

ASPECT BOOK™
EARTH



An Aspect Book for





ASPECT BOOK
EARTHTM

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STRANGE ALLIANCES

Mnemon paced a circle around the room again, as she had done for the past several hours. Too much could go wrong with her plan without any way for her to control the variables, and yet, the rewards of success demanded she take this risk. And so, she waited. The elder Dragon-Blood idly fingered the gold chain leading from her belt to the Emerald Thurible. As if in answer, a pale flicker of green light added its sickly hue to the shadowed room. The eldest daughter of the Scarlet Empress smiled thinly. Nothing would go wrong. Nothing could go wrong. And if the unthinkable happened, she was ready for that, too.

A faint whisper broke Mnemon's introspective musings, an insistent and distinctive aggravation at the edge of her mind. She relaxed her indomitable will slightly, opening a chink in her consciousness through which the pressure could enter.

"My lady," the voice spoke by way of introduction. Coils of wary hate seethed at the edge of its tone. "I bring word as bidden. The envoy arrives within the hour." Impatience joined the projection of hostility, but the creature knew better than to withdraw without instruction.

Mnemon considered framing some artful rebuke but put the thought out of mind. The demon wasn't worth the effort. Instead, she peremptorily closed her mind and almost laughed aloud as the spirit hastily broke contact before her psyche crushed it. Once her thoughts became her own again in full, the Dragon-Blood considered the demon's words. It spoke truth because she had bound it to speak truth with her. It would not dare speak falsehood by misinformation for fear of her. If the demon claimed the envoy would soon arrive, then she had best go meet him.



The pier stank of rotting fish. Mnemon lifted her nose in mild disgust and pulled the nondescript gray cloak tighter around her shoulders. She wasn't cold; the trivialities of the human body long ago ceased to have any real meaning for her. The cloak served other purposes, imparting an aura of veiled anonymity woven into its threads by some clever artisan of the First Age. The enchantment settled as she stilled, turning aside the attention of any sharp-eyed guard who saw her standing alone beneath the scant illumination of the crescent moon. Minutes passed.

As still as a statue, Mnemon stretched out her senses with Charms. If the demon had spoken truth, the envoy would arrive any minute. If not, one less demon would return to Malfeas. She felt the slight eddies of darting fish pressing on the silt floor. The echoes carried through the sunken poles supporting the pier beneath her. She filtered these ripples out. Something larger approached from the deep water to the East. It was still too far to gauge anything more than general distance, but it moved rapidly toward shore. She closed her eyes, withdrew feeling from her skin to focus her entire consciousness on the approaching object. A shape began to form in her mind, separating into three shapes as it drew nearer. A pair of monsters pulled a large and heavy box between them, swimming with powerful and tireless strokes. Given the contents of the box, Mnemon assumed they were demons. She let the creatures approach further, then casually stepped off the pier and slid to the bottom like a stone.

This close to shore, the water wasn't especially deep. Thanks to her Charms, Mnemon wouldn't need air for quite some time, so she stood on the sandy muck and attuned her eyes to the gloom as the demons arrived and set their cargo down several yards away. This close, the Dragon-Blood could see the box was an elaborate sarcophagus of marble bound shut with clasps of soulsteel. She watched as one of the piscine demons fumbled with its webbed claws to undo the first of the locks, then a dull clang echoed as the metal sprang open. A handful of stale bubbles escaped the cracks and raced to the surface. The demon repeated its efforts on the other four clasps before finally sliding the heavy lid out of the way.

Inside the coffin, a cold and apparently lifeless body lay in a position of meditative repose, his arms folded neatly across his chest. Mnemon saw through the

ruse immediately to the powerful Essence beating in the man's still heart. She waited. The Essence spread through the man's blood, warming flesh back from the cusp of death. His heart seized and beat once, paused and then again in normal rhythm. The man's eyes opened, and he sat upright. He swam upward a yard, garbed much as Mnemon, in simple gray robes. He was young and handsome, but his features had an almost feminine quality to their delicate pallor. Ringlets of black hair framed his too-pretty face. He exchanged a wordless glance with Mnemon and smiled. She did not return his smile. He looked at the demons circling closely around him and back to the Dragon-Blood. She tensed, waiting for the prearranged signal. He nodded.

Mnemon and the young man struck as one, each targeting the closest demon. The Dragon-Blood held up her palm to hurl a bolt of crushing force at one demon, while the envoy slipped his slender arms around the other demon's neck and twisted sharply. Both demons died instantly, too quickly for either to register surprise at the betrayal. Mnemon nodded back to her guest, then crouched and sprang up. Her momentum carried her out of the water and back onto the pier. The envoy followed with some Charm of his own and landed soundlessly beside her. He took a deep breath and shook the water from his curly hair. The Dragon-Blood viewed his ostentatious display with some disdain, but then, she hadn't crossed an entire sea in a coffin. She faced the envoy.

"Welcome to the Realm," Mnemon said simply. She pulled the hood back over her face, and the magic of the cloak enfolded her once more. The envoy looked momentarily confused, then wiped the suggested dream of her absence from his eyes and looked directly at her. She felt Essence flowing from him, cold and alien, and then, a sudden urge to look elsewhere overwhelmed her. She resisted that urge. They both understood one another and the precariousness of their meeting. "You arrived on schedule," she noted as an afterthought.

"I was informed that you valued punctuality," the man noted wryly. He scanned the outline of the city against the night sky and began walking slowly in the direction of civilization. Mnemon strode beside him. Anyone who saw them might have assumed they were lovers engaged in a forbidden midnight rendezvous, but no one saw them or would have seen them if they knew where to look.

"I am the deathknight Perfected Tears Upon Alabaster Sorrow," the envoy said in a low whisper, "but you may address me as Sorrow." He cleared his throat, and when he spoke again, his voice held nothing of its previous warmth. His memorized words had the rehearsed air of cold formality that Mnemon often heard foreign dignitaries use. "I bring greetings to the sorcerer Mnemon from my liege, the Mask of Winters. He conveys his regret that he could not meet you in person and extends his hope for an alliance of mutual prosperity."

"I'm sure," Mnemon replied, not bothering to reply with introductions of her own. He knew exactly who she was. "You are Anathema?" she asked.

"To the whole world, in fact," Sorrow answered flippantly. "But not to you. Not now in this place. Here, I am the envoy of my liege. I am his hands and eyes and mouth to discern what accord of common purpose he may find with House Mnemon. That I am Anathema is of no consequence to my message."

"Well then, honored messenger," Mnemon hissed back, "understand that you *are* Anathema, and I have no intention of dying on account of our brief association. Should you be discovered in my presence, I will claim you are an assassin sent to kill me. I am certain the Immaculate Order would take great pains to make an example of you." She watched a scowl mar Sorrow's porcelain face before fading back behind his mask of feigned innocence. His violet eyes narrowed to dangerous slits, but he said nothing for a time. The unlikely pair walked through the streets toward the abandoned townhouse in which Mnemon had chosen to conduct the negotiations. She would have the building burned to the ground in the morning, erasing any evidence.





Mnemon knelt on cushions opposite Sorrow, two cups of steaming tea sitting untouched on the low table between them. Neither had spoken in the hour since her threatening outburst, and now, the needs of diplomacy demanded they put aside their palpable distaste for one another.

“Have you located your mother yet?” Sorrow asked. He lifted his tea and sipped, closing his eyes to better savor the exotic herbs. “Exquisite,” he noted in satisfaction.

“The Scarlet Empress has not yet returned to claim her throne, and the Realm stands at the brink of civil war in her protracted and untimely absence,” Mnemon replied. “But then, you already knew that. Don’t insult me. Ask me something you don’t know, or tell me something I don’t know, or better yet, make me an offer. That is what your master sent you here to do, yes?” Mnemon arched her eyebrow and took a sip from her own cup. Sorrow nodded and smiled again.

“Why did you insist on destroying my demons after my arrival?” Sorrow asked. He sounded more interested in an answer than he had previously demonstrated, almost hungry with anticipation.

“I do not wish any more record of our meeting than is absolutely necessary,” Mnemon answered truthfully. She shrugged. “Demons of the First Circle are eminently replaceable.” The deathknight pursed his lips in acknowledgment.

“Fair enough,” Sorrow said. “You wish an offer? Very well.” He swallowed the last of his tea and set the cup down regretfully. “Then hear the words of my master,” he sighed. Essence burned a blackened brand on his forehead like a third eye, a circle within a ring weeping a faint trickle of blood down his ivory cheeks. Beneath, a stain of black clouded Sorrow’s actual eyes, blurring whites and iris into pits of emptiness. The deathknight spoke, and his rich tenor held an echo of something deeper and more terrible. The voice held arrogance and authority such as Mnemon had only ever heard her mother wield.

“Lady Mnemon, you are wary of my offer,” the Mask of Winters observed through Sorrow’s borrowed voice. He spoke directly, without courtesy or insult, confident enough in his authority not to waste precious time on hollow pleasantries. Sorrow’s lips turned to an involuntary sneer, an expression no doubt graven upon the face of the Deathlord.

“I would be wary if you made an offer, Mask of Winters,” Mnemon responded carefully. “As yet, I see only empty expressions of well-wishing and nebulous hopes for alliance.” She looked directly into the blank hollows of the deathknight’s eyes and saw — or briefly imagined she saw — the robed form of the Mask of Winters himself sitting on an iron throne somewhere far distant. Her vision turned to behold the interior of a cavernous skull and then the reflection of her own face in the obsidian mirrors of Sorrow’s eyes.

“What do you want?” the Deathlord asked. The trickle of blood from his vessel’s forehead widened, raining spatters of crimson on the table. The effort of projecting his consciousness so far no doubt took its toll, though Mnemon couldn’t tell who was paying the price of that exertion.

“I want military aid waiting when the Great Houses go to war,” Mnemon began. Her eyes were hungry and far away. “I want you to keep the Seventh Legion from interfering with that war.” She focused once more on Sorrow’s body, sensing the wash of unclean Essence blazing from within. “I want spells,” she finished.

“And in return for these things, you offer what?” the Mask of Winters asked. He cocked his head to one side quizzically and several bones in Sorrow’s neck popped and ground against one another. “I doubt you offer service, as Perfected Tears Upon Alabaster Sorrow provides.” The sneer deepened into an inhuman grimace. “You do not give fealty.”

“No, I do not,” Mnemon answered emphatically. “However, I could represent a powerful ally if the Seventh Legion decided to commit First Age weapons against you.” She held up her hands expansively, first the right, then left. “More to the point,



I want the Realm. You want the Scavenger Lands. Certainly there is room for compromise in our immediate ambitions?"

"Agreed," the Deathlord said. His thinly veiled malice left no doubt that his ultimate ambitions did not include an alliance with the Realm, but neither did Mnemon intend a long-term alliance with the Mask of Winters. She watched dispassionately as blood began seeping from the corners of Sorrow's eyes and flecked his wine-dark lips. The Deathlord nodded once in final affirmation. "We will speak on this matter again. Until then, accept the gift of my servant as an ambassador of my... investment... in your success. I am confident he will serve our interests with the same devotion as he has previously demonstrated."

At the conclusion of the Deathlord's final syllable, the spectral presence withdrew from Sorrow. The flow of blood from his face halted immediately, while his eyes lightened to their previous shade of violet. Mnemon barely noticed; her attention fixated on the lingering touch of the Deathlord imprinted on the walls and floor. The room felt hollow. Tainted. She wondered if she had just made a very terrible mistake. She would have this building burned to the ground tonight and the ashes salted. Sorrow watched her look around and poured himself another cup of tea. He drank slowly, still shivering from his ordeal.

"Well then, my lady," Sorrow began speaking. He hesitated and licked his lips before continuing. "It seems we are now allies." He stood and bowed low, respectfully, but Mnemon could not help but notice the smirk at the corners of his mouth. He dabbed the streaks of gore on his cheeks and licked his fingers clean. "I look forward to the satiation of our mutual interests. For now, I bid your leave." He bowed again and vanished from sight with a faint ripple. Mnemon heard a scuffling at the window on the upper floor, then nothing. She waited until she was sure the deathknight had truly gone, then laughed aloud.

Mnemon concentrated, extending her thoughts in a pattern she had trained her spy to recognize and answer. The pressure came at once, the whisper of supplication filling her mind. *You will continue to follow the deathknight who calls himself the Perfected Tears Upon Alabaster Sorrow*, she thought. The voice of the demon rasped back from its familiar chink in her will, resentful but obedient.

"As you wish," the demon hissed silently.

Mnemon left the aging townhouse behind her without looking back, her attention directed ahead to the Imperial Manse and the empty throne of her mother. A smile crossed her cheeks.

Soon.



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DEVELOPER'S SPECIAL THANKS

Michael and Eric and Peter and Mur ("Isn't that a Simon & Garfunkle song about wife swapping?"), the authors, for their help when called upon to perform in the direst of circumstances.

ART DIRECTOR'S SPECIAL THANKS

Peter "Don't mind the cat scratches on the box" Schaefer, for sending a homebrewing beer kit to the office so we can finally make some White Wolf beer.

Jim and Gala, for the beautiful "Sad Jesus" statue they gave me during my one hour layover in Toronto. I never meant to make Sad Jesus cry.



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PRINTED IN CANADA



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INTRODUCTION

Any ruler able to expel private crookedness and uphold public law, finds the people safe and the state in order, and any ruler able to expunge private action and act on public law, finds his army strong and his enemy weak.

— Han Fei Tzu, *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu*,
W.K. Liao, trans.

Aspect Book: Earth is a sourcebook designed to help readers better understand the world of the Earth-aspected Dragon-Blooded. The Ivory Dragons form the strong foundation of Dragon-Blooded society. They are the ones who uphold tradition with the strongest conviction and resist the infiltration of chaos with a constant and stolid calm. While the Scarlet Throne stands empty and the Realm threatens to surrender to the encroaching dangers of the return-

ing Anathema and the rampaging Fair Folk, the Children of Pasiap are the ones who hold strong and protect the status quo. This book introduces readers to some of the enduring individuals who bear the mark of the Earth Dragon and shows how they live their lives. It also offers new Charms to give players' Dragon-Blooded new tools with which to enforce the will of the Realm.

The Aspects of Earth hold true to the teachings of the Immaculate Dragons because a structured society endures. They abhor chaos and anything that threatens to fracture order. They do not enter anything half-heartedly. They will not give partial attention to a project or partial adoration to a lover. When they settle on a decision, it is nigh-impossible to change their minds. In a fight, their dedication to martial arts and adherence to meditation shows, and they typically do not surrender. Enduring, solid, dutiful, constant, dedicated: These are the words that best describe a Child of Pasiap. Often seen as the most reliable and immutable of the Terrestrial Exalted, they are also accused of being stubborn, impassive and bullheaded by those who may not agree with their chosen path.

This book not only expounds on the lives of the Ivory Dragons, but it also paints a picture of the world they live in and support. They serve the Realm as architects, monks, leaders and martial artists, to name but a few roles. The Age of Sorrows and the troubles of the Realm rest heavily on their shoulders, but they feel little but the responsibility to bear it.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Aspect Book: Earth opens the often closed and stoic world of the Earth Aspects. It sheds light on how they live their lives and why. This book gives players some ideas on how to flesh out their Aspects of Earth, as well as new Charms and artifacts to use. For Storytellers, it will give some insight on how Storyteller characters may react to the Ivory Dragons in their games.

Chapter One: Childhood and Self introduces five members of dynastic society who have been blessed by the Earth Dragon. They each tell their stories of growing up and of the pains and wonder of Exaltation. This chapter shows how five very different people can all serve Pasiap in their own way.

Chapter Two: A Life of Obligations shows the duties and expectations laid upon the shoulders of the Earth Aspects. These stories show how these Exalted see their roles in the world and how they themselves work to influence it. You will see the nation of the Realm and the world of **Exalted** through the eyes of the Children of Pasiap.

Chapter Three: The World We Rule illustrates the opinions of these Earth-affected Dragon-Blooded on their houses, on the Realm and on the lesser beings that dwell with them in Creation from mortals to invading Anathema and Fair Folk.

Chapter Four: Voices Not Our Own discloses the views others have of the Ivory Dragons. It gives a variety of opinions from friends, teachers, betrayers

and servants, to name a few. Storytellers can use characters in this chapter to beef up the backgrounds of the Storyteller characters in their games.

Chapter Five: Records of the Before gives examples of life in the First Age from the historical records of the Dragon-Blooded. Memory of the glorious days of this time long past is lost to even the oldest living Dragon-Blooded, but some records remain.

Chapter Six: Miracles of Pasiap contains new Charms for Earth Aspects to use. These expand the abilities of the Ivory Dragons to mold and command earthen materials, to strengthen their bodies further and to develop their superior building talents. New Hearthstones and other wonders are also listed here.

Appendix I: Signature Characters supplies readers with character templates and biographies of the five narrating characters. Storytellers will have the Charms, the abilities and the equipment of these characters to use in their own series.

Appendix II: Other Notable Earth Aspects contains biographies of five other notable Earth Aspects that can serve either as inspiration for a player or as Storyteller characters. These are experienced — and, in some cases, highly formidable — characters that may prove useful in a game with comparable players' characters.

SOURCE MATERIAL

If you search the two core books **Exalted** and **Exalted: The Dragon-Blooded**, you already have an extensive list of sources to give you an idea of the themes behind the world of **Exalted**. The following list of literature focuses more on characters that will give you an idea on what the Earth Aspects are all about. Earth Exalts are solid and proud, dutiful and loyal. They get the job done and do not waver from the task. They proudly uphold tradition and demand nothing less from their inferiors. Not all of the following are science fiction/fantasy oriented, and some do not depict warriors, but all exemplify Earth.

LITERATURE

Neil Gaiman's epic comic series *The Sandman* contains several characters that can be assumed to be representative of Aspects of Earth, especially the titular character, Morpheus. It chronicles his story, including his lovers, siblings and the mortal lives he influences. Morpheus is a several millennium-old stoic who is dedicated to tradition and duty. When the time comes that he must review some of his decisions in his life and face regret and change, he remains as duty-bound and unmoving as an Earth Aspect. The Sandman's command of dreams and sorcery can also give one a sense of the sorcery used in **Exalted**.





Neal Stephenson's excellent novel *The Diamond Age* tells the science-fiction tale of Victorian society in futuristic China and how a young girl, Nell, changes it forever. Nell is a very grounded character, focused on her ideals and goals. Whenever anything new is thrown at her, she accepts it and finds a place for it in her plan. Nell's teenage years give her the power to study people and to figure out how they think, which naturally leads to discovering how to manipulate them — much like in the court intrigues of the **Exalted** world. The latter fourth of the book shows Nell's unflappable strength as a warrior, while chaos engulfs China and she has nothing but her sword and her wits to save herself and those dear to her.

Usagi Yojimbo, Stan Sakai's comic about a rabbit samurai, contains the phenomenal martial arts and swordplay that epitomizes **Exalted** while the title character, Usagi, has a strong samurai mentality that Earth Dragons mirror. Sometimes silly (though the art is fantastic), the comic still shows the violent, honor-bound world of feudal Japan and the need for solid, loyal heroes such as Usagi.

In the realm of fantasy, the *Chronicles of the Cheysuli*, a series of eight books by Jennifer Roberson, tells the stories of several generations of a proud shapeshifting race of warriors. The character of Brennan, whose story is told in book five, *A Pride of Princes*, can be compared to an Earth Aspect

with his total dedication to duty. Seemingly blind to everything but his role as inheritor of the throne, he also shows extreme loyalty to his siblings and his race. Strongly dedicated to tradition, he does everything he can to protect the rituals and private matters of his people. These books also show the perils of such single-mindedness, and we are reminded that the Aspect of Earth's focus is not always a positive thing.

LEXICON

You can find detailed lexicons of most of the terms used in the world of the Earth Aspects in **Exalted** and **Exalted: The Dragon-Blooded**. What follows are the new terms this book introduces.

Iron Horses, the: The secret society of the Cloister of Wisdom, typically populated by those students intending to join the Immaculate Order. Initiation consists of forcing the student to face his utmost fears with calm confidence. The Iron Horses are identified by a small scar on the right eyebrow.

Versino, the: A destroyed school that was an early model for the Heptagram. Built on the southeastern tip of the Isle of Voices, it welcomed students wishing to learn demon summoning and sorcery. The school was destroyed during Mnemon's time there, and the Heptagram was built well away from the cursed ruins.



ON BECOMING EARTH-ASPECTED AND THE WORSHIP OF PASIAP

Years ago, before the Great Uprising, the acknowledgement and worship of the Five Elemental Dragons were much different than in the Age of Sorrows.

While the Dragon-Blooded had similar Charms and skills, their views of the Dragons themselves were different. Reverence for the elements and the figurehead Dragons that represented them was commonplace, but the Dragons themselves were not particularly worshiped or emulated. The Dragon-Blooded felt that, even though they did not receive very much in the way of feedback from their idols, it was better to thank them for their gifts and Exaltations than not. However, it still proved to be closer to acknowledgement and thanks than actual worship.

When the Sidereals created the Immaculate Philosophy, they promoted the Elemental Dragons to a larger role in the daily lives of the Dragon-Blooded (and, indeed, the common populace as a whole). The actions of the Immaculate Dragons during the Great Uprising became emblematic of the war against the Anathema.

Currently, the Immaculate Dragons have canonical names and histories and serve as sorts of patron saints for the commoners who identify with them and as guiding forces for the Dragon-Blooded who Exalt under a given element. This deification of the Elemental Dragons is what the Sidereals intended when they set up the Immaculate Philosophy, but as sometimes happens, things got out of hand.

Worship of the Earth Dragon Pasiap is the most widespread of any of the Five Dragons. He is the Dragon who is commonly the chosen of the monks of the Immaculate Order, as his ideals of steadfast endurance and an unbending will appeal much to the Immaculate way of thinking. And as many of the Order follow his teachings, they, in turn, bring his teachings to the commoners.

The great warrior, Pasiap, remained after the wars with Anathema to help the Exalted use the Essence of Earth. He guides Exalted in the focusing of Essence, in the creation of Manses and in leading the masses spiritually. People must have places to live and monks to guide them, so they prefer the Earth Dragon over all others.

While the monks approve of the admiration and respect the Earth Dragon engenders, the worship of Pasiap is not entirely the way they want things to go. Many people, mostly commoners, consider Pasiap a god that must be worshiped. Often, commoners will pray at a site weeks before an architect is set to arrive to begin construction. Others will assume that the blessings of a monk will only be granted if they worship the Dragon the monk follows: commonly Pasiap.

Some Immaculates consider this adoration as following in the line of the Immaculate Philosophy, but it is the official line of the Immaculate Order to frown upon it. Most of the senior members of the Philosophy see it as bordering on heresy. The commoners who pray regularly to the Earth Dragon, forming rituals and calendars around their building schedules, are going above and beyond the call of religious duty and need to be reeducated. Such reverence is restricted to the Immaculates and the Dragon-Blooded, who can better discriminate in their worship.

The Immaculate Order requires its monks to put a stop to this worship, whether by simply refusing to construct a building on a “sacred” site or by razing a temple where too much time is spent celebrating the greatness of Pasiap. While commoners are usually the ones who tend to worship the Elemental Dragons directly, there are Dragon-Blooded who are so in love with the gifts that come with Exaltation that they will join the commoners in their frantic worship of Pasiap. Their thinking is that neither the other Elemental Dragons nor the Immaculate Order gave them their powers: Pasiap did, and therefore, he must be worshiped above all others. Though the Order discourages this behavior as strongly as it can, it cannot stop it.

Pasiap does not smile on these worshipers in any obvious way. Some zealots will claim that ground that has been prayed over will bring forth a stronger building and repel the likes of Anathema and other monstrosities, but no conclusive evidence of such has been gathered.





CHAPTER ONE

CHILDHOOD

AND SELF

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Childhood in the Dynasty and the imperial schooling process are shared events in the life of every Dragon-Blooded. Like the Aspects of Earth themselves, this foundation serves to bind the Dragon-Blooded Host together with shared knowledge and attitude. Like Pasiap did, they teach every Exalt the same Immaculate Philosophy and worldview, so that the Dynasty is not driven by factions debating the true character of the Philosophy. Youthful education and attitudes are the foundation of future life. Yet, each Dynast's experience is unique, as each Manse is unique. What follows are accounts of the early lives of five Earth-aspected Terrestrial Exalted.

CYNIS TAKGANA

My mother, Cynis Janisim, had one child every 10 years for 40 years until her husband died in service to one of our house legions. His father had wished him to become a great warrior and to make Cynis proud — and so, he proudly died in a ridiculous battle soon after my birth. Believing in her duty to her Great House, she took subsequent lovers in an attempt to keep the house rich in children, but she never bore another one.

Janisim is the owner of a large vineyard and a master viticulturist. Our house has one of the large-scale vineyards in the southeast, and it supplies much of the wine for the famous Cynis parties throughout the Realm. Ironically, my mother has eschewed the hedonistic lifestyle of

our house: She makes the finest wine in the Realm but never swallows a drop herself.

I was born in Tuchara 24 years ago. The breezes from the southern coast there makes prime weather for the grapes my mother grows outside of town. I used to love looking out over the rolling vineyards, feeling the fat grapes in my hands and sneaking a bunch when my mother wasn't looking. We would then tour the winery, and I would giggle at the neatly dressed and very nervous employees kowtowing to my mother.

Unlike what I have seen in other houses, my mother had very clear ideas in what she wanted from her children and tolerated very few of the games we played for her attention. We were all told that, to inherit any part of the winery, we had to have large families. If we could not achieve that, we would be disowned (unless we didn't Exalt, of course, but no one talked about that possibility to our proud mother. All her siblings had Exalted, and both she and our father were Exalted, so there was little fear that we wouldn't).

The summer before my final year of primary school, my mother introduced me to the daughter of some local shipwrights of the main Peleps line. Her name was Dekna, and she was the prettiest thing I had ever seen. She was as taken with me, and after a week, our parents proudly informed us that a betrothal agreement had been reached, provided we both graduated from secondary school and Exalted.



EXALTATION

I was my mother's favorite. She always spoke of me being the one to take over the vineyard while my siblings were the ones assumed to do the smaller tasks. Two had Exalted, and all had married and were building their families by the time I reached puberty, but my mother doted on me and my keen interest in the business. They all considered it a job, my mother said, while to me, it was passion.

She would say that, after I graduated from school and started my family, I could take over the vineyard and keep her as master viticulturist. My brother would be in charge of the growers, my sisters in charge of the accounting and shipping details, but I was to be the one overseeing all of it.

I was weeks away from graduating from primary school. After extensive interviews, I had been accepted into the Cloister of Wisdom. My mother was thrilled: My siblings had avoided the Cloister's strict reputation for the other schools. My mother had gone to the Cloister, however, one of the few of our decadent Great House to have the self-discipline to graduate.

I had come home for the celebration of my mother's 70th birthday. My siblings were all there with their families. My sister, Kamin, the one mortal, was silent toward me. She had a good job doing our mother's accounting and had dutifully birthed three children and collected her share of inheritance, but she hated that the vineyard and winery would be mine.

It didn't help when my mother took her time in the spotlight to announce my upcoming studies at the Cloister. She announced my future as the head of the winery and my betrothal to Dekna. I stood beside my mother and glowed.

That night we all stayed in my mother's house. She and my father had planned for a huge family that never quite came, and she had plenty of room for her extended family. I slept in the room next to Kamin and her husband, also a mortal.

I am not terribly sure what happened that night. Maybe they laced my juice with a sleeping draught. Either way, I was not aware of anything until I was outside in the vineyard, stretched spread-eagled and naked. I tried to move and found my limbs were tied to the ground. A gag of clean linen was secured around my jaws, silencing me.

I was a small boy. Knowing the physical demands of the Cloister, this worried me a bit, but I hoped I would get some heft as I got older. Still, my size worked against me in trying to muscle my way out of the bind I was in. I struggled and strained to see who had bound me.

Kamin came into my view, smiling and holding a crude metal knife. *She couldn't afford something nicer?* I thought hysterically. She moved between my legs, and I could feel my privates shrink away from her instinctively. The light from an unseen fire flickered across her face, making her look mad.

She told me that I didn't deserve the winery, that I was only 13 and probably hadn't even had a wet dream yet, much less fathered children as per our mother's inheritance requirements. She told me I would never father children. She didn't listen at all to my pleas and cries.

It was over before I realized it had begun, or else, I blacked out. Her knife was crude, but sharp, and she quickly and efficiently parted my testicles from me. The pain was monstrous, but suddenly, it became a mere tickle. She had not stopped, and I had not passed out. I simply felt no pain anymore. I could smell my burning blood and flesh, coppery and acrid, and assumed she was cauterizing the wound. I opened my eyes and saw a yellow anima burst around me, swirling like the sands that flow through Pasiap's veins.

My sister stumbled back, cursing. I strained once and felt the bonds holding me down fray and break. They had seemed so strong before. I stood before her and she cowered, actually *cowered* before me. I raised my arms and shouted in Exaltation, and then collapsed, drained of Essence. I must have blacked out.

When I awoke, I was in a hospital carriage of a caravan headed for Sion. The healer attending me was an Immaculate monk. Upon seeing me awaken, he silently handed me a letter. I read the short, terse note from my mother detailing her regret over my sister's act, news of Kamin's suicide and that the healers said I would recover but never have children. She told me that the Palace Sublime had graciously offered to house me for the summer before my entry into the Cloister of Wisdom. It was regrettable what had happened, but my future was set: My upcoming time with the postulants would prepare me for my training to join the Immaculate Order, which I would be doing after my graduation. These were my house's wishes, and I had no say in the matter.

I had been betrayed, mutilated and unofficially disinherited. My sister's subsequent death only made it seem like she had somehow gotten away with it. My future as a viticulturist, businessman, husband and father ended at that moment. My future as an impotent monk was set. Pasiap must have had a reason to work his will upon me at that moment instead of letting me die of my wounds as a mortal might have, but I did not understand then what that reason might be.

The summer spent with the monks was a blur of bitter nighttime tears and daytime observances of the Immaculate Order. I slept, cleaned, ate, exercised and prayed hollow words with the postulants. I was treated as postulant by all who had contact with me, even though I was clearly Exalted.

With all my learning, I was still obsessed with my family and Dekna. No letters came from home, and I spent my days and nights in confused and silent routine.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

Although I adapted to everyday life at the Cloister better than most, nothing could have prepared me for the workload the students endure. I found my personal problems shunted to the back of my mind as I attempted to fit meditation, exercise, studies, martial arts and other school priorities into my day. I found meditation my favorite part of the day because that was the only time I could honestly force my mind to let go of my past and find peace. When I meditated, I discovered I danced on the edge of awareness where nothing could penetrate my calm, but I was still cognizant of my surroundings.

In my intensive studies of martial arts, I showed a talent for pressure-point attacks. I learned the delicate art of disrupting the body's Essence and the way to cause pain with just a finger's touch. I also learned of the nerve clusters on the body that signify kill points, such as the one behind the jaw and the one between the legs. Blows against these locations can easily slay mortals, and they are point of vulnerability even on the Exalted frame.

It was difficult at first — my mutilation left me with a smaller than normal body and the inability to build strong muscles. My voice remained high, like a woman's. After some evaluation, I was assigned a female monk with whom to train. I learned to use a woman's typical strengths in battle instead of a man's. Speed over strength, dexterity over force.

After a couple of years, I woke up with a new realization: I was enjoying my time at school. My meditations and my studies were all that I had, and though I had embraced them blindly at first, I now found they very much suited me.

At the beginning of my final year of schooling, I was surreptitiously invited to join the Iron Horses, the secret society of the Cloister of Wisdom. This brotherhood was closely knit, consisting of students who intended to join the Order directly after graduation.

Initiation was perhaps the second most uncomfortable night of my life. I was faced with a naked classmate and told to enjoy my few remaining days of freedom before I became a chaste monk. Angry, embarrassed, confused, I approached her and did what I could to pleasure her with my hands and mouth, gritting my teeth at the lack of desire I felt.

When she was sated, she cut me through my right eyebrow. She told me that initiation into the Iron Horses consisted of facing an impossible situation. They knew of my injury and said I had done very well. I became one of the Iron Horses that night and have never been closer to a group of people.

We all entered the Order upon graduation from the Cloister. I was surprised when my house sent me a letter after my graduation. I had not spoken to or heard from my family since Exaltation. I burned the letter, unopened.



CROW

“Apples! Fresh apples! Cider! Strained juice! Apples!”
It’s been almost a century, and I can still hear the calls in my sleep. I can still smell the apples.

My father named me Walking Blossom. I was the one they didn’t want, the one that was too small, too slow and too afraid of heights. I would rather spend my time singing or pretending I was a great hero, when I actually had time to play.

My family managed a tiny orchard between the Imperial City and Sion. We were something between farmers and merchants, owning nothing and doing all the work. We tended the trees, picked the apples, pressed the cider and then took it to the cities to sell, giving the money to our overlord. We all did the work, but I was the only one who went with Mother to the City. Some may consider this a treat, but I was made to work during these market days while my brothers and sisters had the days off, able to relax in the orchards.

I went with Mother for three reasons: I was a girl, and Mother always said women sell better than men; I had a loud, piercing voice that made me the best caller; and as I was terrified of heights and refused to climb the trees and pick apples, I had to do something to pull my weight.

I would begin calling the apples in our tiny stall before Mother was even done unloading the cart. My loud voice would turn heads, and I would smile my prettiest, although I knew I wasn’t the best looking of my siblings. Some would stop and comment at how such a big voice came out of such a small girl. More often than not, they would buy apples or cider for the upcoming feasts.

I remember the day I saw the grand Dragon-Blooded warriors. One, a tall, gorgeous man with skin almost blue in color, came over to the stand after he heard me hollering. His companion, a smaller, red-haired woman, followed. They were dressed in full armor and carried massive daiklaves. Clearly, they were mighty warriors. I could almost feel the air twist around them when they came over. I trembled but held the apples out, showing them how red they were.

The woman sniffed, saying she preferred the tart green apples at another stand, and asked why they were wasting their time in the market anyway. The man, however, looked down at me and smiled, and I melted. He was so beautiful. He said they could certainly use a voice like mine in their house and asked if I had ever thought about performing. As I fell at his feet to claim fealty, the man laughed and said my mother would need me. They bought almost our entire inventory, but my cheeks still burned with shame.

EXALTATION

That night, I dreamed I was high up in the tallest apple tree in the world, one with leaves like the great umbrellas I’d seen Exalted travel under and apples as large as boulders. I inched out along a branch, terrified, but unable to stop myself. The branch cracked, and still, I inched, leaving the safety of the tree’s trunk behind me, edging out to where the branch got smaller and smaller. It cracked once more, and then, I was in the air, falling, crashing through branches and leaves, getting briefly tangled, then falling again. I screamed and cried, falling on and on toward the Earth. I could see it very clearly, rushing up to meet me, and knew I would shatter my bones on its rocky surface. But when I hit, I felt the Earth take me into her breast, envelop me, love me. I slipped deep into her womb and slept.

I awoke seven days later. I say “awoke” because I truly felt as if I’d been asleep. To my anguished family, I was in a trance, eyes open, lying in my bed. I did not sleep, eat or even breathe during this time. They thought I was dead, but when night fell on the first day, they saw it — the anima, pure white, glowing all around me. They sent my brother to carry a message to the Palace Sublime, it being the nearest location of Dragon-Blooded we knew of. By the time I woke up, I was looking up into the face of a bald woman, Iselsi Omi.

She told me that everything was all right, that I had been chosen by the Immaculate Dragons to serve the Realm as a Dragon-Blooded and that important people from Juche were on their way to take charge of me. I was very confused, telling her that there must be some mistake and explaining how I’d only slept for a bit, but Omi pointed out the anima, which still gently billowed around me.

I was terrified, but I looked at Mother and Father, who looked proud enough to burst, and at my siblings, who looked jealous and angry. Everyone assured me that it was true and that I needed to leave for Juche soon to be trained.

I tried to pack my things, the few belongings that were simply mine and no one else’s: a small knife I used to sharpen sticks to be my daiklaves in my games, a jade coin I’d found in the dirt in Sion once and my ragged security blanket with which I still slept. Omi stopped me, reminding me that, as a Dragon-Blooded, I would have the mightiest swords, more jade than I could imagine and the softest linens. I still snipped off a corner of my blanket while she wasn’t looking and kept it wedged in my sweaty fist for most of the journey. Halfway to the Obsidian Mirror, I left the corner in the dirt. I was frightened and sad, but excitement began to stir in my chest. I was really one of *them*, and one didn’t see a Dragon-Blooded warrior carrying a beloved scrap of cloth around.



SECONDARY SCHOOL

In the Obsidian Mirror, we were shown to be different from other young Dragon-Blooded. I like to think of us as blank slates overwritten with the blessings of the Immaculate Dragons, all frightened and banding together. Some tried to lord their (somewhat) higher birth over the rest of us, but they were quickly taught otherwise: We were all Dragon-Blooded. Those that became my friends were Swirling Waters (who was, interestingly enough, a Fire-aspected Exalt), the daughter of a farmer, like me, and Hanging Vine, the son of performers.

Although I had a quick mind for math, as I'd spent my time in the stalls taking money and making change for our customers, I'd never gotten the hang of reading, so I was placed in the remedial reading courses alongside Swirling Waters. We found we had much in common, and we would whisper together about our plans to become great warriors some day. When I found out what the Obsidian Mirror was grooming us for, I felt there was no choice in the matter. I'd dreamed of wielding a daiklave against the fury of Anathema and Fair Folk and any horror that came my way, and now, the chance was handed to me. Swirling Waters felt the same way. We mistrusted the calm priests — one could never tell what they were thinking.

