1 mobility penalty)

Willpower: 5 **Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Essence: 4

Personal Essence: 10 **Peripheral Essence:** 25(29)

Committed Essence: 4

TEPET ELANA

Quote: *I stand before you as a messenger of the Scarlet Empress. In my eyes, see her, and in my hands, feel her fury. Look to your lives, for I carry her judgment on my blade!*

Prelude: By the time you were born, your parents had already given up hope that you would Exalt. Both of your brothers were mortals, and though you held great love for them, they were only a disappointment to your parents. Lacking the parental guidance received by most Dragon-Blooded and wanting little to do with your tutors (who considered you incorrigible), you were raised largely by your brothers.

You were unprepared for the rigors of an imperial academy, and when your brothers fell in battle, you cared even less for your studies. At the dominie's request (and with your parents silent blessing), you were shipped off to the Palace of the Tamed Storm, an entirely different sort of school. Though it nearly broke you, the harsh discipline of the Palace soon tempered you into a woman worthy of her Dynastic heritage and, ultimately, prepared you for Exaltation.

Though your parents enrolled you in the Cloister of Wisdom, you had little use for the life of a monk. You were determined that you would follow your brothers' path: You would march with the legions, your parents' wishes be damned. When that time came, you found your careless youth had caught up with you: The Vermilion Legion was the only one that would have you.

Your courage and valor marked you for a quick climb through the ranks, and despite serving under an Aspect of Earth, you found a place on her command staff as a dragonlord, with command of your own flight. Then came the Battle of Five Fangs.



You saved hundreds of lives but were forced to disobey your commander to do so. Unable to reconcile this contradiction, you resigned your post in disgust and returned home.

There, for the first time, you found yourself welcome. It was clear your parents had plans for you, plans that would advance the interests of House Tepet — plans that you wanted no part of. The Empress saved you from a life of petty politics, investing you instead with the duties of a magistrate.

Now, you roam the Threshold, carrying her law to the furthest reaches of the Realm's satrapies. It is a good life and one you do not mean to give up easily.

Roleplaying Hints: You are a soldier and have little patience for the niceties of debate and politics. You know your duties,

and you pursue them to the exclusion of all else. Thanks to your mortal brothers, you have a great deal of respect for humans, though you are well aware that they will never be the equal of a Dragon-Blood. As such, you tend to be overprotective of those you care about, even though you would never admit it. As your recent years have been spent almost exclusively in the company of mortals, this behavior may sometimes extend to other Dragon-Blooded, though you are not conscious of it.

Image: Though clad in ornate armor, your sword is a simple one. Your auburn hair is cut close to your skull, as anything longer is a nuisance to a soldier. You bear the scars of many battles, most prominently a limp that has never faded from your days in the Palace of the Tamed Storm.

Equipment: Daiklave, superheavy plate, bundled javelins, war-horse



TEPET ELANA

Element: Air

Concept: Loyal Magistrate

Nature: Visionary

ATTRIBUTES

Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 4, Charisma 4, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 4

VIRTUES

Compassion 3, Conviction 2, Temperance 2, Valor 4

ABILITIES

Archery 2, *Athletics 4, *Awareness 4, Bureaucracy 2, Dodge 4, Endurance 2, Investigation 3, *Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Low Realm, Old Realm, Riverspeak) 3, *Lore 3, Martial Arts 4, Medicine 3, *Melee 5 (Daiklave +2), Performance 2 (Leading Troops +3), Presence 3 (Leading Troops +2), Resistance 3, Ride 2, Sail 1, Socialize 2, Survival 2, *Stealth 2, *Thrown 3

* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 3, Breeding 3, Backing (Magistracy) 3, Resources 4

CHARMS

Athletics: Bellows-Pumping Stride, Effortlessly Rising Flame, Falling Star Maneuver, Fiery Prowess

Awareness: Precision Observation Method

Dodge: Flickering Candle Meditation, Hopping Firecracker Evasion, Threshold-Warding Stance

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique (x 2)

Melee: Ringing Anvil Onslaught, Stoking Bonfire Style, Threshing Floor Technique

Martial Arts: Five-Dragon Blocking Technique, Five-Dragon Fortitude

Presence: Aura of Invulnerability, Glowing Coal Radiance

Resistance: Mountain Toppling Method, Strength of Stone Technique

Thrown: Whirlwind Shield Form

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 8

Attack:

