

ASPECT BOOK WOOD



An Aspect Book for



THE DRAGON-BLOODED

ASPECT BOOK
WOODTM

By George Holochwost and Ellen P. Kiley

FOR THE LOVE OF FLOWERS

The garden. An endless series of spirals superimposed on one another. No discernable beginning, no foreseeable end. A blossom. Another blossom. Flowers differentiating themselves with colors and pageantry premeditated within the seed's seed...

Petals like feathers, feathers like colors unfold in circles of station, majesty, usefulness...

Blessed rose. Ripe and bright, the garden's queen resplendent in red.

Scavenger poppy. Soft and thick, desire and salvation reside in its petals.

Martyr's cup. Dark and stinking, it catches water for other plants despite its own ugliness.

Fair ivy. Greedy and poisonous, the vigorous vampire of Creation's flora.

Emerald braids each rearing a different head, countless. Bouquet as convoluted as voices joined in song, myriad colors unending, unending. There is only one smell, one flower, one garden. There is no distinction...

"He's here," so distant.

"He's here," a cool, wet cloth is applied to my brow by soft, trembling hands.

"Milord Nagezzer. Your guest, he's here," I'm shaken to full consciousness, mercifully ripped from my journey by a servant whose name I can not rightly remember but who is, in fact, holding my opium pipe and looking rather anxious. I slowly adjust myself on a stack of black cushions as twin girls, eyes as blue as the West, gather my robes over me and comb the prongs of my moustache into place.

He's come, after three requests on his part, to the Throne of Roses. My silk-clad servants scurry about the bodies that adorn the sea of carpets, oil lamps, pillows and hookahs, as if there was something they could do to make the main orgy hall more appropriate for a visiting officer of the Scarlet Empire's legions. I remember my time with the legions. There is nothing here that he will find shocking or unfamiliar.

Though it has many rooms, of the chambers within the Throne of Roses, the main hall is the heart of its power and spirit. It is here that appetite is laid bare and the animal of desire is set to run free. Due to the endless efforts of myself as well as countless courtesans, apothecaries and menservants, this Manse is well known throughout the Realm and Nexus as a place of pleasurable escapes not to be found in any other one place. It is in this orgy hall, with its lavish tapestries, fountains, statues and high mosaic dome, that nearly all of my dealings occur.

My guest's name is Cathak Abona Krespus, and he's considered to be one of the most valiant and loyal of the Cathak Second Legion's officers, excelling during his time at the House of Bells, manifesting the leadership, strength and skill of a one of Her Majesty's finest well before it would have been expected of him — a promising hero of the Realm. Considering this, I mindfully assume the posture of respect due such a dignified personality — much as one softens one's gestures when in the presence of a potentially violent animal. I will acknowledge his rank, as I did when I served in the Legions. This is the least he deserves for serving the Realm.

My, this is taking a bit, isn't it? He must have worn some absurd amount of armor, not taking into account the warmth and humidity of my dead mother's Manse. It is also possible that he is discussing his travels with Autumn Spiral who takes pleasure from the travel tales of those who come to visit.

The twins, so reserved in their movements, so lithe in their form, recline on either side of me, clad only in jeweled ornaments, their symmetry so perfect as to almost be doubted. These are their only tasks — to enhance my presence and impact on those who come to deal with me and to declare my hospitality to those with whom I give audience. On more than one occasion, they have held the fascination of a merchant prince when a most critical twist of negotiation was in the making. However, these men, however rich and jaded, were mere humans. I am not expecting so dramatic an impact on this son of House Cathak, seeing as he is, like myself, a Child of the Dragons.

Ah! So gallant he comes with his cape and sashes blown on the wind of his pace. Red and gold, Cathak Abona Krespus struts through the bodies of my courtiers, guests and servants. He is a truly a striking figure, as if drawn from the reliefs of the First Age, an aspiring legend who has fostered every visible trait a hero could possess. Even from this distance, his flaming warrior's braids and flashing red eyes bespeak a sort of breeding that the Great Houses revere. My man, Ledaal Ansharu, called Autumn Spiral and trained as an Immaculate devoted to the teachings of Sextes Jylis, accompanies Krespus through the carnal swell. The intense look of annoyance and stifled expression on Autumn Spiral's face foretells the niceties that I will endure at the hands of this legionnaire.