Hanging Vine was quieter than Swirling Waters and I, and he already knew how to read. We made friends when I heard him singing one night to himself, and I joined him, making the perfect counter-melody. He had been trained by his parents to sing and was amazed at my natural talent. We discovered during our physical training sessions that we could confuse our opponents when we sang, which gave our attacks a certain flair. Swirling Waters would try to keep tune with us, but sadly, she had no voice for it.

The three of us would stick together as long as they'd let us, going over our lessons. As the Feast of the Elect approached, I got so excited I could barely sleep at night. I had never tasted such food as was presented there, and I stuffed myself silly on meat, soup and desserts (eschewing those flavored with apples), then found myself sick with the anticipation upon going before the Master of Orphans. I knew what I would choose, I only feared that somehow they would find me lacking, would have some monks come and rip the Essence from my body and give it to someone more worthy. Hanging Vine and I took the coin without hesitation, but Swirling Waters came from the private meeting clutching the gilded razor. I was stunned, and Hanging Vine was furious. We did not question her, but stiffly congratulated her on her future as a monk. We did not talk much the rest of the night. One does not ask an orphan why she took the coin or the razor. It's simply accepted. I tried to look forward to the Stair, but without my friend, it was a hollow hope.

The hollowness was soon filled by the Stair and the difficulties that came with it. Stories were swapped as we

packed our meager belongings, and the escorts tried to prepare us of the torment that would start the very first day we laid foot on the bottom stair. But, in hindsight, someone can tell you about the daiklave ready to cut off your head, but it's still up to you to be fast enough to get out of the way. And if you're chained to a pole at the time, as we were bound to our fates as outcastes, you just have to watch that blade come at you.

I'd like to say the first year was the hardest because that's what I hear others say. But I honestly can't remember a lot of it. I remember it in emotions, not true memories. I remember thrill at finally owning my own blade, bone-crushing exhaustion after a workout, sick dread that the sun would rise the next day, pain more often than not and hot-faced shame as Hanging Vine bore me on his back after I collapsed, growling at me to wake up and run for myself.

That was the year I'd earned the name Crow. Worm and Pit, two older fang leaders, heard me and Hanging Vine singing one night after a particularly grueling workout. We leaned against each other on the stairs, quietly singing, doing the only remaining thing that gave us joy. I faced inward as always, as I forever lived in fear of falling off the mountains. No one knew of the fear but Hanging Vine.

When Worm and Pit found us and mocked us, we stood to go. Pit grabbed me and held me over the rocky edge and my feet dangled in the wind. I screamed, losing control of every amount of strength and valor I had learned. While he laughed and punched me as I clutched at his wrist to make sure he didn't drop me over the side, Worm beat on Hanging Vine, kicking him. I saw Worm raise his foot, and his anima flared, an ugly greenish black. He leveled a stomp at Hanging Vine's head who rolled away too late. Worm's foot landed on his neck, crushing Hanging Vine's larynx. They left us then, laughing and warning us not to sing again. I was only shamed with a soiled pair of pants: Hanging Vine nearly died. When I saw him the next day, beaten with a large bandage on his neck, I learned he had been rendered mute. When I realized he would never command a legion with his mighty voice or whisper to me on the wedding night I so desperately desired or even sing again, I began focusing on my studies. I was here to master the art of war, and finally, I had a true reason to apply myself.

Hanging Vine retreated into himself, and suddenly, he was our fang's liability instead of me. I did my best to protect him, but our leader beat him up frequently to make an example of him. I'd hold my breath as he'd stumble to class, seeping blood from a makeshift bandage and limping on a leg that never healed.

They noticed the difference in me, too. I bore the name Crow with no shame or outward malice, seeing it as the fulcrum around which my anger levered itself. I was





singled out and beaten less and watched warily more. I began to assert myself, demanding more difficult trials even as I was exhausted and bleeding. I received accolades and praise even as they made me run harder and carry more than the others. I kept internal notes on where Pit and Worm were during the days so I could know when best to strike. And I did not sing again.

It was my seventh year at the Stair when it happened. Hanging Vine and I were still best friends and had established a system of communication. I had pulled him out of his despair, and he had even finally begun to shine in the more covert training operations. A man who cannot make a sound is valuable, if you know how to use him.

I lay in the infirmary in the spring of that year, a deep wound in my thigh keeping me down. Bruises on my face were still swollen, and I had trouble swallowing from a blow to the neck. My opponent had a flair for pummeling his enemies before sticking them with his blade, and he had brought me down most effectively. My thigh was heavily stitched and bandaged, and my head swam. Pit and Worm, set to graduate in a month, were studying military medicine in the infirmary. I don't believe Pit gave me a second thought as he came to check my dressing. I watched him impassively as he deemed me ready to go back to training in a day. After he left me, I got out of bed and took my blade from under my mattress. I balanced on my good leg and limped after them. My anima flared, and the pain left me. I grinned and called out to them.

I was younger, and they were stronger. Still, I had made a promise. And I had a knife. One was dead and one was alive when they both walked off the mountain that night. Essence depleted, the pain returned, and I collapsed back into bed, fresh blood staining the linens and my right arm hanging useless at my side, and I prayed to the Immaculate Dragons that I would survive until morning when I was to be checked on by another medical student.

Hanging Vine came in the next afternoon smiling at me. He touched my bandaged leg and signed "Forgive me?" I smiled at him and gave him his Stair nickname: Silent Betrayed.

RAGARA JASIR

My early childhood was spent in the Ragara quarters of the Imperial Palace, where the young were drilled relentlessly in preparation for those rare occasions when we were paraded in front of the other families who lived in the palace or, worse, the Scarlet Empress herself. I remember countless tiny starched uniforms, endless memorization of the classics and dozens of beatings when I came up short. No matter how proficient one was at one's lessons — and I was very, very proficient — there

was always another child faster at reciting a classic poem, cuter in their tiny gown or suit, more ready with an appropriate response when complimented by an adult of high station.

My mother — an unExalted Tepet who was married to my father to help cement some business contract — doted on my older brother Temer, rather than me. Even before he entered his teens, he was tall, lithe, well muscled and precociously intelligent. I cannot fault my mother for favoring Temer, for where he was a glorious piece of Dynastic breeding, I was broadly built, introspective — others said slow — and awkward. I suppose that if I had been in my mother's place, I would have prayed for Temer's Exaltation as well.

My father Avila was appropriately distant. He was a manager of Ragara business affairs, specializing in shipping. He had become wealthy through numerous private investments, the profits of which he pushed upstairs to the heads of the house, after taking an acceptable percentage for himself. My father, I now suspect, was an unhappy man, locked in a marriage with a woman he had no real connection to and responsible for two boys he didn't know what to do with. My father had a head full of jade, you see, and no mind for people. He saw everyone as lines on an accounting sheet, worth so much, capable of being levered for this much jade, worth disposing of or discounting for that much land. He was cold to Temer and I because, until we Exalted, we were unknown quantities to him. We were unacceptable not because we had no value, but because our potential value was uncertain. In essence, we were investments that might never pay off.

I will be honest, for after almost two centuries, I have no reason to lie: I hated Temer. He was well aware of his prospects if I Exalted and he did not and did everything in his somewhat limited power to make my life miserable. I remember how he once tried to drown me as we both played in a pool as if it were yesterday. A pair of household guards saved me, in the process breaking my brother's arm, for his grip on me was sure and relentless. Although my mother joined the rest of the family in applauding the guards' actions, each man disappeared from the family apartments over the next year — I suspect she had them put to the knife for daring to break Temer's arm, but I will never be sure. She always moved carefully when it came to protecting Temer — she knew better than anyone the price for favoring one potential Dragon-Blooded heir over another.

As I said, I have no ill feelings toward Temer for the attack — he was stronger, I was weaker, and thus, he was the bully. If the situation had been reversed, perhaps I would have bullied him, maybe even tried to kill him as he tried to kill me. Whatever the case, he is dead now, and so, I can afford to forgive him.

My mother had been tutoring Temer in the family quarters the year the murder attempt occurred, against my father's better judgment. Old Avila saw the assault as a sure sign that Temer should be pruned from mother's grasp and sent to a conventional primary school, and my brother left the very next week. I remember my mother wailing as Temer boarded the carriage to leave for the countryside and him coldly shaking my hands just before he departed, a look of hatred in his eyes.

The following year was a cold one in our family apartments, and my father sensed my mother's rage toward me. Avila kept me close to him until I could be sent off to primary school myself, which meant that I was taken to parties in other sections of the Imperial Palace. It was during those parties that I first saw the Scarlet Empress.

The Empress was glorious, terrible and distant, with long, black hair and a penetrating gaze. I cannot remember her face, oddly enough — when I search my memory concerning her, all I can remember is her presence, if that makes any sense, and the way her passage through a room threw the place into disorder as people jockeyed for a chance to catch her eye and others ducked to avoid her. I must admit, she terrified me, and I can barely remember what actually happened when she deigned to speak to my father.

Years later, I would revisit those various fetes and balls in my memory and come to realize how she maintained her hold on others. She was in a position of such power that people desired her friendship and goodwill, rather than any specific item she could bestow. Even those who hated her passionately desired that she notice them, that she laugh at a joke or acknowledge them in some way. I realized that if you truly want power over others, you must have something beyond mere jade or trinkets — you must make them want you to love them. That is what I believe true power is.

But that realization would come later. First, I was sent to primary school, to the Palace of Three Crowns, which was located on a tract of land in Juche Prefecture. I remember very little of it after a century, except that I was diligent in my studies and still remained almost painfully shy after the murder attempt — when a child's closest sibling tries to murder him, the scars run deep. Instead of playing with the other children, I remember being frequently mesmerized by the view of the Imperial Mountain that dominated the western sky. How can I describe the center of the world? How can I emphasize the sheer weight of the thing, swallowing the western sky, casting a massive shadow in the afternoons such that it cast the whole world in twilight? How can I convey the eerie beauty of an obscured sunset, the sky turning red and purple but the sun barred from one's sight by a mountain that was nothing less than a pillar to Heaven?





The effect a feature of the landscape as massive as the Imperial Mountain has on the mortal mind is well documented by savants — one is drawn to it, as if it possesses a gravity all its own. It exerts a subtle, geomantic pull upon the architecture and landscape of the area, so that, when observed from above, houses and buildings all seem ordered around the mountain. And it is a reminder, to mortals and Exalts alike, that Creation has wonders in plain sight far greater in their own way than anything created in the First Age.

If it sounds as if I am in awe of the Imperial Mountain, then so be it. The hold the Elemental Pole of Earth had on the mind of a child echoes forward in time even to today — even after all my travels, after all of the inexplicable and life-changing sights I have witnessed, the Imperial Mountain remains the image that sticks with me the most.

EXALTATION

I remember that my Exaltation took place on the sports field at my primary school as the other children raced around the track or played hookball. I had been studying a text. Bored with the book, I set it on my lap and found my gaze drawn, as it often was, to the Imperial Mountain. It was early afternoon, which meant that the sun slowly fell behind the mountain, a terminator of shadow racing forward across the plain. I remember finding myself short of breath and standing, perhaps to seek out an instructor.

As I stood, I felt it — a oneness, a transcendence based upon the connection of my feet to the earth. I felt tied as one to the ground beneath me, aware of every creature that moved across the face of the playground, from the field mice capering through the grass to the ungainly bounding of the hookball players. I breathed in, and deep beneath the skin of the earth, I heard a thrumming so loud and so penetrating that I felt my bones shudder. I saw flashes of white light, pulsing in tune with that ever-present, all-powerful beating of that subterranean heart. The children on the field had all stopped what they were doing and begun to stare, and through their eyes I saw myself, glimmering and scintillating like a perfect white gem in tune with that beating of the Earth Dragon's heart.

The instructors came and took my unresisting body away to the Exalted quarters, where I was given a mild soporific to stop my anima from flaring and return my Essence-charged senses to normal. I could still hear the echo of the beat of the Earth Dragon's heart, though, and in my mind's eye, I still saw the Imperial Mountain, wreathed in clouds near the base and displayed in chiaroscuro as the sun passed behind it.

When I awoke, the days of being able to hide myself in a book of poetry were over. I was a Dragon-Blooded now, just like my father, and the Realm expected me to perform my best. After that day, when I pulled into myself, I was

beaten by the instructors, although beatings like that were rare. My studies increased in both intensity and frequency, and it was lucky that I found that the Elemental Dragon of Earth had blessed me with the endurance of a yeddim, for I spent many a night up until almost dawn, caught up in some text on history or finance.

More interestingly, my Exaltation had allowed me to find my center, socially. I was still not as vivacious as the other children at school and possessed a certain seriousness and conservatism that the other children lacked. In my later years, when I tried to reason why I behaved differently than the others, I blamed the somewhat religious nature of my Exaltation. Nevertheless, despite my shyness and seriousness, I began to gather a circle of friends around me.

To help me gain control of my own Essence, I began studying the Five-Dragon Style of martial arts, reading *Five Dragons Fight as One* at the behest of a Dragon-Blooded instructor. I dreamt, weeks into my training, of attending the Cloister of Wisdom and attempting, through meditation, to regain that sense of oneness that I experienced at my Exaltation and which I could now only experience in tiny pieces through the use of Essence.

In a rare show of warmth, my father sent a letter praising me for being chosen by the Dragons — I remember thinking that it must have seemed to him as though his investment had paid off, perhaps. I also received word that, across the prefecture in another school, my brother had also Exalted — perhaps at the very same time as me, interestingly enough. I realized then, with the simple spiritualism of a child, that Temer and I were linked, somehow, by destiny — what else could explain our Exaltations occurring so close to one another?

In the letter, my father also made it clear that he was already arranging to guarantee me a place at the Spiral Academy. I had been chosen by him to follow his example and become a bureaucrat, my destiny bound up in the ebb and flow of money and favors that made up the Thousand Scales and the management of the Great Houses. Oddly enough, I don't really remember being disappointed that my childish fantasies of Immaculate monkhood and its attendant martial-arts prowess had been overruled. Instead, I remember being obscenely pleased that my father had chosen me to follow in his footsteps, whilst my brother was chosen to go to the House of Bells. For the first time, I was not jealous of Temer — I gave no thought to my brother's future as a heroic soldier in the armies of the Realm. Instead, I was proud that my father had thought to have me attend the same school that he had.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

I entered the Spiral Academy three years later. I was more socially adept than I had been when I entered primary school and far more self-confident due to my

early progress in the Five-Dragon Style. Any pleasure I might have felt at the prospect of attending the Spiral Academy, however, was soon worn away by the actual courses of study. No matter how many times I hear about the tedious lessons at the House of Bells or the Heptagram, I can't help but wish that those doing the complaining could experience the mind-numbing tedium involved in doing the accounting farmed out to the Spiral Academy by outside interests, such as the Great Houses and certain mercantile concerns. Memorizing *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier* or *The White Treatise* cannot compare with reading Ledaal Seramiz's *The Complete and Annotated Directory of Rank and Departments within the Thousand Scales of the Dragon*, 8th edition, for sheer sleep-inducing boredom.

During my time at the Spiral Academy, I realized several things, nearly simultaneously. The first was that my fellow schoolmates, with very few exceptions, were always pressed for money despite their backgrounds. As conservative as I was with my spending and given the few opportunities to spend money available at the school, I was amazed at how quickly even my most wealthy friends were in need of new coin. During a short trip home, I explained the situation to my father, who, somewhat impressed with my thoughts on the matter, began loaning me money at an incredibly low-interest rate. When I returned to school after the brief vacation, I began loaning that money to other students. Those who had something I wanted, or whose friendship I wished to cultivate, were loaned money for only a few points above the interest rate I was paying to Father. For everyone else, I loaned money out based on an interest rate slightly higher than the going rate in the Imperial City — I had, after all, a somewhat captive population that needed to deal with me or one of the other few wealthy students at the school.

The other thing I realized, which was more profitable for me than the loans, was that, taken piecemeal, the work being farmed out to the Spiral Academy meant nothing. It was data entry in ledgers, double-entry bookkeeping, checking facts and figures and the like. Most of the details were written in somewhat simplistic ciphers in order to give it a bare minimum of protection from passing glances. When viewed from above, however, beyond the perspective of a single student or team of students, the work painted interesting pictures. Taken separately, each ledger or piece of farmed out work meant very little, but taken as a whole, even the simple, nonproprietary information within could give the right people an advantage in trade.

The task of ferreting out such useful information was made somewhat difficult thanks to the fact that the Scarlet Throne was the sponsor of the Spiral Academy and the Great Houses knew that the material they sent was under official scrutiny — they expected the All-Seeing Eye to check the figures within each set of books. Still, there were

pieces of intelligence within each ledger that might have meant nothing to the Eye, but turned out to be diamonds in the rough to House Ragara.

Thus, the second phase of my plan took shape. Those students who were unwilling or unable to pay me back money that I loaned to them could continue to pay me back only the interest, if they searched the odd file or ledger for me and reported back its contents. I was careful — only a handful of students in different years received such an offer, and they were never allowed to perform a search through material pertaining to their own Great House. Those students who puzzled out my purposes were ones I made sure to draw closer into my circle of friendship — they believed they had something to hold over my head and, thus, let their guards down as I plied them with money and favors until they were fully in my debt.

Needless to say, House Ragara was mildly impressed with the information I was able to occasionally give it, and my father's fortunes rose as well as word got out of his son's industriousness. The rewards for my little enterprise, in the form of profits gleaned from our insider knowledge and social contacts made because of my largesse, more than made up for the odd loan my father and I had to write off because of a recalcitrant or down-at-the-heels student. In addition, House Ragara became very careful of what information it sent to the Spiral Academy for assistance with in the future. It is my understanding that, sometimes, it has even sent bogus ledgers to the Spiral Academy every few months since my departure in case an enterprising student from another Great House picked up where I had left off — which I'm sure has since happened more than once in the long decades since I attended the school. In fact, when I think about it, I realize that I cannot be the first student to have thought of it.

I also went into business with someone for the first time at the Spiral Academy, bankrolling a young Cynis with the right contacts who wished to start a drug operation, in exchange for a share of the profits. The drugs were the kind of recreational and study-enhancing fodder appropriate to a school such as the Spiral Academy, although I ended our partnership when he began branching into harder substances, with the understanding that our friendship would remain intact.

MOIAS

My mother didn't like me. From an early age, I always insisted on walking my own path, and in a house as tightly kept as Ragara, that's not an endearing trait. She was continuously excusing my behavior to her mother, and I could always hear her strained backroom discussions with my father or the help. It was when one of those flamed out of control that I learned that I was not my father's daughter. I remember feeling relief as I sat in my room and thought it over — my father was a particularly boring man,





and mortal. And since the failure to Exalt hung over his head, he had little influence over my mother.

The result of this imbalance of power was that she chose to hire Ledaal Potis, the famed Dragon-Blooded tutor known through the Realm for his ability to tame the wayward at an early age. From him, I learned to agree in public and disagree in private — but the practice still irked me. I didn't figure out until late in my fifth year under his tutelage that Potis was my tutor for another reason. The smoldering looks my mother gave him when she thought I wasn't looking, the innuendoes that grew increasingly transparent to me as I aged and the resigned looks my father gave the man on the rare occasions when the two encountered each other were clues enough. Returning home from primary school for my first vacation to find my mother and former tutor in an illicit embrace was the final proof I needed. Although he was demanding, I appreciated my education at Potis' hands. He liked me more than my mother ever did and understood me more than she ever tried to. And he taught me how to tell with whom my father was "being illegitimate," as he put it. The two of us are still friends, and he has demanded that I allow him to tutor one of my children when he is next available.

The man I called father, despite whose line I may really bear, was pleasant enough for all the empty work he did in the Thousand Scales. He would treat me with the sugared fruits Potis and my mother chose to forbid, and he would take me out to the parks of Juche when we vacationed, a welcomed respite from my strict if well-meaning tutor. The memories of those parks still help me to relax — flowering ivies and roses climbed smooth marble trellises beside emerald saplings and quartz poppies, all tended by those queer Folk. I enjoyed watching them work, disappearing into their tunnels and emerging upon the highest branches of a stone oak.

I was in my late childhood when my father grew tired of his situation. Being found to be a less-than-useful child, being married off to the Ragara in exchange for some share of profits in a failing venture and then being made to suffer social abuse at the hands of his spouse for a decade might have aggravated the sense of self-worth he had developed as a scion of House Cynis. He had been busy amassing a number of healthy favors from various other ministries, and he felt it was about time that he had significantly more say in what went on in the home. As my parents geared up for battle, Potis prepared to leave. His profession called him elsewhere, he said, although he promised to return to visit.

The result of the growing conflict between my mother and father was my departure for Ilicar Academy. I had hoped to attend (as Potis had encouraged my mother to allow) the Seeds of Wisdom's Gardens in Sion to study the scholarly arts. But my father's growing potency demanded

compromise, and my mother decided Ilicar a fair trade. I was to be hurled into the bureaucracy.

I managed to surprise myself once I arrived at the academy. My studies under Ledaal Potis had given me more knowledge of history and literature than the teachers required, and some of my knowledge felt quite useless. My skill in math came in quite handy during my lessons in finance and household management. More importantly, however, I managed to gather a strong group of friends about me through my ability to point out which teachers were sleeping with other teachers, which slept with the dominie and which shamed themselves with the help.

EXALTATION

I was nearly done with my schooling, having survived the Ilicar Academy through study, careful cheating and no more than the acceptable amount of blackmail, when my father came to speak with me on a visiting day. I could not remember having seen him so happy, and the combination of surprise visit and unusual joy set me on edge. I resolved that whatever he had to give, I wouldn't accept it. It turned out to be the right choice — my father had secured my admittance to the Spiral Academy. Of all things I wanted, my desire to be free of the bureaucracy was strongest. I had envied my mother's position as a much-demanded occult landscape artist and public works director for much of my childhood, and to be trapped inside a small, airless room far from the outside was abhorrent to me.

I wouldn't go. And when I told him so, he ordered me into the dormitory to discuss it further, but I remained stationary. Then, he tried to move me by force. His first attempt saw him swung over my hip onto the grass. The second ended with him on the front steps of Ilicar, and my feet still hadn't left the ground. I barely knew what I was doing, but I knew I wasn't going to budge. By this point, a small crowd had gathered, and as my mortal father prepared to put hand to me again, a teacher I thought a particularly odious character redeemed himself by demanding that my father stop. That was when the man trying to sculpt me to his design saw what I had become. I had Exalted into a new life, and I would be doing the shaping from that point on.

Or so I thought. Things moved very quickly after that. My mother arrived in short order, and the two began to argue over what was to be my fate now that I had Exalted. It appeared that my mother had agreed to the Spiral Academy after it appeared that I would not Exalt. She now wanted to see me attend the Cloister as she had done. Neither wanted to see me at the Heptagram, and I had no reason to argue that point, and as the debate locked into a stalemate the two realized the need to compromise. I hear that my grandmother's wishes had something to do with the decision that I attend the House of Bells, but if that is truly so, I don't know why.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

Being accepted by the students of a bureaucratic primary school is no mean feat, but neither does it endear one to those who think of themselves as the best the Realm has to offer. And my fellow students at the school thought just that. It fell to my new friends and I to take the local riffraff down from the top rung to a more well-deserved peg — specifically, one just beneath us. The coup came in the form of a complex plan conceived by my friend Cathak Thoan. Always our ringleader, he led us through a series of deceits that left our scale judged at the head of our year — and just before the rest of them ganged up on us, he managed to ensure our class' victory over each of the next two years in the seasonal competition. We were instant heroes, and the impetus from that victory carried us through much of our education on that wave of popularity. By the time we were the graduating class, we were thought of as equal to any other, and that was all we really asked from the start.

That is one of my few memories that stand out from my time at the House of Bells. The other is of when the entire curriculum changed in the blink of an eye. A rogue spirit had slaughtered a small town not far from the House of Bells' grounds. The Immaculates had come and put the spirit to death, but their appeasing rites for the villagers must have missed a few — or a few dozen — because hungry ghosts were appearing all over the countryside at night. We were all hastily trained with ghost-fire blades so we could use them to combat the ghosts, and then, we went on a hunt. It was great fun, and I claimed two kills that night — two more than any of my scalemates.

The other most exciting event in the school was when, in lieu of the scheduled tradition of hunting the condemned, we were surprised by the arrival of a much smaller closed wagon, guarded by more men than we expected and some Dragon-Blooded as well. The quarry they had brought for us (at great effort, they explained) was a small cadre of wild Fair Folk from the jungles of the East. They would be released onto the grounds and after only 10 minutes — a much shorter period than that for criminals — we would hunt them.

The beings were not to leave the grounds and were offered no freedom in that manner. Each, in fact, was forced to plainly agree that it would remain at the House of Bells until removed. Thoan whispered to me then that they could not break an oath, to my wonderment. (How wonderful, I think now, imperial politics would be if argued only by the Mountain Folk!) Any who survived for a set length of time would be returned to their native forests. The creatures were released and shortly fled into the deepest of the forest. Our pursuit was nearly immediate.



For the first time.



Not the most skilled tracker, I depended upon a scalemate for direction. But it was I who noticed one of them waiting to ambush us from the trees. The battle did not last long, but Tepet Ruol broke his nose through hesitation and Cathak Weril accidentally set the tree on fire. Only one of the Folk survived long enough to be found and carted from the school grounds, but it was the one that looked the most regal and proud. His bearing seemed to suggest that all had gone as he had desired. Thoan claimed that it was only a show, but I could only wonder as the cart rolled away.

MNEMON

Years and years and years. There are only a few snatches of childhood that stand out like a beacon against the fog of too many years, but those that do stand out are as clear as yesterday.

The woman who birthed me, the Scarlet Empress, is the center of most of the memories. She was awe-inspiring: I remember her as tall, daunting, beautiful. You could smell the power on this woman, and I'm not talking about her magic. I often have wondered the truth of her story, the everyday soldier who stumbled upon great power. I looked up at the woman who guided the Realm with shrewd brilliance and thought it must have been a lie to bring her closer to the people. I couldn't fathom her playing the obedient soldier.

My birth was insignificant compared to the others who make up my remarkable family. Meteors and stars did not streak across the sky as they did for Ragara. Water did not force itself out of the ground forming new springs such as in the events that surrounded Sesus' birth. As far as I know, nothing remarkable happened the day I was born.

I feel that it is clear that nothing else could have rivaled my birthing, so the world did not even make an attempt.

Ragara was already over two centuries old, building his family and his legions and wondering somewhat too openly when the Empress would name him heir. He and I shared a father as well, the Empress' husband Rawar, dead the year after my birth. I have always found it amusing that some families have children born of the same parents showing more affection for each other than their half-siblings. Ragara was a distant, frightening individual in my life when I was a mere child.

I remember playing in unobtrusive corners of the palace, watching the monks practice their arts with wonder, keeping out of people's way when I could. She would call for me from time to time and allow me to watch her rule. Mostly, I found it boring. The intricacies and subtleties of ruling the Realm did not impress me until later in my life.

EXALTATION

My brother was an imposing force in my youth. I was only a girl getting tutelage from a handful of monks, but Ragara was the head of a Great House and had a stable of descendents ready to follow his whims by the time I Exalted. He was tall, powerful, a paragon of might. When I was still a skinny young girl, watching the Empress with shining, adoring eyes, he was the only person who could steal my gaze from her.

While the Empress was an unreachable icon, Ragara was the image of what I wanted to be. He had started his house, developed a profitable business and military following and appeared on his way to securing the Scarlet Throne when the Empress died — unlikely — or stepped down — even more unlikely. However, Ragara had a fatal flaw: He was afraid of me.

The ironic thing was, there was nothing to fear. Not then, anyway. I was so in awe of my family and its power that I had no designs on the Empress' seat. She was hundreds of years old. I was twelve. She commanded the defenses of the Realm, while I was still clumsy with a boot knife. I could not possibly compare myself to her, or even to Ragara.

The primary school system was not well established in my childhood. Many Dynasts received their tutoring from their parents and older siblings or from the local Immaculate monks. The Imperial City did have a primary school run by the Immaculate Order, but the Empress preferred to teach me herself when the demands of state did not distract her, which, admittedly, was often. Our time together often had me learning the theory behind sorcery. I'm sure she knew I was to Exalt (she had Sidereals who would inform her of her children's potential) else she would not have wasted her time.

When she did not tutor me, I was left in the capable hands of three monks. There were two younger monks, Laughing Butterfly and Kiran, who were in charge of most of my lessons concerning the mind. Laughing Butterfly was a small woman who was an expert in the Immaculate Texts. Although she bore a disposition much like her moniker, she still lectured with gusto and punished with speed if I didn't please her. Kiran was Dragon-Blooded, and he taught me history and politics — much of which I already knew because of my family, but I still had to learn the official history of the Realm anyway. He was less quick to punish, which, in retrospect, was foolish. I asked many questions based on what I knew about my family that conflicted with the official histories, and he rarely punished me for this. It is only through swift punishment that one learns where one has erred, and I erred through questioning the word of the Realm. I knew the truths, but I was to keep them to myself. That was the lesson, and it took some time to learn it.

Kiran was my first crush, which was laughable, as I could never take a monk as a lover. But I remember his liquid eyes and his lovely smile.

The third monk was the most memorable. His name was Stone, and his age was indeterminable. He terrified me, but I learned more from him than from any of the other monks. Indeed, I learned more from him than from anyone save the Empress. He was short, shorter than I even at age 12. He build was stocky, and his skin was rough and weathered, as if he'd been stolidly plowing through the years. He was Dragon-Blooded as well and supposedly one of the Empress' greatest advisors. This was an odd rumor to my young ears, as I never once heard him speak.

The thing that terrified me most about Stone was that he wore a black hood covering his face at all times. I never saw him eat or drink, and there were no holes for his eyes, nose or mouth. The hood was tied at the neck with a gold cord that only later did I guess was orichalcum.

Stone was in charge of teaching me the martial arts and armed combat. With patient fingers and demonstration, he showed me the secrets of the sword, the knife, the bow and weaponless fighting. I was unsure of learning from him at first, but he was tolerant, and we were slowly able to communicate. Although the most formidable of the three monks, he was the slowest to anger. When I pushed him past his breaking point, retribution was swift and painful, and I did not do so again.

It was Stone who was with me on that day. I was getting tired of his mute lessons, angry and petulant like teenagers can get — I have seen it all too often in the young members of my family through the years. I do not tolerate it in my children and grandchildren because Stone didn't tolerate it in me.

He was teaching me how to disarm a knife attack, and I was getting bored and sloppy. My arms were covered in light slashes from where I had been clumsy at taking the knife away from him. Then, instead of going through the usual drill of an attack on the right side of the body that I was to react to, Stone feinted left, and I fell for it. I moved to grab his wrist when he dodged right. He met my face with his punch, and I went down. Immediately contrite, I was ready to apologize when he settled his bulk on my midriff and held the jade knife to my cheek.

I tried to keep my stomach muscles tense, but his weight was too much, and the breath slowly whooshed out of me. I could sense his anger even without the view of his face. The knife slid a fraction of an inch along my cheek, and I had no voice with which to apologize to him. Attempting to command him to stop never occurred to me, as my rank was never something I'd had need to use. I was prepared to take any punishment so long as he'd let me breathe, but I couldn't communicate this to him.

The sharp jade touched my cheek, and the blade was cold. Panic was rising in my chest, and I could see purple

shadows dancing at the edge of my vision as unconsciousness threatened. I felt something release that had been caged in my soul forever, and it was ready to burst forth. Stone leaned on the blade, intending, I'm sure, to give me a warning cut, but the blade did not sink into my skin. It might as well have been a brittle stick for all the edge it had. He leaned on it more, not considering the consequences of killing the Scarlet Empress' daughter. He pulled it back quickly, and then, I didn't feel the weight of him on my chest. I could breathe again, and the Essence burned in my body, still asking to be set free. Stone stumbled back as my anima flared.

I no longer felt faint from the lack of oxygen. I got my sustenance from the earth, not the insubstantial air. I could see my anima out of the corner of my eye, but it wasn't the colorful cacophony that I'd seen in many other Dragon-Blooded. It was bright white with sharp lines. It didn't billow. It stayed steady as I advanced on my adversary. At that moment, I truly knew that the word "Exaltation" was absolutely accurate. I had never felt so free, so glorious, so powerful.

The long knife had clattered to the floor, and Stone moved to go after it. I grinned at him and dashed between him and the knife. He shook his head and held his hand up to me, commanding me to stop. I advanced on him and felt the power of Pasiap welling inside me. Everything he had taught me about fighting, using my size as my advantage, forcing my opponent into giving away his intentions, it all filled my head. I launched myself at him, kicking, punching. For me, it was all slow, he stood there like a great rock and allowed me to attack. I attacked with a speed that surprised me, and when he doubled over, the breath puffing his mask outward, I brought my elbow across his face and contacted with a cheekbone. He lunged for me and I ducked, hitting him open-handed across the ribcage and felt his lung collapse under broken ribs.

Then, I was done. It was all gone. The anima died, and I felt fear return. He faced me and, clutching his side with one hand, leveled me with one punch from the other. I landed hard beside his knife. He turned to leave, but I grabbed the jade knife and threw it, using no power but what skill Stone had forced into me through countless hours of training. The knife buried itself into his shoulder, and he cried out. Then, I saw his anima flare, discordant and fractured, a green halo surrounding him. At the time, I had never seen anything like it, and since then, I have come to understand he must certainly have been one of the Sidereals. I was suddenly very afraid.

Then, he was gone. I can't rightly say he disappeared, but I had no awareness of him after he invoked the Charm. I found the knife on the floor, but there was no Stone.

I bent and picked up the knife. I inhaled the steaming blood and then slid the knife into my belt. I sat against the wall, unsure of what to do.





It turns out my next step was not up to me. After a moment or two, the Empress appeared in the doorway, smiling her enigmatic smile. My breath caught in my throat. “Well done,” she said.



The greatest mistake Ragara ever made was acting on his paranoia. I don’t know where I would be today if it were not for him. It amuses me to no end to know that he made his own fear manifest. I was not dangerous until I was feared.

After my Exaltation, I received gifts that I had never dreamed of. From the Scarlet Empress, I received a long slashing daiklave wrought in jade designed to deliver poison, a silver helmet with a setting for a Hearthstone in the forehead and a tract of land containing a Demesne for me to build my own Manse upon. From Ragara, I was surprised to receive a magnificent suit of armor.

Ragara himself accompanied me to the armorer to have me fitted for the suit. Measurements were taken with the armorer’s skilled eye taking into account my assumed growth pattern. When a party was thrown in my honor at the Imperial Palace, the gifts were laid out before me. My brother proudly displayed the suit of armor. It was a beautiful blend of gray metals and light green jade. I had never seen anything so beautiful.

But even though Ragara feared my potential, the fool underestimated my already burgeoning power. I reached out to run my hand along the smooth surface, and as I touched it, I *knew*. I immediately knew of the poison that coated tiny barbs on the inside of the breastplate. With the smile of a proud brother and hundreds of the Empress’ court looking on, Ragara encouraged me to don the armor. Hiding my terror, I turned to Ragara and smiled at him. I motioned for a servant to come forward and bade him to clean the armor, inside and out. Still smiling at Ragara, I mentioned that I’d heard that some armorers often leave dirt and oil on their otherwise flawless products when they deliver them, and I did not wish to soil myself on such an important day.

Ragara’s face did not change. Servants came to take the armor away, and two of them died that night of the poison intended for me.

The Empress was doubly proud of me that day, I think. She loved nothing better than making sure her children were pitted against each other. If I had shown weakness, she would have simply allowed me to poison myself and gone to work to make another child to set against Ragara. But that day, even more than my Exaltation, showed me that I commanded the same power that my brother and the Empress could tap into.

I found out several years later that the Scarlet Empress, while being impressed with how I handled his assassination attempt, was not impressed with the attempt itself. She gave Ragara the same condition that surrounded Sesus’ life — if I died, so would Ragara.

SCHOOLING

After my Exaltation, things changed rather dramatically. The following year, the Empress sent me to the Versino, the Heptagram of my day. It was not much different than today’s school, although we focused less on overall training of etiquette and histories, if that is possible.

I was three years into training when the school fell. I was attempting to summon and bind a First Circle demon, something my instructors claimed I would have little problem doing. My tutor, Janalar, stood with the ancient Emerald Thurible hanging from his belt, smoking slightly. Three monks from the Immaculate Order stood behind him. We always had at least 20 monks at the Versino at all times to help with situations that may go awry. They were all there to watch and see if I succeeded in this test of my summoning skills.

The demon rose obediently from the symbol on the floor, wearing its human-like form: a beautiful naked young man with golden eyes and spikes lining his back along his spine. It was Patrok, a demon of the First Circle. I was tired but not exhausted — I had plenty of Essence left for the second half of the trial. The demon, understandably, was not pleased at being summoned, and the trial of wills began. I could sense my tutor and the monks behind me, but I didn’t need them. The demon had no chance, I flattened it. It hung its head in defeat, and I formally demanded my year and a day of service. Thus, I entered into the elite ranks of upperclass students with demon slaves.

The demon was more properly only one of the patrok, the Havens of the Wanderers, Progeny of the Grieving Lord. Their ribcages can open to engulf anyone matching their size or smaller. This can either protect the being inside from harm or keep him secure while the patrok transports him to the Demon Realm for consumption.

I had overheard that my tutor, Janalar, was going to test the power of the Emerald Thurible and attempt to summon a demon of the Second Circle, much more powerful than the demons we had bound for our service at the school. He and seven monks were prepared for the summoning. Nothing should have gone wrong.