Fist: Speed 8 Accuracy 7 Damage 3B Defense 7

Kick: Speed 5 Accuracy 6 Damage 5B Defense 7

Daiklave (Battle's Spirit): Speed 14 Accuracy 11 Damage 8L Defense 11

Javelin: Speed 8 Accuracy 8 Damage 7L (Rate 2, Range 30)

Dodge Pool: 8/7 **Soak:** 12L/13B (Reinforced jade breastplate and target shield, 10L/9B, -1 mobility penalty, +1 difficulty to hit)

Willpower: 6 **Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Essence: 4

Personal Essence: 12 **Peripheral Essence:** 27(36)

Committed Essence: 9

TEPET ARADA, THE WIND DANCER

Quote: *This Dynasty can go to hell for all I care.*

Prelude: You grew up the child of a successful household. In the years of your youth, you fell in with the wrong crowd. An upper-class thug, you were sent to reform school for your misdeeds and Exalted during a lethal dispute with a classmate.

The Palace of the Tamed Storm and your subsequent military service hammered away at your individuality, making you into the best damn fast-offensive officer ever. You gave your whole life, and the lives of thousands of soldiers, for their ideals — and in the end, no one gave a shit about what you'd done or the ideals you'd fought for.

So, you walked out on them, betraying them like they'd done to you and yours. There's nowhere you can go to get away from what's going on in the world, though, and you can't help but get involved when you see something that needs to be done. You'll be dead soon one way or another, so to hell with it — you may as well die being right.

Roleplaying Hints: One of the most decorated soldiers in the history of the Realm, you spent your whole life in service to your nation only to have its new leadership betray you and pointlessly waste the lives of the men under your command. In response, you resigned your commission, retiring to live the life of an Immaculate monk in a small temple in the middle of nowhere. You thought to escape the brinkmanship of Realm politics and Dynastic social-climbing and tried to lose yourself in drink and prayer. But even here, you couldn't escape from the problems that now plague the Realm. Damn it, you turned your back on this sellout government, and you still have to clean up its messes.

Image: Personal appearance has stopped mattering much to Arada. He wears a simple wrap and a pair of sandals pretty much exclusively now and has stopped bothering to hide the tattoos he collected as a student and a young officer. Relentless Wind, the blade of Tepet himself, stays in a bundle on Arada's back. Arada is very close to the end of his lifespan, and his long hair is snow white

and all but gone. On the other hand, the Wind Dancer is as powerful and as enlightened as Terrestrials get, despite his curmudgeonly demeanor: His skin is often icy blue, and a cold wind blows about him constantly.

Equipment: Daiklave (Restless Wind), jade Hearthstone bracers (see **Exalted**, p.338), jade blood seed (see **Bo3C**, p.94)



TEPET ARADA

Element: Air

Concept: Bitter Ex-General

Nature: Rebel (formerly Leader)

ATTRIBUTES

Strength 3, Dexterity 5, Stamina 5, Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

VIRTUES

Compassion 4, Conviction 3, Temperance 2, Valor 4

ABILITIES

Archery 2, Athletics 3, Awareness 3, Bureaucracy 2, *Dodge 5, Endurance 4 (Age +3), *Linguistics (Low Realm, Old Realm, Skytongue, Riverspeak, Tribal Tongues) 5, *Lore 4 (Strategy + 1, Tactics +2), Martial Arts 2, *Melee 5 (Multiple Opponents +3), Performance 1, *Presence 4 (Leadership +3), Resistance 1, Ride 2, Socialize 2, Survival 2, *Thrown 5

* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 5, Breeding 3, Connections (Legions) 3, Reputation 4

CHARMS

Athletics: Effortlessly Rising Flame, Falling Star Maneuver

Dodge: Flickering Candle Meditation, Hopping Firecracker Evasion, Safety Among Enemies, Smoke Obscuring Effect, Smoldering Karma

Strike, Threshold Warding Stance, Virtuous Negation Defense

Linguistics: Language-Learning Ritual, Poisoned Tongue Technique, Thousand Tongues Meditation, Voice of Mastery, Voices on the Wind, Wind-Carried Words Technique, With One Mind