"Winglord Cathak Abona Krespus, Master of the Cathak Second Legion" announces Autumn Spiral, the bitten back contempt in his voice completely undetected by this man he introduces to me.

The azure eyes of the twins stir to focus "Our master, Sesus Nagezzer, bids you blessings of peace and joy. Welcome, dear guest, to the Throne of Roses. What is your want and pleasure?" They speak in a voice that moves like the fingers of a courtesan on young flesh. I am surprised when Krespus raises an eyebrow, his look of dismissal an obvious veil for his self-judged inappropriate attraction to the twins.

I address him. "Would you care for a seat, Winglord Cathak? Some other refreshment? Wine? Fruit? You must be so very weary from your long voyage from..."

"Cherak." he interrupts demonstrating his impatience. "My men and I traveled from Cherak."

"Your men? Are they yet to arrive?"

"They await me in the Imperial City. This business is my own, and my men are loyal. They needn't worry about the details of such dealings. Although they are able-bodied," a stab "they require good rest before returning to duty." His responses betray his contempt for me; this contempt in which I can not find fault.

"Well, I can not say that I am not disappointed about being deprived of the opportunity to give a few of the Realm's fighting men some quality recreation. They would have been very much welcome. The Throne of Roses is a splendid place to take one's leisure." I entreat.

Krespus looks repulsed as two robed servants surround my guest and myself with screens and curtains, cutting off our conversation from the rest of the hall. "Such a place is not good for a true soldier's spirit. This house, albeit rich, would be a distraction. They can wait for the riches of conquest and the glory of battle, rather than having their courage dispersed by the drunken pleasures of your manse, Slug."

Slug. He said it. So soon? My, how pleasantries vanish when the Children of Hesiesh are wanting! "Have I done something to offend you, Winglord? Is there something you need for your comfort that I have so rudely failed to offer? Is there something..."

"I have come to discuss a matter of the Realm"

This ought to be entertaining. "The Realm?"

"There is a place, not far north of Cherak, that would be a great asset to the Realm."

"Ah. Yes?"

"It is a place, a sacred keep, of the First Age."

"Interesting. Continue?"

"This keep, called the Hold of White Idols, is currently occupied by icewalkers, barbarians, who serve, it is rumored, the shape-changing Anathema."

"That is most definitely a fascinating matter." I affirm. "So, the location of this place has been verified? You have visited the Heptagram's libraries to confirm that this place, the Keep of Ice Statues..."

"The Hold of White Idols." he expresses with contempt, correcting my deliberate misspeaking with the snap of undeniable condescension.

"Yes. White Idols. I apologize. Its location has been confirmed?"



"There is no time for such scholarly scrutiny and time-wasting. If I don't recover this site, the icewalkers will solidify their hold, become fully entrenched, and I'll never take the Hold from those savages. I have seen what happens when hesitation delays such operations as this. Haste must be made."

If I don't recover this... I will never take it from them. I thought this was a matter of the Realm. Nonetheless, such an endeavor without confirmation is a fool's errand, far more likely to result in a slew of wasted lives accompanied by profound embarrassment rather than the glory that this winglord chases like a gilded tournament trophy.

"Understood. What do you think this will require, this matter of the Realm?" I reply.

"I will need a talon's worth of your best men. I will need them outfitted with foul-weather gear and repelling equipment, as well as the finest standard equipment your armories can provide." Cathak Krespus catalogues all of this as if the men he asks for are children's toys and not citizens of the Realm.

"Where do you wish to assume command of these forces?"

"I will meet them in Port Cain, and then, we sail to Cherak. From there, we move North. I don't expect that the campaign will require more than a fortnight of military force." An arrogant, inaccurate and reckless estimate. "I understand that you think highly of your mercenaries. Let us see if they are worth the jade I'll be paying for them."

"Then, we are agreed on terms? Shall we discuss the terms of payment?" I inquire, with a smile, holding back the bile that this selfish brat's words have brought up from my belly.