I wanted to see how they did it and what they summoned. I took a big chance and placed a Charm on one of the lower-ranked monks to see through his eyes. Remarkably, it worked, and the monk did not sense me. I commanded the patrok to shield me as I watched the spell take hold.

The demon appeared, much more terrible and angry than Patrok had been. My tutor held the Thurible in his hand, and I saw his hand tremble just for a moment. Then, the demon was on him. The monks were at the ready, and someone made a call for more support, but the demon was too powerful for them. My monk fought valiantly but was the first to go after my tutor fell in a spray of arterial blood. My Charm ended, I quickly

whispered a spell my mother had taught me and felt my skin gain the particularly odd feeling of supple bronze protection. I covered there in my demon, ashamed of myself but having no idea what to do. I heard the monks and soldiers running down the hall to subdue the loose demon, heard the battle. Still, I remained.

A great commotion rampaged past my door, and when it was gone, I bade my demon to release me and follow me, keeping close. I went by the tutor's room where the door stood open. The bodies littered the room, and I went closer to see my tutor. Besides the blow that had killed him, the demon had paused to make a bloody hole in his back. The monks were similarly desecrated. I bent down and searched the belt of my tutor and swore — the Thurible was gone.

I heard some terrible screams and realized that the demons bound to guarding the place had entered the fight to protect the school. I decided I had to have the Thurible, that it should rightly pass to me as the prize student of my tutor, and followed the carnage.

The demon was fighting what seemed like all the demons in the school and the last remaining monk. It was alternately screeching with pain and laughing with triumph. It was a terrible thing to watch as it snatched livers from corpses even as it fought.

The monk held the Thurible — my Thurible — and attempted to force it to do his bidding. He was winning. I frowned and made my decision. I commanded my patrok

to interfere, and it scampered in its little-boy way to enter the fight. The monk took no notice of it. As he spoke the final words to send the demon back to the Demon Realm, I nodded to the patrok. It grew to twice its size and enveloped the monk, reaching down with its childlike hands to grab the Thurible from the surprised Immaculate even as its ribcage closed.

I do not speak of what followed. Once the Thurible was in my power and the last of the Immaculates was imprisoned in my demon, I decided my time at the Versino was done. I left.

I had interviews with the Scarlet Empress upon my return. Apparently, the school had been razed to the ground after I left. Apparently, I was the only survivor. She both appreciated my treasure and accused me of destroying the school to get it. She did not believe my story and employed other ways to get information from me.

I assume she learned the truth. I do not remember much from the interviews, and I think that is best. I remember the Empress had others come in to interview me, some I assumed were Sidereal. I am not sure.

In the end, she proclaimed the destruction of the school a horrific tragedy and publicly thanked the Elemental Dragons for my safety. The Empress tested me in private to discern what I had learned at the school, and when at last I pleased her, she rewarded me with my Thurible.





CHAPTER TWO

A LIFE OF OBLIGATIONS



The Immaculate Philosophy dictates that the life of a Dragon-Blooded, while glorious, is far heavier with duties and obligations than the life of any peasant. A peasant need only till his field and pay his taxes, but an Exalt must protect the peasant, the field and the taxman alike. While the imperial educational system does its best to inculcate the core philosophies of the Terrestrial Exalted on the youth of the Dynasty, life experience and personality mean that no two Terrestrials share the same views entirely. Here, our narrators explain what they perceive to be their place in the world.

CYNIS TAKGANA

I felt I'd been training for the Immaculate Order since I Exalted. I'd already spent a summer posing as a postulant, and four years at the Cloister had honed my mind and body. Although I never would have spoken it out loud, I was confident at being accepted into the Order and moving through the coils quickly. Suffice to say, I was not humble.

And they knew this, I think. Firstly, I was made to wait three weeks before being presented to the Paragon of SEXTES JYLIS. All of the members of the Iron Horses were made to wait at least two weeks, and I was commanded to wait an extra week.

Much of that time was spent in meditation and service to the monks. I also spent a great time worrying because,

if I did not enter the Order, I had nowhere else to go. My house would not take me, I had no skills other than those the Order would welcome, and I was not marriage material. I watched with a heavy heart while all my friends entered the Order.

After enough time had passed to humble me, the Paragon accepted me alongside a group of postulants that had arrived that day. I finally understood that, although I may have talents beyond others, I still was equal to any other postulant. My eyes humbly cast to the floor as I understood my place at last.

I would have been content to spend my days undergoing more training and meditations, but after I had achieved the Second Coil, I was summoned to an intriguing meeting with the Mouth of Peace herself. I sat on her floor, eyes on the floor, humbled by her presence. She told me she'd been watching me for some time, since the surprising action by my mother sent me to their doors before my entrance to the Cloister. She said she'd watched me through school and was impressed with my performance, although worried about my ego. That worry went away after my first few years in the Order, and she was pleased with my service to it.

I thanked her and told her my only wish was to serve the Immaculate Order. She smiled at that and said that's what she wanted to hear. She said she needed monks whose ties to the Order were as strong as — or stronger, as in my case — their ties to their Great Houses. We were



rare, but she rejoiced when she could find one. Then, she told me about the itinerants, who I had heard of but had never met. She said they were special monks — not that one monk was better than another, but these were different in that they reported directly to her and patrolled the Realm on duties beyond most monks. She said they compared to the All-Seeing Eye and often caught blasphemers and the corrupt that the Eye could not catch.

I readily accepted a place among them. Serving the Order was all I ever wanted to do, and she was giving me a way to serve it even better than I had ever hoped. I was told to report to Diligent and Skilled Teacher Ledaal Dahon the next day to discuss my training as an itinerant.

Exaltation has been the biggest burden I have ever had to shoulder. Without the “gift” of Exaltation, I would have likely died of infection after my sister’s mutilation and been reincarnated, probably into another life of an Exalt, one with more choices.

Would I rather have lived as a mortal than to have Exalted and lived my life as I have? As a mortal, only one path, the path of the Dragon-Blooded, would be closed to me. I would have lived a handful of years and passed to a better life. As I am now, all paths but one are closed to me, and I must likely travel that path for hundreds of years.

But that path is a good one. The Order is my life, and I embrace it. The Immaculate Texts sooth me when I have doubts, and my mission sustains me. Pasiap has chosen me

for a reason. He has placed me in the hands of the Mouth of Peace to be her tool. That is the way things are, and it is not a bad life.

ROMANTIC LIFE

I saw Peleps Dekna last week. Our meeting had an unexpected effect on me, not to mention a violent one. I was visiting Noble with my itinerant companion, Nir, and we were preparing to leave the following day. A sense of wanderlust took me to the streets.

I saw her walking, wearing a heavy cloak. She was dressed lavishly in purple silk and had a golden wire wrapped several times around her temple. Hidden in the boughs of a willow across the street, I stood in my drab monk’s garb and watched her hurry down the street. She pulled a dark red cloak around her against the night chill.

I followed. I couldn’t help it. You can remove a man’s equipment, but the mind behind it still works, thinks and dreams. I wanted to see more of her, to feel just for a moment that we were walking together. Perhaps she could tell me news of my family.

I lost her, inexplicably, down an ally. Hurt and confused, I returned to my hotel, telling myself that it wasn’t really her in the first place and that I’d gotten my hopes up for no reason.

These emotions were a turmoil in my mind as I entered my dark room. It was perhaps my occupied mind



that caused me to not notice her right away, but as I lit a candle, I almost dropped it as I saw her perched in the window. My room was three stories up.

Her eyes were full of tears. She said she'd thought me dead. She didn't know I'd lived and become a monk. I asked her what made her say those things, and she told me that my mother had said so. Rage, unlike I had never felt, boiled up in me. This explained everything. I walked to her, briefly ready to do anything I could to break my vows of chastity, when she held her hand up. I put my hand on her knee and implored her to stay, to explain everything to me, and I would tell her what had happened. I was babbling. I was sure we could work things out. I would leave the Order. I had forgotten everything but her beautiful face, mature and confident in her womanhood.

She jerked back from my touch and lost her footing on the window ledge. I made a grab for her, but she fell. I screamed her name and turned and ran down the stairs, calling for the innkeeper to find my companion, Nir. When I got outside, I was astonished to find her on her feet, her back to me. When she turned around, her jaw was set. A bright mark glowed on her forehead, and I felt nauseous with revulsion and despair. "Anathema," I whispered.

She was on me in an instant, knee hitting my chest and knocking me to the ground. I felt three ribs break under her weight and groaned as her forearm fell on my exposed neck and she held a golden knife an inch from my left eye.

I tucked my chin under her forearm the best I could to relieve the pressure of her choke while my hand found the forearm of the hand holding the knife. Instinctively, I found the pressure point and dug my thumb in, causing her hand to spasm and drop the knife. I moved as quickly as I could, one hand groped for the fallen knife by my head, while another pressure point strike and a push rolled her off of me, robbing her the use of her other arm.

I jumped to my feet. She stood a couple of feet away, flailing her arms to regain feeling in them. Fear and regret were on her face. The demon within her said I would never understand. I advanced, holding her knife, thinking I had incapacitated her.

She moved faster than I thought possible and caught me off guard with a strong side kick to my ribs, the ones she had broken. The breath left my body in a croak as I fell to my knees. I felt the ends of my broken ribs grind together as I folded.

She could have finished me there, and I do not know why she didn't. She apparently didn't stay to see what damage she'd done. When I could stand, I saw her running down the road, arms swinging uselessly at her sides.

I tasted blood at the back of my throat and realized a lung had been punctured. Groaning, I slid her knife into my belt. The Mouth of Peace would be interested in this news and my find. But that would come later. The innkeeper and Nir came running down the side street, and Nir

helped me to my room and worked on wrapping my torso so my bones would heal.

I sent word back to the Palace Sublime of the Anathema, her name and the treasure I took from her. I left the next day, refusing to let the township see me show pain or weakness. I walked out of the town on my own feet, coughing blood only when necessary. As I was not dying, I continued on my travels, walking the Realm with Nir.

FUTURE PLANS

The Anathema made too much sense when she told me of my mother's lies. I believe her and look forward to meeting my mother in a few days' time. Even better, I would like to see my sister's memorial. My life at the Order has fulfilled me, but the bitterness and betrayal are still fresh hurts, and I look to put those feelings to rest. I do not have high hopes for this visit, but things will be settled one way or another. And then, I can move on, serving the Immaculate Order, my true house.

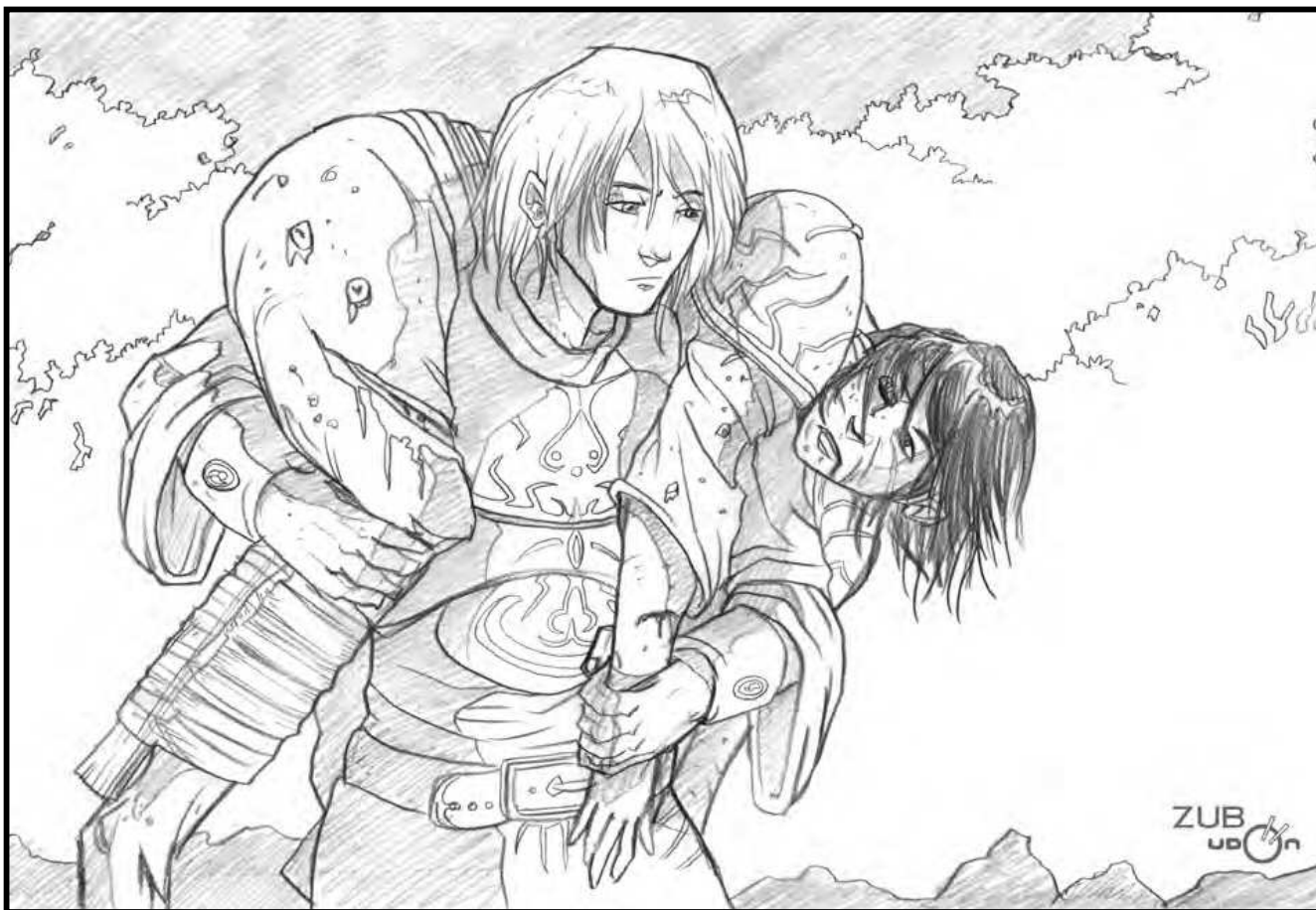
CROW

Seeing the Imperial City as a Dragon-Blooded warrior was very different than seeing it as a merchant caller. Silent Betrayer and I traveled with the rest of the graduates to find work in the legions. I had recommendations from the instructors saying I would make a good talon leader, while Hanging Vine had recommendations for more covert positions. We vowed we would remain together as long as we could.

We both marched with the Empress' legions, and we had both joined the 25th. I was assigned a talon to command, as I'd expected, and drove my men hard. Silent Betrayer had his own assignments of a covert nature, leading a wing of silent warriors, although he was the only one forced into silence. We were sometimes separated for weeks at a time. The battles all ran together in my mind, hours of blood and screaming and dirt and sweat. Only the before and after periods mattered to me: I would spend the days before engaging an enemy pouring over maps and discussing strategy with the other leaders, while the days after were spent agonizing over what I could have done differently to change the outcome or save some lives. Strategy became my forte even over my considerable martial talent. I suppose when the sword at the end of my hand was covered in blood and brains that it no longer held the shiny glory it had in my imagination as a girl.

I was promoted more quickly than I would have liked. Still new and fresh, I focused more intently on my failures than my triumphs. It began to feel as though I only suffered failures, for if my strategy was not flawless, and then it must be flawed and therefore inferior. I never once contemplated leaving, though. Outcastes have three places they can serve the Realm. With one of them being the Immaculate Order and the other walking off the mountain to free





the soul for reincarnation, I had chosen my path with the legions and was dedicated to it.

The battle that changed everything happened when I was only 80 years old. It took place on the cliffs near Paragon. The Perfect had beseeched the Empress for help as the city was under siege. He promised fealty and tribute to her forever if she would help. The information never reached the legion that we were dealing with a Fair Folk army that was laying waste to his surrounding lands and threatening the city. He only said a force he couldn't handle was coming and he needed his own forces to protect the inner city. We walked straight into the dragon's mouth.

My memories are spotty. We fought as well as we could, but there were only eight Dragon-Blooded in the dragon, and the mortals were fodder for the Fair Folk. I ordered my most risky maneuver, what I called the Tiger's Despair, retreating and then sending the forces back in, flanking the enemy. It's dangerous as it thins the ranks across a great line, but it proved useful in training exercises, and I had nothing else to try.

All that did was spread out the banquet for the slaughter. I saw Iselsi Monar, my strongest talon leader, fall, and I knew it was over. Silent Betrayer's wing still stood, fighting fearlessly under the commands he sent through his standards. I could watch no more when the Fair Folk converged on me and the other wing leader, Shining Rose, and we fought. No style, no plan, we were

reduced to brutal and useless fighting, cursing our precious daiklaves and wishing for iron.

I would have preferred dying at the hands of the Fair Folk, even left as a useless shell for the slave camps. But in our fight, I came too close to the edge. I was distracted by Shining Rose's cry as she went down, and retched at the sight of the Fair Folk consuming her. I stumbled once, tried to right myself and went over the edge.

There is a sense of self-righteousness in finding your worst fear — one that people have mocked you for your entire life — justified.

I awoke to silence, broken bones aching and covered in blood. I could hear no sounds of battle above me, meaning either that I had fallen very far or that I had been unconscious for a while. I opened my eyes and discovered I couldn't see very well. I touched my face and felt several cuts and lacerations and realized my eyes were clouded with blood. I slowly moved different limbs, taking a tally of what worked and what didn't. I clearly wasn't dead, so I had to get up, find what was left of my army and continue the battle with the Fair Folk.

I was pleased to discover that my left leg only had an ankle sprain and no fractures and that my right shoulder was only dislocated, not broken. I hobbled around, using my precious blade as a cane until I found a stick that would bear my weight. My left arm was broken in at least two places, and it felt like my femur was broken in my right leg.

How my spine survived intact I don't know. I looked up and gasped, seeing a figure descending the cliff at a rapid pace with no ropes. I sighed and raised my daiklave, trying not to lean on my cane too much. But it wasn't a Fair Folk.

Silent Betrayer leapt lightly from the cliff and landed in front of me. He was minimally wounded and carried a first-aid kit on his back. He took a quick look at me and then wrapped bandages around my deeper lacerations. He splinted my right leg and my arm and tossed me across his shoulders. I growled in pain and then yelped as he leapt to the rock face and began to climb. I sobbed and hid my face in his neck, begging him not to drop me. He took me quickly to the top and set me down, pointing to the field in front of me.

My entire dragon lay before me, slaughtered. I could see the Fair Folk heading toward Paragon. I swore and looked around me. No option presented itself. I grabbed my staff and began hobbling toward the Fair Folk army again. My duty was to stop them, and I was determined. Silent Betrayer saw me moving and hoisted me to his shoulders again, carrying me without signing a question.

I knew I couldn't hurt them. I had to rely on my limited resources of diplomacy. Some people say the Fair Folk honor the powerful and the mad. I have no delusions that they allowed us passage, the nearly dead and battered warrior riding her silent friend because they feared our power. I was taken to one tall, black haired and gloriously dressed fae, more of noble stature than warrior. I asked him what it would take for him to spare the city. I offered myself and my companion, the few warriors that survived their battle, as a gift if they spared the city.

He laughed, a sound like glass falling onto rocks. While he might be sated by our offer, what would feed his army? He made a counter offer of 10,000 Paragon slaves, given every five years. I considered. While I assumed the Perfect could afford the cost, it was not my place to bargain with the lives of the people I was bound to protect.

I slowly shook my head. The leader grinned and said he looked forward to meeting the Empress' Crow on the battlefield in the mighty defense of Paragon. Four large Fair Folk surrounded us at that point, I assumed to escort us from his presence, and I blacked out.

ROMANTIC LIFE

The joke was on me. I had fully expected either to be robbed of my mind totally or to die in our pitiful two-soldier defense of the town, but the leader had other ideas. When I told him that my companion was mute, he must have thought it a great joke to take both my eyes to make our communication that much more difficult.

I awoke on the bare sands, feeling wind blow sand into my wounds. The world was dark, and my hand went to my face. I swore as I felt Silent Betrayer touch me gently on the arm. He took my hand, and I shivered as I felt him kiss it.

I felt tears on his cheek and asked if it took me being totally blinded for him to be able to do that. I felt him nod. He lifted me to his shoulders and, establishing a method of squeezes for communications, I asked if the bastard took my eyes. He squeezed my arm once. Yes. I asked if Paragon had been saved. There was one hesitant squeeze. I asked if I could use his eyes for a moment. He agreed immediately.

It took more effort to expend the Essence than I thought. The entire field outside Paragon was lined with burned husks of Fair Folk. It was as if a great burning wind had scoured the land clean of their taint. I had only heard of power like this, and I gasped. I saw myself through Silent Betrayer's eyes, and at the sight of my ruined face, I spun with vertigo and landed back in the darkness inside my head.

He took my hand and pulled me to my feet to lean on him. I asked him if it had been her, and he indicated that he thought so. Later, I learned that the poor fool of a faerie had made a mistake by saying her name aloud and that she had homed in on our location. She then decided to take matters into her own terrifying hands.

The city was saved. The Perfect welcomed us with accolades, praising us and promising to send his regards, admiration and, most importantly, tributes back to the Empress. Silent Betrayer and I left with a Paragon honor guard to return to the Blessed Isle.

I received a commendation from the Empress herself, including a land grant near the Stair in Juche. I moved there with Silent Betrayer, where we were able to finally celebrate our love for the first time in 70 years. He was not released from his duty in the legions though, and I bade him farewell as I pondered my next move.

I had had lovers in the armies, too frightened to reveal my true feelings for my friend, but it was nothing like the communication I have with Silent Betrayer. I cannot see his expressions, and he cannot hear my words, but we communicate better than two people ever have. We plan to have a handful of children, as is required, and to ship them to the Stair to become great warriors. I await his retirement with great anticipation, wanting nothing more than to simply grow old with him.

I still have my sight, given to me by the Charms Pasiap felt I needed to learn. Since the need has become more necessary, I have begun studying a Charm that allows me to discern the vibrations in the air to identify objects and people. It serves me well.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I follow the teachings of the Immaculate Dragons as all do, but I have always mistrusted monks. In the legions, I discovered passions for battle, love and sex, and in our various forays into the civilized cities, I discovered passions for fine food and wine. Monks deny themselves all of that, channeling all they are into the Order. There is something





unnatural about this, and I cannot comprehend what causes people to voluntarily do that.

I still think of my friend Swirling Waters, although I have not spoken to her in 70 years. She made her decision, and she never explained to me why. I had hoped to run across her in my travels or, perhaps, to find us fighting on the same side at some point, but luck never brought us together.

I do not speak my fears aloud, but the very existence of the outcaste seems to prove a flaw in the Immaculate Philosophy. If a peasant girl is taught from birth that there are those who are born better and more talented and closer to the Immaculate Dragons than she, and then suddenly, she is catapulted into the ruling class by mere chance, how does that explain me? How does it explain the frightened slave boy who recently arrived at Pasiap's Stair, a Dragon-Blooded outcaste who is beginning to grow into his own powers? These are heretical thoughts, and I keep them to myself, but doubt still gnaws at me. Pasiap saw fit to grace me with power, and I did my best to train to suit his plan for me. I can only guess he chose correctly.

FUTURE PLANS

I had given only 60 years to the 25th legion and felt I had more to offer, but I had to train to get past my handicap. Silent Betrayer would help me, as would various retired warriors in our community. I became an expert in blind fighting. Five years after my ceremony with the Empress, my old instructors called me back to the Stair. I wondered if they were calling me back to help me walk off the mountain. The thought did not frighten me much anymore, honestly. The fear of heights was actually lessened by the fact that I couldn't see the dizzying views. Instead, I received a teaching position at the Stair to teach blind fighting. I was also offered temporary housing in the Stair, but I preferred my own home. I make the five-mile run to the foot of the Stair every morning in full gear — I cannot let the students assume they can get the upper hand on this old blind warrior.

At home, I have a servant to help around the house and to serve as eyes when I need him to. I still work to hone my remaining senses — although with a few choice Charms I can still see, I prefer to know how to function without my eyes, just in case.

I enjoy teaching at the Stair, once again surrounded by the outcastes. Much has changed in the past 60 years: The young students do not serve the Empress as I do. They only serve the idea of her and the safety of the Realm. One wouldn't think it would make much difference, but it does. I think my time at the Stair will serve me well again, as the years in which I wait for Silent Betrayer to retire span out ahead of me, and I have no Empress left to serve.

RAGARA JASIR

Just before my graduation from the Spiral Academy, I was offered a minor post in the Honorable and Humble Caretakers of the Common Folk. I demurred, in order to wander the Threshold for a few years, disguising myself as an outcaste caravan guard for the Guild and making a tidy sum over the ensuing decade while perfecting my mastery of the simpler martial arts and my own Essence. All of the time I was away, I continued building and strengthening the network of contacts I had begun building at the Academy. I chatted with Guild factors in Whitewall, walked the vermin-ridden streets of Nexus alongside slave-dealers and outcaste sorcerers and smoked hashish with smugglers in the bars of Chiaroscuro. Although I saw wonders unlike anything on the Blessed Isle, I still missed the Realm, with her riches, culture and stability.

But no matter what I did on my travels — no matter who I spoke with, what drugs I lost myself in or what lovers I took — that original feeling of oneness that I had briefly touched during my Exaltation fled my grasp. Never in that decade away from the Realm did I come anywhere near it. One day, in Thorns, I sent a letter to my father and to the ministers of the Home Office — I announced that I would be returning to take a position in the Thousand Scales in one year, although I would be back in the Realm before the end of the season.

Once in the Realm, I avoided the pleasure of my parents' company in the Imperial Palace and headed straight to the Imperial Mountain. I bought supplies at one of the quarries in Juche and began climbing.

I have never spoken of what happened on that climb, except to admit that I never made it to the peak. For eight months, I climbed through snow and heat, walking long, winding and forgotten paths, and grappled my way up sheer cliffs that stretched skyward for a mile at a time. I met Immaculate hermits, saw the ruins of First Age cities, fought elementals and dined with Mountain Folk. In fact, the daiklave I wield, Glorious Shadow of the Mountain, was forged from jade and strange metals mined from the depths of the Imperial Mountain as a gift for services rendered, and I briefly took one of the Mountain Folk as a lover.

Three quarters of the way up the mountain, I paused for a day and looked east. I saw much of the Realm laid out before me, from the gray quarries of Juche to the green plains and forests that lay between the Imperial Mountain and the Imperial City. The whole world was there for me to see — as birds wheeled in the cold sunshine, I dreamt of what structures I could build across the land given the time and the willpower.

I anchored myself to the ground and reached out with my Essence, and I felt that same feeling of ecstatic oneness that I had sought for so hard and so long. It was a turning point for me — I was complete. The time for laying foundations was over, and it was now time to emulate the

Dragon Pasiap and build something lasting — for myself, for my house and for the children that I would someday have. I saw my future laid out before me, and while the specifics were hazy, I knew that I must make myself great.

There is one more thing to say about that ascent up the Imperial Mountain. Three quarters of the way up, after I paused to look at the Realm beneath me, I met the god of the mountain. Yes, there is a god of the Imperial Mountain, just as there is a god in every place, for everything, in the perfect hierarchy that the Immaculate Dragons set up for the Realm. I have sworn an oath never to repeat what we talked about that night, under the half moon in the god's sanctum, and I have kept that oath to this day. I can say only this — that night, I learned how the Anathema came and went and how and why the Shogunate passed into dust. I see now that the Realm as it has been under the Scarlet Empress appears to be sliding into shadow, too — but I know the Imperial Mountain will endure. If we are to survive the coming chaos following the reappearance of the Anathema and the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress, House Ragara must be like the Imperial Mountain — we cannot be a fortress in this time of trouble, we must be the landscape on which it rests.

Satisfied, that night I began the long climb down, and I reported back to the family quarters two months later.

THE THOUSAND SCALES

I served the Thousand Scales for 50 years. In that time, my network of contacts expanded, and I was promoted time and again. I made a precious few, very calculated lateral moves, from the Home Office to the Honest Assayers to a short stay in the Jade Sniffers, where I sought out secret caches of jade kept by certain Great Houses. All the while, I was building up my network of contacts under the aegis of helping a friend here and sponsoring a colleague there.

I murdered 12 people during my time in the Thousand Scales, sometimes superiors six or more ranks above me, in order to ensure that favored mentors were promoted, who, in turn, would promote me. The Realm is bound by loyalty, money and obligation, and I learned to exploit all three. I mastered the art of aiding my friends as they rose through the ranks, while subtly stifling the promotions of those who spurned my friendships, until, in despair, they turned to me for help. Four times in my career, someone attempted to assassinate me, and each time, I waited decades before unleashing a devastating reprisal. It was not enough for me that people coveted my friendship — I wished them to fear my enmity.

I finally left the Thousand Scales after my tenure as a Jade Sniffer and returned to the bosom of House Ragara. I was forced to leave because I had uncovered a cache of jade belonging to my own Great House, and no matter what oaths bound me to the Thousand Scales, I had vowed to protect House Ragara. I covered up the information I had

discovered, then warned the house's leader, Ragara Banoba, about the discovery of the cache. I retired shortly thereafter, ostensibly to handle family concerns, but actually because I knew that I could get away with such a maneuver only once — the Jade Sniffers were far from stupid, and I knew that another wrong move would cost me my life. Still, I left many friends in the Thousand Scales and many more people who look upon me favorably for favors arranged and loans granted in the past.

Over the years, I have cultivated the appearance of the wise, companionable Dynast. Do you need a small loan of jade, handled unofficially? See Jasir. He won't bleed you over interest. Do you need someone to aid your business? Jasir will step in for you. He's been a friend of my family for years. Do you have a relative in need? Jasir is easily swayed by tears.

Those who know me well eventually learn of my unorthodox contacts, as well. Do you seek a promotion but lack the ability to follow through yourself? Ragara Jasir knows people who can get the job done, and he'll arrange the whole thing so that blame falls on your enemies. Want to avoid import taxes? Old Jasir traveled with a smuggler in his youth, and the man's son is still in the business. Jasir can set up an introduction, for a price.

Over the years, I have been very careful to make sure that only the barest whispers of my activities reached anyone of import, although, in the process, I've occasionally had to silence those whose tongues got to wagging. A few people I counted among my very best friends — one of them even a boon companion going back to primary school — sometimes took too much pride in our friendship and threw my name around unwisely. I tried to counsel them, but sometimes, there's nothing you can do. I remember having to take care of one of them myself, and I still recall the look in his eyes right before I struck him so hard his body broke a wall.

It's sad, but at this point, my interests are of greater import than the life of any one person.

Since the disappearance of the Empress, of course, my more unorthodox contacts and sidelines have begun to take up more and more of my time. Ragara Banoba himself has taken to calling on me increasingly often. Last week, a shipment of swords brought to the Realm by smugglers found its way into the hands of a Peleps fishing village that was revolting due to an increase in the Salt Tax. A month before that, the botched assassination of a Jade Sniffer led the bureaucrat into my safekeeping — not coincidentally, the bureaucrat had just uncovered a secret stockpile of Sesus jade. Anything could happen to that stockpile, with the Jade Sniffer free and in my keeping.

For now, though, I remain on the sidelines of the brewing war for succession. No matter what happens, no matter what it takes, I will make sure House Ragara survives.





RELIGIOUS LIFE

I am a man of great faith, for the Immaculate Philosophy has guided me my entire life. For the astute, the lessons in the Immaculate Texts serve as a guide to finding success, and I have used those lessons to shape how I interact with others.

I have spoken of how I attempt to try and cultivate friendships with others, and I admit I sometimes do so by aiding them in their moments of weakness. But who can blame me for helping those in need? Those with a suspicious nature might think I prey upon my fellows, but what I'm really doing is helping them — the Perfected Hierarchy states very clearly that it is the duty of the strong to aid the weak, the obligation of the powerful to aid the helpless. In turn, the helpless and weak should do what they can, in their small way, to aid the strong and the powerful. I ask nothing more than that from those I assist — that we all, essentially, take our places in the Perfected Hierarchy.

Pasiap the Builder is the greatest example a Dragon-Blooded can have — to create something lasting, to lay a foundation and then to build upon it — these are what make a man great. We Dragon-Blooded live long lives, but we are not immortal. Our legacy lies in our children and what we have built for them. Leaving one's offspring mere wealth is commendable, but greater still is the man who leaves something substantial to his children — and Dynastic life is fraught with dangers that make sure that only the most intelligent man can hope to leave something for his offspring.

FAMILY LIFE

If I have one regret regarding my family, it is that the nature of Dynastic society pits siblings against one another at an early age and that, sometimes, wounds dealt so early in life never heal. My brother viewed me first as a potential threat, then as a permanent rival. Despite Temer's age, and perhaps because of my mother's smothering influence upon him, he never learned as I did to enjoy the companionship of others, never learned to trust the friends he made or to dote upon them fondly as I did. He distrusted all of those around him, even after he joined the legions, and was too hamfisted in his relationships to master the art of making people covet his friendship, as I learned to. As we both grew older, he learned to despise me, and even his marriage into a decent line and the birth of his three children could not assuage his hate.

It came to a head, of course. There was a banquet held when my father celebrated his second marriage. Due to a perceived insult on my part, Temer spoke to me harshly. He raised his hand in anger, and I'm sure the whole incident would have escalated into a shameful brawl had not my father stepped in and forced my brother to leave. It was a scandal, and many of those who hold me in esteem stepped in to console me. I made it clear to them



that all I wished for in the world was that my brother and I could put aside our differences.

Sadly, months after that incident, Temer was placed in charge of a satrapy's security forces in the East. Local rebels led by a God-Blood slaughtered the satrap's advance forces, and my brother and an entire fang died at the hands of the half-men and their insane, Wyld-tainted leader. The Realm sent more forces to that region to avenge the insult, and the God-Blood and his men were captured and executed. But the damage had been done — I had lost my brother before we could make peace between us.

What truly saddened me was that one of my allies in the Thousand Scales had arranged for my brother's transfer to that satrapy at my behest. My friend and I had both hoped that if Temer had the chance for glory and honor in combat, he would cease to be jealous of me and, thus, end the strife between us. My friend, naturally, was wracked with guilt over the matter, blaming himself for my brother's terrible end. I reassured him that it was not his fault, and as a sign that our friendship was still strong, invested in his daughter's weaving business in Chanos.

I am wealthy, and so, I have allowed Temer's widow and his children to stay in our apartments until she can find someone else to marry her, for she is a beautiful bride and easily capable of finding another husband if she wishes it. Until then, Temer's children are like my own, and I pay for their upbringing.

I have a wife and three children of my own, of course, one of whom has Exalted, and I make sure that I do not pit my children against each other as my mother pitted poor Temer and I against one another.

MOIAS

After our graduation, Thoan introduced his brother Alesk, a recent graduate of the Spiral Academy, to the group, and we traveled the Realm in a sworn brotherhood. One of the first things that stole our attention from our wanderings was the middling-sized town of Underbridge, so named because it sat directly beneath an ancient stone bridge joining two small mountains. When we rested at one of the inns there, a servant girl got up the nerve to approach us and claim that the local judge was treating the town unfairly. When we investigated the matter, we found it to be worse — the foolish man not only sentenced any who sparked his ire, but also demanded trial by the gods. He sent people of suspect guilt to a cave around the mountain. If they returned after spending two nights, they were innocent. Needless to say, most were found guilty. The serfs didn't know enough to decry the man's heresy, and the local guardians mysteriously did the man's bidding. After Alesk set him to rights with a sound lesson in the law, my fellow graduates and I wandered into the cave to say hello. Light investigation turned up some human remains and an unruly wind spirit. We harried it until it

swore to cease its unlawful activities, and we each demanded from it a favor.

We weren't always so smart in our choice of actions. Our visit to the Threshold stands as an excellent example of our occasional poor choice. We traveled north to the city of Whitewall where my friend Peleps Erion hoped to find a cousin of hers. Nearing the city, though, she insisted that it would be a shorter and faster route if we stepped off the road and hiked over a series of hills to the left. It was a mistake to agree with her, but we all knew that once she got something in her head it was like taking a glass of ale to a firestorm to try holding her back. "Fools," Alesk called us as we left him on the path. Perhaps he was right.

The walking dead left us alone after we carved up the first several of them, or they at least hung back and only followed us slowly. But the Fair Folk were persistent. There was one of them walking beside us at all times, asking in its hollow voice, "Where are you going?" "You do know you've walked off the path, do you not?" and "All things that walk off the path belong to Vertuche, the Hundred-and-First Snowflake and my lord. Come to him peacefully, and all will be well." Another of them never ceased pulling glamour after glamour upon himself, trying to appear as we did. Though all good, his impersonation of Thoan was the best, probably due to their shared aspects.

The Folk were gathering more thickly now and crowding out the dead, who turned and went their own way. Erion was becoming less and less sure of her decision, and Thoan and Hyksos were willing to turn back, but by this point, I did not agree. "They have not yet attacked us," I said, and with that confidence, I marched forward through the crowd. The hobgoblins threw balls of snow at us, and the lesser fairies taunted us with flashes of tempting flesh and glimpses of their too-perfect faces. But the whisperer stayed beside me as I plowed through ever-deeper snow and led my friends farther from the safety of the road. My determination blinded me to the fact that I was being guided by the man-thing next to me, and my surprise was absolute when I fell through a weakness in the ground and slid a very long distance into the earth. My friends followed suit.

Being of the Host, we were able give ourselves light, and we found ourselves at the edge of a sizable ice cavern. Enormous stalactites and stalagmites of crystalline water stretched from the ceiling to the floor and formed columns that held aloft the glistening dome far above our heads. The exploration quickly revealed what we all suspected — our unexpected detour had landed us within an ancient Manse of unknown power. It wasn't long before we found the one who lived there — or perhaps he found us.