Melee: Deadly Wildfire Legion, Dragon-Graced Weapon, Portentous Comet Deflecting Mode, Ringing Anvil Onslaught, Stoking Bonfire Style, Threshing Floor Technique

Occult: Spirit-Detecting Mirror Technique, Spirit-Grounding Shout

Presence: Glowing Coal Radiance

Thrown: Vengeful Gust Counterattack, Whirlwind Shield Form, Wind Armor Technique

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 8

Attack:

Fist: Speed 8 Accuracy 7 Damage 3B Defense 7

Kick: Speed 5 Accuracy 6 Damage 5B Defense 7

Daiklave (Relentless Wind): Speed 12 Accuracy 9 Damage 8L* Defense + 2

* This attack is piercing, ignoring half the soak value of armor. Natural soak applies normally.

Dodge Pool: 10

Soak: 13L/15B (Relentless Wind — when drawn, 8L/8B, jade Hearthstone bracers, 2L/2B)

Willpower: 8

Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Essence: 6

Personal Essence: 19

Peripheral Essence:

33(47) **Committed Essence:** 14

APPENDIX II

OTHER NOTABLE AIR ASPECTS



SENATOR NELLENS PORAMO

Senator Nellens Poramo is a man possessed of dual reputations. On the one hand, he is a firebrand. In sessions of the Deliberative, he endlessly preaches reform of all sorts. Some of his fellow Senators suspect Poramo simply enjoys the tempo and tenor of his own voice, but the truth is, he truly hopes to reshape the Realm into something better. On the other hand, he has become a tourist attraction and the default butt of the majority of jokes that circulate about the Deliberative.

Poramo doesn't mind. Such is the fate of a visionary. He only hopes that, as the Scarlet Empire falls farther from the grace of the Empress' guiding hand, his fellow Senators will recognize the wisdom in his words. Unfortunately, he is blind to his largest obstacle: He has no allies to speak of in either chamber, so his diatribes often fall upon deaf ears. Even so, he is beginning to draw attention, if not applause, for his opinions.

Poramo is young yet, and the wisdom he needs will come with experience. Born in RY 707, Poramo is only 61 years old and considered an upstart by his fellow Senators (though an entertaining one). Further, he is fresh to the Deliberative: He gained the position only four years ago. Finally, Poramo came to his Deliberative seat through a peculiar road. His family pursued the assignment for him, going so far as to apply political leverage to secure the seat.



Though his parents argued an assignment to the Deliberative was a waste of Poramo's talents (for little ever *really* gets accomplished), the seven elders of House Nellens

have a plan. With the Empress already gone for a year, they believed the Deliberative was destined to become the next great power in the empire (barring the Empress' return, of course), for no Dragon-Blooded can unite the Realm so effectively as the missing Empress. As such, Poramo's appointment is a long-term investment.

Poramo has fire and skill in debate, and the elders are convinced that, despite his current ineffectiveness, he will grow into a force to be reckoned with in the halls of the Deliberative, perhaps one day achieving the position of Master of the Deliberative. It may take 30 years or 300, but House Nellens is prepared to be patient.

Poramo himself, however, does not look to tomorrow. He sees the Realm falling to ruin about him, the brick crumbling without the mortar of the Empress' decrees. It is only a matter of time, and time is in short supply. Poramo works diligently to compose motions that he believes will heal the rifts between the Great Houses and once more bring the Threshold under the unquestioned control of the Blessed Isle. He has thus far been able to complete only a few Declarations of Harmonious Intent, but he is making valuable inroads within the Deliberative and has impressed several prominent Senators.

RAGARA SZAYA

The daughter of adventuresome Dynastic parents, a flamboyant merchant and a storied tactician, Szaya was an extroverted rebel and individualist from a very young age. Luckily for her, she was also obviously brilliant and had inherited the best of her parent's traits, making her more than capable of walking the line between nuisance and prodigy with aplomb. Her remarkable skill in the game of Gateway alone earned her a great deal of leeway as a child, in addition to bringing her into contact with her future husband and partner Ledaal Kes.