"Jade is no matter. My coffers have adequate jade to pay whatever is required." Indeed.

"Well, then." I slide my right hand out of my rope and raise two fingers with my thumb pressed against my palm, my smallest finger protruding, subtly.

The twins respond immediately. Autumn Spiral switches places with them, moving behind me as they move to stand on either side of me, each holding a crystal flute of sweet wine. Despite its rich body and color, this wine is quite cheap and is so thick as to coagulate like syrup between the teeth, its flavor so honeyed that no other quality can be tasted but an overwhelming sweetness. The twin on the right flexes her right shoulder ever so slightly.

"Let us drink, then." I say in closing, gesturing to the twin on the left to give my guest his well-deserved glass of wine as I meet the eyes of the twin on the right as she hands me my glass with a flirtatious pursing of the lips.

"To conquest." Cathak Krespus boldly barks as he sharply raises his glass, the weight of the heavy flame embroidery on his robe's cuff pulls his sleeve to his elbow, the motif accentuating the rashness and pride of his proposed toast.

"Not at all, good Winglord." I smile, "For the Realm."

"Very well. For the Realm," the tone in his voice reflecting his disappointment with my alteration of his words, all interactions perceived as a conflict of ego.

For a moment, the tingle of crystal against crystal is the only sound in my hall.

We drink every drop. The glasses are empty. We exhale. He clears his throat. I smile.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Sesus Nagezzer. It was not my intention to cut this visit so short, but I have men to lead to glory," the Winglord states, taking leave rather than requesting it, as the twins ease back onto my cushions, one massaging my knee, the other my hand, as Autumn Spiral comes to the soldier's side to escort him out of my sight as quickly as won't be noticed.

Autumn does not look back at me as he escorts the Winglord back through the orgy hall. A servant comes, and the twins move off into the hall. He offers me a selection of delicacies from a wide, stone plate. I choose a swollen pomegranate and recline.





I did not poison the Winglord, nor did my servants, though it was surely a tempting prospect. The Winglord, it seems, was poisoned in spirit before he ever set foot upon the grounds of my Manse. The Winglord's desire for greatness at any cost is what will undo him. The Scarlet Empire provides numerous avenues of glory that do not require one to compromise the resources of the Realm.

I understand that the method I implemented to destroy Winglord Cathak Abona Krespus was not unlike the methods of momentum and redirection used in the martial arts. The Winglord never would have approached me with this business if there had been any chance of him procuring Realm forces for the attack on the Hold of White Idols. He came to me because he knew this task was purely for his own gain. This is why, upon reaching Port Cain, he will meet with a small group of my men, who, upon reaching Cherak, where they will have assured the young Winglord the rest of his mercenaries will be waiting, will alert the local magistrate (a dear old friend of mine) of Cathak Krespus' intent, having him arrested for treason, sedition or any of many career-ending charges.

What I did, whether good or bad, was necessary. Since the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress, my grandmother, the Realm has suffered constantly because of Dragon-Bloods like Cathak Abona Krespus. These young warriors and aspiring heroes, so desperate for grand significance and recognition, would have the entirety of the Blessed Isle's resources allocated to fund their glory-seeking whims. The Great Houses, in all honesty, do this as well, each desperately grabbing for its own piece of the Realm as if its conquered portion would thrive though the rest then falls to ruin. Although ultimately devastating, the play between houses is not as foul to my heart as what Krespus is: a parasite who would commit those forces that I have gathered for the Realm's needs alone to an ill-planned and reckless scheme to set his own deeds and name upon a pedestal so that he will have one more story to tell while he banters to his house's fawning sons. If only these stupid children would learn that purity of intent is what makes a hero's feat, not the act itself.

When considering the verses of He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass, one could do so on countless, increasingly abstract, levels. There is, however, a simple message that even a wholly uneducated pilgrim from the most remote hamlet could interpret through the most basic experience one could have, whether he is tending the crops of a farmer's field or strolling the flagstone paths of the gardens that ornament the Blessed Isle's Manses. Sometimes, a thing must be cultivated, nurtured, fed. This is done so that which is great and good may grow and prosper in Creation. In the same way, there is a disposition of life, which grows at the expense of such beauty and loveliness, which must be pruned, removed altogether and burned.