The Hundred-and-First Snowflake he was called, but I still can't see why. His semblance was more that of an icicle than that of snow, and his smooth, crystalline skin glittered with drips of water that melted and then froze again before our eyes. Vertuche claimed it was because of





a tryst he had had with a Dragon-Blood of House Mnemon, whereupon climax his partner had burst into full anima. Of course, he also claimed that it happened 600 years ago. The many furs he wore appeared to be the hides of sled dogs, except that they whimpered when the man moved. His eyes, to my discomfort, appeared entirely too human.

Introductions and niceties completed, Vertuche drew a daiklave of black ice into his hand from nowhere and balanced it upon its tip on the ground. It was clearly a threat, and none of us were ready to test his capability to act on it. In the end, there was no combat, and no one was harmed. The man-thing played games with us — a strange maze-game that centered around reaching the ice daiklave that towered from the center of the board. For every game he won, we would have to answer a question, and the same in return — we added the caveat that we would not divulge secrets important to the Realm, and he smirkingly demanded the same consideration.

Vertuche seemed to enjoy playing Thoa best, but he insisted upon playing each of us in turn. He won as often as he lost, which suggested that the game was a fair one. His questions, though, confused me. He asked strange things about our past loves, our humiliations and our prides. He inquired about whom we hated and why, where we played when young and the color red. Yes, he *asked* us the color red. Our questions to him were uninteresting in comparison and, in truth, seemed to satisfy him more than they did us.

After the game of mazes and questions was finished, he thanked us for our assistance in “extinguishing” his curiosity and, to our shock, gifted us. Thoa received the long black blade that Vertuche had produced long before — our stay there lasted at least one day, though how long I am unsure — and to all of us he gave the Manse and then walked out a small passageway. I have never seen him since. Thoa knew the rites, so it wasn’t long before the group of us had attuned to our own private, hidden residence. Where our host had gone and what his plan had accomplished were still mysteries as we found a passage up to the surface and hastened to Whitewall and our worried friend.

Upon our return to the Blessed Isle, we were sorely welcomed by a party of the Imperial Force. Only Alesk was unmolested, but despite his oath to help us, there was little he could do. The soldiers took us into custody and treated us much too roughly — I wasn’t overly discomfited, but I worried for my sworn comrades. It was only when we were released from our cells in the morning and taken to an open parade ground empty of all souls but one: Ragara Nuoko, a fearsome and ancient judge from near the head of my Great House and a person I was warned never to cross. He took me aside and whispered, “You and your friends have been troublesome. A half-dozen houses call for your heads. If you will confess your crimes and theirs, I can save your life, but Banoba has determined that this is a battle we will not fight.” When I refused, the man’s eyes

shone with the ice that traced his cold features, and he turned from me.

The trial was immediate, and despite our attempts to delay the proceedings until we could prove ourselves elsewhere, the verdict was political, deadly and immediate. It was only by Ragara's wish that the trial be sparingly attended that I managed to free myself, and even that chance I almost abandoned when an empty feeling of shock struck me — the feeling of my bonds with my friends being severed with their deaths.

Instead, I found myself fleeing from the aptly named Dragon Handlers. Only two things saw me free. I called upon the spirit my brothers and I had bested in Underbridge — even now it pains me to remember them — and I forced it to forfeit to me its favors owed. The god lent its wings to my flight, and between my increased speed and my untiring frame, I outdistanced the pursuit until I was sure they could no longer see me, and then, I left the roads and ran for the Imperial City. My friends were dead, my family had abandoned my life for politics, and somebody was going to pay for it.

My feet did not stop carrying me until I was at the gate of the Imperial Manse itself. Unsure how long it would be before the guardians knew where to find me and took me into custody, I knelt and touched my head to the ground before the gate as legend states that the Mouth of Peace did long ago. When a servant came to ask me my desire, I replied that it was only to see the Scarlet Empress and beg her favor. After three days and two nights, the Imperial Force came to collect me, and I resigned myself to the fate of my brothers. But as the Dragon Handlers reached to lift me from the ground, the gates opened and Ledaal Inarcus Alesian, the Empress' personal attendant, stayed their hands. "This one is to be a magistrate," he said, and for the second time since my birth, I began a new life.

When Alesian showed me into the palatial Manse, I was still shocked that my audacity had saved me. I numbly received a gift of delicate armor, finer by far than what my family had lent me for my adventures, and a puissant lance to use in my travels. I was told that I would not see the Empress, but that she knew what she must of me and trusted my judgment. I was given my badge of office and a book of law, and an encouraging smile sent me on my way.

Three years ago, it became clear that the power behind the magistracy was no longer supporting us. Performing our duties became more difficult. All of us met more resistance and occlusion along the paths it was our duty to follow. Our numbers began to suffer as people who disliked our rulings discovered that they could take action against us and remain safe from imperial retribution. When the first such tales reached me, I sent out my first letter. I began laying a groundwork on which I hope the magistrates may build some structure for ourselves.

Today, I have many contacts among the other magistrates, and I have recently begun to spread the word. Search out the Empress. Find her, and it may not be too late.

I have been a magistrate for nearly 75 years now, and my judgments have been fair and even-handed. I realize that I was used to smack the wrists of a few Great Houses whose politicking grew too rough, but that doesn't appease me. They killed my friends in cold blood, and the sting of their deaths is still a sharp memory. Wood may grow over a wound, and the other elements will hardly notice, but a Daughter of Pasiap remembers. Stone never forgets.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I am not an overly pious woman. I respect my station and do my best to care for the mortals below me as the Dragons ask, and of course, I thank Pasiap every day for his gift of blood. I know the precepts well enough to correct any misconceptions I encounter, but I borrow others' texts when I desire to read them and do not carry my own on my circuit. I dearly hope that my friends have gone on to enlightenment or been reborn and Exalted by this point. It's silly, but sometimes, I look into the face of young Aspects of Air or Fire I see and hope to see my friends staring out at me.

The one thing I truly regret is that I have yet to bear a child. Had Ragara Banoba not officially expelled me from the family, my parents would be urging me to marry and tarry until I achieved a pregnancy. And I would agree. But without income as a magistrate is, I would not be able to do my duty to raise a child I would bear, and worse, I have no true home in which I could try to give my son or daughter a normal life. I fear I could not even receive permission to marry in my half-beggared state — it would require the Regent's blessing, and he hasn't enough will to leave his chambers some mornings. And while I could try to foster the child, I fear none would take it from someone with little to offer — since I am loathe to deal in favors.

The strangest face I have seen religion wear is that of the few Immaculate monks who assisted me in quelling an uprising of spirits and the simpleton mortals the heretical beings held in their thrall. My archons would be able to deal with the misled townspeople were it not for the little gods, and I was not enough to hold them all at bay. The monks, a man and a woman who emulated Sextes Jylis, managed to say nothing directly, their comments while we dealt with the threat and after were clearly colored by a prejudice against me. What I managed to infer from their manners was a severe disapproval that my choice of profession took me away from the social structures of the Realm. They felt I was dodging my responsibilities. "Only a devotee of the Order should be free from children," one muttered when he did not know I could hear him. Other than these two, I feel I must stress, my encounters with the Immaculate Order have all been positive.





ROMANTIC LIFE

My first lover was Thoan's brother. He was not the first man I slept with, but romances at the House of Bells are brief, doomed to fail when the two are swept into combat against one another. Alesk was my first lover in the more important sense of the word. The first time we coupled, our brotherhood had been traveling together for three years and we had been in the Threshold for a short time. We had played games with each other since meeting but no points had been tallied. I liked the idea of having something broad to build upon. He returned to the small camp we had erected outside of the southern city of Chiaroscuro and surprised me with a thrown pillow from the flap of my tent.

"I thought you went off to the city to seduce for yourself a prize noblewoman," I said.

"I did," he replied, "but I could only think of you."

We made love that night, and again the next, and very soon, we were sharing a tent and continued to for our many years of travel. Thoan was very happy for us. I think he had been waiting for it to happen for some time. I bear a strong suspicion that he had hoped we would marry. I was careful not to get with child because I didn't think the time was right. I sometimes regret that now.

We were careful to sleep with others now and again for variety and to ensure that we didn't tire of each other, and so, we were still lovers when we returned to the Realm. But the tragedy that followed tore us apart. I joined the magistracy and found the means to wander the Isle dispensing a truer justice than most people were given. Cathak Alesk reintegrated himself into the structure of the Imperial Bureaucracy and has risen to high ranks as a Honorable and Humble Caretaker of the Common Folk. We see each other rarely, but always with joy and sadness. If we treat ourselves to a performance at the Lazy Flame Theatre and inebriate ourselves enough, we can, for a short while, live in the past, forgetting the bad times and remembering only the good.

MNEMON

After the Scarlet Empress was satisfied with my testimony concerning the tragedy of the Versino, she formed a group of advisors to build another school of sorcery on the island, well away from the ruins of the fallen school. I asked to be on that panel or perhaps to help out with the school, but the Empress silenced me with a glance. I was not permitted to be involved with the new school or to speak of it in public. Only then did the tragedy strike me what a political nightmare this was for the Empress. I regretted the deaths, but I had killed no one, and did not understand why the Empress' advisors frowned so when they looked at me.

Well, most of them frowned. One of them smiled. I took notice of a sorcerer who had joined the Empress' ranks

to help rebuild the school. He was shrewd and talented, tall and powerful. His curly brown hair was caught back in a leather tie, and his eyes were a deep brown. I told my mother I wished to pay him for his services to the school with more than money, and she was delighted.

Worik was my first lover. When we weren't experimenting abed, he would teach me sorcery. I knew after I learned everything he could teach me, I would surpass him with the knowledge I hid from him.

With the birth of my first child, Naser, the three of us procured an unused section of the Imperial Palace with our servants. It was a happy time. The wet nurses told us that the baby thrived, my lover continued to teach me, and I began to build my legacy. Sadly, I had to put Worik to death after he asked me to marry him. It was a sweet proposal, but he was too powerful a sorcerer to simply stand aside and watch me build my Great House and take the Scarlet Throne. He would have wanted more than simply me, and I could not give him that.

Power plays have been a constant in my life. Some successful, some not. I discovered early on that the Empress enjoyed making life just difficult enough for her children to foil any hopeful heir. She did not stop Ragara's feeble assassination attempts, knowing they kept me on my toes. She encouraged my placing many of my children and grandchildren in the Immaculate Order to hold House Iselsi back. And — I believe — she elevated the pretender House Nellens to punish both Ragara and myself.

Rumor had spread about the children of Nellens petitioning the Empress for elevation and that she was seriously considering it. I was young and brash and stupidly thought I could move against the Empress' desires. I had yet to build my own Great House, save for three children, all younger than 20, and the children of Nellens were already wealthy, powerful adults.

Ragara was not pleased either. It is not recorded in the histories, but we had reached a brief truce in our opposition. We agreed that this elevation could not happen. We discussed the possibilities for public disgrace, financial ruin and assassination. With a sketchy plan laid out, we agreed to keep it private.

During the following months, I sent demon agents to stalk important Nellens tax caravans, the absence of which crippled their spring earnings. Ragara made the clumsy assassination attempts that I was all too familiar with, but they had not worked. I suspect the Empress' hand was involved with protection. She wanted House Nellens to be created, and nothing would stop her.

After my attacks on Nellens, the Empress increased my share of tithing to the Imperial coffers. Even though I was considerably richer due to the money taken from Nellens, this put my books in the red because of the amount she took. I had to borrow from my siblings to cover the costs of my rents and satrapies. The message was clear — mess with

Nellens, and you're messing with the imperial take, and the Empress would get her share no matter what.

Soon, the Empress made her announcement. The children of Nellens — not even of the Empress — had their own Great House. They were on par with Ragara's and my own. And there was nothing we could do about it. During the speech, she looked over to where I was sitting, then her eyes sought Ragara. I knew what she was thinking as a small smile played across her lips: Don't go against her directly. I have since made my moves more subtle and my meetings even more clandestine. She was always watching.

With the hated Nellens confirmed as a Great House and Ragara and Sesus back to warring for power, I was free to continue building my own house. I did a lot of watching: watching the Empress for her ever-changing preferences, watching the houses of my siblings for power plays and watching the events of the Realm unfold. In the meantime, I encouraged my children to excel in all they did, especially those that fulfilled my dreams to serve the Immaculate Order.

LIFE LIVED

I have lived my life carefully watching, waiting, looking for the right time. I have made a few mistakes but learned to be all the more careful due to the mistakes others have made.

There was a time in the past decade, before the Empress left, when I was determined to find out the key to entering her Manse. No one knows how to open the doors, and no one who has entered (save the Empress) has returned. One night, I convinced my youngest sibling, a girl named Lillun, that the Empress wished to show her something in the Manse. She believed that all of the Empress' children were allowed a look in the Manse when they reached a certain age. After convincing her of this, I locked myself in my quarters and placed a Charm on Lillun to ride with her as far as she got.

I eagerly watched young Lillun tiptoe innocently down the hall, following the Empress, meaning to surprise her at the door. The Empress easily saw the young idiot in the shadows and offered to show her the Manse. I waited patiently, knowing it was not to be that easy.

Once they reached the door, the Empress looked Lillun in the eyes and said, "You don't get to see." She severed my link easily, and I was back in my room. I swore loudly, pounding the walls. They stayed in the Manse for four weeks. When the Empress unsealed the door, she exited alone. She did not punish me, and I suspect that although she knew someone was riding the young girl, she did not know who. Still, I learned my lesson and did not follow her again. Not that way, anyway.

I have advisors, but I trust no one fully. I only trust those who are in my debt or magically bound by me. I've found the truth only lies in fear.

After about 200 years, the Empress lifted my ban on visiting the ruins of the Versino, although she recommended I steer clear of the Heptagram. The demons I pass on the way to the Versino make it clear I am not welcome in that new school, and so, I stay away.

I visit the Isle of Voices every decade or so. The Heptagram lies on the southwestern shore, and the southeastern part of the island remains mostly untouched. Only adventurous Heptagram students and teachers go there, and not all of them return. The ruins of the Versino lie there and all the ghosts therein.

Well, not all the ghosts. Most of the ghosts of my former teachers and fellow students have been scoured from the area, either captured for class assignments or for the knowledge lost when the building collapsed.

During my most recent trip, I took a servant with me, an ugly boy who babbled incoherently when I told him I wished for him to travel with me. I wonder why they serve me when they are so terrified of me.

We rode on horses to the site of the Versino. When the school fell, it created, instead of a pile of rubble, a crater. The wind was blowing hard that day, and I imagined I could still hear the screams on the air.

The servant was standing next to me, trembling. I took a moment to admire his bravery — many before him attempted to run at this point. No mortals enter the graveyard of the Versino willingly. Only students and teachers of sorcery venture there. I retrieved a glass jar from my saddlebags, something I had purchased for a high price from one of the teachers at the Heptagram. I had had to negotiate by post, of course, and arrange a meeting in my offices when he was traveling to the Imperial City, but I thought it was worth it.

Perhaps it was my nostalgic feelings or my admiration of my servant's bravery, but I decided to make his death a quick one. I bade him put the glass jar on the ground and open it, and then, I took him by the hand and drew him to me. He began to weep, and I shushed him and took my dagger from my belt. Holding his eyes with my own, I thanked him for his gift in the name of my fallen friend and slit his throat and held his body over the crater so that the gout of blood washed into it. After he was drained, I took his horse and repeated the action.

Janalar, freed from his jar, appeared at my side. He did not look pleased at my summoning, but I did remind him about my offering. He, in turn, reminded me that he may still be alive that day if it had not been for my actions. He cast a reproachful eye at my belt where the Thurible swung. He asked if I'd looted his corpse, but I assured him that I'd looted the corpse of the monk that had looted him.

I smiled at the ghost, and he frowned back. I told him I needed information that I was sure he had. Although I was master of the Emerald Thurible, he knew all the tricks





to it, and I needed help. His access to knowledge of the Demon Realm couldn't hurt either.

I needed the demon Istar, and I needed him bound. With his cold eyes fixed on me, full of hate, the ghost told me what I needed to know — and more besides.

TEMPORAL LIFE

In my younger days, I rode out on the Wyld Hunt from time to time, although few were needed. I saw it as my duty and as an opportunity to see the Threshold. My siblings never made the journey, seeing Wyld Hunts as extermination missions that were below them. They were fools. Extinguishing the bright flames of Anathema is one of the most fulfilling things a Dragon-Blooded can do.

One hunt stands out in my memory. It was not my first, but it was the first that taught me the true horror of Anathema. The Hunt took us to the East, where a Lunar Anathema terrorized villages, forming followers of mortal barbarians. We met this troupe outside a village the barbarians had eyed as their next conquest. Their force stood a good 200 strong, while we had but 70 warriors and monks — five Exalted — with us. The fight was glorious. The barbarian mortals attacked first, with the Anathema holding back. I kept my eye on him. He was tall and strong, a coat of feathers obscuring his body but his head bare. His eyes were an unnatural silver and shaped unlike any human's I'd seen. I motioned to two of my talon and skirted around the fighting. He was smart enough to know what to watch out for. He kept his eyes fixed on me.

When I reached him, he opened his arms to me and bowed. I drew my jade daiklave, the same blade I had been given upon Exaltation, and advanced. He looked as if he wanted to play as if a cat with a toy, but I didn't have the time for that. I was there for a reason, and I intended to do what I came to do.

His hands, still outstretched, began to change and resemble something akin to cats paws. I stared at them and didn't flinch. I had a plan. I'd heard of how these demons operate.

I swung my blade at him, and he batted it away with his paw, advancing on me. I allowed myself to stumble. I got inside the reach of his great paws, and he swung one at me, claws outstretched, but it glanced off. I laughed, full of the blessings of Pasiap, and stepped closer to him. He snarled and wrapped his arms around me, attempting to crush me. I felt nothing but a warm hug and fumbled at my waist for my secondary weapon. It was a tool from the Old Realm, an ingenious design of small levers and gears surrounding a tube and a plunger, made of jade and infused with magic.

While the abomination attempted to throttle me, I withdrew the tool, as big as my finger at one end and as sharp as my daiklave at the other, and inserted it into his bare abdomen. He gasped but kept on squeezing. My concentration was ebbing, and I knew that, if I didn't stop



him soon, he would crush me. I pressed a button on the side of the device, and I knew that, inside him, a star pattern of six needles had sprung from the end, umbrella style. I pushed the plunger and injected a venom into him, which entered his bloodstream in six directions.

Immediately, the pressure ceased. I stepped away and watched him crumple. As I raised my daiklave, he screamed, loud and long. The look on his face was one of determination, not fear, and I sliced his head off and ended it.

The Wyld Hunt had no problem taking the rest of the barbarians down, and we gathered to nurse our wounds. We had lost many, but all looked at me in admiration for taking down the Anathema. My two companions were busy spreading the tale as they tied the Anathema's head to a pole.

I heard a noise in the wood. A noise like a great many animals moving at once, all in the same direction. I turned my head, and there they were. Anathema, more than I'd ever thought existed, perched in the trees and crouching on the ground. All of them watchful, all of their eyes on the slain Lunar Anathema and his defiled head.

I looked at the tired, injured men. I looked at the demons in the trees. I made my decision, leaped on my horse and spurred it away. I used every trick and Charm I knew to aid the horse along as I heard the sounds of carnage, of animals devouring men, behind me.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

As a child, I admired the Immaculate monks and their devotion. At one point, I wished to become one, but the Empress reminded me that a monk does not bear children, build a Great House or have a chance to rule. Empty promises, I know, but it was enough to get me to open my eyes and ignore those ambitions. I still remained close to the Immaculate Order, however. I instruct tutors in my house to teach the children the Immaculate Texts early in life so that they may begin to walk the correct path. With careful guidance, many of my descendants have taken up the mantle of the monk and have served both house and Realm well.

I use many advisors from the Order, those I know are secretly more faithful to me than to the Mouth of Peace, that thrice-damned Iselsi puppet. This would never go public, however, as it is not necessarily... fitting for me to claim I have the devotion of these monks over their leader, but they and I know whom they serve.

House Iselsi is trying to win control of the Order so that it will be able to enter the battle for the empty Throne. This is laughable because the Order is the only thing they have. For some years, I wondered why the Empress did not simply discredit the house as part of the Dynasty, but after several years, I understood: There is power in waiting. The power is in the subversion of the Great House, of making it little more than a den of assassins that serve willingly as her pawns. She has allowed the house to harm itself and to slowly degrade.

I have placed several spies in Sion to watch and wait. Nellens Mirar, one of the rare Dragon-Blooded of that

house, will be visiting the coast soon. It is very likely he will be killed by an Iselsi assassin. Or one the populace will think of as Iselsi...

Soon, with Iselsi's control damaged by the murder, I will be able to maneuver the Order back to within the walls of the Imperial Palace. And if closer proximity brings it closer to favoring House Mnemon, all the better.

ROMANTIC LIFE

Romance has little place in my life. There are fleeting lovers and those I choose as suitable fathers to my children, but I haven't fallen in love in years and don't plan to. Love involves sharing, and there is nothing of mine I wish to share.

I don't think I could ever find what I want in a man. I am not interested in anyone who is not like me: He must be intelligent, a sorcerer and ambitious. But it is the ambitious men who see me as a path to greater power, and that I cannot abide. However, the unambitious man who would truly be happy being my subservient would bore me.

With the current turmoil in the Realm, I have ceased to bear children for obvious reasons. My lovers since have been chosen for pure beauty, nothing else.

FUTURE PLANS

My moves on the Scarlet Throne have been put on hold for the moment. My plans will all go ahead, but the actual taking of the throne may have to wait. And this is not due to anything the other Great Houses have done or what I expect them to do.

I have kept the following close to me. Some may suspect what's going on, but none know the details I do.

The Scarlet Empress is alive. And she is coming back. I learned this recently and have been biding my time, considering what this information can do for me. It is unlikely I can reproduce the... source who led me to this news the first time.

Last night, I woke up sweating. My throat was sore, as if I'd been screaming. My lover of the time, a girl I'd purchased from the Cynis trades, cowered naked at the edge of the bed, weeping quietly.

I blinked several times, trying to orient myself. But I knew it wasn't a dream I'd had. It was something akin to prophecy, or a message.

My dreams had been full of black, twisting, writhing things. They dropped from the womb that I had once occupied, these abominations that were my half-siblings. And they wanted the Scarlet Throne as badly as I.

"What if they breed?" I whispered to the slave, who cowered and sobbed harder. "What of their children?"

I got up from bed and took a jade dagger from the table against the wall. I slit the slave from neck to pelvis and threw the entrails on the floor. I sat there panting on the edge of the bed, staring at the ropes of guts on the floor, and considered my next move. Even if the augury was not informative, I no longer had to worry about what the slave girl's ears had heard.





CHAPTER THREE

THE WORLD WE RULE



As important as each Terrestrial's view of her duties is her view of the world. Perceived responsibility is filtered through the lens of perceived reality and impels action. The Manse is important, but the earth that the Manse stands on is equally important. In the material that follows, each of the five narrators reflects on the world he or she lives in and on pressing concerns of his or her times.

CYNIS TAKGANA

THE REALM

The Realm is a fascinating place. I sometimes cheer myself with the knowledge that, had I married my betrothed and made wine in Tuchara, I never would have seen as much of the Realm as my new position promises. I have only begun my travels as an itinerant, but I am looking forward to seeing the Realm.

The people I have met seem to be good people, eager for the smile of a monk. It warms my heart to name a child or bless a marriage, even with the quiet bitterness lurking in my heart about the life I may have led. But my life as an itinerant allows me to do much more and to touch more lives.

I can see how the Immaculate Order has shaped the way people live for the better. I can also see how the absence of the Scarlet Empress is hurting the mortals in the Realm. In so many places we go, we are asked about the

Imperial City and whether there is any news of her return. I have never been to the Imperial City, but my companion, Iselsi Nir, has. I let him field these questions, as he is better versed in the workings of the Imperial City. He tells them calmly that the Deliberative expects her return any day. The people do not look convinced, though. I suspect they've heard this before.

I've heard stories of the Empress, some of them conflicting. Some say she loves the mortal people that carry the Realm with their hard work. Others say she is too old and too callous to care about anything but power. The latter argument does not support the Immaculate Texts, which puts her as the leader because she is the closest to the gods, and I have a problem with this rumor as it borders on blasphemy. Sadly, from what I have seen in my short journey thus far, it may also be true.

HOUSE

I have no house. My mother has returned my letters unopened. I presume she bears me the grudge of both my castration and my sister's suicide. She has been spreading the word that I died during an attack after her birthday party. I learned of her lies through outside sources, however. She has not spoken to me since the night she proudly proclaimed me her heir to run the winery. I do not know what I will say to her when I see her, but I know the encounter will not be pleasant.



The ironic thing is that if she had supported me even through her disappointment, I may have been a valuable resource to her house.

The majority of other Dragon-Blooded have a house that sustains them, that they are loyal to. As a monk, I am expected to place the Order first, and I have had no problems doing so. I have no house, and I am happier for it. I explain my situation to anyone who hears my bitterness. If I had openly betrayed my mother, society would be right not to blink an eye if she disowned me. The Order does not throw away its children. It finds places for them where they will do the most good.

Now, I am in Tuchara on itinerant duty. I visited her vineyard yesterday and lost my temper when the wine master told me about her poor dead son. I shattered a wall in her new winery and told him I would be back and to tell her to expect me.

Her wine master says they expect her to return from the southern coast in two days time. I have been told by the Order to stay in Tuchara until a messenger comes to collect the dagger I took from the Anathema. So, I have time. I will visit my sister's memorial while I wait.

MORTALS

Mortals have little idea how easy it is to live a short life of insignificance. Free of power and the responsibilities of rank, they are able to live life the way they want. If they make a mistake or something horrible happens to them, they only need to endure the consequences for 60 or so short years. They can spend those 60 or so years bettering themselves and hope to be reborn in a better situation, having improved their souls in this life.

They strive to live in a way that will allow them to become Dragon-Blooded in the next incarnation. They have no concept of what bitterness that can bring. They attempt to live good lives serving those of us higher born so that they too can be closer to the Elemental Dragons and, of course, garner the honors high rank brings. Some of them do not understand the burden of rule, however. While they die in a handful of years, we live with our regrets and decisions much longer.

I thank Pasiap every day that he brought me to serve the Order. If he had not, I would have spent my long years as an outcaste Dragon-Blood, and that is a fate worse than even mortal slaves have. It is an honor to serve the Order and, in turn, to serve the mortals that come to me for spiritual guidance. But sometimes, when I think of my injury and my house and my lost love, I envy the mortals and their simple lives.

ANATHEMA

The hardest thing I've ever faced was the discovery that my love's soul had been devoured by that of an Anathema. I do not know how they choose a host for their

evils. Why they would have chosen the sweet Dekna, why they would have fouled her body and infected her soul, I will never know. I sent word back to the Palace Sublime to let them know of her, but I keep her knife close to me. I will only trust it to a messenger coming directly from the Mouth of Peace.

I never knew Dekna to be a strong fighter. She was more dedicated to her ships than the martial arts. But she moved in ways I have only seen while sparring with my masters in the Order. She survived the fall and was still able to fight, and she withstood my pressure-point attacks as well as anyone I have fought against. I have trained the past 11 years in the martial arts, and she is my equal already. Anathema truly are stronger than we take them for. I now understand why the entire Wyld Hunt is called for the destruction of one Anathema.

I mourn the loss of her. I lost her once, years ago, and I feel I have lost her again. Nothing could ever have been between us, not after my mutilation and my dedication to the Order, but Anathema must be hunted.

THE FIRST AGE

I know little of the First Age, as the histories of such were not taught extensively at the Cloister of Wisdom. I understand that they created wonders we can never aspire to emulate and that the Contagion and the wars that followed destroyed many of the greatest minds ~~and~~ — and workshops — of the time.

Many treasures from that time remain, however, and several thousand have fallen into the hands of the Order. We are also able to create less wondrous items of armor and weapons to use in our travels of the Realm. The Mouth of Peace, when the spirit moves her, often loans these items out to monks she feels has need of them. Our oaths of poverty do not allow us to own such expensive items, but we carry them in the name of the Order. Some monks own heirloom weapons gifted by their house, but I am not one so lucky.

Before my first trip as an itinerant, she granted Nir and me the use of two of three jade crosiers — staffs with jade caps at either end, wielded with both hands at one end, as one would a jade tetsubo. While we are both more than capable warriors with normal clubs, these weapons are truly a wonder, as fast and powerful as daiklaves. I've studied weapons such as these but never though I'd be honored with carrying one. I have seen my staff shatter a gold and bronze statue of the Unconquered Sun. It seems a relatively simple design, but there are Charms I've never seen that have been placed on the weapon to make it stronger.

My brief possession of this item has enflamed my curiosity, though. At night, when I do not dream of my sister's self-inflicted death or what life with Dekna would have held, I wonder about the original wielder of this

weapon. I am but a humble monk, but I am sure the original owner was a great warrior who fought for his convictions as I fight for mine. Perhaps he shattered Anathema bones with it, protected villages with it or severed a Fair Folk's spine with one well-placed strike. I call it Crane of the Earth and keep it close to me.

CROW

THE REALM

The Realm is a vast, beautiful land covered in the blood of the legions. I have little mind for politics — if I can't stick a sword into a problem or send a wing to disable it, I honestly don't know what to do with it.

The Empress has served the Realm for centuries, bringing the Dragon-Blooded to the position in society that the Elemental Dragons and the Immaculate Philosophy wished them to be. She always represented the Realm to me, a strong warrior with difficult decisions to make, but it was her face I chose to serve, and her absence makes my service seem a bit hollower.

I met her only once, after the battle of Paragon. She permitted me (I would think it is suicide to use Charms in the Imperial Palace) to use the eyes of one of her servants so that I could see her and the gift she bestowed. She was, as everyone knows, beautiful and deadly, her smile tight and thin like a sword. I knew at that moment that my service was not in vain. I had served her wishes as I was meant to do.

She rewarded me with a gem-encrusted steel breastplate and a simple, ugly iron dagger, for defense against the Fair Folk, she said, and she smiled again. I thanked her and told her I would still do what I could to serve her and the Realm, and she told me my place was in Juche.

She disappeared days after our meeting. I thought nothing of it, as most did, because she had been gone before. But she hasn't returned, and I begin to fear for my Realm.

HOUSE

I am not a member of a Great House. My blood family is mortal. Or, I should say, was, as they are all dead but my sister, who is in her old age and sends her grandchildren to school in Sion. Their situation is much better now, as my salary has funneled down to provide for them. They now run the orchard themselves and employ other peasants to work the trees, and my nieces and grandnieces are all educated. I did not have a close bond with my family, but it is nothing to send them some of my savings every month.

Family is a different concern for outcastes. It is odd to watch everyone I share blood with grow old and die as I stay young and strong. Where the Dynasts have an odd mortal child here and there that they must watch die as they stay young, it is more tragic for the outcastes who must watch

everyone die. I visited my sister as her daughter gave birth and held the child in my arms and realized she would likely die before I did. I wonder why I was chosen to bear the weight of Pasiap's gifts and not my strong brother or my smart sister.

The Immaculate Teachings tell us that, if one has an ancestor that is Dragon-Blooded, then it is likely that, somewhere down the line, the blood will show itself again. My family could not find this mysterious ancestor that passed his blood to me, but the Order assures us he is there because it is impossible for the peasants to create Dragon-Blooded. They are simply not close enough to the Elemental Dragons. I am quietly skeptical, but I keep my misgivings to myself. My life has been too busy to sit and quietly wonder where these gifts came from. I know my sister's children and grandchildren see me and wonder when they will Exalt, as unlikely as we tell them it will be. They remind us that it was unlikely that I Exalted, and I have to admit that they are right.

MORTALS

I have a soft spot in my heart for mortals. Even after 70 or so years as a Dragon-Blooded, I still have a little mortal girl in the back of my mind that wishes for what I already have. Although I have much of the skill and training of the Dynasts (and, in many cases, more), there is still a part of me that wants to show the awe and respect mortals owe the Dragon-Blooded to even my fellow officers.

Thus, I attempt to be kind to the mortals we come across in our travels, especially the peasants that work so hard in the fields to feed us. They do not ask for anything from us other than a smile and an unspoken request for acknowledgement.

The mortals that serve with us in the legions are of a different ilk, strong and tough. They have a fatalistic view of the world that I have always admired — while I have the comfort in knowing that I will live for a long time, even when I was in the legions, these souls would serve the Realm, shortening their already short lives by sowing the ground with their blood to protect the Empress' interests. I know mortals outnumber Dragon-Blooded greatly and that the Realm cannot afford legions of only Dragon-Blooded, but I still respect that these mortals face death daily knowing that, when they die, we will simply replace them. They are fodder for the army, and yet, they fight valiantly.

ANATHEMA

The Wyld Hunt deals more with Anathema than the legions, although there are tales from the First Age of legions of Dragon-Blooded going against Solar Anathema and legends in the last several hundred years about a handful of the Anathema that survived the cleansing before the Great Contagion. Mostly, I



have heard of the barbaric Lunar Anathema on the edges of the Wyld.

My only encounter with a Solar Anathema came soon after the battle for Paragon. I was traveling with Silent Betrayer toward Juche after my meeting with the Empress. I was still healing and would sit by the fire as Silent Betrayer would hunt for our night's food. He was away when I heard a traveler approach and politely ask to share the fire for a time. I was amazed at her presumption, but I was intrigued. I could tell it was a woman, and she was well-equipped. I welcomed her and mentioned my partner would be bringing food back soon. She said she would be gone by then and would cause us no trouble.

She asked if I was a warrior, and I said yes, I had been wounded by a battle with Fair Folk. She seemed impressed that I had come out of it sane, and we discussed war and battle for a bit. She said she was more of a mercenary than an imperial soldier, and she was headed to the coast to see if she could find work in the Threshold. I wished her good fortune, and she rose to leave. I was amazed at how keen my hearing had become. I heard Silent Betrayer approach, and told her that he would be glad to share our dinner with her. She bade me a quick, almost panicked goodbye, and I felt... something. Something that made my hair stand on end and my Essence prickle. Silent Betrayer confirmed my fears that the woman, glowing brightly with the light of the sun, had dashed down the road to escape his eyes.

The memory of the encounter still chills me — in my weakened state, I couldn't have taken on an Anathema. Probably, in my best days, I couldn't have taken one on. My only question is, why she didn't kill us when she had the chance?

FAIR FOLK

You will be hard-pressed to find a Dragon-Blooded with a stronger view of the Fair Folk than I. I have seen their bloodlust, their desires for everything from fears to dreams to the sound of a sword going through an eye. They fight for the love of fighting, for the manic whirlwind rush of it all. They prefer the desperate aura of battle over the quiet calm of peace.

I have also witnessed their bizarre sense of honor and their sick sense of humor. They love a good bargain, and finding loopholes is their specialty. My encounter with them left me free of fear but also free of sight. It allowed me to win my battle, but I had already lost my army.

I fear them more than anything now, wondering if the nobleman that took my eyes is out there, wishing to take more. I know our legions are out there, making sure that the Realm is defended against the likes of the Fair Folk, but sometimes, I wish I had stayed with them to let them know the true danger of the fae. Sometimes, you can't comprehend horror until you're in its clutches, and by then, it's usually too late.



RAGARA JASIR

THE REALM

During my years at the Spiral Academy, I learned that the Realm was a shaky construct, designed with inefficiency in mind in order to keep the hundreds of factions within it from ever gaining too much power. All of it was held together by the solid foundation that was the Scarlet Empress. That foundation is gone, and so, the entire framework begins to shake itself apart.

But the Mountain survives when all else turns to dust, and in this case, that proverb speaks to the Dragon-Blooded Host itself. I believe that, just as the Realm was forged out of the ashes of the Shogunate in order to lead us out of the horrors of the post-Contagion world, something new will appear from the Realm's current strife. No one who sits on the Scarlet Throne will ever have the power the Empress wielded, and so, by necessity, the flow of power in the Realm will shift. I've seen it a dozen times in business and in the Thousand Scales — after a powerful leader departs, there is a major transformation in any organization. What form will this take? I cannot say, really — I just know that changes must occur if the Realm is to survive.

The true threat to the Realm lies in those who do not realize that the Scarlet Empress' power can never be emulated. I speak here of Mnemon — she has all of the drive to power her mother displayed, and she may be the strongest living Dragon-Blood in the Realm right now barring certain Immaculate monks, but she has none of her mother's temperance. I wish Ragara was not yet in his dotage, so he could counter his sister, but it was not meant to be.

HOUSE RAGARA

Of all of the Great Houses of the Dynasty, House Ragara is the one with the greatest claim to the Scarlet Throne. While Manosque was the first-born of the Empress' children, that line is gone — Ragara is the eldest extant house. In addition, we are the only house fiscally powerful enough to maintain the Realm's economy.

Unfortunately, despite our legitimate claim to the Scarlet Throne, the other houses insist that their claims are just as legitimate. Under normal circumstances, I would say that we should press our suit — but given the deteriorating situation in the Threshold, I feel that the quicker we reach an accord with the other Great Houses, the better. Our house wields enough fiscal power in the Realm and our Threshold clients are still loyal enough to us that I believe we would be better served acting as empressmakers rather than pressing for the throne itself. We can always rethink the matter of who will hold onto

the throne after the Anathema are sent back to the hell from which they came.