Szaya is a risk-taker in all things. Her history has been hallmarked by dangerous chances and wild behavior, always stopping just short of being completely unacceptable. She graduated high in her class from the House of Bells as a combat sorcerer. She, in turn, used her immediate, lucrative success as a merchant-warrior and explorer as a bargaining chip for her family's permission to marry her childhood friend and rival, Kes, the Ragaras being none too fond of the intellectual Ledaals.

Szaya has built her career and reputation on being willing and able to travel anywhere in the Threshold where there is money to be made or resources to be tapped for the Realm, her personal favorite endeavor and specialty being the exploration of First Age sites and the associated dealing in ancient knowledge and items. Szaya has developed a respectable degree of expertise as a sorcerer and artificer as a result of her exposure to a wide variety of First Age artifacts and has, in recent years, begun to move toward work in that field over the more adven-



turesome escapades of her youth. Along with her husband, she semi-inadvertently created a very powerful intelligence several years ago, Icemind (see p. 78), and her turn toward a more academic career is privately due in large part to her effort to understand what she has wrought.

None of this is to say that Szaya has settled down fully. Both her and her husband are high-ranking operatives of the All-Seeing Eye, and her work for the Eye — coupled with her household's many successful private business affairs — requires her to make extensive use of her Threshold-wide mercantile and Guild contacts.

Szaya is an athletic and charismatic woman, if boisterous, and retains quite a bit of the exuberance and lust of her teenage years. She and her husband both have a well-documented reputation as great appreciators of parties, intoxicants and the company of the skilled and beautiful. More than one person has allowed this reputation to blind them to the fact that Szaya is a competent and experienced warrior and sorcerer with a great many magical weapons and Hearthstones at her disposal.

PELEPS CORDERA

Peleps Cordera is among the most popular living poets in the Realm today, riding the wave of renewed interest in the crisp, inspirational military epics of the Shogunate's peak. Part of her popularity, and a tribute to her time-management skills, stems from the fact that Cordera has been an active-duty dragonlord in the legions for the duration of her writing career, her works all composed while in the field.



Cordera graduated from the House of Bells just under a century ago and immediately enlisted in military service, distinguishing herself as a marine commander during a series of campaigns against pirate fiefdoms in the Western islands. She has developed a reputation as a passionate and very physical leader, what those less skilled with words might call bloodthirsty, and is always at the front of any offensive she leads bearing her unit's own standard as a weapon. Just before her first epic became widely known, Cordera had been upbraided for a number of incidents where she was perhaps too demonstrative of her affection for those under her. That zeal, they say, has apparently been channeled into her writings, a more palatable and, perhaps, constructive outlet.

Dragonlord Cordera is a giant, even among Dragon-Blooded, requiring special consideration in the making of clothing, armor and other gear for her nearly seven-foot frame. Despite this, she is widely thought to be a passing attractive woman and as capable in the social arena, intemperate advances notwithstanding, as she is in the martial.

The truth of the Dragonlord's sudden ascension to literary popularity is a well-guarded secret among the higher-ups in House Peleps and its legions, and that truth is that none of them know who is writing the epics published with Cordera's name. She has sworn that she didn't write them, and her story holds up under scrutiny, but that, by the time she heard of them, she was already receiving accolades and could hardly deny authorship without some manner of scandal. Investigation of those involved in the publication of the works showed clear evidence that someone had taken great pains to cover his tracks and utilized an elaborate system whereby new epics

were delivered using an astounding array of intermediaries. Those of House Peleps aware of the situation have had little choice but to continue to play along in hopes of drawing the prankster out. In the meantime, they have attached a number of discreet tutors to Dragonlord Cordera's staff to teach her the specifics of the poet's craft as quickly as possible. They reason that, should it come to it, they can demonstrate her skill as a writer publicly to foil any further mischief and possibly turn this elaborate game around on whoever initiated it.

ISELSI JOLIN

It has been 200 years since Iselsi Jolin has been known by any name other than "Death Bloom." She is an object of fear and mystery for powerful Dragon-Blooded throughout the Blessed Isle, and death walks in her shadow.