One can not allow one's garden to be threatened by a greedy weed.

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CREDIT WHERE CREDIT'S DUE PART 2

To Ed Bourelle for his fantastic map in **Exalted: The Autochthonians**. Once again, I apologize for leaving his name out of the credits.



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PRINTED IN CANADA



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INTRODUCTION

Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

—Harold Whitman

Aspect Book: Wood is the last in the series, the final, up-close glimpse into the hearts and minds of the Dragon-Blooded and their Realm. This is an appropriate position for those who emulate the Wood Dragon, Sextes Jylis: Cycles, the beginnings and endings of things, are an intuitive part of their Exaltations.

Wood is unique among the five elements that lend their strength to the Dragon-Blooded. Air, earth, water and fire are eternal, and at their essence, unchanging. Wood grows, drawing the other four elements into itself; wood

dies, to make way for more growth. The very essence of wood is change.

Change is not a concept that is terribly welcome in an empire. Yet, the Emerald Dragons can be found throughout the Realm, at all levels of the Thousand Scales — just like their peers among the other four elements. They are bureaucrats and generals, merchant princes and governors. How do they do it? What keeps their metaphorical roots from breaking through the clay pot of the empire?

Dragon-Blooded society and culture are the gardener's tools that keep the Children of Sextes Jylis in their proper places. It is not unnecessarily restrictive or cruel — a rosebush will not blossom properly unless it is pruned, and wild grapes are sour. Wood-aspected parents often fondly speak of raising their children with the same terms they use to discuss topiary. Those who cannot or will not flourish within the confines of the Realm may find room to grow by joining the legions, adopting the wanderer's lifestyle permanently or, at the most extreme, becoming outcaste.

Most Wood Aspects, of course, choose to live and grow within the bounds of Dragon-Blooded society. What do they give back? Wood-aspected Dynasts are without doubt the most skilled survivalists in the Realm. Foraging and hunting are second nature to them, and they can instinctively avoid (or seek out) natural hazards and fearsome predators. While exploration and gallivanting about the countryside are well-regarded pursuits among the Dynasts, this sort of lifestyle is usually an indulgence granted to the young. Older Wood Aspects make their marks much more subtly, shaping the living beings that make up or surround any society. They breed and train beasts of war and beasts of burden — not just proud horses and sleek hunting cats, but sturdier oxen and intelligent messenger birds. They cultivate exotic plants and vital herbs, whether for purposes of healing or pharmacological indulgence, and become expert in the administration of both sorts. They strengthen their families by speaking eloquently in the Deliberative or by performing evocatively at festivals. The Children of Sextes Jylis are the heartbeat of the Realm — and in the turbulent days that have followed the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress, that pulse is picking up speed.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Aspect Book: Wood contains the thoughts and life stories of five Wood Aspects, related in their own words. Within their stories and those of the individuals who surround them, readers will glean insight into the varied motivations of Wood Aspects, those who stand beside them and those who oppose them. This book also includes new Charms, artifacts and Hearthstones that would be found particularly useful by Aspects of Wood (and therefore those who include them in their games, Storyteller or player), including the items and Charms possessed by the featured Dragon-Bloods.

Chapter One: Childhood and Self recounts the early lives of five Dragon-Blooded Wood Aspects. These are the roots of their lives, laid bare in their own words. Family, education and experiences from these times shape their lives in sometimes surprising ways.

Chapter Two: A Life of Obligations continues the accounts of our narrators as they describe their roles in society and empire — both roles they currently fill and

those they wish or may be forced to assume. This is the trunk of a Wood Aspect's life, whether solid and sturdy or deceptively slender, which must support and sustain all her endeavors. This chapter will illuminate more than the lives of the five Terrestrial Exalts: Through them, you will see the world of Exalted with a new hue.

Chapter Three: The World We Rule enfolds the opinions of our five Wood-aspected narrators on a host of subjects: the state of the Realm and their families; the workings of Dragon-Blooded society and the machinations of their peers; and their encounters with others, from lowly peasants to mighty Anathema. Their branching convictions reach toward the sky and hang low near the ground. What sort of fruit will these strange trees bear?