MORTALS

The backbone of Dynastic society is the teeming swarms of mortals that crowd our streets and dwell on our lands. It is the duty of the Dragon-Blooded to care for our mortal servants, although too many forget that in these dark times — we neglect our duties in order to bleed them dry. I, who have attempted to cultivate relationships with even the lowliest of my servants, cannot understand these shortsighted attempts at profit. The farmer does not keep the yoke on the ox's neck, the ox does.

Still — the situation is not without its potential opportunities. For every village disenfranchised by greedy Dynasts, murmurs concerning an uprising grow louder, and sometimes, all it takes is for a few crates of weaponry to fall into the hands of the disaffected for rebellion to become a reality. Instead of eyeing the Scarlet Throne, the Great House is suddenly busy attending to its own lands, wasting time and energy keeping its farmers in line. And needless to say, villages in the middle of an uprising aren't growing foodstuffs for the house to profit from, either.

I have spoken to the head of our house, Ragara Banoba, about easing the burden on our mortal subjects when all of the other Great Houses go for the short-term profit — it decreases the chance of others profiting from an uprising in our villages, it keeps our lands productive, and it allows the money to continue to flow in. We must make sure our subjects love us, while the other Great Houses' subjects are reaching for blades.

ANATHEMA

The Scarlet Empire is the greatest empire on the face of Creation, and if all that plagued it was the disappearance of its immortal ruler, then it might yet stand a chance of survival in its present form. But at the same time the Realm struggles with the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress, the Anathema are reappearing in unheard-of numbers, the conquest of Thorns has occurred, and the Wyld-touched are massing on the borders of the Threshold.

If the Realm can find new leadership quickly enough, before the Anathema build up their powerbases in the Threshold, then the power of the Ten Thousand can be brought to bear, and the Anathema will be vanquished once more — I believe this. We are the Dragon-Blooded Host, and we defeated the Anathema once before — there is nothing that can stand against us when we are united. But time is of the essence, and I sometimes despair at the Great Houses' lack of unity. If we cannot settle the matter of who will rule the Realm, then it will be too late, and our Threshold clients will be destroyed just before the Anathema land on the shores of the Blessed Isle itself.



MOIAS

THE REALM

The Realm is the center of the world. When I need to ground myself, my martial training tells me to look to my center. When the world needs to find its center, it looks to us. The Pole of Earth is here, and stone binds. That is what we Dragon-Blooded do as well. Our paths take us out into the Threshold, through the various tributaries and city-states, and we form bonds between the peoples there and the Blessed Isle. We hold the world together like mortar.

But it's hard to see that from where I stand, sometimes. The position I hold only serves to accent the failures and weaknesses that form in our ministries and structures of law because of the acidic game of politics. Like a good jeweler cutting a gem, I try to excise the flaws in the system to keep the diamond strong. Sometimes, though, it seems like every piece I cut away reveals stone more pitted and rotting than before, and my frustration mounts. I find myself wondering if I'm going to cut away the last of the flaws to discover that there's nothing left. It's no small effort to calm myself, then.

When I'm on the road, and my archons are out on tasks, I wonder about what the Empress thought when she looked at her Realm. She surely built something fantastic and grand from the remains after the War of the Anathema and the Contagion, but it is all slipping downhill so easily that I find it hard to believe that she planned this. A foundation this delicate is no foundation at all.

This is why we must find the Empress. It may be the Magistracy's — and the Realm's — last hope.

HOUSE

I have no house. When they sacrificed me to play their petty games of political leapfrog I resolved that House Ragara would not love me if I survived. And I am sure it does not. I find its loathsome business practices at conflict with the law more often than that of any other Great House, and I am sure it has felt my blows against its corruption.

In the line of my duties, I once hunted a criminal who had stolen a meal and slain his host when the Black Helms were too far too respond. When my archons and I cornered the man where he hid in a nearby copse of birch, he cowered from me. But what surprised me were the telltale signs of Exaltation. My nose picked out the slight scent of warmed air, and I could see the sparks dancing behind his eyes. I sent my archons away then to fetch me food, while I sat and spoke with the man, who called himself Heron Diving. He was outcaste, an egg from without the basket who had come to the Realm to seek his fortune and birthright.

But he did not understand the Dynasts' reactions to him, a youth from the Threshold who didn't even know enough to realize he would never have a place in society. He didn't understand when the Dynasts tried to brush him off, one to another, until he ran into a soul with enough compassion to insist that he attend the Obsidian Mirror for education. Absurdly predictable, Heron Diving took offense to the command, or the tone of voice, and refused. When his benefactor insisted and suggested that the guardians might become involved, Heron Diving fled. The name of the Dynast who took this time out for a lost egg was Ragara Acune, and through the rube's ignorance, Heron Diving mistook Acune's kindness for oppression. With a passion that only very young Children of Hesiash can manage, he swore vengeance upon the House Ragara and all who followed it.

I could have taught him his error then. I had the strength and the patience to do so. It is a failing of mine before the Realm that, instead of suggesting he do attend the Mirror and become a productive part of society, I treated him with sickening kindness and escorted him toward the nearest small monastery. At my behest, the monks there took him in and began his education, and at my suggestion, he entered into the emulation of Pasiap. It has only been 10 short years, but in time, I shall return to find him, and perhaps, he will be a useful asset to me. It was a small cost to pay for what might be a great return, in any case.

MORTALS

While the Dragon-Blooded may be the gems among the rough, the granite is what holds the Realm together. One diamond may be able to purchase a ton of stone, but it cannot do what the stone can, and there are only so many diamonds. What I like best about mortals is that they're simpler folk. If I meet an Exalt, I know that she'll have something going on in the background different than what's at the fore, two favors she's hoping to call in and three lovers she's trying to juggle. A farmer or an artisan isn't like that. She settles for a husband, a family and a productive job to keep her household afloat, and she's happy. If the Dragon-Blooded weren't around to emulate, I doubt even the patricians would be as rank with corruption as they are.

I may sound like I envy them, but I don't. I wouldn't give up Pasiap's blessing even for a full promise of retribution against all my hates and reparation for all my woes. But I sometimes find it comforting to spend my time among people who have no designs for me to worry about and have no position to corrupt.

My archons are all mortal, very carefully chosen from the ranks of the disenfranchised and those sentenced to death — and then only those who were cast down from the citizenry. I have found that such people have an assort-

ment of useful skills and the will to use them to my ends. They are still often crass and boorish, and it is sometimes only through my practiced patience that I can share a dining table or campfire with them for an evening.

ANATHEMA

Long ago, when my sworn brotherhood was not yet broken and we were traveling abroad, the Wyld Hunt caught up with us from behind, rushing from Chiaroscuro for the East. We joined it for the duration of the hunt and helped lead the party through the mountains where the stars and omens pointed us. Unfortunately, they also pointed us to a landslide that had fallen across the path.

Between the dozen Dragon-Blooded there was little difficulty in lifting the wagons across the worst of it, but just before we left the troubled area, we came upon a young man, not yet to his second decade, hurling boulders frantically. He looked at us as we approached, and each of us, I think, recoiled from the glare of the symbol born upon his forehead. He cried out to us as we approached, begging for help and claiming that his father was buried beneath the rubble. His manner was convincing, but the lies have been too well documented to be false. He was disturbingly confident in his ruse — he made no move to flee nor even appeared to suspect our mission until the first monk's palmstrike sent the boy flying.

The battle was short but fierce, and in the end, the figure lay broken on the rocks. As the wagons were gathered up and the soldiers turned about to return to the southern tributaries, I used the gift of Pasiap to cast my senses in and among the rocks. There was indeed a man there of middling age, but he was long dead. It occurred to me that the powers the Anathema worship may have used a father's danger to tempt the boy into accepting them — a demonstration of the fatal lack of faith here in the Threshold.

FAIR FOLK

The disparity between the Fair Folk of the Threshold and the Mountain Folk of the Realm makes me wonder what they really are. The Wyld-scholar and sorcerer Ledaal Kebok Juro claims that they are born out of the same chaos and that it is only the stars that dictate where they shall appear and what form they shall take. It is the nature of Earth, he says, that those Fair Ones born into it desire and work toward stability and structure, creating rather than destroying as those taken of the other elements do.

I have other thoughts on the matter. The Mountain Folk clearly know their place in the world and within the Scarlet Empire, and they act to preserve the correct milieu. In the Threshold, there are Fair Folk without number who act without regard for the proper order of things and often attempt to sow confusion and fatal disarray. But not all are so horribly misguided. The Winter Folk I met near White-

wall show that there are those who simply play games and entertain. It is my notion that the Fair Folk bear a different but parallel hierarchy to our own. As what passes for their souls age, grow more enlightened, lose shape in some form of death and are reformed, they grow more docile and less offensive until they are eventually reincarnated as the Mountain Folk, who know to maintain the world rather than destroy it. After all, if a Fair One cannot disobey its word once given, there must be some core of order buried beneath all the madness.

I don't need to debate this, though, it is merely a pedantic piece of theology I have let run through my head on occasion.

THE REGENT

The time for my return to the capital and my audience with the Empress came and went nearly a year ago. I refuse to bend knee before that *compromise* and give him the satisfaction of seeing me at his whimsy — a satisfaction he surely does not deserve! My counsel to my fellow magistrates is to do the same. To return opens us to risks that we may not be able to overcome.

I fail to understand how a Dragon-Blood with any self-respect can pretend to sit on the Scarlet Throne and play puppet for the politicians in the Deliberative and the Imperial City. Fokuf should spend his time making plans and attempting to strengthen the Realm instead of maintaining his reign of impartial inaction. His is the power to quell the storm! I feel certain that a few proper actions could calm the Great Houses' squabbling long enough to return the Realm to some form of normalcy. Alesk tells me that taxation has more than tripled since the Empress' disappearance and that the imperial coffers are seeing less than a 10th of that — causing a search for such rot in the management of tributes and taxes would be as impartial as no action at all.

THE MAGISTRACY OF HARES

We may be weakened, but we are far from powerless. Simply by virtue of being Exalted, we can command nearly any mortal to do as we will. That alone allows us to yet pursue our mistress' ends. But despite the disappearance of our benefactor, we can and will continue our purge of corruption on this island, our home. What the many people who think our bite without venom will soon learn is that there are more magistrates than they suspect — and I know them all. My network has begun to bind us together, and soon, our weaknesses will be more than balanced by the strength of unity.

THE ALL-SEEING EYE

They don't like us, and we don't like them. More often than not, it's a matter of stepping on each others' toes that gets us at odds. Well, we may be the hunted





hares right now, but the Eye is the cat, starving while it watches the rabbit hole so patiently it doesn't know we've skipped right out the other end. But its agents are a lot more like us than they're willing to admit. My contacts tell me that they're low on funds — lower than the rest of the empire, maybe — and that they've taken to extorting their victims for money. So much for protecting the Realm. Their real weakness is that the Eye's so big, so secret and so internally tangled that its agents aren't going to know they've run out of momentum until the last spy drops dead from exhaustion.

MNEMON

THE REALM

The Realm is currently a place of chaos, a political viper pit and a civil war waiting to happen. It has been five years since the Empress left, and our world is deteriorating.

They — the Deliberative, the other Great Houses, even my siblings — think she's coming back, that she is holed up somewhere contemplating the state of Creation, flexing her great wisdom. That's what they keep telling themselves in private and the people in public. They have even gotten some to believe it. I'd bet a great deal of my house's yearly income that they know she's gone for good. They just don't know what to do about it, so they keep fooling themselves.

Currently, they are jostling around, attempting to protect the Scarlet Throne from occupation. While the thing the Realm needs now is a strong ruler — a strong present ruler — they insist on making sure the Empress is gone before they replace her. They say they want proof of her demise before they support an heir.

They also know that officially declaring the Empress dead and gone, or at least gone for good, will invite even more chaos. The Great Houses will fall upon each other like jackals, and woe to the one who appears ready to take the Scarlet Throne. Some of the house leaders are making blatant attempts to place themselves ahead and are suffering for it. Others know they have no chance and therefore place themselves in strategic positions, waiting to see who they should support. When the dust clears, the Great Houses that supported the winning Empress (or, unlikely, an Emperor) will be in much higher favor than the others.

Few have come forward and actively stated they wish the throne for themselves. I have not hidden my desire, though, and I believe the others are bridleing because of it. If no one opposed me, I would be able to take it with little opposition. This would never happen, of course, but my statements will force more out into the light so I will know who truly oppose me. I know I cannot count on support from Iselsi or Nellens, but who would want that support anyway? Neither has much of a voice, although they both

have irritating ways of blocking my moves. Iselsi still has a hold on the Immaculate Order, while Nellens is one of the few Great Houses to avoid suffering in these troubling economic times.

Ragara is a dying fool, but his children bear watching. V'neef thinks she poses a picture of sitting quietly while others quarrel over the Scarlet Throne, but I can see her watching and judging. She would take it, if she could. House Tepet is too weakened by its abysmal military failures and the upcoming execution of Ejava, and Sesus supports my campaign, for the most part. House Cynis believes it has a chance at it, although it has no strong alliances. The same goes for House Peleps. Cathak Cainan is another like V'neef, claiming he is simply watching the others, but I believe he is making his own plans. Ledaal does not care to vie for the throne, but it would be a strong supporter. I am making a private list of things: items, amounts of jade, threats, people, demonic influence, insignificant trinkets that could sway some of the Great Houses that perch on the middle of the fence.

It is infuriating to watch the Realm fall into disarray while the Great Houses and politicians bicker. A handful of years ago, we were on our way to glory and reaching our influence to the Threshold. The Immaculate Order was crushing any heretical worship. Such is not the case now. With the threat of civil war and the probably scuffle over the Scarlet Throne, nearly all the Great Houses have removed their armies from the Threshold (and some even from the Realm's coast) to concentrate their support in the Realm. Because of this, barbarians ravage the towns of the Threshold, and pirates outnumber our ships on the seas.

The Anathema are coming back. That is one truth. The Lunars have existed in the Threshold, we've known that for some time, but the Solars are back and are now encroaching on the Realm. They are back in numbers that are less than the original estimation of 300, but still formidable, and we do not have the resources to facilitate as many Wyld Hunts as are needed.

I have poured everything from the contents of my coffers to my sons, daughters and grandchildren into the Immaculate Order to uphold the teachings and guard the Immaculate Philosophy and the Dragon-Blooded Host. The peasants bear the Realm on their backs, growing our food, the armies fight the bloody wars, and the Dragon-Blooded make the decisions and settle disputes. The Order keeps more dangerous things at bay, such as Anathema and heretical gods and those that worship them. With the Dragon-Blooded infighting and the Anathema threatening the Realm, the natural order of things is cracking. The peasants will have less to look up to, and if they lose faith, then everything we work toward could fail. The Order bestows just that — order — to the Realm, and it is its return to the Imperial City that will aid my ascension to the Scarlet Throne.

HOUSE

I've heard them say I am like her. I don't appreciate this, as I have spent hundreds of years building a Great House to emulate me, not her.

My house is my self, and I hold each of my children and grandchildren to the same standards that I myself strive for. I have been very successful. Those of my house dominate the Immaculate Order, and we have key people inside set to influence a return of the Order to the Imperial City and remove it from the damnable Iselsi influence. The Sidereals that occupy high positions of the Order are enigmas, even after knowing about them and dealing with them for centuries. I do not know where their loyalties lie, only that they saw the Scarlet Empress as a beneficial ally. But I cannot discern whether they prefer the Iselsi influence or that of my house.

My children are powerful and talented, and nearly all are Dragon-Blooded. Our marriage alliances are many, and few of my children have turned from me.

There was a time when we were forced to work to find positions for those souls born mortal. Some houses felt they were inferior, but I realized that they could be devious, intelligent and rather useful tools. Although they lack the power of the Dragons and the years we are gifted with, they still have their place. After looking at the possible population issues that would stem from treasuring our mortal children instead of casting them aside, I worked with the Empress to have laws passed to protect those mortals. Now, many mortal children live to represent their Great Houses well, and some bear Dragon-Blooded children. The few that I gave birth to are born with ambitious natures to rival my own and the brains to go with them. My child Bata is a prefect, and a good one. It is a pity he has turned from the loyalties of the house, though. My own laws hold my hand in this matter, so I have worked through some channels to have him killed by an assassin apparently working for House Ragara in a week's time.

I appreciate my children and grandchildren and the work they have done to build the house. I do not trust them, as the Empress was right to have never trusted me. My house is too large and too rich for them not to have ambitions to wrest control from their elderly mother. But they know me as well as I know them, and we all know better than to underestimate each other. If I smell strong ambition, I stamp it out, as in my Dragon-Blooded son, Ulrin, who took the oaths of an Immaculate monk and serves the house in ways other than building a family that can work against me. If I smell betrayal, well, I can always make more children.

MORTALS

Mortals pass in the blink of my eye. When one has lived almost 400 years, the lives of mortals begin to matter

less and less, as they cannot possibly experience all that I have experienced in the years they are limited to. When I was a child before I Exalted, I was of the opinion that the Empress' soul was dead. She had no compassion for mortals, despite what she showed to the masses. I have seen her kill countless mortals for various reasons: they displeased her, they displeased her lover, or simply at her own whim.

I understand better now. We who rule are given tools with which to better serve the Realm. The rights of the ranks we hold are bestowed by the blessings of the Elemental Dragons and the Essence that flows through our veins, also supplied by the Dragons. The Immaculate Order is a tool, a way to speak to the spiritual leanings of the people, to guide their lives. The Dragon-Blooded themselves are tools: We are creatures of power, created to rule and lead the mortals. And the mortals are tools as well.

They are perhaps our most important tools. There would be no Realm without the mortals, none to rule but temperamental Dynasts. They pull the Realm and its economy on their backs, plodding through the ages, each one dropping in the blink of an eye to be replaced by another.

Mortals are useful in particularly difficult spells or as payment to hard to please demons. Their lives are so short that one should not weep for their loss. Instead, pray to the Dragons that perhaps, in the next life, they will be blessed with the gifts to touch the Essence that rests inside them. For now, it is ours to use as we see fit, and in return, we guide the Realm for them.

ANATHEMA

In my youth, I studied Anathema and their powers. I was fascinated with them: They stood outside the order the Immaculates reinforced in our teachings, and yet, Sidereals mold the Immaculate Order. As a child, I knew my mother had powerful allies, more powerful than Dragon-Blooded, but these were not hunted. Instead, they were given sanctuary inside the Immaculate Order and even the Imperial Manse! I was very confused by this and had the audacity to ask the Empress why we do not hunt the Sidereals as Anathema. She was in a good mood that day, or she would have understandably punished me harshly for the question. She took me to meet Chejop Kejak, and he stared down at me with those stern eyes. I met his gaze with my heart pounding. *He is Anathema and worthy of killing*, I thought, but I said nothing to him. He told the Empress he would have a talk with me — actually dismissed her! — and explained to me many things about the Sidereals and the history of the Immaculate Order. I think he and the Empress feared I would not accept the truth, that I would call for the Wyld Hunt there and then for the heresy, but I understood immediately. The natural order of things was already laid out by the Immaculate





Texts, and it was clear that it served the Realm and the goals of the Dragon-Blooded and Sidereals well.

They would, of course, have had me killed had I done anything but understand. I kept their secrets and act accordingly. The Sidereals are more than mere Anathema. They helped the Dragon-Blooded rise to power and usurp the Solars and Lunars that drove Creation to its knees.

When it comes to the populace, we have to work with the occasional feeling that Anathema are stronger than the Dragon-Blooded, which seemed to put them closer to the gods than we. But we are fit for rule, while they are fit for chaos — they stand outside the natural order, they are an abomination to the natural order.

The return of more Anathema is alarming and not just because of those who worship the Unconquered Sun. A darker force has risen from the shadowlands, and these are even more of a threat than the sun and moon worshipers who spread chaos and murder. The forces of undeath that took the town of Thorns for their own had unstoppable military leaders, pale, deathly Anathema with weapons that could suck the souls from mortals. And they do not act on their own: These newer ones serve horrible masters. The Deathlords, who have mostly kept to their own wars in their own territory, are spreading out with this new force. These dark Anathema hold the power of the dead in their hands, and that may be a threat to the Realm even greater than the Anathema we are accustomed to fighting.

I have sent a demon envoy to the shadowlands to gather some information for me. I await his return with anticipation.

FAIR FOLK

I have dealt with the Fair Folk and found that, although they do not break their word, they are still somewhat unreasonable. After I withdrew my legions from the Threshold, I needed some sort of force to protect my tributaries — while making sure they continue to pay. I offered several groups of Fair Folk a bargain: 1,000 slaves a year for this service.

Reaction was varied. The desert riders of the South sent my messengers back to me with their guardians missing. The messengers sobbed and babbled about the horrors behind the veils of the Fair Folk, their horses that moved like wind over the sand and their cruel mockery of my request. They had taken the warriors, one Dragon-Blooded and one mortal, and made play of them. The mortal, they made sexual sport of until he died of exhaustion, but the Dragon-Blooded, they sipped at her dreams and her mind as she slowly went mad. I nodded to the messenger and made a note to contact this group again after I achieved the Scarlet Throne.

The Fair Folk of the Northeast were more receptive. I even traveled to meet one group's leader, a nocturnal noble prince who stood tall and beautiful with midnight-

MNEMON, THE IMMACULATE

ORDER AND TRUTH

Mnemon is unbelievably powerful, both politically and magically. She hasn't gotten where she is by dumb luck. However, the Bronze Faction made a decision rather early in the Scarlet Empress' reign that, although the Empress may know many Sidereal secrets, no other Dragon-Blooded should have as much information. Mnemon and Chejop Kejak had a meeting when Mnemon was very young, and Kejak told her much of the truth of the Sidereals, the Immaculate Order and the history of the Empress' rule. However, he did keep much back.

Kejak and his other Bronze Faction Sidereals foresaw that House Mnemon's support of the Immaculate Order would be vital to the organization, and no one wanted her to remove that support. They therefore kept the information they gave to her selective. More information on the Usurpation and some deals the Empress and Kejak have undergone may have to be given to her at her assumption of the Scarlet Throne, and that makes Kejak uncomfortable. The Bronze Faction is therefore against Mnemon's assumption of the throne, as she would undoubtedly learn too much.

Mnemon knows that there is another significant power besides her mother in the Realm. She understands that Sidereals have more personal power than Dragon-Blooded, but she also knows the power of the people's hatred of Anathema. The Sidereals live with the permission of the Empress, and if the Dragon-Blooded Host rose against the Sidereals, they would fall. She certainly has no concrete plans to make this move, but Mnemon always has contingency plans. She knows, however, that exposing the Sidereals would shatter the Immaculate Order's power over the Realm, and that would be disastrous. But Mnemon works for herself and understands that, if she needs to move against the Sidereals, she will be able to.

blue hair and red eyes. I believe my escort spread rumors that I was his whore, trading my body for his cooperation, but both the prince and I are under geas not to talk about what transpired. Suffice to say, the deal was made. I send 1,000 slaves to his Fair Folk yearly, and he holds up his end of the deal. Our tributaries are protected from barbarians, and the tribute still arrives on time. If they notice the dip in their population, no one has complained to me.



THE FIRST AGE

The First Age is a time lost to us, a time of cohesion, peace and magical wonders. It pains me to realize what has been lost and how puny our efforts of rule and sorcery are today. When the Dragon-Blooded wrested power from the corrupt Solar and Lunar Anathema, there were regrettable and inevitable losses from the war. Sorcerers and their textbooks, inventors and their magical treasures, many were destroyed as casualties of war.

What wasn't lost in the Usurpation was lost during the Great Contagion. The skills of the Shogun to enforce the peace are a mystery. I wondered if he had 11 Great Houses of descendents squabbling over his throne. Then again, perhaps he appointed an heir and there was nothing to fight about. I know of nowhere in the histories that talk of infighting over the throne, which makes me wonder if the Empress was incorrect when she pitted house against house. I believe I understand why she did so, but her peaceful reign has not equated to a peaceful existence to most others, from her children to the lowest peasant.

I have several architects, inventors and sorcerers of my house dissecting the handful of artifacts I could stand to part with. As much as they try to figure how these things were made, the more powerful wonders of the First Age remain elusive, although we can still imbue weapons and armor with Essence. I have done what I can to search for more and keep most of them locked safely away in my Manse. My Emerald Thurible, my jade daiklave and a handful of others are on my person at all times.





CHAPTER FOUR

VOICES NOT OUR OWN



The Terrestrial Exalted are great forces exerting themselves on the world around them. Even as individuals, they can change the course of local history. As friends and sworn brotherhoods, they can change the course of great nations. Yet, the world around them is not mere clay to be shaped. Like the lands around a great Manse, it provides the context for the Terrestrial existence. As a Manse taps into and harnesses the natural Essence flows of Creation, so the Terrestrial can do no more than harness the world around her. Thus, it is as important what the world around the Terrestrials thinks of them as what they think of it. What follow are the narratives of many individuals to whom the Terrestrial narrators are in some way important figures. Many are also important to the Terrestrials in question. Others are footnotes or less in the glorious sarabande of Terrestrial existence.

MORTALS

As the staunchest proponents of tradition (and, thus, the Immaculate Philosophy), Earth-ascended Dragon-Blooded are some of the Terrestrials most involved with the mortal world. They forever tend to the great Manse of society. Note, of course, that this does not always mean they are care-giving helpers. The landscaper and the gardener do not care if the sick tree is happy being sick, they simply prune or destroy it. Thus, too, those who are of the Earth Aspect may act coldly or even cruelly toward

mortals, knowing that such hard-handedness is a blessed act if it is done for righteous ends.

TOLOMENS ATIKA

I was out in the vineyards yesterday checking the new seedlings when I saw the monks coming. Two Immaculates, one tall and bulky and the other short and thin, came walking up the road to the winery. As Mistress Janisim put her winery on a dead end, I could only assume they were coming to visit us. Why, I did not know: We adhere to the Order's teachings, and the monks certainly weren't seeking wine.

The tall one saw me and waved. The other frowned. The tall one introduced them. He was Iselsi Nir, and the short he simply called Takgana. Nir asked if the mistress was present. I said no, but that she most certainly would have been if she'd known she was to receive such honored guests. Takgana asked when she would return, and I told him she would return in a couple of days. He looked past me to the winery and said something about it being different. I said that if he had seen it 10 or so years before, it was different then. I told them of the time the mistress had torn down the walls of the winery with her terrible power over grief that her son had died. Takgana went pale.

He asked which of the mistress' children had died, and I said it was her youngest, who was abducted and killed before he ever had a chance to Exalt, to go to school or to



inherit this fine winery. His face changed, then, and I thought he would strike me down. Nir put his hand on Takgana's arm, but he shook it off. I stepped aside as the angry monk walked up to the winery and stared at it. I started to ask Nir what the problem was, but he held his hand up, silencing me.

Takgana stood outside the winery and placed his hand on a wall. I thought I saw yellow flames flare from around him as he stood before the wall. He stood there, glowing brightly, and held his hand out. The strike was too fast for me to see, but the wall crumbled before him. He returned to us, walking fast. His face was a mask, showing none of his previous anger. He said to tell the mistress to expect them the following week. His voice was flat. The tall monk said a polite goodbye, and they left, striding purposefully down the road.

The mistress returns from the Imperial City in three days. I've sent a letter to her about her, ah, guests, and I hope the messenger will meet her on the road. I do not know what else to do. I hope she returns soon.

SIDORO KYVUN,

MASTER OF SEVEN WINDS SHIPPING

Yes, I know Ragara Jasir. He is... a good friend of mine. I first met him at a party and, mindful of his reputation, ignored him. However, a decade later, I found myself on the wrong end of a shipping deal that went bad and ended up losing my business and deep in debt to Ragara Somerit. Being a Dragon-Blooded means nothing when you're knees deep in debt and you come from a minor line unaffiliated with a Great House, so I was at a loss as to where to go for help. A friend suggested I put aside what I had heard about Jasir, and so, I sought him out.

He welcomed me to his apartments in the Imperial Palace in the Ragara quarters. He introduced me to his wife and his children, all of whom were intelligent and dutiful. We had tea. For hours, he asked about how I'd grown up and about mutual friends whom I had no idea we shared, touching upon every topic but what I wanted. He was polite, and I daresay quite charming. We never got around to talking about the money I owed Somerit that day, but as he walked me out of his apartments, he said, "Kyvun, if there's anything at all you ever need, please call on me. I hold nothing in the world in higher esteem than those who call me friend."

The next week, I called on him, and before I could mention my problem with Somerit, he brought up that he was looking for someone to take over a business for him and asked if I knew anyone who could manage it? He needed someone who knew overseas shipping and who the Azure Department for the Smooth and Harmonious Transport of Materials would license without a second glance. He claimed he just wanted to provide the money to start the business and to see a profit — the actual running of the

business was left to me. Of course, I agreed. When I mentioned that I had problems with Somerit, he agreed to talk to him.

Now, I've run the business for a decade and a half. Once a month or so — it used to be far more infrequent, but times have changed — Jasir calls on me and sends me on a vacation to the coast or on some errand into the interior for one of his other business interests. I suppose if anything suspicious is going on, it all happens when I'm gone. Still, whenever I need anything, I know that Jasir is there for me.

URILE PO,

WIDOW OF URILE FE LEI

My husband, Fe Lei, used to run Seven Winds Shipping, a business in the Imperial City that handles overseas transport to the East. We were no patricians, but as merchants, we had a good life. Fe Lei had built the business up from nothing and made sure that everything was aboveboard. One day, a patrician came in, representing "interested parties." He wanted to know if Fe Lei would be willing to sell the business and retire. While they offered a decent sum of money, Fe Lei wasn't interested — he had another decade left in him and wanted to leave something behind for our children.

A little over a season later, Fe Lei was killed in an accident one day, hit by a cart. The body wasn't even cold before I had potential suitors crowding me and offers to buy the shipping business. It was then that the patrician came back. He offered me the same deal he'd offered Fe Lei, except that I'd still have a small interest in the company so long as it was profitable. After he appeared, the other offers to buy the company soon stopped, and sensing something odd, I took the deal. It seems the agent represented some fellow named Sidoru Kyvun, who owns the place now.

FURROW,

SECOND-RANK ARCHON TO MAGISTRATE MOIAS

There just ain't no way I'll ever cross m'lady Moias, no sir. You c'n buy me drinks all y' like — fillit, barkeep — and may as well be I'll put one o' my fellows off yer scent, but she's off limits. Let me tell you a quick story.

It was th' third day of my execution in th' Juche Prefecture, so I'm buried up to my neck in a pit of stones an' gravel. They've some strange customs there, thank the Mountain Folk for it. The rule goes, if any feel so strongly of my life or innocence that they want to do the work t' get me out — and that ain't no half-day's work — then I'd be free t' go. With a hefty fine, course. Well, by the time I saw my third sunrise and none'd lifted a pebble for me, I was thirsty as hell and I'da been done if I hadn't looked up to see m'lady flash that badge o' hers at the guard an' order me dug up. An' I was! That lady saved my life, so I s'pose part of it's now hers.

Don't mistake me, it ain't some fucking feeling of gratitude that stops me. I've seen the looks she gives us 'round the campfires at night, and if I set her up for a fall and she came through, she'd leave me in a ditch sooner'n you can recite the Dragons. And I have no doubt she'd come through. Tougher than nails, she is.

But she does good work, stoppin' th' bad judges 'n' all. It gots t' be done, and I'd not be here today if she'd not realized my judge'd been paid off by m' wife. Why, you ask? Buy another round, an' I'll tell you.

RAGARA MOX, UNEXALTED IMPERIAL JUDGE IN ARJUF, IN A MISSIVE BY COURIER TO RAGARA NUOKO IN THE IMPERIAL CITY

Most Exalted Minister of Justice,

I regret to inform you that the processes for the judgment and sentencing of young V'neef Linor has been delayed by the intercession of one Magistrate Moias. She approached my person yesterday evening, even as I was about to close the court and declare my intention to pass sentence after an evening of meditation. She announced that the matter was not yet closed and that the sentencing was to be delayed for a minimum of a week, pending the conclusion of her investigation for "unlawful intention and bribery." To my chagrin, she further stated that she and her entourage would take rest and repast in my manor. "Where better to watch the spiders than from the web," she said.

She has already invaded my private study and given my personal letters over to perusal by her followers. My servants are being interrogated harshly by some Black Helm she claims as an archon. Her questions appear biased. I feel sure she intends to find some fault in my proceedings, and I assure you, cousin, that no such indiscretion exists.

I fear that Moias may release this young murderess on imbecilic grounds simply to frustrate me. I urge you to set in motion some manner of prevention that this perversion of justice may not happen in the future.

Congratulations on your newborn child. Please give my best to him and to your lovely wife. My Iara sends her regards and expresses her pleasure at your last visit. We would be most pleased to host you again when next you are near.

Yours,
Ragara Mox

OTHER DRAGON-BLOODED

Other Dragon-Blooded see the Earth-pected Terrestrials as the staid centers of the world, providing a stable social matrix on which the machinery of the Realm can hang. They are seen as homebodies, improvers, nurturers and auditors. Their ability to adhere to tradition in com-

plete disregard of facts when they find it appropriate is seen as a maddening eccentricity and an inescapable facet of their nature. They will adhere to a wrong argument because it seems better to them than a right one, and thus, a Terrestrial is said to be mature when she is no longer surprised that fire burns her and that rocks do not move.

SILVER ELM

Crow returned to the Stair two weeks ago, her ruined face grinning up at me like she did when she first ran the Stair in full gear without vomiting or collapsing. We sat in my office to discuss lesson plans, punishment, rewards and the like. She was eager to get started, and I saw something odd in my old student. I'd heard of her triumphs in battle and her brilliant defeat of the Fair Folk outside of Paragon, but I honestly believe that, aside from all her skill that we taught her, she did not like war.

She loves everything about war, however. She loves the battle strategy, the grace of the weapons, the sense of power victory gives her. She loves the feel of Essence coursing through her as she taps the power of Pasiap to defeat her foes. But she does not love *war*.

I think she will serve as a good teacher here. Old Snake had finally retired after 150 years, claiming he'd like to take off his blindfold and see a student for once. Crow is our first truly blind instructor in blind fighting, and I think she will have a stronger impact on the young ones than anyone else. There will be no more claiming the instructor was peeking through his blindfold or wearing a trick helmet. The first time they see her face, they'll know, and she will show them what they can become.

I'd heard of her encounter with the Fair Folk that took her sight and her fear but left her mind intact. She kept her determination, her skill and her logic, amazingly enough. I know a little of her history, of how she faced her bullies while badly beaten and forced them to walk off the mountain. She does not know, but I watched her during this personal battle, curious as to how far this girl would go. She had engineered for Silent Betrayer to beat her in sparring so that she would end up needing Pit and Worm's medical attention and then faced them at a huge disadvantage. This is a woman who holds grudges until the time is right.

Her first classes have gone well. All student talk stopped when she approached them, her customary blindfold gone, and the ruin that was her eyes facing them. In addition to teaching them to use their senses, she is teaching them the Charms they may use to borrow another's eyes or other senses to help them fight. Disorientation is high in this aspect, as the students see themselves fighting from another angle than what they are used to. Although these Charms are more suited to a Child of Pasiap, Crow allows anyone in her class to study them.

I have even seen children attempt to ambush her, perhaps as a joke, perhaps in anger over a difficult class.





These children are now in the infirmary, each missing one eye. In a mere two weeks, Crow has become well-established as an instructor here and will fit in quite nicely. She told me yesterday that she can think of several worse things than bookending her life with service at the Stair.

SILENT BETRAYER

Sometimes, I am happy about our handicaps, Crow's and mine. We've always had a connection: When we first met, I could see it in her eyes. When we first sang together, I fell in love (despite the beating that came after that). But there are secrets, as always, and knowing her as I do, she can never know.

I kept in touch with Swirling Waters. She is a monk now, serving the Order in a monastery in Portee. Crow often talks of how the three of us were inseparable and very close, but in all honesty, we were only friends for about five months before we chose coin and razor. Crow and I supported each other through the Stair, and I don't know how I would have survived if it hadn't been for her determination. Of course, I wouldn't be mute if I hadn't been singing with her, but it is impossible for the Dragon-Blooded to know what might have been. Regardless, it's been a good life, a life of battles, a life of saving each others' lives countless times and a life of secrets.

I was trained in espionage since the instructors at the Stair learned of my handicap. I served faithfully in the 25th legion until the legions disbanded and I applied for service in House Iselsi. I began working as an assassin, living within the Palace Sublime with the monks. That's when I met Swirling Waters when she came to visit the Mouth of Peace.

It was an encounter I didn't want to happen, and neither did she. There was too much at stake. On the surface, it was her position at the Order and my relationship with Crow, but in reality, it was our very lives. An outcaste may not leave the Order, so she would have been killed, and I've seen Crow's view of vengeance. I love her will all my heart, but I have seen her dedication to a plan and know she would not stop until I was dead.

Still, it happened. One night — even half a night, for she stole from my room after the deed was done. I have not seen her since, and I don't know why she seduced me. Or why I allowed her to. That was the day I first was thankful for my wife's blindness, as she cannot see the guilt in my eyes. She knows I was not celibate before we were together, and I know the same about her, but she has made it clear that, for my time away from her, I am to be chaste.

There are other ways she can find out about this, and I do my best to remove the thoughts from my mind.

TSAINÉ, FIRE-ASPECTED OUTCASTE SORCERER

There never used to be work in the Realm for an outcaste — the games the Dynasts play tend to be inside affairs, and if they need a bit of skullduggery, they look in-

house. I made my living in the East and the South ghost hunting, working the odd mercenary job for the Guild and, yes, occasionally murdering for hire. It's a cold world, after all, and if I didn't take the silver, someone else would.