When the resources of and members of House Iselsi were commandeered by the Empress, some of their number were sent far from the Blessed Isle to a secret stronghold in the South. There, hidden among the volcanic mountain ranges nestled near the Elemental Pole of Fire, this hidden branch of the fallen house lived and trained in secret. One day, they would strike against the Empress in revenge, but for now, their faces were known to too many.

They bided their time far from the empire, and though they did not prosper, they survived. When more Iselsi were born, they were trained in all manner of assassination technique from the moment they took their first steps. Iselsi Jolin received her first chakram only months out of the cradle. The first lesson, Iselsi taught, was to strike from a distance, where the only danger is to be seen. When she was five and had gained confidence in her movements and body, she learned the path of the shadow and how to hide in plain sight. By the time she was 10, she had mastered a



variety of weapons, each designed to deliver a quick, quiet death. Even before her Exaltation at 13, she was a master of unarmed killing techniques and the perfect assassin.

At last, she was ready to return home. She arrived four months later, and it was as if a great scythe had swept down on the Realm and struck down both Dragon-Blooded and mortals like wheat in a field. There was no apparent rhyme or reason to the assassinations, save to create chaos and fear. At this task, John performed admirably. Now, there was a predator hunting wolves and sheep alike.

Jolin quickly realized that, in order to maintain the proper level of apprehension among the Dynasts, she would need to “sign” her work. That in mind, she developed a habit of leaving a single stem of lilac flowers among the possessions of her target on the morning prior to an assassination. It didn’t take long after that for gossips and wags to dub her the Death Bloom. For 200 years since, she has remained on the Blessed Isle, one day a beggar, the next a Senator and the day after that a shadow, long since passed from sight.

Despite her seemingly random attacks, her purpose has been ingrained in her from birth. Erode the confidence of the people in the Great Houses and the Scarlet Dynasty. Make the powerful appear weak, and the weak will look elsewhere for leadership and protection. She serves her line by preventing any house from gaining a true position of leadership and by striking down those who draw too near this goal. She is never far from Regent Fokuf, on the off chance that he should suddenly develop political ambitions, necessitating his removal.

WINDTAMER CYNIS MOND

Though few can claim to have met him, very nearly every Dragon-Blood has heard the nickname of Cynis Mond, the Windtamer. The very old and very eccentric sorcerer is one of the most prolific artificers of the modern age and created countless everyday artifacts over the course of his career. For the first centuries of his life, he obsessively pursued the study of wind, first in its mundane aspect and later as a magical energy and source of inspiration or in the forms of artifacts that made use of its power. These seemingly fruitless studies did little to endear him to his peers and to society at large, and he was thought of by many to be a failure, obsessed with oddly shaped sails and the design of immense kites. Toward what would seem the end of his life and career, though, Mond began to steadily unveil technique after technique, artifact after artifact, all predicated on his life’s study of the power and Essence of the winds of the world. In the span of a few short years Mond, now called Windtamer, went from being a marginalized crackpot to one of the most respected and well known of sorcerers, rivaled only by the likes of Mnemon. The First Age windslave terminals, and their



more specialized variants, repopularized and reproduced by him are in use by geomancers, architects and the legions in every corner of the Threshold. Hundreds of Terrestrial Exalts are taught Charms created by him for use in endeavors from sailing and combat to music and communication.

Mond himself is as flighty and hard to identify as the winds he so loves, and he moves around a great deal. He is several centuries old now and maintains homes and workshops anywhere in Creation where there are winds for him to study or commune with. He is seen on the Blessed Isle only infrequently and erratically, sometimes teaching at the Heptagram for a few years or working with the Realm’s naval forces before hurriedly settling his affairs and disappearing back into the Threshold, most often to the North.

In recent years, the Windtamer has come and gone from the Blessed Isle at a greater frequency than previous. He scuds from place to place to meet with a great array of his peers, from all walks of life, most notably Immaculate monks and the Paragon of the Air Dragon in particular. His command of Essence is said to have reached the pinnacle of Terrestrial potential, though those who speak of interacting with him hint that he is more wind than man, now. His blue-gray hair and beard have grown to a prodigious length — they and his flimsy wrap constantly blown about him in ceaseless winds — and he no longer touches the ground for longer than a moment at a time — instead hovering and flitting patternlessly above it.

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