Chapter Four: Voices Not Our Own is a cornucopia of sentiments and speculations from those who consider the Children of Sextes Jylis to be peers and those who look on them as if from afar. Storytellers and players are encouraged to use these anecdotes as the seeds of plots, to create antagonists or allies for the characters in their stories.

Chapter Five: Records of the Before opens a small window into the time before the Great Contagion, allowing the briefest peek of the glories that were once common. The Wood Aspects of the Realm have the least information from that time available to them — few who followed in the footsteps of the Wood Dragon had the foresight or the inclination to record their insights in a manner that would survive the ravages of death and war. What remains is precious and is held in high regard.

Chapter Six: Miracles of Sextes Jylis details new Charms for use by Wood-aspected characters and other Dragon-Bloods who embrace the surging energy of life. Artifacts and Hearthstones round out the selection, including some favorites owned by the narrators of previous chapters.

Appendix I: Signature Characters includes five character templates, one for each of the narrators as they are presented in the setting's modern day. They are, as individuals, of varied power and experience, suitable for both Storyteller and player reference in the crafting of your own stories.

Appendix II: Other Notable Wood Aspects finishes up with five Wood-aspected Dragon-Bloods worthy of notice — through fame or infamy — throughout the world of Exalted.

SOURCE MATERIAL

The Exalted are, each and every one of them, heroes of legend. They do not do small things. They are the best (and sometimes the worst) of humanity writ large on the canvas of the heavens. The Wood-aspected are unique among the Terrestrial Exalted. The others are blessed with affinities for ethereal, impersonal and inanimate forces. In many cases, Exaltation by the other Elemental





Dragons renders those chosen distant from the rest of humanity. Those Exalted of the Wood Dragon are filled with the glory of life itself. Their bond with humanity, indeed all living things, is strengthened a hundred-fold. Their flesh is not a hindrance to their enlightenment, it is the chief instrument in their search for it. The pursuit of physical pleasure isn't just a pastime for them, but a true and sublime expression of their spirituality. They are the great hunters and epic lovers of the Exalted world. They are both wolf and shepherd. They are, to a one, fantastic survivors. Drop the daintiest dandy of a Wood Aspect you can find naked in the jungle, and he'll not only survive, but thrive. Each is Robin Hood, Natty Bumppo and Tarzan all rolled into one.

CLASSICS



The epics are the obvious choices here. Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, while perhaps a touch on the Western side of things, certainly provide great fodder for defining "great deeds." Every Dragon-Blood is an Odysseus or a Hector or an Achilles. Imagine, then, living in a world with 10,000 of them.

The work of Sun Tzu in *The Art of War* is as close a match to *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier* as can be found in the real world, and Machiavelli's *The Prince* is but a primer for those Wood-aspected Exalts who choose the halls of power as their hunting grounds.

20TH-CENTURY FICTION

Steven Brust's Vlad Taltos series and the related *The Phoenix Guards* and *Five Hundred Years After* are excellent resources for how a society populated by epic heroes steeped in magic and awash with intrigue might run. George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* series is awash in politics, intrigue, war and betrayal in an excellently developed fantasy setting. One could do far worse than to use it as inspiration for the brutal, merciless, and frequently lethal political workings of the Realm and its tributaries.

The Book of the New Sun series by Gene Wolfe has been mentioned time and again, but it bears mentioning at least once more. They are unreservedly excellent and serve well to illustrate the workings of an empire steeped in debauchery and self-involvement.

20TH-CENTURY CINEMA

Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and Yimou Zhang's *Hero* stand out as excellent examples of epic, non-Western fantasy and wonderful illustrations of what the Exalted might look like if they were put on film. Written by Gore Vidal and directed by Tinto Brass, *Caligula* remains the chief illustration of decadent empire on film and joins Christophe Gans' *Brotherhood of the Wolf* as fine examples of the Wood-aspected Dragon-Bloods at their most carnal.