About three years ago, a Guild factor contacted me about a job working for some Dynast in the Realm and offered me enough money to make me blink. Being a sorcerer is a prince's life in the Threshold, but the Realm is *real* civilization for my kind, so between the money and the chance to live in Dragon-Blooded paradise, I couldn't say no.

This fellow that I work for — and no, I won't tell you his name, but he's a man of some import in a Great House — paid to have me shipped over in a smuggler's hold, then put me up in some very nicely furnished apartments in a bad section the Imperial City. I keep a low profile and have to avoid the authorities, but he pays in jade and, mostly, all he calls on me for is the occasional spell to ensure someone's silence or to guarantee the odd, surreptitious "accident." Once in a season or so, he sends me to the Threshold to arrange some matters with the Guild for him, and once, about a year ago, I was sent to oversee a shipment of some illegal drugs, mostly bright morning, of which I got a small cut.

I'm sure I could betray the guy if I wanted to — the authorities here would pay greatly to discover half the awfulness he's up to — but he's got a good name, and I've seen him spar. He's a fantastic martial artist, but more than that, he's eerie. He doesn't move fast normally, but I think it's because he doesn't need to move fast. He's like an avalanche waiting to happen.

TEPET ELANA

I've heard of Ragara Moias. Most magistrates I meet nowadays have. Some speak of her with vigor and hope, but more speak with suspicion. There was a letter from her waiting for me when I passed through Gantry. Mostly, she asked that I keep my eyes and ears open for news regarding the Empress' whereabouts, as if that isn't a pastime for the Realm already. I also find it interesting that she didn't sign with her house in her name.

She appears to be constructing the magistracy into an organization. We have always been the hundred hands of the Empress, floating free and each with our own way and will. But if Moias has her way, she'll lock us into positions about the Scarlet Throne, more of a hardened crystal or a defensive wall. But the throne is empty, and what would that have us protecting? I can't help agreeing with some of her ideas, but let's say I'm dubious.

MNEMON ULRIN, PRIVATE JOURNAL

I had a visit from a young sibling of mine this evening. Phanjain is currently studying at the Cloister of Wisdom and will graduate soon. He bears the mark of the Iron

Horses, for which I am greatly proud. He wished to discuss with me the life of a monk and whether I am fulfilled or not.

The first rule you learn in this house is that, to be a Mnemon, you will be held to standards higher than anyone you will ever meet. This is not fair. But it was not fairness that made our Great House the most powerful, and it was not fairness that puts Mnemon in the path for the Scarlet Throne.

Fairness does not enter into the world of a child of Mnemon, only service and duty.

She asks nothing of us that she does not demand of herself. No one works harder than she. I have seen the Scarlet Empress take more leisurely days than my mother. She works to lead the house, works to serve the Realm and the Order and works to obtain the Scarlet Throne.

Was it fairness that forced me into the Immaculate Order, putting her smartest, most powerful child and logical heir in a position of never inheriting? No, she was simply putting me where I would be the most use to her... and of least threat. She is not unlike her mother in that respect.

Sometimes, I think I resent her, but no, resent is not the word. The healer must cut at the healthy flesh to remove gangrene, and he does it for our best interest. Mnemon makes her decisions for the good of the Realm, and what is best for the Realm is that Mnemon be seated on the Scarlet Throne. If her actions are ever questionable, I reassure myself with that fact.

I am her confidant, and I believe I am the closest to her of all children. I know things the others only guess at. I know her plans are to move on the Scarlet Throne soon. I know she is fully confident that, if the Empress is not dead, she is at least not returning in full capacity. I asked her how she knew, and she gave me that chill smile that means I should silence myself if I do not want to be punished. I do not doubt she knows exactly where her mother is, and this knowledge gives her power. She's not ready to share with me the information, but if I press carefully, she may confide in me. It's a dangerous road I walk.

I am of the Order and have been for over 100 years. She sent me here to serve the Order but also to be her eyes and ears. She has suspicions about the influence of the Iselsi within the Order, believing their intentions to be outside the area of serving the Order. Any ironies I spot within this argument, I keep to myself.

I will continue to watch and continue to report to her information that I see fit. She is the pinnacle of what the Elemental Dragons wished when they created the Dragon-Blooded, which makes her the best suited for the throne. The other heads of houses are either dead or in their dotage, giving leadership to their children who are not smart enough to understand the workings of the Realm as she does. Mnemon has stymied countless assassination



attempts and attempts to dishonor the house. She has emerged shining from every trial.

SIDEREAL EXALTED

The Sidereal Exalted know that the Aspects of Earth are their greatest tools in the battle to manage history. They absorb and repeat the Immaculate Philosophy and keep the Dragon-Blooded Host aware of its nature and its history. At the same time, they also know that the Exalted of this aspect do so because they have consciously chosen to. If at some point, tradition is judged to have failed, tradition will be no more, and all the astrological meddling of the Sidereals will be of little use against the implacable determination to do what is honored by the natural order with success.

LETTER FROM STONE TO CHEJOP KEJAK RY 381

Concerning the daughter to the Empress, Mnemon. Upon your request, I served as tutor for her in martial arts. She shows little promise and little ambition — surprising coming from one of the Empress' get. I believe she is intimidated by her heritage. She is quick to learn her nonphysical studies but slow when it comes to weaponry and open-handed fighting. You asked me to watch over this "promising" one, but there is little to watch. I see a spoiled child, not a future force in the Realm.

I'm fairly certain the Scarlet Empress will do away with this daughter if she doesn't Exalt and make something of herself. The Empress cannot afford to have useless children.



Honored sir, the child Exalted two days ago. I would have written you earlier, but I have been tending my wounds. I was witness to the child's Exaltation — and almost victim to it. It was violent, which was not surprising, but the power she commanded as she touched her Essence was extraordinary. She used advanced Charms, managing to strike me several times before exhausting herself. The most alarming thing about the encounter after she had expended her Essence was that her force of will — not magic, sir, merely her will — had her manage to throw a knife at me as I left the room. This was not Essence. It was mere tenacity. I did not see it coming, to my shame. I saw her Exaltation and expected it, but the final attack was a surprise.

After her attack, I found it necessary to remove myself from her view to get to safety. If she had enough consciousness left after expending her Essence to keep attacking, she is truly a dangerous girl. She knows without a doubt that I am a Sidereal now. I feel your insistence on my disguise was a wise one. I will be able to watch the child later with my true face, and she will be none the wiser.

I am currently staying in the private quarters the Empress set aside for her children's tutors until I have use of my shoulder again. It should not take long.

Addendum — I had to open the seal on the letter and add this, as there are new intrigues. I just returned from Mnemon's party thrown by the Empress. There was an assassination attempt by her older brother, although I'm sure only myself and the Empress knew about it. The young girl saw the poisoning attempt right away, and showing wit and grace previously unforeseen in her, she calmly avoided it, let Ragara know she knew of his attempt and allowed him to avoid public humiliation, which places him in her debt. I am sure the Empress will not let Ragara get away with this. He will be punished.

LETTER FROM STONE TO CHEJOP KEJAK RY 768

Honored sir, I keep watch on Mnemon for you, keeping myself close to her family in the Order and as close to her as I dare. I have been here in the Imperial City since the Empress' disappearance, watching for Mnemon's move on the Scarlet Throne. She still does not recognize me as her childhood tutor, as my face is uncovered, and I am careful to hide the scar she gave me. After watching her for a couple of years and carefully gaining the trust of some of those she confides in, I've learned that you were correct: With the Empress gone, Mnemon is going to make a play for the throne.

It is my opinion that there will be serious consequences if she gains the throne in the Empress' absence. Mnemon is one of the few who know of the Empress' true whereabouts. My scrying has told me that much. Her actions have changed in the recent months as well: She was once careful to act as if the Empress could come back any time, but recently, she has become more bold, almost as if she didn't fear her mother's homecoming anymore. However, she holds her hand close to her chest and does not move yet. If Mnemon gains the throne, she will have closer contact with you to keep the Realm in the state it is accustomed to, if that is her goal. Although she emulates the Empress in many ways (some she will not admit to), she is an enigma. I understand the conflicts between the Great Houses, but with the knowledge and power Mnemon possesses, I do not see why she does not move on the Scarlet Throne. It may be that she has information that even we do not.

OTHER EXALTED

Other Exalted primarily know the Earth-pected Terrestrials through their mastery of supernatural martial arts and their extreme durability. Most Hill-Crushing Heroes are Earth-pected, and many Aspects of Earth study at the Cloister of Wisdom and emerge practicing Earth Dragon Style. Aspects of Earth often serve in the Wyld Hunt and as monks, and thus, the caring but

implacably brutal face of the Earth Aspect is one of those stereotypes most commonly associated with Terrestrial Exaltation.

PELEPS DEKNA

I saw the man who would have been my husband last week.

Before my Exaltation I was destined for a life of Dynastic games, perhaps captaining one of my father's ships. I had not become Dragon-Blooded, my intended's mother had told me he had died after he was attacked, and no one else either caught my fancy or proved advantageous to my parents for me to marry. I attended the House of Bells without romantic entanglement and figured I would join my father's shipyard after graduation.

These plans seemed insignificant after I was called by the Unconquered Sun. I became a refugee, fleeing from my parents, my hometown and the life they had laid out for me. I was lucky, I found, to have fallen in with some other Solars who guided and trained me. I became a thief, using the dark face of the night to hide me.

I was in the north of Noble when I encountered my former fiancé. It's considered suicide for Anathema to wander that close to Sion, the birthplace of the Wyld Hunt, but there was a statue I needed to liberate for a water spirit with whom I'd made a deal.

I noticed the monk following me after the theft. I melded to the shadows and he lost me, but as he passed by, I recognized him. I was numb with shock — Cynis Janisim had told me he was dead. I had spent the last 11 years getting over him, and he was walking right in front of me. But he was a monk, and I was Anathema. He may as well be dead to me.

Still, I was intrigued, so I followed him. He didn't need to know I was Anathema.

He was frighteningly just like my memories of him. He had not grown much and still had the same slight body. I had hoped his thin frame would gain some muscle, but his body was still lithe like a child. He did, however, carry himself like a man, confident and sure. I did not know if he had gone through the Cloister and then entered the Order, but I knew he must be surprisingly effective in a fight if he wore the robes of the Order.

Our meeting ended badly. I was nervous, and he was much like the boy I had kissed: uncomfortable, needy, tripping over his feet. I fell, and to stop myself, I accidentally caused my anima and Caste Mark to flare. Without stopping to question me or to think that maybe Anathema aren't that bad if I happened to be one of them, he reacted violently. I was shaken from my fall but still tried to get the first blows in, but his manner of attack was surprising. He struck me with a well-placed blow and disrupted my Essence. I had expected a blow to the face or body or a play for my knife, but he left me fleeing the

fight with my arms hanging uselessly at my side and my treasured dagger in his possession.

My arms are better now, although my grip is still weaker than it was before. My former love, the monk, calls me Anathema and has my knife. Do I still love him? He was the only man I've ever loved, but life is different for us both now. And the fight put somewhat of a damper on any remaining feelings for him.

So now, I track him. I know he's recently arrived in Tucharra with his traveling companion, and I'm fairly sure he's going to confront his mother. This encounter will be a sight to behold. I should know: I will be there too.

I have a dagger to fetch.

SPIRITS

The little gods, like the rest of the world, generally see Earth-aspected Dragon-Blooded as monks in the Immaculate Order, come to deliver the latest tidings from the Empress and the Mouth of Peace or to dish out discipline for some infraction. Accordingly, Aspects of Earth are generally given a bit of a berth by the little gods.

MEYMAN BONE, SUPERIOR FROZEN CHILD

Do you still remember Ragara Moias? It has been long since the celebration of the season's 12th snowfall that Vertuche held that year, but the peculiar flavor of the girl's fresh love is a treat to remember. And her strange determination that she and her friends would escape without harm evoked such amusement as to not be forgotten. Truly, deterring those little god-folk from their path only to chat with them was such a pleasant event, I feel almost certain that I might choose to throw such a party of my own some day. I wonder if they knew we were watching. Major-domo, send Vertuche an invitation to the ribcage that we might meet before the next new moon.

No, don't. He would only gloat that I have been seduced by his talent for finding subtle flavors and that I desire to give him my body as praise. And that he would be right would only inflame my lust, just as he desires — and I will not have that! Wyld take the Dragon who fell into Vertuche's arms those centuries ago. Had he but spent the night with me, he would have never desired to leave, and I could have denied the Hundred-and-First Snowflake the strange and erotic mind that has grown from it.

It is obvious now: I must have my own Dragon-child. Ragara Moias will do nicely — her passion is firm and will ground me in a way that Vertuche will not be able to match. Soon, his influence will be gone from me and the icicle will hang over his own frozen heart. Major-domo, fetch me over to the Misted Cataract, I need look upon the world and seek this woman who will love me. And ready the hounds.





CHAPTER FIVE RECORDS OF THE BEFORE



*Five great dragons sent to die,
In wastelands where the fallen lie,
Five great dragons hard as jade,
Pure in heart and unafraid,
Five great dragons take the field,
Their righteousness becomes their shield,
Five great dragons come to slay,
Usurpers of the moon and day,
Five great dragons yet endure,
Against the lies, the poisoned lure,
Five great dragons, heroes all,
Must prevail or all shall fall.
—Early Shogunate-era children’s rhyme*

The Dragon-Blooded live in acute awareness that their culture flourishes in the ruins of the far more sophisticated Dragon Shogunate. They study the records of the Shogunate with grave intent. Yet, the majority of their reflections on this period are highly idealized. Peasants are, of course, kept happily ignorant. Even among the educated classes, too much study of the actual history is discouraged, and instead, those who are curious are pushed toward learning more about the Immaculate

catechism’s view of the period and less about its actual history. The Aspects of Earth are in a uniquely conflicted position, as a result. On one hand, they are the guardians of tradition and, on the other hand, of the tradition of the Immaculate Philosophy as well. More often than not, they choose the sound constructions of the Immaculate Philosophy over the helter-skelter truths of that troubled time, but frequently, they learn both and choose to espouse what they find soundest of line.

OFFICIAL NOTICE

WARNING!

The area is a **CLOSED MILITARY REGION** by order of the Immaculate Preceptors of the Church of Pasiap and the Shogun of the Dragon-Blooded Bakufu. This region contains structures whose autonomous defenses were created by the **SOLAR ANATHEMA!**

**DO NOT APPROACH
BEYOND THIS POINT!**

This area's automated defenses **HAVE NOT BEEN DISARMED OR BYPASSED!** In addition, the forces of the Bakufu have deployed their own defenses to contain any remaining undiscovered threats and to prevent trespass by Anathema cultists.

TRESPASSERS WILL BE KILLED!

If you perceive any activity in this region, contact the district's Office of Residual Menaces in Kurogu **IMMEDIATELY!** Entering this area is a Grade 1 offense punishable by summary execution! Undue study of this region is a Grade 3 offense punishable by transportation to remote hard labor!

Security Personnel: This is a threat level A area. The defenses of this area will not respond to standard commands or hailing. Under no circumstances may you enter without specific explicit authorization from the Bakufu and guides from the Office of Residual Menaces.

LETTER FROM ANYS SYN TO CHEJOP KEJAK, YEAR OF THE RAT, GOLD ERA OF THE FIRST EPOCH OF THE DRAGON- BLOODED SHOGUNATE

As I am sure you are already aware, the Righteous Dojo of Immaculate Wisdom suffered a terrible accident yesterday. Vorush Nelam, a founding student of the Wood Dragon School, disconnected his own soul and perished in a failed attempt to execute the final technique of his style. I need hardly remind you that this tragedy marks the third of its kind since I began this dojo. I hear the whispers of dissent and unease from the other students in the Wood Dragon School, and I cannot help but echo these sentiments. This series of accidents reveals integral and unforeseen flaws in the Wood Dragon Form. We should thank the Maidens we haven't had more deaths sooner in the curriculum. The only solution I see is a total redesign of the Form katas. With your permission, I would like to begin work on these revisions immediately. Given the lifespan of our students, we can expect to phase out most of the obsolete techniques within 300 years — or sooner, if we have more accidents.

In more auspicious news, the most recent graduate of the Earth Dragon School has written a treatise on the Glorious Paths of Higher Essence. I don't know what to think of Tan Su's work. His philosophy is crude and simple without any real understanding of the fundamental principles behind his statements, yet in his clumsy way, he somehow stumbles onto meaningful truths. Other students have taken to quoting the treatise in class, and I would like to incorporate his work into the official curriculum for the Earth Dragon School. I have attached a copy for your perusal and approval. I entreat your quick reply. Until then, may the Maidens watch over us.

"THE LITANY OF THE MOUNTAIN," EXCERPTED FROM *The Apocrypha of Tan Su*

I am patient. I am inevitable. I am the mountain.

Those who would walk in the path of the Earth Dragon must ascend to the pinnacle of understanding before they can embody that peak. These are the three roots of the mountain, which I reveal to you as perfected truths.

The mountain is patient. Waves break against it, and yet the mountain endures. Wind blows upon it, and still, the mountain endures. Fire exhausts itself and fades to smoke and ash, and always, the mountain endures. Wood can only stand in the shadow of the mountain, closest to understanding and, yet, imperfect, for the mountain endures beyond all trees and does not yield to axe or flame.

The mountain is inevitable. The mountain endures beyond all brethren elements and also beyond time. The purpose of the mountain transcends passivity into the conquering patience of the unassailable and relentless force. Mountains move, not lightly or without reason, but who can halt the tread of the world upon itself? The footsteps of the Earth Dragon are the steps of One upon the Whole and the Whole upon the One, for neither may be separated in the unity of purpose when purpose itself becomes perfected. The Anathema look to the sky for power because the earth spurns their wickedness and shall not shelter them. They dwell in the world and not of it. Though the earth shall endure invincibly beyond all demons, the world refuses to endure the blasphemy of the sky thieves. The defeat of the Anathema is inevitable as you become, and in the perfection of the earth shall your inevitability become the inviolate purpose of the world.

I am the mountain. The final root of understanding is acceptance. Until you are the mountain, you are dirt beneath the mountain. Can a Manse of dirt stand? Can a child's fortress of sand hold back the tide? Can anyone

triumph by their own strength when they are dust? The strength of one is the strength of one sand grain, and the strength of many is but a fortress of sand. Alone or in thousands, the strength of flesh cannot prevail or endure against the forces of wickedness. My strength is the strength of the world, and I shall always endure.

I am patient. I am inevitable. I am the mountain.

FROM THE TACTICAL ANNALS OF CHUMYO KARACH NU

They rode creatures that looked like scorpions with too many segments and with legs stretched into crude parody of centipedes. The creatures stood taller than my warstrider and spat streams of Wyld-tainted venom from their mandibles. Victims of that poison writhed and tore inside out, their bones and naked viscera bursting through folded skin. They screamed out muffled cries of agony from mouths twisted inside their bodies but lingered in suffering until their companions had an opportunity to exercise honorable mercy.

I ordered the infantry to scatter to a looser formation to minimize further casualties from the poison and retaliated with all the remaining forces at my command. A trio of warstriders armed with shock pikes pinned the largest of the behemoths in place long enough for the aerial units to catch it in a synchronous burst of Essence cannon fire. The death of the largest beast shattered the morale of the other five. Three talons wearing dragon armor completed the rout, turning the massacre back on the Fair Folk. The warstriders used their lances to shepherd the frenzied monstrosities, stampeding them repeatedly over the hobgoblin infantry. I must compliment my subordinate officers for their unfailing discipline throughout these maneuvers. Thanks to their diligence, we lost only a quarter of our ashigaru and less than a sixth of our gunzosa. Only one of the Host died, crushed beneath the last of the monsters when it toppled sooner than expected.

Though our victory was absolute, I cannot help but wonder at the audacity of the fey. Attacks such as these have grown more numerous in the past decade, and I fear these strikes are too deliberate for mere raids. I believe the hordes of the Wyld send these assaults to test our defenses in preparation for a larger invasion. Yet, I cannot help but wonder whose hand could coordinate the children of chaos. Anathema? Traitors among our own kind? I have sent a petition to my daimyo requesting reinforcements to replace my casualties, but she has not yet responded.

LETTERS HOME

Librarian's Notes: Transcribed from a recovered memory crystal, probably recorded circa mid-Shogunate. The material was unencrypted, and other evidence suggests it was a

communication intercept from the files of a long-forgotten security service. The subject seems to be in the employ of one of the Shogun's security agencies. White mice is Shogunate-era slang for mortal secret police, while sniffers are presumed to be some sort of specialized interrogator, apparently skilled at extracting information during casual conversation, possibly without revealing their Exaltation.

The days go by, but my love for you does not decrease. I hope our little Dragonette is well and taking to her lessons. It pains me slightly to miss these, her formative years, but I content myself with knowing that I'll have a century or more to catch up with her.

We've been deployed here in the hive for about a month. We're doing the best we can under the circumstances. We have about five sniffers and a company of white mice, and between tooth pulling and wringing out the locals during the course of casual conversation, we're getting to the bottom of the problem. Hopefully, I'll be able to wrap this up soon and head home.

I don't know that we're going to see much change here, though. While we've gotten plenty of evidence and broken lots of fingers, all we're doing is rounding up militants. There'll be another generation of city rats along soon enough to replace them. With catch-and-release monitoring, we can find the cells, but the political will to roll up the basic operation is lacking. The Dragon Chair, in its infinite wisdom, provided us with a list of individuals who are of value to the local administration and who are not to be harmed or interrogated, and of course, half of them are prime suspects. Various daimyos must have stakes in them, and I have no idea who is taking advantage of whom — if the rebels are a tool of their sponsors or if their sponsors are being taken for a ride. For all I know, this is an insurgency sponsored by the throne, having concluded that the civic administration has no discernable intention of reforming any time soon. Senior Administrator Wodu certainly seemed to be a little unhappy opening the central purse to this effect, so it wouldn't surprise me. Whatever the case, it's not my business, and clearly, I'm not meant to know.

We could take care of it in about an afternoon, if we had the permission, but we're just here to keep the open tongues of flame out of sight, not to put out the fire. I assume our budget somewhere will run out or the political charade will wind down and we'll return to the Isle soon. Until then, I'll be thinking of you whenever I have a chance.

THE KODAMA CAMPAIGN

From The Decline of the Terrestrials, by Chejop Kejak
Faerie forces in the breakthrough numbered approximately one million, which was the largest army that the Fair Folk had brought against Creation since Zarlath. The initial penetration was achieved in 342





separate smaller penetrations that were widened by vortex activity near instantly. Of these, 27 were deep-Creation penetrations. Most such penetrations lasted only a few minutes on average before put down by Terrestrial quick-response forces or collapsing under the weight of reality, but they left major transport hubs contaminated and unusable, as well as causing tremendous infrastructural damage. The scale of this assault had not been properly anticipated, despite the lessons of the Zarlath attack, and the response of ashigaru and gunzocha units was severely hampered as their transports were reliant on airship docking facilities that were, in many cases, still inhabited by live vortices when they arrived.

Units of the Mighty Imperial Fast Attack went into battle directly from the air, and the Dragon-Blooded's loyal gunzocha suffered terribly shielding their masters without any lesser troops to pin down and weed out enemy formations. Less than one gunzocha in five survived, and over 127 dragon-armored troopers were slain, the highest butcher's bill the Fair Folk had ever inflicted on the soldiers of the Faerie-Suppressing General. Even at Zarlath, less than 40 Exalted had actually died, but the lack of fodder units forced the Exalted to deplete their Essence and expose themselves. Units of the Bureau of Destiny and the Aerial Legion intervened on the battlefield repeatedly to halt the growth of breaches, and two

of the Fivescore Fellowship traveled to their next incarnations on that day.

This situation was finally remedied when the original shores of Creation were reached, as the faerie could not stage breakthrough deep inside the fabric of the real. The Dragon-Blooded hold on the outer runes were really only holding actions, attempts to keep Creation as large as possible for as long as possible. It was anticipated we should lose so much. It was not anticipated how much the lost would cost our hearts. From the Kodama Breakthrough forward was when we truly understood what the slow loss of Creation's outer marches would cost us, in terms of our culture and our understanding.

RHETORICAL FLOURISHES

From a recovered document found during raids subsequent to the Kodama Breakthrough

What do we care for our souls, that we might be born again to serve endlessly as the Dragons' slaves? What do they hold out to us, that a hundred thousand of our billions might perhaps taste of Exaltation, presuming, of course, that those irresponsible Dragons Exalted of the modern day fail in their labors and do not Exalt once again? And for the rest of us? Labor, war and poverty? This is not a cosmic cycle of promotion. It is a carrot bound in front of a mule's nose, that he might pull harder at the wagon. The Fair Folk cannot promise liberation.



They will not elevate your soul — but march with them and be avenged for your enslavement.

THE VOICE OF THE EYE

Defeatists and traitors are poison in the veins of the Dragons. This is the Voice of the Eye. We are watching you. We are always listening. We know who is disloyal to the state and who is a truly loyal subject of the Daimyo of Paragon. Fear and rumormongering are the weapons of the Fair Folk. Temerity and self-glorification are the weapons of the bandit kings. Those who are rumormongers will be hanged and their tongues cut out. Those who are temeritous shall be castrated and impaled. Surely you know one whose treachery was punished in such a fashion. Heed their lesson, and choose life. This is the Voice of the Eye. We are watching you.

Savant's Notes: Broadcast date unknown — certainly late Shogunate. The original was a broadcast of daydream-type impressions best perceived during periods of hypnagogy. Possibly transcribed and reduced via some Charm from a memory-crystal impression. The initial effect must have been quite impressive. There are notes in late Shogunate-period materials about the Voice of the Eye, and it is accorded great awe (Chuhuchitil XII, 234).

FROM A REPORT TO DAIMYO HAC YI FROM MAGISTRATE JIRU KAI

My lord, I write to inform you that Chumyo Takahi Sheden has committed honorable suicide according to the terms of his recent duel with Chumyo Dened Nira. He challenged her to a match barring the use of Essence in either Charm or artifact, believing incorrectly that she would not fight so well without access to her Immaculate Charms. He trusted in his own speed and

power, both rightly formidable and tested in many battles and duels. Both generals arrived at the appointed hour from opposite sides of the proscribed arena, wearing nothing but simple fighting robes in the color of their aspect. Each opened their arms wide and bowed to the five directions and then to each other, thereafter accepting the matched dueling torcs to suppress their Essence in full view of the assembled witnesses. The generals were truly a wonder to behold, my lord. Fit and confident, skin purified with oil and perfume, they fought to prove their philosophy on pain of death.

Takahi struck first, a blur of crimson even without Essence. I know now why his soldiers call him the Blazing Fist. I wondered then if Dened planned to accept the blow without defense because she did not flinch or turn away. Instead, she moved only slightly, an inch back and left so that he missed by the narrowest of margins. Takahi left himself wide open in reaching too far, but Dened did not strike as she could. Instead, she pushed with two fingers of each hand at the muscles of his stomach. He fell, sprawled to an inglorious heap upon the earth. She waited as he arose and dusted off the dirt and his pride. He struck again with a flurry of kicks and punches, each deflected with frightening precision. She returned exactly one blow for five, counted and deliberate. When he paused for breath, she paused to let him breathe. She never attacked save that he attacked, and in the end, no blow of hers felled him. He simply tired and fell unconscious from his exertions. By the terms of the duel, he lost and pledged forfeiture of his life. Takahi invited Dened to tea the next day before his suicide, honoring her lesson with meditative silence. She alone witnessed his death and dutifully reported his passing to me. She specifically asked me to convey her deepest respect for the late Chumyo Takahi Sheden.



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CHAPTER SIX

MIRACLES OF PASIAP



The gifts of the Earth Dragon grant clarity and expansion of senses, mastery of engineering and artistry, the stone-like capacity to weather slow suffering and immediate agony and, of course, the deadly precision of the martial arts. Aspects of Earth are exacting and indomitable, whether as architects or soldiers, and very little escapes the stern attention of the Children of Pasiap.

Storytellers should remember that Dragon-Blooded teach each other Charms very readily, so Terrestrial characters will almost certainly be able to find a knowledgeable tutor or instruction manuals. Dynasts in particular have the support network of their families to provide necessary magical education.

NEW CHARMS

AWARENESS

UNFAILING DRAGON GLANCE

Cost: 2 motes
Duration: Instant
Type: Reflexive
Minimum Awareness: 2
Minimum Essence: 2
Prerequisite Charms: None

The character hesitates and looks more carefully, a quick flare of Essence pushing aside all distractions. Her player may reroll a single Awareness roll but must take the new results over the old. The Dragon-Blood cannot use this Charm more than once for the same action. If Unfailing Dragon Glance is part of a Combo, Essence must be spent to reactivate all the other Charms in that Combo when the reroll takes place. If those Charms have separate dice rolls associated with them, they are not rerolled.

SIGHT OF FLUTTERING TREMORS

Cost: 4 motes
Duration: Indefinite
Type: Simple
Minimum Awareness: 5
Minimum Essence: 3
Prerequisite Charms: All-Encompassing Earth

Sense

Upon activating this Charm, cataracts like white jade cloud over the character's eyes, and he becomes blind for the duration of the effect. In exchange, the Dragon-Blood gains a preternatural awareness of vibrations echoing through the air and ground. He can "see" in any or all directions at once as desired, simultaneously perceiving the shape and exact location of all objects



within half the range of his normal vision or his (Awareness x 10) yards, whichever is less. Beyond this range, objects and sounds blur together and have no coherent meaning. Darkness and environmental conditions impairing true vision do not normally hinder the “vision” granted by this Charm, although magical obfuscations and effects that muffle sound may create regions of murky vision. Within a radius of (Awareness + Essence) yards, the character can even see through and around thin walls and other blocking physical obstructions by sensing the vibrations passing through the interrupting objects. Thick walls obscure and disrupt echoes too much to allow vibration sight to peer around them without a substantial crack or flaw through which sounds can flow. This omnidirectional perception makes the character difficult to surprise, adding one automatic success to all Awareness rolls made to avoid ambush.

Despite the obvious utility of sensing vibrations, the sense is not sight and cannot fully replace vision. Vibrations do not convey colors or shades, making it impossible to read or otherwise notice exclusively visual information. Characters *can* recognize people and objects they have “viewed” with vibration sight previously, using their memory of profiles and surface contours.

Dragon-Blooded who know this Charm can reflexively spend four additional experience points as insurance against blindness. Should such characters ever become truly blind for any reason (whether temporarily as the result of magic or permanently from maiming), they gain the full effects of this Charm for the duration of their blindness without spending any Essence. This special benefit vanishes if a character regains her sight.

PULSE OF THE DRAGON’S SOUL

Cost: 1 or 3 motes

Duration: One turn

Type: Reflexive or Simple

Minimum Awareness: 5

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Feeling the Dragon’s Bones
The Dragon-Blood concentrates and spends 3 motes as a simple action, allowing his consciousness to flow down and outward through the Essence currents of the earth. For a moment, he experiences the land as an extension of his own body and perceives the unnatural wounds and blights of all shadowlands and Wyld zones within a number of miles equal to his permanent Essence. He cannot gauge the strength or direction of these tainted regions unless they are within a mile, in which case he can determine the rough size, shape and potency of the blights. The character can also sense all Manses and Demesnes within a mile, but only as wellsprings of power. He knows where these sites are and whether they are weak (rating 1-2) or strong (3-5), but he cannot

differentiate between Manses and Demesnes or identify a site’s type (Earth, Solar, Celestial, etc.). At the end of a turn, the mystical perception fades, and the character’s senses withdraw back into his flesh.

In addition to the Charm’s active use, Pulse of the Dragon’s Soul activates reflexively for a cost of 1 mote whenever a character crosses into a shadowland or Wyld zone without realizing it. The Charm does not activate itself if the character already knows the nature of his location. The character becomes immediately aware of the blighted energies of his new location and their overall type, but he does not gain the full awareness of the surrounding terrain as with conscious activation of the Charm.

CRAFT

RESPLENDENT ARTISAN MASTERY

Cost: 3 motes per success

Duration: Instant

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Craft: 3

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Any three Craft Charms

A Dragon-Blooded with this Charm learns to apply divine majesty to his chosen art, developing a signature style of breathtaking prowess. The character may convert specialty dice for any Craft roll into automatic successes for a cost of 3 motes per die converted. Exalted may use this Charm to benefit any Craft they have a rating in, provided they are exercising a specialty for that Craft.

RAMPARTS OF OBEDIENT EARTH

Cost: 2 motes per cubic yard

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Craft: 4

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Stone-Carving Fingers Form

The Dragon-Blood stamps hard or smites the earth with his fist, and a shockwave of Essence and force ripples across the ground from the point of impact. This shockwave can crudely shape and pack one cubic yard of soil for every mote spent, but the continuous structure must have at least one edge within a yard of its creator. Ramparts of Obedient Earth can only shape soil, but it may affect mud, sand and even hard-packed dirt liberally strewn with pebbles. The Charm has no effect on solid rock of any density.

Dragon-Blooded chiefly use this Charm on the battlefield to quickly erect cover for themselves or others (using the standard rules for cover on pages 229-230 of *Exalted*), though creative applications can wreak havoc

on a cavalry charge and disrupt formations of infantry. Anyone unfortunate enough to be standing on the ground when it buckles or collapses into a sinkhole suffers no damage unless an extremely deep excavation prompts an injurious fall, but such characters suffer immediate knockdown unless their players make a successful Dexterity + Athletics roll at standard difficulty. Outside of combat, this Charm has considerable utility for excavation work of all kinds, especially since the heavy compression of displaced earth allows for the creation of extremely stable tunnels. In general, walls of packed earth roughly a yard thick have a soak of 5L/8B and require 20 health levels to damage and 30 to destroy outright. These statistics will fluctuate wildly depending on a given structure's thickness and architectural stability. Characters may only use this Charm once per turn.

BREAKING THE DRAGON'S HEART

Cost: 5 motes, 1 Willpower, 1 health level

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Craft: 5

Minimum Essence: 4

Prerequisite Charms: Charm of Greater Unmaking

The Dragon-Blood holds a Hearthstone in his hand and crushes the gem in his fist. Such is the power and exacting skill of this grip that the stone shatters. Use of

this Charm requires a Wits + Craft (Jewelry) roll against a difficulty of the Hearthstone's rating + 2. A botch causes the stone to explode, inflicting dice of unsoakable aggravated damage to the Exalt equal to the difficulty of the Craft roll. If the character suffers two or more levels of damage from a botch, the explosion of Essence also costs him the hand holding the gem. On a failure, the Hearthstone remains undamaged. Success breaks the gem safely, releasing its store of Essence in a surge of power. If attuned to the Manse producing the Hearthstone, the Exalt regains a number of motes equal to the rating of the Hearthstone x 10. If this surge would bring his Essence pool above maximum, the excess motes bleed into his anima banner as if spent from his Peripheral pool. The act of shattering a Hearthstone with this Charm manifests as a deafening thunderclap and a flash of light brighter than the noonday sun.

This Charm is chiefly intended to break Hearthstones removed from settings. It cannot be used in combat or against Hearthstones still in their settings. Breaking a Hearthstone has negative effects on the geomancy of the Manse. Dragon-Blooded Dynasts who use this Charm to cannibalize family Hearthstones without an extremely good reason may not be permitted to reclaim the gems when they reform. Soldiers of Lookshy can expect even harsher sanctions from their superiors. Other outcastes may or may





not suffer social ramifications for use of this Charm, depending on who owns the Manse generating the Hearthstone they destroyed.

ENDURANCE

SLEEP OF STONES TRANCE

Cost: 1 mote

Duration: One hour

Type: Simple

Minimum Endurance: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Unsleeping Earth Meditation

The Exalt assumes a meditative position and becomes perfectly still, clearing his mind of all thoughts as he locks his gaze forward without really seeing. The character does not actually sleep or dream in this trance and regains no Essence for meditating, but remains peripherally aware of his surroundings. If the character experiences any substantial distraction or interruption, he may prematurely and reflexively snap out of his torpid reverie to confront the situation. Ignoring the distraction and remaining in the trance requires a Temperance roll at standard difficulty. If the character goes a full hour without leaving the trance, roll one die. Success restores one point of Willpower, while a failure or botch indicates the meditation provided no real benefit except to rest the character's body. Characters may not use this Charm more times in a day than their Endurance rating, and trances broken by distractions count against this limit. Dragon-Blooded with Essence 3+ may explicitly use Sleep of Stones Trance to regain Willpower points lost by overusing Unsleeping Earth Meditation, allowing these disciplined stoics to go indefinitely without sleep so long as they regularly meditate.

BREATH OF EARTH TRANCE

Cost: 2 motes

Duration: Until broken

Type: Simple

Minimum Endurance: 4

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Sleep of Stones Trance

The character sinks into deep meditation, opening her consciousness and soul to the breath of the Elemental Dragons flowing through the world. Whenever the character experiences a substantial distraction and after each hour that passes, roll her Temperance to maintain the trance. The difficulty starts at one and increases by

+1 after every two successive checks. A failure or botch on any of these Temperance rolls breaks the meditation and ends the Charm. For each hour the Exalt remains in the trance, she recovers (her permanent Essence + 8) motes. Hours spent using Breath of Earth Trance refresh the soul even better than time spent asleep, possibly supplanting the need for sleep altogether. Characters using Breath of Earth Trance for at least four consecutive hours may regain Willpower with a standard Conviction roll, but players of Exalted only receive one Conviction roll for their characters to regain Willpower each day regardless of the number of hours they sleep or meditate with this Charm.

Breath of Earth Trance only functions within Creation. Dragon-Blooded cannot concentrate on the Essence of their patrons inside the tainted energies of a shadowland or Wyld zone, let alone in the Deep Wyld, Malfeas, Autochthonia or the Underworld. The sanctums of the little gods and the Celestial City of Yu-Shan are considered part of Creation for the purpose of this Charm.

PURIFYING BLOOD ASCENDANCY

Cost: 5 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Endurance: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Uneating Earth Meditation

The Terrestrial Exalted calls upon the blood of the Elemental Dragons to awaken and cleanse her body of dangerous impurities. Liquid Essence glows visibly as it spreads through the arteries and veins beneath her skin, growing into a web of vibrant pulsing light the color of her anima. Characters can use this Charm to completely rid themselves of a single disease they have contracted or to completely nullify a single toxin currently present in their bodies. Once this Charm has purged a disease or poison, the character becomes completely immune to that impurity and may ignore any and all future exposure without a Resistance roll for a number of days equal to her permanent Essence. Characters may also use this Charm to cleanse all wounds of infection, which also serves to make their bodies immune to any infection for days equal to Essence. Purifying Blood Ascendancy does not aid against magical plagues and poisons. Characters may use this Charm while unconscious or otherwise incapacitated, making this an effective defense against paralytic venom.

MARTIAL ARTS

JADE MOUNTAIN STYLE

This Terrestrial-level martial art channels the overwhelming strength and resilience of the mountain, similar in tone and yet far less powerful than the Immaculate Earth Dragon Style. Jade Mountain Style sees most use among the Dragon-Blooded soldiers of Lookshy, where each practitioner may hold a pass against a talon of mortals. Unless specifically noted otherwise, all Charms in this cascade may be used freely with armor and treat one-handed crushing weapons as unarmed attacks. These include clubs, hammers, maces and goremauls, but *not* the sledges or grand goremauls favored by Earth Immaculates.

Unlike Five-Dragon Form and most other Terrestrial-level martial arts, all Charms in this style draw heavily on the Essence of the earth. As a result, only Earth Aspect Terrestrial Exalted and God-Blooded children of earth elementals or earth-associated deities may use this style for the listed activation costs. All other characters must pay the standard 1 mote elemental surcharge to use any of these Charms. Jade Mountain Style does not function unless the Exalt touches the ground. He need not actually make contact with the earth itself and may use these Charms inside structures, when wearing boots, standing on one foot and so forth, but he cannot wield such magic while swimming, flying or leaping through the air.

PILLAR OF MARBLE STANCE

Cost: 1+ motes

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Martial Arts: 2

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: None

The Exalt flexes and roots his Essence into the earth, momentarily locked in a stance of balanced immovability against any force. This Charm averts one effect that would knock the Exalt down, back or otherwise move him from his current position, but it does not prevent any associated damage. The character may have his flesh reduced to red mist by the fist of a Second Circle demon, but his Essence-laden bones will stand defiantly upright for a few seconds. This Charm costs 1 mote for the Exalt to prevent knockback, knockdown or similar effects from non-magical forces. If a Charm or other magic would move the character, the cost is the

permanent Essence of the attacker, but the Exalt cannot defend against magical forces created by beings of higher Essence.

Pillar of Marble Stance only functions if the Exalt touches the earth.

FORTRESS OF ONE

Cost: 2 motes per 1L/1B, 1 Willpower

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Martial Arts: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Pillar of Marble Stance

The Exalt performs a slow kata with both feet planted firmly on the earth. At the conclusion of these ponderous movements, she freezes in place, while her flesh visibly hardens to stone with Essence. She adds 1L/1B to her natural soak for every 2 motes spent and ignores all fatigue penalties regardless of exertion or encumbrance. There is no upper limit on how many motes a character can channel into a single activation of this Charm. Fortress of One ends immediately if the character fully exhausts her Essence pool, breaks contact with the earth or moves more than a yard from her original location for any reason, so wise Exalted reinforce their position with Pillar of Marble Stance as needed to resist the knockback of forceful impacts. Owing to the movement restrictions of this Charm, characters protected by Fortress of One cannot dodge without a well-described stunt approved by the Storyteller or appropriate magic (such as Threshold Warding Stance, **Exalted: The Dragon-Blooded**, p. 204). Finally, this Charm ends immediately if characters attack with any weapons except those permitted by Jade Mountain Style.

BOULDER-CRUSHING GRASP

Cost: 3 motes

Duration: Until released

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Martial Arts: 2

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: None

The Exalt seizes an opponent in a tightening clinch, his muscles and joints creaking like a cliff before an avalanche. If the clinch attempt succeeds, all damage the Exalt inflicts on the grappled opponent is lethal instead of bashing. This Charm ends as soon as the character releases his hold. Exalted may also use this Charm to enable similar feats of destructive gripping strength, such as a bone-pulping handshake. Resolve such attacks as lethal clinch attempts, except that victims will not usually defend themselves from attacks disguised as greetings.





Characters may only activate Boulder-Crushing Grasp while touching the earth. If the character breaks contact with the earth without releasing his victim, the Charm remains active but his clinch reverts back to bashing damage until he sets foot on the ground once more.

SLIDING GLACIER GRIP

Cost: 4 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Martial Arts: 3

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Boulder-Crushing Grasp

The Exalt holds an opponent with implacable strength, preventing any possibility of ending a locked struggle. This Charm may only be used immediately after an opponent wins an opposed clinch roll. The opponent loses the option of ending and escaping the clinch and must, instead, inflict damage or hold the martial artist without causing injury. Characters may only activate Sliding Glacier Grip while touching the earth.

JADE MOUNTAIN FORM

Cost: 5 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Martial Arts: 4

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Fortress of One, Sliding Glacier Grip

The Exalt strikes an impossibly forceful blow at the earth beneath his feet and straightens to his full majesty. His stature grows as he rises, adding nearly a foot of height and 100 pounds of weight. More dramatically, a second skin of stone rises and envelops the character's flesh in a carapace of plates extruded out of Essence from the ground itself. These plates absorb the character's other armor into themselves as they grind into place, allowing both forms of protection to coexist seamlessly. The transformation evoked by Jade Mountain Form adds the character's permanent Essence to his Strength and Stamina, while allowing his augmented Stamina to soak lethal damage as if it were bashing. Unfortunately, the character's Dexterity drops by one dot in this transformed state (to a minimum rating of 1), and his ground movement speed drops to half its normal rate.

Two restrictions govern this Charm's use. First, characters may only activate Jade Mountain Form while in contact with the earth. If they break this contact for more than a turn while the Charm remains active, the Charm effects are immediately terminated. Additionally, characters may only have one Form-type Charm active at a time. Activating a second Form immediately ends and replaces the effects of the first.

PASIAP STILL STANDS

Cost: 1 mote per 2B or 1L

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Martial Arts: 5

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Jade Mountain Form

The Exalt gives ground a step and stamps thunderously as she suffers injury, transferring the energy of a blow to the ground beneath her. This Charm must be used after applying normal soak against injury but before rolling the remaining damage. Each mote spent cancels 1L or 2B damage. Pasiap Still Stands may reduce an attack to zero damage dice, but it provides no protection against aggravated damage. Any remaining damage dice left over after the use of this Charm (if any) should be rolled and applied normally. Damage averted by this Charm is not stopped, but redirected. The ground or structure beneath the character suffers levels of bashing or lethal damage (as appropriate to the type of averted injury) equal to the dice of damage prevented. Although this redirection has little effect on soil apart from tearing cratered fissures around the Exalt's feet, the effect can be dramatically inconvenient or dangerous for characters walking across a bridge, the frozen surface of a lake or standing on a wooden plank floor. Characters may only use this Charm while touching the ground.

FALLING ROCKSLIDE ONSLAUGHT

Cost: 4 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Martial Arts: 5

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Pasiap Still Stands

The Exalt turns the leverage of weight and Essence to crush an opponent in a brutal, choking hold. Characters may only use this Charm after winning a clinch roll but before inflicting damage. Falling Rockslide Onslaught doubles the damage dice pool (including extra successes from the clinch roll) and allows Exalted to choose whether they inflict lethal or bashing damage. Characters may only use this Charm while touching the ground.

RESISTANCE

ARMOR-HARDENING CONCENTRATION

Cost: 2 motes per person

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Resistance: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Strength of Stone Technique

The Exalt focuses, invoking the durability of the Earth as an enchantment upon his armor. The degree of benefit depends on the composition of his armor according to the table below. The Exalt can extend this Charm to any ally within his (Essence x 3) yards by paying the same cost, and a character may simultaneously evoke protection on as many allies within range as his Essence reserves permit. Characters may only benefit from one application of this Charm at a time and immediately lose the enchantment if they remove their armor for any reason.

Armor Type	Soak Bonus
Non-Magical Armor	1L/2B
Magical Armor	2L/2B
Jade Armor	2L/3B
White Jade Armor	3L/3B

MANTLE OF (ELEMENT) INVULNERABILITY

Cost: 6 motes, 1 Willpower
Duration: One scene
Type: Simple
Minimum Resistance: 5
Minimum Essence: 3
Prerequisite Charms: Appropriate (Element) Protection Form

Like the lesser (Element) Protection Form upon which this Charm builds, Mantle of (Element) Invulnerability is actually a cluster of five separate Charms that must be purchased separately. Each confers unsurpassed protection, allowing the Exalt to completely ignore all non-magical sources of injury associated with the respective element and adding the character's permanent Essence to her soak against magical attacks involving the element. This Charm uses the same guidelines for determining the elemental association of a damage source as (Element) Protection Form (see *Exalted: The Dragon-Blooded*, p. 201).

Dragon-Blooded always consider the Mantle of (Element) Invulnerability for their own element to be a favored Charm, even if they do not actually have Resistance as an Aspect or Favored Ability. However, because this Charm is still based on Resistance, Earth Aspects never pay an elemental surcharge to use *any* of the five elemental permutations.

PERFECTED SCALES OF THE DRAGON

Cost: 12 motes, 1 Willpower, 1 health level
Duration: One scene
Type: Simple
Minimum Resistance: 5
Minimum Essence: 5
Prerequisite Charms: All five Mantle of (Element) Invulnerability Charms





The Exalt dons the fivefold aegis of the Elemental Dragons, his anima roaring out in a gale of destructive power as if he had spent 16+ motes of Peripheral Essence. For the rest of the scene, the character is at one with the harmony of the elements and suffers no damage from any non-magical object or force native to the Tapestry of Creation. Beings and forces from outside of Fate can hurt the character normally by mundane means, but all others must use magically enhanced attacks or weapons of the Five Magical Materials to harm the Exalt. Unlike the individual Mantle of (Element) Invulnerability Charms, Perfected Scales of the Dragon offers no additional soak versus damage sources that penetrate its limited perfection.

TAINT-CLEANSING TECHNIQUE

Cost: 20 motes, 1 Willpower, 1 aggravated health level, 1 experience point

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Resistance: 5

Minimum Essence: 4

Prerequisite Charms: Chaos-Warding Prana

The Dragon-Blood kneels in humble supplication to the Elemental Dragons, briefly setting aside his authority as a Prince of the Earth to become a vessel of greater divinity. As the Charm activates, a sphere of living Essence spreads from the Chosen's heart and grows to envelop a radius of her Essence in yards. Taint-Cleansing Technique cannot be placed in a Combo but may be used synergistically. In order to obtain the synergistic benefit, all participant Dragon-Blooded must stand in an outward-facing circle with each no more than five yards from all other participants. The total number of participants cannot exceed the Essence + Performance + applicable specialty (usually Leadership) of the Exalt leading the combined effort. A synergistic use of this Charm combines the spheres of Essence from each character into a single sphere emerging from the center of the participant circle. This sphere has a radius in yards equal to the (highest Essence in the group) x (the number of participants).

Within the radius of the sphere, the energy of the Wyld is completely displaced, turning the affected area into a bubble of perfect and inviolate stability. Every decade of contact with the Wyld erodes one foot of radius from the protected region. Fair Folk and Wyld mutants can freely enter regions of stability created with Taint-Cleansing Technique without suffering any more harm than they experience in any other part of Creation.



ENCHANTED ITEMS

HEARTHSTONES

HARDENED SPIRIT GEMSTONE (EARTH •)

Trigger: Regaining Willpower

The deep amethyst of this polished jewel glitters as if from distantly reflected torchlight. Each morning, its bearer's player adds one die to his Conviction roll for his character to regain Willpower. A character must have a permanent Willpower of 6+ or a Conviction rating of 3+ to receive this benefit.

STONE OF HUMBLE GLORY

(EARTH •)

Trigger: Constant

This pentagonal jewel has a mirror finish that never dirties or smudges, always revealing the simple truth of the world. The player of a character bearing this stone adds a bonus equal to the Exalt's lowest Virtue to all Social rolls in which the character speaks plain truth without guile or embellishment. A character who bears this stone for a month may optionally choose to shift her Nature to Paragon, but this personality change is not required.

GEMSTONE OF THE BROTHER'S BOND

(EARTH ••)

Trigger: Constant

These marbled pebbles bear intermixed striations of the five colors of jade and always grow in sets of two to five from the same Manse. Multiple individuals attuned to the Manse who carry these stones feel a powerful psychic link binding them together. This link duplicates the effects of the spell Sworn Brothers' Oath (see **Exalted: The Dragon-Blooded**, p. 161), save that the bond has a fixed rating of 5.

KATA-SCULPTING GEM

(EARTH ••)

Trigger: Activating Form

This pearly disk emits a faint white light that brightens and dims in the regular intervals of a heartbeat. Dragon-Blooded martial artists can use the focusing rhythms of this Hearthstone to activate any known Celestial-level Form-type Charms without their players needing to make the usual reflexive Dexterity + Martial Arts roll. Only Terrestrial Exalted with a Martial Arts rating of 3+ possess the precision necessary to execute the expanded katas permitted by this Hearthstone. In addition, all bearers of this stone reduce the Essence cost to activate Form-type Charms by 2 motes.

CRYSTAL VENOM JEWEL

(EARTH ●●●)

Trigger: Spending Essence

This smoothly oval-shaped stone pulses with a bilious acid-green glow. Its bearer can spend 1 mote as a simple action to purge a single non-magical poison or intoxicant from his body. Over the turn that the character spends Essence, the toxin condenses and crystallizes within his stomach as a dull and lightless copy of the Hearthstone. At the end of the turn, the character coughs out this noxious jewel. Crystals of concentrated poison dissolve if swallowed or submerged in any liquid, but otherwise, they exist indefinitely. Anyone consuming a poison gem directly or in a beverage must contend with the normal effects of exposure to the toxin. While Exalted assassins originally developed crystal venom jewels to distill deadly new poisons in their own blood, the Hearthstones see more use in the Realm by House Cynis as a means of creating exotic drugs for their jaded palettes.

PRECISION OF FORM GEMSTONE

(EARTH ●●●)

Trigger: Activating Form

This Hearthstone bears the rainbow iridescence of an opal glittering inside a translucent white sphere. Whenever the character activates the Form-type Charm of a martial-arts style, the Essence cost to use all Charms in that style decreases by 2 motes. This effect cannot reduce the Essence cost of a Charm below half its original value, rounded up. Characters using a Form-type Charm cannot activate any Martial Arts Charms of another style while bearing a Precision of Form Gemstone.

GEM OF INNER PURITY

(EARTH ●●●●)

Trigger: Constant

This clear pentagonal stone smolders with a perpetual inner fire the color of its bearer's anima. A Dragon-Blood attuned to this gem gains the benefits of the Breeding Background (see **Exalted: The Dragon-Blooded**, pp. 158-159) at a rating equal to his Essence. This Hearthstone does not increase the likelihood that a bearer's child will Exalt, nor can the jewel raise temporary Breeding above 5. Other types of Exalted and Dragon-Blooded with a higher innate Breeding rating than their Essence do not gain access to this power, but may carry this Hearthstone to recover Essence.

IRON SOUL STONE

(EARTH ●●●●●)

Trigger: Constant

This unassuming gray stone does not glow or bear intricate facets. Apart from its surprising weight and perpetually cool surface, the Hearthstone does not give the slightest impression of magic and looks no different than any other rounded pebble taken from a riverbank. Those who bear an iron soul stone receive the stabilizing protection of the Earth, shielding them and their gear from all effects of the Wyld. If one of the Fair Folk or any other Wyld denizen susceptible to cold iron approaches within five yards of a character bearing an iron soul stone, the creature suffers one level of unsoakable aggravated damage each turn. Creatures of the Wyld killed by this baleful radiance disintegrate into utter annihilation. All creatures of the Wyld can sense the deadly chill of an iron soul stone from 15 yards away.

Bringing an iron soul stone any deeper into the Wyld than the Bordermarches creates a violent disruption of Essence that all Fair Folk within a league can sense. Needless to say, the hordes of the unformed fae do not look kindly on those who bring such a bane into their realms.

ARTIFACTS

HEARTHSTONE COMPASS

(ARTIFACT ●)

This three-inch-diameter sphere of jade and adamant has concentric rings that spin and move in three dimensions as if of their own volition. Attuning to this device requires the commitment of 2 motes of Essence. Hearthstone Compasses serve two functions, depending on how they are used. In their default state, they allow any attuned user with Essence sight (such as through the Charm All-Encompassing Sorcerer's Sight or similar magic) to perceive a thread of light leading toward the central chamber of the nearest Manse. The thread ends at the exact spot where the Manse's Hearthstone forms. Alternately, an attuned user can press the correct series of pressure plates on the compass, causing it to unfold and open. This requires an Intelligence + Lore roll at standard difficulty. Once opened, a Hearthstone may be placed inside and the device closed. The attuned user can now perceive the thread of Essence leading back to the Hearthstone's own Manse — regardless of the distance separating the gem from its source. This function allows treasure hunters to locate abandoned and ownerless Manses if they find the "useless" Hearthstone set in the socket of an artifact.

CACHE EGG

(ARTIFACT ● TO ●●●)

These simple vessels of jade have the texture and shape of large eggs. The size of the egg determines the artifact's rating: ● up to six inches, ●● up to two feet, ●●● up to four feet. Larger models probably existed, but





they were never popular or widely manufactured. Attuning to a cache egg requires a number of motes equal to its Artifact rating. These devices are specifically designed to be compatible with all Exalted and do not impose the usual double mote commitment for non-Terrestrials. An attuned owner can open or close a cache egg with a touch, opening as much as half the “shell” from any desired point. The eggs are hollow, allowing storage capacity appropriate to their size. Once sealed shut, a cache egg may be banished or summoned as an automatic dice action for a cost of 1 mote. Banished eggs remain attuned to their owners indefinitely as they fade into the Essence of the world. They become unreachable by anyone save their owners, as they simultaneously exist everywhere, nowhere and Elsewhere. Celestial Exalted can sometimes recall an egg banished and lost by their previous incarnations, but this requires substantial effort, a mote of Essence and an Intelligence + Occult roll (difficulty 6). Characters may not voluntarily withdraw Essence committed to a banished cache egg.

SKIN-MOUNT AMULET

(ARTIFACT ••)

This artifact of Mountain Folk design often takes the form of a delicate ring of jade surgically implanted in the wearer’s flesh, although other Magical Materials can be used. The amulet serves as an enhanced form of Hearthstone socket, allowing the wearer to use such gems more efficiently than external artifacts allow. In addition to receiving the mystical benefit and increased Essence recovery for the Hearthstone, the wearer also adds a number of additional motes of capacity to his Peripheral Essence pool equal to the (rating of the Hearthstone x 2). Besides Exalted, only God-Blooded characters capable of channeling Essence and attuning to Manses may use skin-mount amulets. Neither type of character needs to pay any motes to commit to the device, as the surgical implantation bypasses conventional attunement.

Rarer forms of skin-mount amulets (also Artifact ••) permit a mortal to attune to a Manse and to receive the benefits of a Hearthstone set in the socket. Such characters even gain a tiny Personal Essence pool equal to twice the stone’s rating that they can use to attune to other artifacts (but not for any other purpose). An apocryphal legend in Lookshy speaks of a legendary Gunzoshu warrior named Kan-Hai who was allowed to live a full lifespan through the use of a powerful skin-mount amulet, though it seems unlikely that the Seventh Legion would waste geomantic resources on any mortal, however heroic. Non-invasive Hearthstone amulets capable of being worn by mortals without attunement are extremely rare and almost unheard of in the Second Age (Artifact •••), as the knowledge of how to build these

extraordinary devices was regrettably lost in the Great Contagion. The Dragon Fakharu owns at least one copy of such a wonder for his mortal lover’s use.

Implanting a skin-mount amulet requires complex surgery lasting at least an hour. Roll the surgeon’s Dexterity + Medicine (difficulty 7 - the patient’s permanent Essence). A botch kills a mortal patient or inflicts the effects of a normal failure to Exalted or God-Blooded. Failure inflicts one level of unsoakable lethal damage for every success by which the roll fell short of the difficulty. Removing the artifact requires the same procedure and imposes the same dire consequences for failure. A character can remove and exchange Hearthstones from an implanted amulet as easily as with any other setting.

PERFECTED KATA BRACERS

(ARTIFACT •••• FOR A PAIR)

These matched bracers have the appearance of prayer strips coiled around the wearer’s wrist and forearms. Fine calligraphy etched in Old Realm along the metal or stone of the bracers reveal sutras of martial wisdom, and each of these artful coils has a setting for a single Hearthstone on the back of the wearer’s wrist. When attuned for a cost of 8 motes, the paired bracers augment any Form-type Charms the wearer activates. Using such a Charm causes a dramatic display as ribbons of light uncoil from the bracers and swirl around the martial artist. These ribbons vanish within seconds, but their power remains for as long as character continues to use the augmented Form.

The Form augmentation granted by perfected kata bracers adds the character’s permanent Essence to the accuracy, damage and defense of all her unarmed Martial Arts attacks. Attacks made with weapons permitted by the style of the augmented Form are also considered unarmed. The character may also choose whether to inflict bashing or lethal damage with any of these strikes. Finally, the augmentation adds additional benefits depending on the type of Magical Material used to construct the bracers:

Jade: The character gains added resilience and speed, adding her Essence rating to her natural bashing and lethal soak, as well as to the speed modifier of all her unarmed Martial Arts attacks.

Moonsilver: The Lunar gains preternatural flexibility, striking from unexpected angles to slide around defenses. In addition to opening up new possibilities for stunts, this effect reduces the penalty for unarmed Martial Arts attacks against opponents protected by shields or cover by the attacker’s Essence rating.

Orichalcum: Burning light flashes wherever the Solar strikes. All unarmed Martial Arts attacks against demons, ghosts and the walking dead inflict additional dice of aggravated damage equal to the Exalt’s perma-

ment Essence. These damage dice are applied separately after resolving the normal damage for the attack.

Soulsteel: A withering chill spreads wherever the Abyssal strikes. If the deathknight's unarmed Martial Arts attacks cumulatively inflict more levels of damage to a mortal victim in a single turn than her Stamina rating, the victim dies at the end of the turn. Exalted and other magical being are immune to this effect.

Starmetal: The Sidereal finds her techniques augmented by auspicious harmony, reducing the Essence cost to use Martial Arts Charms of the same style as the augmented Form by 3 motes. This reduction cannot reduce the Essence cost of a Charm below 1 mote, nor is the effect cumulative with the effects of a student's sutra or elder sutra for a secret style.

DUELING TORCS

(ARTIFACT ●●● FOR A PAIR)

Somewhat common during the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate, these paired collars of white jade enforced duels in which Charms were banned in favor of pure physical prowess and skill. To use these devices, both opponents must place the collars on their necks and close the iron clasp at their throats. The clasp will not lock in place until the wearer willingly commits a mote of Essence. As soon as both clasps have locked, the dueling torcs simultaneously activate. All ongoing Charms that are not permanent enhancements to the wearers abruptly end, while the wearers become incapable of using Charms, casting sorcery, using anima powers or employing any other effect that involves or requires Essence. This dampening effect only lasts as long as both of the dueling torcs in the pair remain within 100 yards of one another. Journeying beyond this range will cause both collars to automatically unlock and fall off. The death of either wearer will have the same effect. A third party with a higher permanent Essence than both wearers can also touch either collar and spend a mote to unlock both, although this is a safety precaution for emergencies and not a common-use function. Dueling torcs cannot suppress the powers of beings with a permanent Essence of 6+; the clasps simply refuse to lock shut on such mighty beings. If any artifacts exist to

restrain the Essence of elder Exalted and gods willing to permit voluntary suppression of their power, these devices would be Artifact ●●●● at minimum.

EMERALD THURIBLE

(ARTIFACT ●●●●●)

This horrific relic takes the form of an incense burner sculpted from mottled green crystal. Any educated demonologist can recognize the shade of green as the very color of the mad green sun shining upon the Demon City of Malfeas. Exalted or God-Blooded with access to Essence must commit 8 motes to attune the Emerald Thurible, while mortal users can instead commit two points of temporary Willpower and a lethal health level that does not heal for the duration of the commitment. Once attuned, the artifact allows any Celestial Exalt to cast Demon of the First Circle, Demon of the Second Circle and Demon of the Third Circle as if the character was a sorcerer who knew these spells. Terrestrial Exalted and Dragon Kings are limited to the first two Circles of demon summoning, while God-Blooded and mortals can only cast Demon of the First Circle. The bearer does not have to learn these spells or the sorcery Charms enabling their use, nor must she meet the Trait prerequisites normally associated with the appropriate level of sorcery.

As an additional benefit, the Emerald Thurible allows users to convert blood sacrifices into motes for the purposes of powering demon summoning spells and weakening summoned demons during the act of binding. Each lethal health level of human blood spilled by the Thurible's bearer as a dedicated sacrifice counts as 1 mote, so butchered extras only offer 3 motes. Sacrifices may be performed and "banked" to provide a phantom Essence pool on which to draw, but this pool depletes each day at sunrise. Mortals without Essence pools can *only* summon and bind demons with the Emerald Thurible using sacrifices.

If other copies of this dread artifact exist besides the one hanging from Mnemon's belt, they remain well hidden in the tombs and towers of First Age sorcerers or the vaults of the Deathlords.





APPENDIX I

SIGNATURE CHARACTERS

Aspects of Earth are the builders, the pillars, the accountants and the officiants of Dragon-Blooded society. Their urge to raise up structures, clean and strong, to make things which will outlive them and to understand the world are critical to the Dragon-Blooded Host.

What follow are the game statistics for the book's five central narrators. Only one of the characters presented here, Sesus Takgana, is near the starting character level. The others are all experienced Dragon-Blooded, presented as examples to Storytellers and players to illustrate how such experienced characters might look, as possible characters for a game featuring experienced Terrestrial characters and for use directly as Storyteller characters. In the latter case, they need not be used in a Dragon-Blooded game. Mnemon is, of course, a pivotal figure in the Dynasty, and both Moias and Crow could easily be mid-level opposition for Solar characters, while Cynis Takgana is an idealistic youth who could easily be swayed to support or oppose a strongly stated cause. Ragara Jasir is an influence-peddler a rung below Sesus Nagezzer in the Dynastic pecking order, with shipping interests and a willingness to consort with individuals from the Threshold. While he is not a natural warrior, he could certainly play a large role in games on and off the Blessed Isle.

In terms of power level, Sesus Takgana is very young, while Crow and Ragara Jasir represent the young middle age of the Dynasty — they are effective, but not yet without weakness. Moias is somewhat older and more powerful. None, however, are overwhelmingly mighty. Mnemon is, of course, one of the greatest of her kind, although most of her experience has been funneled into increasing her Essence and her Attributes, and she is not especially deadly in battle. Her spell selection is somewhat minimal, so Storytellers should bulk up her grimoire to meet their needs. The listed spells should be considered her personal preferences.

CYNIS TAKGANA

Quote: *I know why I am here and what I am meant to do. I doubt you share that conviction.*

Prelude: The son of a wine maker, your childhood was full of promise. All you had to do to inherit your mother's famous winery was to have a large family. When you met your betrothed, Peleps Dekna, you fell in love and knew that your mother's requirements would be no problem.

All your dreams crumbled, however, when you were abducted and mutilated, which triggered your Exaltation. Castrated and disgraced, you were shipped to the Cloister of Wisdom months early. That summer, you toiled at the Palace Sublime with the postulants, grasping the teachings of the Order as a blind man for his cane. Before you entered the Cloister, you already belonged to the Order.

You excelled in secondary school, entering the secret society of the Iron Horses in your final year. You faced your fears and found solidarity with your fellows. Once you entered the Order, you were the prime example of what it is to be Immaculate. The Mouth of Peace chose you to become an itinerant and to search for heresies and betrayal.

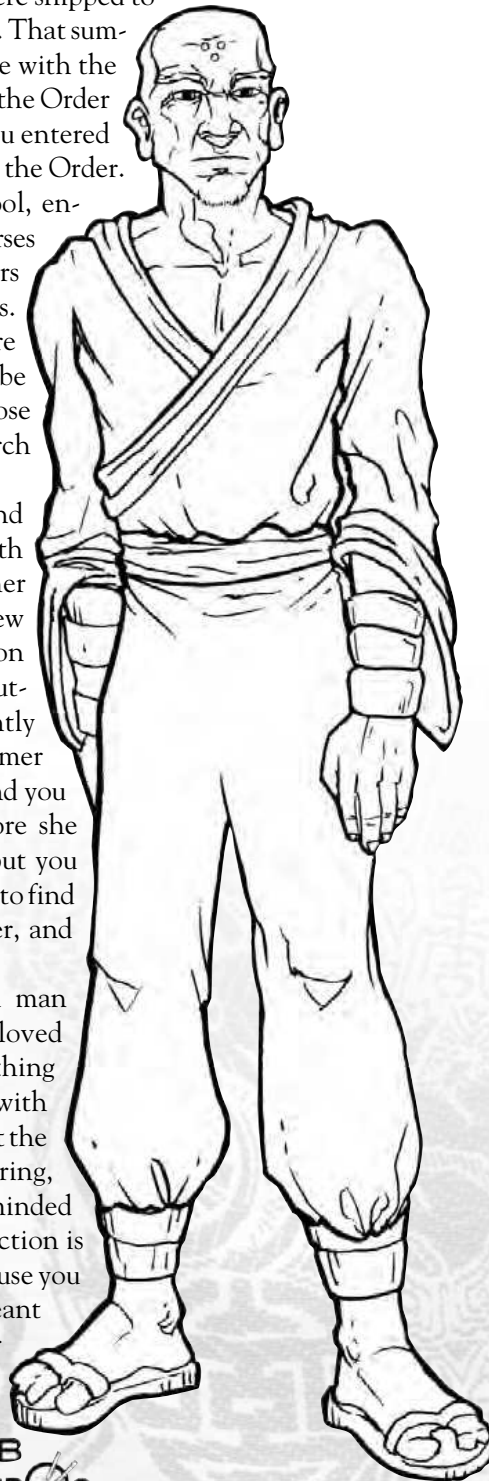
Your past is not completely behind you, however. You are not pleased with your mother. You recently visited her estate, destroying a wall in her new winery, and now seek a confrontation with her over your abandonment. Outside of your family issues, you recently had a surprise encounter with your former betrothed. She is now Anathema, and you survived a brief fight with her before she fled. A Wyld Hunt will be called, but you know it will be easier than they think to find her: You have her orichalcum dagger, and she'll want it back.

Roleplaying Hints: You are a man who has had everything he ever loved taken from him. You've found something new to love now, and you serve it with blind devotion. No one speaks against the Immaculate Order within your hearing, and you take joy in your work. If reminded of your physical disabilities, your reaction is commonly violent anger — just because you have found a new love doesn't mean your old loves are buried. Among other monks, you are easygoing and pleasant, as you prefer the company

of those who share your passions — plus, you have never been betrayed by the Order or those within. You treat those outside the Order with polite distance, and your guard is always up.

Image: Takgana is short and thin. His hands have remarkably long fingers. His head is bald as befits a monk, and he prefers the traditional robes over dress robes or even the clothing he wore as a student.

Equipment: Crane of the Earth (jade tetsubo), Immaculate robes, orichalcum knife, backpack with traveling supplies and blanket



ZUB
UDON



NAME: Cynis Takgana CONCEPT: Young Monk
 PLAYER: _____ NATURE: Survivor
 ASPECT: Earth HOUSE: Cynis

ATTRIBUTES

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

ABILITIES

AIR		EARTH		FIRE	
<input type="checkbox"/> LINGUISTICS _____	○○○○○	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AWARENESS _____	●○○○○	<input type="checkbox"/> ATHLETICS _____	○○○○○
<input type="checkbox"/> LORE _____	●●○○○	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CRAFT _____	●●○○○	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DODGE _____	●●●●●
<input type="checkbox"/> OCCULT _____	○○○○○	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ENDURANCE _____	●●●○○	<input type="checkbox"/> MELEE _____	●●●○○
<input type="checkbox"/> STEALTH _____	●●○○○	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MARTIAL ARTS _____	●●●●●	<input type="checkbox"/> PRESENCE _____	●●○○○
<input type="checkbox"/> THROWN _____	○○○○○	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RESISTANCE _____	●●●○○	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIALIZE _____	●●○○○
WATER		WOOD		SPECIALTIES	
<input type="checkbox"/> BRAWL _____	●○○○○	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHERY _____	●○○○○	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	○○○○○
<input type="checkbox"/> BUREAUCRACY _____	●○○○○	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MEDICINE _____	●●●○○	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	○○○○○
<input type="checkbox"/> INVESTIGATION _____	●●●●○	<input type="checkbox"/> PERFORMANCE _____	●○○○○	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	○○○○○
<input type="checkbox"/> LARCENY _____	○○○○○	<input type="checkbox"/> RIDE _____	●○○○○	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	○○○○○
<input type="checkbox"/> SAIL _____	○○○○○	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SURVIVAL _____	●●●○○	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	○○○○○

ADVANTAGES

BACKGROUNDS		CHARMS	
Artifact _____	●●○○○	Name	Cost
Backing _____	●●●○○	Force of the Mountain	2
Breeding _____	●●○○○	Unmoving Mtn. Stance	3
Connections _____	●○○○○	Stone Dragon's Skin	2
Henchmen _____	●○○○○	Earth Dragon Form	4
Mentor _____	●●●○○	Shattering Fist Strike	3
_____	○○○○○	Weapon-Breaking	_____
_____	○○○○○	Defense _____	Spec+1wp
_____	○○○○○	Stillness of Stone	3
_____	○○○○○	Earthshaker Attack	5
		Name	Cost
		Hungry Earth Strike	5+1wp

WEAPONS

Jade and Oak Crosier
 SPD 11 ACC 11 DMG 18L DEF 10
 Jade and Oak Crosier (EPC)
 SPD 21 ACC 10 DMG 13Lp DEF 10

WILLPOWER

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ○

VIRTUES

COMPASSION	TEMPERANCE
●●●●○	●●○○○
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
CONVICTION	VALOR
●●●○○	●●●○○
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

ANIMA

Yellow Sandstorm

HEALTH

SOAK
 B 8 L 5 A 3
 Buff Jacket (-1 mobility penalty)

ESSENCE

● ● ● ● ○ ○
 PERSONAL 15 | _____
 PERIPHERAL 35 | _____
 COMMITTED 8

VIRTUE FLAW

Focused Rage

-0	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
-1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
-2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
-4					<input type="checkbox"/>
INCAPACITATED					<input type="checkbox"/>

EXPERIENCE

CROW

Quote: *I do not need my eyes to see the opening in your defenses. But take heart, I will sing at your funeral.*

Prelude: The daughter of apple farmers, you began life as a young peasant girl with an overwhelming fear of high places. You always played at being a great Dragon-Blooded warrior and prayed you would be worthy enough in this life to be granted reincarnation in a Dynast in the next. Pasiap had different plans for you, though. As you preferred to be as close to the ground as possible, he saw fit to grant you the powers of the Earth.

Upon Exaltation, you were whisked away to the Obsidian Mirror with the other outcastes. You made two close friends there, one of whom accompanied you in the choice of the coin and a position in the Empress' legions. Although the cliffs of Pasiap's Stair terrified you, the school taught you battle skills, but more importantly, it taught you about injustice and revenge. You waited years until you were strong enough to face your bullies, and this dedication to a single cause would carry you through your career.

You spent the next 60 years going from battle to battle, where preferred the more cerebral aspects of warfare rather than the actual bloodshed. You lost a battle when you were ill-equipped to deal with an army of Fair Folk, but you were hailed as a hero after the Empress eliminated the army with the powers of the Imperial Manse. You paid for the victory with the loss of both eyes to the fickle faerie. You received a commendation and a gem-encrusted breastplate from the Empress for saving the city and left the legions to live near Pasiap's Stair in Juche.

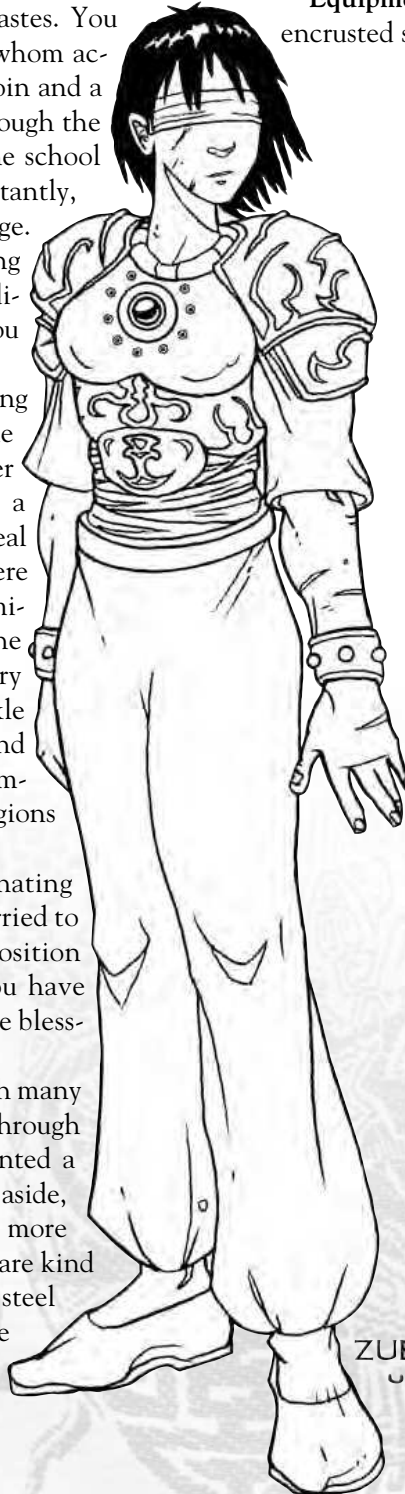
Currently, life has taken a fascinating turn for the better. You are finally married to your childhood love, and you have a position in Pasiap's Stair as an instructor. You have your own home, your own farm and the blessings of Pasiap.

Roleplaying Hints: A warrior with many years ahead of her, you are midway through your life but have suddenly been granted a new career. Your brilliance in battle aside, you know that this job will fulfill you more than anything else has. Although you are kind with a beautiful singing voice, a vein of steel runs through your spine, giving you the drive to accomplish your goals, whether

they are to win a battle or to rid yourself of bullies. The somewhat-recent loss of your eyes was tragic, but your mastery of several of Pasiap's Awareness Charms makes the loss not as horrific as it could have been. You are completely devoted to your husband, Silent Betrayer, despite the difficulties in communication.

Image: Crow is battle-worn and scarred. She uses the horrors of her missing eyes to make an impression on her students, but at all other times, she wears a blindfold. She is short with close-cropped black hair and a strong medium build. She is most comfortable in armor, but wears a soft linen shift when she is in her home.

Equipment: Iron warknife, jade daiklave, gem-encrusted steel breastplate





CROW

Element: Earth

Concept: Outcaste Soldier

Nature: Architect

ATTRIBUTES

Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 5, Charisma 4, Manipulation 4, Appearance 1, Perception 3, Intelligence 1, Wits 3

ABILITIES

Archery 2, *Athletics 3, *Awareness 3, *Craft (Blacksmith) 1, Dodge 2, *Endurance 5, *Lore 3, Larceny 4, Linguistics 1 (Native: Low Realm; High Realm), Craft 1, *Martial Arts 5, Medicine 1, Melee 3, *Resistance 4, Ride 1, Stealth 1, *Survival 3

* Aspect or Favored Ability

VIRTUES

Compassion 1, Conviction 4, Temperance 2, Valor 3

BACKGROUNDS

Backing (Fellow Outcastes) 4, Command (Outcaste Cadets) 3, Mentor (Silver Elm) 3, Reputation (Hardcore) 2, Resources 3, Retainers 1

CHARMS

Awareness: Precision Observation Method, Sight-Riding Technique

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique, Unbreathing Earth Meditation, Uneating Earth Meditation, Unfeeling Earth Meditation, Unsleeping Earth Meditation, Untiring Earth Meditation

Martial Arts: Five-Dragon Blocking Technique, Five-Dragon Claw, Five-Dragon-Force Blow, Five-Dragon Fortitude, Force of the Mountain

Melee: Dragon-Graced Weapon, Stoking Bonfire Style

Resistance: Impervious Skin of Stone Meditation, Strength of Stone Technique

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 6

Attack:

Punch: Speed 6 Accuracy 8 Damage 3B Defense 8

Kick: Speed 3 Accuracy 7 Damage 5B Defense 7

Jade Daiklave (Watchman Number Three): Speed 12 Accuracy 8 Damage 8L Defense 8

Iron Knife: Speed 9 Accuracy 6 Damage 4L Defense 4

Dodge Pool: 5 **Soak:** 12L/14B (Jade reinforced breastplate, 10L/9B, -1 mobility penalty)

Willpower: 8 **Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Essence: 3

Personal Essence: 11 **Peripheral Essence:** 18 (27)

Committed Essence: 9

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

ATTACK:

Punch: Speed 6 Accuracy 9 Damage 3B Defense 10 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 3 Accuracy 9 Damage 6B Defense 5 Rate 3

Jade Daiklave (Watchman Number Three): Speed 16 Accuracy 9 Damage 9L Defense 8 Rate 5

Iron Knife: Speed 6 Accuracy 7 Damage 5L Defense 4 Rate 4

Dodge Pool: 8

RAGARA JASIR

Quote: *Your friendship has always meant much to me.*

Prelude: Your life would have taken a completely different turn had your brother not tried to murder you — since that moment, you’ve been torn between the desire to gain love and friendship from others and your fear of them, thus leading you to desire to have power over those around you.

After your Exaltation, you realized that, thanks to the Ragara family’s wealth, you could bring people into your circle of friends by helping them with debts and loaning them money. From there, you realized how easy it was to take the people who were in your debt and get them to perform small tasks. In the Spiral Academy, you started the first of your enterprises, using the information provided to the Academy to give your family an edge in business and politics.

After the Spiral Academy, you attempted to climb

the Imperial Mountain, which was a life-changing experience for you. You truly wish to leave something substantial behind you, and in your quest to do so, you look past even loose, conventional Dynastic morality. There is no question to you that the ends justify the means.

You have since spent your life looking for angles to play in order to place people in your debt in some way or another, climaxing in the way you subtly used your influence to arrange for your brother’s death. Since then, you have dabbled in political influence peddling and the odd criminal enterprise, and with each year that passes, you slip deeper into the role of a “slightly criminal” powerbroker. With the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress and the resulting chaos, you have embraced that role, performing various services for your Great House while attempting to amass more power for yourself.

Roleplaying Hints: You are a strong believer in making sure that every short-term action you take is a step toward completing larger goals. You are driven to create a lasting family dynasty and will lie, cheat, steal and murder to do so. At some point, you really believed that you were performing the occasional criminal act only to help out people you desired to be your friends, but now, whether you admit it or not, everyone is a pawn to you, even your own family.

Image: Jasir is a solidly built man whose body is only now beginning to soften in middle age. He has black hair and soft blue eyes that seem to be either laughing or sizing someone up for a coffin, depending on his mood, and he is always ready with a gentle smile. He favors conservative black clothing, and when necessary, he wears his jade daiklave, Glorious Shadow of the Mountain.

Equipment: Glorious Shadow of the Mountain (jade daiklave), jade breastplate, collar of the Dragons’ cleansing might, expensive yet conservative clothing, mon with the Imperial Mountain upon it, numerous coins of every denomination



RAGARA JASIR

Element: Earth

Concept: Dynastic Fixer

Nature: Architect

ATTRIBUTES

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

ABILITIES

Archery 1, Athletics 1, *Awareness 3, *Bureaucracy 4, *Craft (Calligraphy) 1, Dodge 2, *Endurance 2 (Climbing +1), Larceny 4, Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Low Realm, Riverspeak) 2, Lore 2, *Martial Arts 5 (Against Dynastic Opponents +2), Melee 2 (With Glorious Shadow of the Mountain +2), Performance 1, *Presence 3, *Resistance 2, Ride 1, *Socialize 4 (In Polite Society +3), Survival 2

* Aspect or Favored Ability

VIRTUES

Compassion 1, Conviction 3, Temperance 3, Valor 2

BACKGROUNDS

Allies (Tsaine the Outcaste) 1, Artifact 2, Backing (House Ragara) 3, Connections (Guild) 2, (Ragara) 3, (Thousand Scales) 3, Reputation 2, Resources 4

CHARMS

Awareness: All-Encompassing Earth Sense, Feeling the Dragon's Bones, Hearing & Touch Riding Technique, Precision Observation Method, Sight-Riding Technique,

Bureaucracy: Benevolent Master's Blessing, Bestow the Saffron Mantle, Confluence of Savant Thought, Geese-Flying-South Administration, Thoughtful Gift Technique, Thrashing Carp Serenade

Dodge: Threshold Warding Stance

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique (x2), Unsleeping Earth Meditation

Martial Arts: Five-Dragon Blocking Technique, Five-Dragon Claw, Five-Dragon-Force Blow, Five-Dragon Form, Five-Dragon Fortitude

Melee: Dragon-Graced Weapon

Resistance: Strength of Stone Technique

Socialize: Brother-Against-Brother Insinuation, Loquacious Courtier Technique, Seizing-the-Tongue Method,

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 7

Attack:

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 8 Damage 3B Defense 8

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 7 Damage 5B Defense 7

Daiklave (Glorious Shadow of the Mountain): Speed 20* Accuracy 9 Damage 8L Defense 9

* The daiklave's high speed bonus comes from its unique alloy of jade and metals mined from the heart of the Imperial Mountain.

Dodge Pool: 5 **Soak:** 9L/10B (Collar of the Dragons' cleansing light, 1L/2B, jade breastplate, 6L/4B)

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

Essence: 4

Personal Essence: 10 **Peripheral Essence:** 18 (28)

Committed Essence: 10

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 9 Damage 3B Defense 10 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 9 Damage 6B Defense 5 Rate 3

Daiklave (Glorious Shadow of the Mountain): Speed 23* Accuracy 10 Damage 9L Defense 9 Rate 5

* The daiklave's high speed bonus comes from its unique alloy of jade and metals mined from the heart of the Imperial Mountain.

Dodge Pool: 9

MOIAS

Quote: *Your politics are suspect. Please relinquish the prisoner to me until I may investigate further.*

Prelude: Little more than fond memories to you now, your youth was a time when things were simpler. Fight your mother, ignore your father, and learn from your tutor how to do well enough to get the things you want. And you succeeded admirably — a strong base of friends surrounded you for most of your young life, and you had such resolve that Pasiap deemed you worthy of his blessing. But after your return to the Realm ended in disaster and the loss of your sworn brotherhood, you sacrificed your life to the Empress in order to root out the corruption of the Realm, to strengthen the order upon which it rests and to slowly achieve revenge for the wrongs done to you and your friends.

Your old house lies at the heart of your complaints. Its callous judgment that you — and more importantly, your friends — were worth little enough compared to its political designs has planted an anger deep within you that has never ceased. Still, you maintain even and fair policies, as that is the only way to ensure that your actions strengthen the Scarlet Empire rather than weaken it.

Roleplaying Hints: You are fair and strict in business as well as in your social life. Usually distant and somewhat cool, you will warm up when with friends. The problem is you spend very little time with any of your very few friends, and you haven't become close to anyone new in several decades. But if someone manages to find a crack in your hard shell, you will prove a dedicated companion.

What you refuse to accept about yourself is that you have a bias against the Ragara that subtly affects your magistrate's duties. You rationalize the harsh stance you take with them with your belief that they actually are worse than the other Great Houses and use your own experiences as a youth, strongly tinted, to prove this point.

Image: Moias is of middling height and stocky, her strength and endurance obvious in her form. She keeps her hair no-nonsense short but for a small tail she keeps tied in the back — partly to remind her of older times when her hair was longer and partly because she always has. Early after being called to the Magistracy, she commissioned the tailoring of a particularly hardy suit of clothes that managed to just meet the minimum decorum necessary to appear in court. She cares enough about propriety, however, to acquire something more fitting a Prince of the Earth once she arrives in town, if there's time.

Equipment: Kellan's Reach (dire lance), jade-reinforced breastplate, badge of office, stone of memory capture (see *The Book of Three Circles*, p. 118)





RAGARA MOIAS

Element: Earth
Concept: Jaded Magistrate
Nature: Critic

ATTRIBUTES

Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4, Charisma 4, Manipulation 1, Appearance 2, Perception 4, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 3, Temperance 4, Valor 2

ABILITIES

Archery 1, Athletics 2, *Awareness 5, *Bureaucracy 4, *Craft (Arms) 2, Dodge 2, *Endurance 4, *Investigation 3, Larceny 4, Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Forest-Tongue, Riverspeak, Low Realm) 3, Lore 2, *Martial Arts 5, Medicine 1, *Melee 5, Occult 3, Performance 1, Presence 2 (Magisterial Air +2), *Resistance 4, Ride 1, Socialize 2, Survival 1
 * Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 3, Connections (Magistrates) 4, (Thousand Scales) 3, Manse 5, Retainers (Archons) 5

CHARMS

Awareness: All-Encompassing Earth Sense, Feeling the Dragon's Bones, Precision Observation Method, Unfailing Dragon Glance

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique, Unsleeping Earth Meditation

Investigation: Indisputable Physical Analysis Technique, Scent-of-Crime Method

Larceny: Ears of the Snowy Owl, Observer Awareness Method

Martial Arts: Five-Dragon Blocking Technique, Five-Dragon Fortitude, Pillar of Marble Stance

Melee: Dragon-Graced Weapon, Stoking Bonfire Style

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

Resistance: Impervious Skin of Stone Meditation, Mountain Toppling Method, Strength of Stone Technique

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 6

Attack:

Punch: Speed 6 Accuracy 8 Damage 4B Defense 8

Kick: Speed 3 Accuracy 7 Damage 6B Defense 7

Dire Lance (Kellan's Reach, as spear): Speed 15 Accuracy 10 Damage 9L Defense 8

Dodge Pool: 5 **Soak:** 12L/13B (Jade reinforced breastplate, 10L/9B, -1 mobility penalty)

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

Essence: 4

Personal Essence: 10 **Peripheral Essence:** 18 (28)

Committed Essence: 10

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

ATTACK:

Punch: Speed 6 Accuracy 9 Damage 4B Defense 10 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 3 Accuracy 9 Damage 7B Defense 5 Rate 3

Dire Lance (Kellan's Reach): Speed 21 Accuracy 10 Damage 13L Defense 11 Rate 3

Dodge Pool: 9

MNEMON

Quote: *I saw it all: the hatred that fueled your action, the carefully laid plan, your pitiful attempt to stop me. It will never happen because I will always see you coming. Never forget that.*

Prelude: One of the few founders of a Great House still living, you are still a political and magical powerhouse at age 399. Born into a well-established Realm and a family already accustomed to political maneuverings and backstabbing, you were daunted by your powerful siblings and mother. You admired the monks of the Immaculate Order and thought they followed the most pure path in life.

Upon Exaltation, you discovered that your family feared you. Your brother Ragara saw you as a threat, and you foiled the first of many assassination attempts just days after achieving Exaltation. This fear they had emboldened you, and you realized your power could match — or even surpass — those of your family. At that moment, you entered the struggle to be the Empress' heir.

You were shipped off to a school for sorcery on the Isle of Voices run by a group of sorcerers. During your stay, the school was obliterated and everyone but you died. You were interrogated heavily by Sidereals, but the Empress was satisfied with your answers.

You spent the bulk of your life competing with other houses and nurturing your own — in your own way. You have taken many lovers but no husbands, preferring not to share your power. The next Empress does not desire an Emperor. Your children and grandchildren are the most driven in the Realm, your mostly loyal tools. They enter the Immaculate Order at your command and inform you of many things. You focus your plans on the destruction of the other Great Houses to clear the way for your assumption of the Scarlet Throne, but you know that it is a delicate operation.

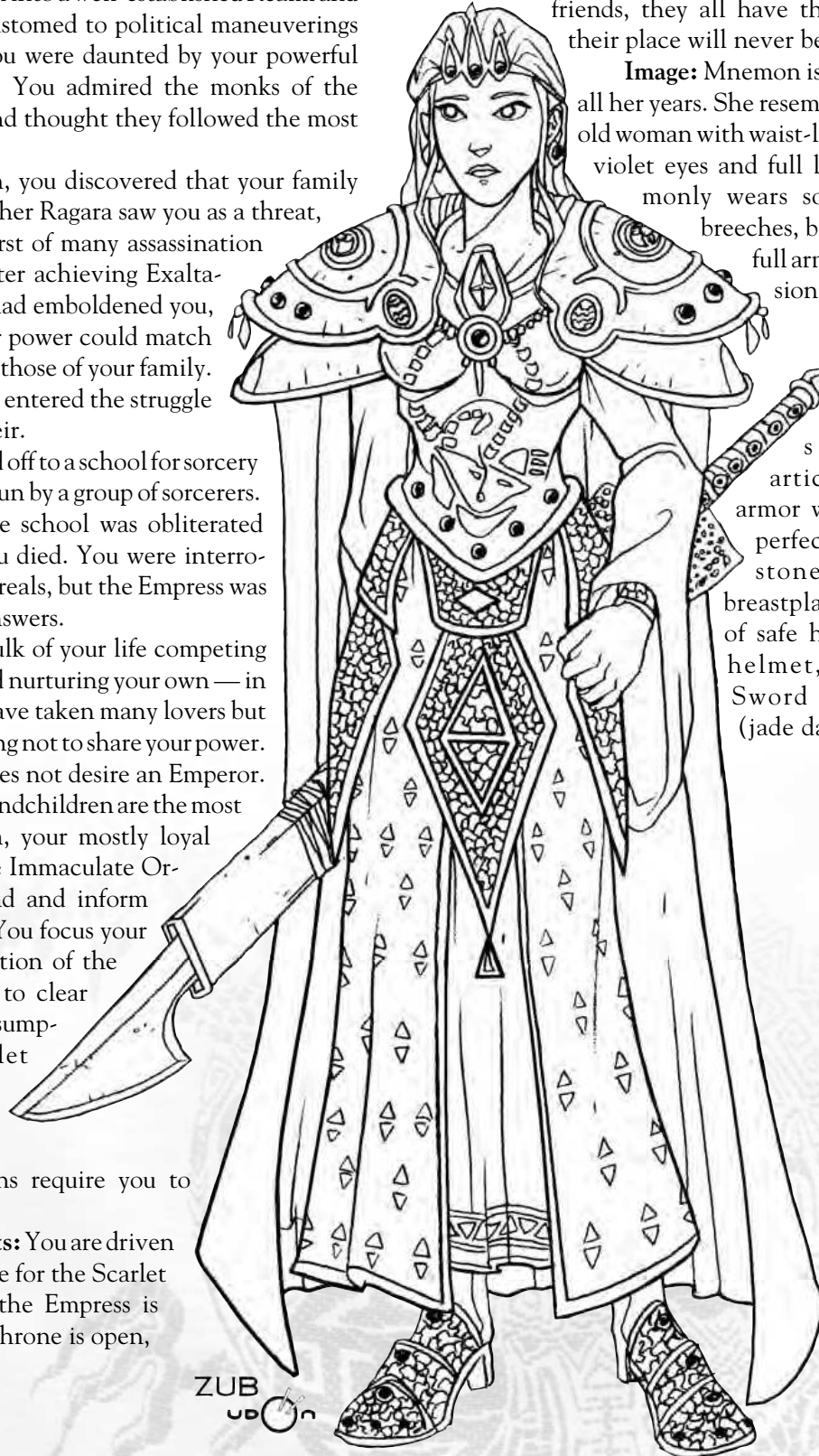
Your future plans require you to tread carefully.

Roleplaying hints: You are driven by one thing — desire for the Scarlet Throne. You know the Empress is gone, you know the throne is open,

and you are working to put all the pieces in place before you take the place you see as yours. Nothing — not compassion, not assassination attempts, not concern for others — will stand between you and the throne. You trust no one. You view anyone who attempts to get close to you as trying to sponge off your power. Just as your mother doesn't trust you for trying to set yourself as her heir, you do not trust your family. Children, lovers, friends, they all have their place, but their place will never be by your side.

Image: Mnemon is still young for all her years. She resembles a 30-year-old woman with waist-length red hair, violet eyes and full lips. She commonly wears soft tunic and breeches, but will dress in full armor if the occasion calls for it.

Equipment: Emerald Thurible, jade-and-steel articulated plate armor with a gem of perfection Hearthstone in the breastplate and a gem of safe harvest in the helmet, Weeping Sword of Sorrows (jade daiklave).



MNEMON

Element: Earth

Concept: Dynastic Power Broker

Nature: Architect

ATTRIBUTES

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

ABILITIES

Archery 3, Athletics 1, *Awareness 3, *Bureaucracy 6, *Craft (Sculpting) 1, Dodge 2, *Endurance 2 (Climb +1), Investigation 1, Larceny 4, Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Mountain Folk, Old Realm, Riverspeak) 3, Lore 7, *Martial Arts 4, Medicine 2, Melee 5, *Occult 7, Performance 2, *Presence 5, *Resistance 5, Ride 2, Socialize 3, Stealth 2, Survival 1, Thrown 2

* Aspect or Favored Ability

VIRTUES

Compassion 1, Conviction 5, Temperance 3, Valor 3

BACKGROUNDS*

Artifact 5, Breeding 5, Manse 3, Reputation (Sorceress) 4, Resources 5, Savant 2

* Includes purely her own Backgrounds, not those she possesses as the leader of a Great House and an elder member of the Scarlet Dynasty.

CHARMS

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique (x2)

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

Melee: Dragon-Graced Weapon, Ghost-Fire Blade, Refining the Inner Blade

Occult: Spirit-Chaining Strike, Spirit-Detecting Mirror Technique, Spirit-Grounding Shout, Spirit-Shredding Attack, Terrestrial Circle Sorcery

Resistance: Fire Protection Form, Impervious Skin of Stone Meditation, Mountain Toppling Method, Strength of Stone Technique

Spells: Assassin's Fatal Touch, Burning Eyes of the Offender, Demon of the First Circle, Demon of the Second Circle, Plague of Bronze Snakes, Sorcerer's Irresistible Puppetry, Stormwind Rider, Summon Elemental, Unconquerable Self, others

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 7

Attack:

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 8 Damage 2B Defense 8

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 7 Damage 4B Defense 7

Daiklave (Weeping Sword of Sorrows): Speed 13 Accuracy 11 Damage 7L* Defense 11

* Plus the effects of "Arrow Frog Venom" (see **Exalted**, p. 243) if the target takes any health levels of lethal damage from the attack.

Dodge Pool: 6 **Soak:** 11L/12B (Jade reinforced breastplate, 10L/9B, -1 mobility penalty)

Willpower: 9 **Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Essence: 7

Personal Essence: 21 **Peripheral Essence:** 37 (54)

Committed Essence: 17

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 9 Damage 2B Defense 10 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 9 Damage 5B Defense 5 Rate 3

Daiklave (Weeping Sword of Sorrows): Speed 17 Accuracy 12 Damage 8L* Defense 11 Rate 5

* Plus the effects of "Arrow Frog Venom" (see **Exalted**, p. 243) if the target takes any health levels of lethal damage from the attack.

Dodge Pool: 13

APPENDIX II

OTHER NOTABLE EARTH ASPECTS

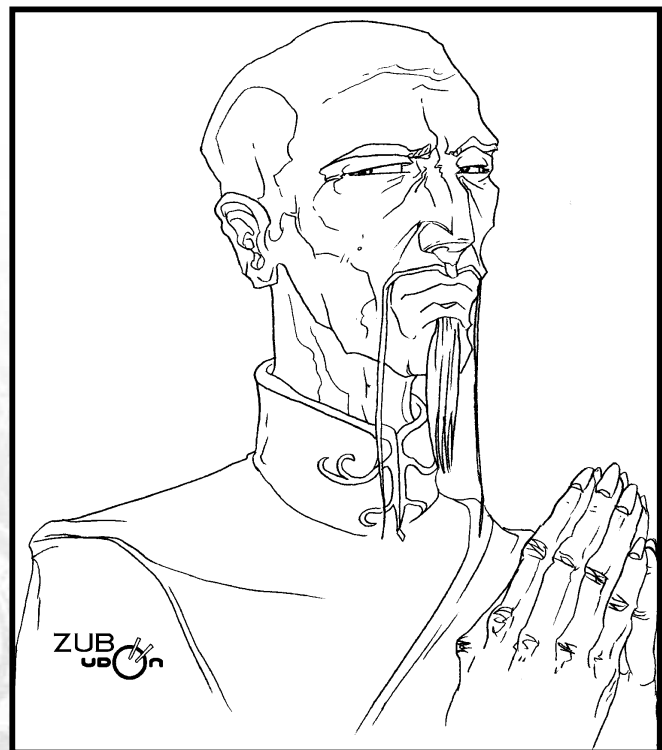


IMMINENT THUNDER

Very few individuals outside of the Immaculate Order or the All-Seeing Eye have ever heard the name Imminent Thunder, although within the offices that sponsor the Wyld Hunt, his name is legend. He is an ancient Immaculate monk, although by anyone's standards, he is well-preserved — he appears middle-aged, but rumor places him at two and a half centuries old. When asked about the secret to his longevity, he admits to following a special diet of millet and spring water and occasionally thanks mighty Mela, Petitioner of Clouds Accordant to the Call of Battle, for blessing him with long life.

Imminent Thunder was born to the Iselsi and raised on the paths of the Immaculate monk even as he was trained in the arts of assassination and deception. From the very beginning of his career in the Order of the Immaculate Dragons, he has embraced the brutal tasks required of him in slaying the Anathema whenever they appear, keeping rebellious gods in line and vanquishing the forces of the Wyld.

Imminent Thunder is a master of several styles of martial arts, both mundane and Immaculate and has traveled on over a dozen Wyld Hunts, making him one of the most experienced and efficient killers in the world. Due to shortfalls in resources and time, he was



even recently sent out on two advance missions to assassinate newly Exalted Anathema ahead of the main Wyld Hunt. On both occasions, he has been miraculously successful. When in a Wyld Hunt, Imminent



Thunder takes pleasure in facing an Anathema in open hand-to-hand combat, but in his last two missions, he was forced to strike from ambush and then finish off his opponents quickly.

Unbeknownst even to Imminent Thunder, he has been a ready pawn of the Bronze Faction Sidereals since his birth, and any time he goes into combat, he is aided by powerful magic, ancient sorceries and the blessings of Sidereal astrology. Being under the influence of such a variety of effects has had a strange effect on the old man's destiny, and many in the Celestial Bureaucracy wonder if this might not have strange effects on those close to him and those whom he fights in combat.

DUTIFUL SPARROW

Dutiful Sparrow was born in a small farming village on the northern coast of the Realm. She was a clever and resourceful girl who was a valuable asset to her father's farm. Her family's sole purpose was to supply the Heptagram with food.

When she was 15, she joined her father on his trip to deliver the food and exact payment. During the voyage, one of the guardian demons broke free from its binding during the crossing and attacked, stirring the waters to form a great whirlpool that caught the boat in its funnel. While watching in a panic from the deck of the ferry, Dutiful Sparrow's anima burst forth, and she held the demon off while the frantic captain took the boat to the shore. As frantic sorcerers took over the battle, Dutiful Sparrow collapsed from her efforts and woke up in an infirmary bed.

The master of spirit lore visited her before she left the infirmary. He said that the Arbiters from Juche had heard of her Exaltation and were to arrive in three days time. She was confused and frightened, but the master

savant spent much time with her and helped her calm the Essence that threatened to break free from her again.

She left the Heptagram and learned the life of an outcaste at the Obsidian Mirror. When it was her time to encounter the Master of Orphans alone to choose her future, she was surprised to see that he was not alone after all. He looked very discomfited but stood with another man — the master of spirit lore from the Heptagram. He told her that she alone of the outcastes had a third choice — join the Heptagram first as a student and later as a teacher. Her power fighting the escaped demon had impressed the teachers, he said, and he had intervened on her behalf. He held out a green cloak, symbolizing the sorcerer's separation from Dynastic society, and she took it.

It took some time for Dutiful Sparrow to fit in at the Heptagram, but when she did, the students discovered that, in addition to her sharp mind and skill at sorcery, there was a wicked wit. The teachers still laugh about the time she forced all the demon servants at the school to don servant's garb, looking ridiculous. The demons also remember.

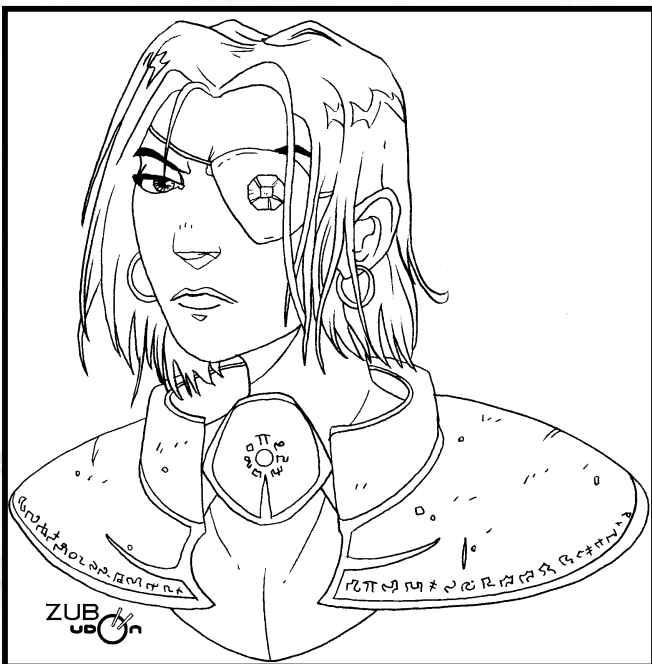
During her years at the Heptagram, fewer students died from demon mishaps than ever before. Upon her graduation at age 20, she took a job as a field teacher and specialized in taking promising students with her on her journeys to hunt roaming demons.

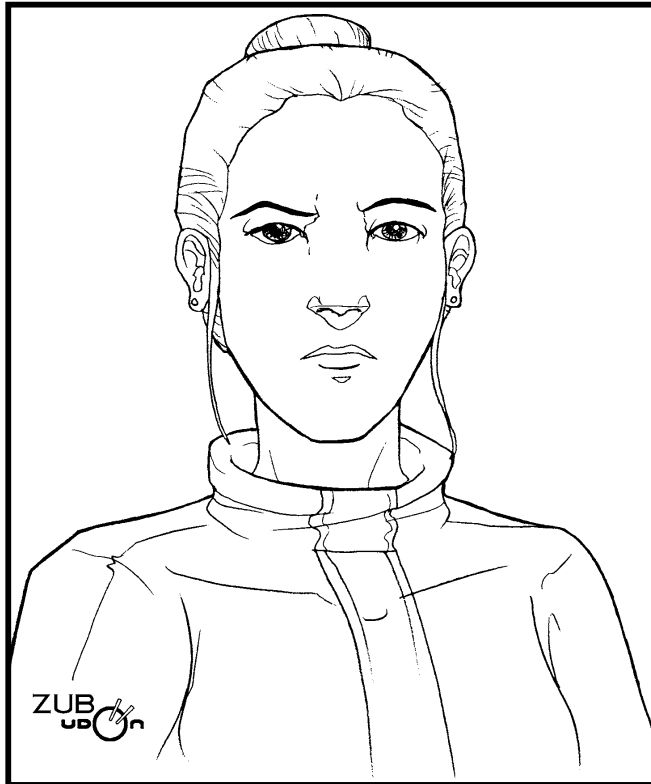
Dutiful Sparrow loves her life of demon-hunting, although her adventures have cost her an eye and a finger. She understands that the Sidereal who intervened on her behalf was allowed to only because the Master of Orphans believed that life as a sorcerer would possibly be more dangerous than her other two choices and that her life would soon be over as a result and she'd be reborn in a more fitting station. Life is getting more difficult now, however, as word has spread of her power and the Second and Third Circle demons are starting to take notice.

CYNIS JANISIM

Born from a line of vinticulturists, Janisim embraced the seriousness of her business while ignoring its assumed debaucheries. Her parents both drank heavily and beat the children when in their cups. Janisim found it shameful that others looked at her parents drunken, lustful parties as "typical" Cynis behavior. Janisim swore her life would be different.

She had four children by her husband before he died in service to his family's legions. Although he was usually on tour, she was faithful to him, which stirred more gossip than her parents' social offenses. She took lovers after his death, however, but never quickened. She has since slept alone.





Janisim owns the largest vineyard in the south, supplying most of her house's raucous parties with wine. She is well known in the Imperial City and has even accepted invitations to dine at the Imperial Palace. A delicious — but true — rumor has started that she will not swallow even a drop of her wine.

Her wine master lives in fear of her cold gaze as she tastes the vintages. The proud Dragon-Blooded has been known to kill a man for a poor cask of wine. Still, viticulturists flock to work under her, as the honor — and pay — is great for those whom she praises.

Those in the most awe of Cynis Janisim do not speak of her wine-making abilities but of her actions after the death of her youngest son. He was abducted and killed before graduating primary school, although the locals do not know exactly what happened that day.

Her employees whisper that Janisim was inspecting the winery for flaws in the wine barrels when a messenger brought the news. Immediately, the workers felt the ground begin to shake. Everyone but Janisim fled the building to allow the grief-stricken woman her conversation with the Earth Dragon. The building began to fall, wooden beams and stone blocks striking the casks of wine and splitting them, coating the woman in her life's work.

Her mortal employees watched in terror as the building folded in on itself. While the dust was still settling, Janisim strode from the wreckage, unharmed. She was soaked in wine, and her eyes were dry. In a calm

voice, she gave her employees the day off and told them to arrive at work early the next day.

Unsure of what they were to do at a destroyed winery, the workers arrived the next day to a shining, new building made entirely of stone. Luckily, it was the time of harvest, so there was much work to be done preparing the new grapes for fermenting.

Local rumor also states that no one attended her son's burial, that Janisim bade the local monks to inter him into the ground. She forbids anyone to speak of him to her.

LEDAAL CHISKA

A graduate of the Heptagram, Ledaal Chiska is the foremost architectural geomancer in the Realm. Her Manse designs are truly inspired, embodying a perfect balance of elegance and function. Her previous clients have nothing but praise for the quiet and reserved architect.

Unknown to all, the soft-spoken Chiska secretly harbors heretical religious convictions. Her worship of Pasiap extends beyond veneration, combining extreme interpretations of Immaculate doctrine with ancient references she found at the Heptagram library to a being called the Great Maker and Forger of Gods. Where the Immaculate Order teaches that Pasiap was the avatar of the Elemental Dragon of Earth, Chiska asserts that Pasiap came first and the Earth Dragon later sought to emulate the Great Maker's perfection. Chiska cleverly hides icons to the Great Maker in every Manse she builds, carefully designing the geomancy of each structure to funnel unused Essence into the icons. She has no





idea that her actions actually grant prayers and power to a being much older than the Immaculate Dragon she believes she worships, nor does she realize her efforts might rouse the attention of the slumbering Primordial.

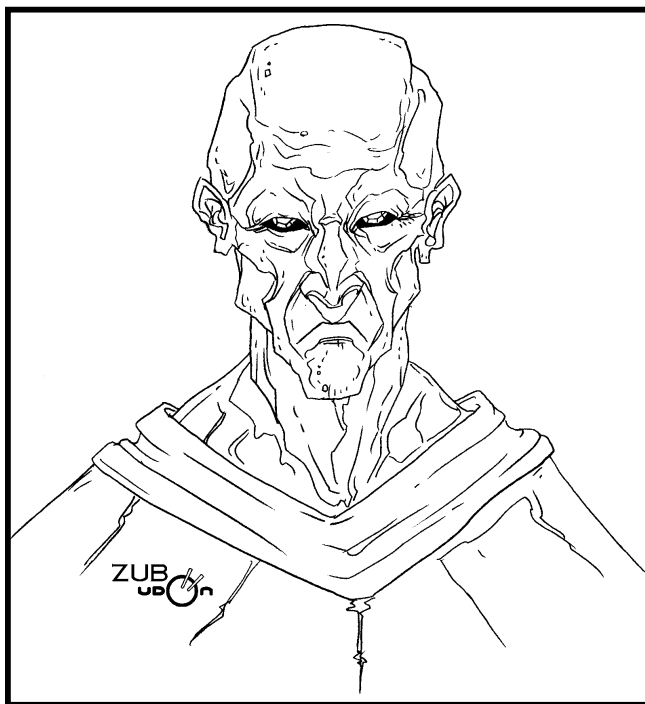
Ledaal Chiska eschews armor and weapons in favor of simple robes. Bound earth elementals attend her as bodyguards and foremen. Chiska is pretty, but not strikingly so. She lacks the mien of presence that surrounds most of the Chosen, and most onlookers would mistake her for a mortal were it not for her most unusual retinue.

RAGARA MYRRUN

A grandson of Ragara, Myrrun entered into the Immaculate Order as soon as he completed his secondary education. He showed himself to be a brilliant prodigy of the martial arts, mastering Earth Dragon Style with uncanny ease. Over the next century, he mastered the other elemental styles in succession to become one of only three living Immaculate grandmasters.

The Immaculate Order views Ragara Myrrun as a priceless treasure. He lives at the Palace Sublime, cloistered away from all distractions that could interfere with his meditations or studies. He never accompanies the Wyld Hunt, nor does he teach individual students except in the most extraordinary cases. Instead, he dutifully scribes martial-arts training manuals used throughout the Realm.

The Sidereal Exalted of the Bronze Faction also view Ragara Myrrun as a treasure. In his youth, the monk caught the attention of Anys Syn, an ancient Chosen of Mars who helped create the Immaculate styles. She has quietly guided the Dragon-Blood's education ever since, grooming him to receive initiation into Sidereal martial



arts. Although no Terrestrial Exalt has ever survived such an initiation, Anys Syn believes that Myrrun can succeed with a careful regimen of prayer and diet she developed. Already, his Essence blurs and warps to accept the Blossoming of the Perfected Lotus or death. If he lives, the experience will assuredly change Myrrun in ways even the Sidereals cannot predict.

Ragara Myrrun has a skin of flowing granite, cracked by age where a mortal would bear wrinkles. He no longer even grows hair, and his eyes bear a closer resemblance to jewels than flesh.

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