LEXICON

It is not the goal of this book to add an entirely new layer of complexity to an already complex world, but rather, to further detail what already exists. To that end, we have not developed a whole new, special, unique jargon for the Wood-aspected Terrestrial Exalts. The terminology used by the Wood Aspects is the same as that used by any other aspect and, so, can be found first and foremost in the two main books of the line: **Exalted** and **Exalted: The Dragon-Blooded**. There are a few terms that bear repeating, though, for convenience sake if nothing else.

Perfecting Hierarchy, the: The natural order of all things, as preached by the Immaculate Order, in which enlightenment, as measured by one's mastery of Essence, marks one's place in the world. The Dragon-Blooded stand at the top of the Perfecting Hierarchy as superior, enlightened beings.

Sextes Jylis, He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass: The avatar of the Wood Dragon who came to Creation in the wake of the Great Uprising to repair the damage done to the land. Of all the Immaculate Dragons, he is perhaps the most revered by the common folk for his influence over the fields and the fruits of the earth.

ASPECTS OF WOOD AND THE IMMACULATE ORDER

Wood-aspected Dragon-Blooded are well represented in the Immaculate Order, in numbers proportional to their peers among the other four elements. But fewer master the Wood Dragon Style than would be expected from their numbers (and only a scant few Air, Earth, Fire or Water Aspects achieve that level of proficiency with the Wood Dragon Style).

There may be several reasons for this discrepancy. First, the Wood Dragon Path is notoriously difficult, even compared to the rigors of the other Fivefold Paths. The learning and practice of it require asceticism and deprivation, which are certainly not encouraged in any widespread fashion in Dynastic households. Lost eggs taken in by the Order generally have a less difficult time adapting to the deprivations of training.

A deeper reason may be that a trained master of the Wooden Path is dangerous — physically, spiritually, philosophically, politically and morally. The highest mystery of the Wood Dragon Style is an attack that rips the soul from a living body (the existence of this technique is practically unknown outside the Immaculate Order). And this is only the most concrete threat posed by the style. Mastering one of the Fivefold Paths requires a monk to open herself more intimately to the flow of Wood Essence than any of the most powerful, non-martial art Wood Charms. This Essence idealizes two conflicting concepts: change and the hierarchical character of the natural order. Monks embracing the concept of change cause enough headaches (as discussed elsewhere); monks getting fully in touch with the Celestially mandated natural order could be disastrous for the Immaculate Order. More than one Wood-aspected monk has disappeared from the Order after an encounter with an Anathema — whether unfortunately deceased, gone into hermitage or something more troubling, the Order does not know (or will not say). Knowing the dangers of Wood training, the Immaculate Order only officially allows strictly indoctrinated monks to study the higher mysteries of the Wood Dragon Path. Unofficially, instructors may take on promising students who do not meet the Order's qualifications, perhaps directly flouting the Order's authority or, more subtly, allowing the student to watch and mimic the training of others.

CULTS OF SEXTES JYLIS

The Wood Dragon incarnate, Sextes Jylis, is understandably the subject of great reverence from some of the poorest people in the Realm. While the mighty and wealthy might have to tighten their belts when harvests fail, the poor starve and die. And while Immaculate monks and well-educated Dragon-Bloods have a far better grasp of Immaculate philosophy and the place of Sextes Jylis therein, those who toil in the fields have an intimate, up-close knowledge of how things grow. The Dragon-Blooded may tend gorgeous gardens or supervise prize breeding lines, but they rarely have dirt under their fingernails from cultivating staple food crops, nor are they called from their comfortable beds in the dark of night during lambing season.

Occasionally, reverence gives way to worship of Sextes Jylis or local spirits of fertility and plenty. Both the leadership of the Immaculate Order and local satraps prefer to avoid taking punitive measures against such heresy when possible — after all, who wants to report to his superiors that grain production has dropped markedly in the region in the aftermath of rooting out a heretical fertility cult?

The Immaculate Order has found it far more effective to be proactive. During work-intensive times such as planting, itinerant monks (and even sedentary monks pressed into service) throng the countryside, making an effort to reach every village to offer the Wood Dragon's blessing over the fields and the seeds. After the harvest, when the peasants' labors lessen, the Order sponsors festivals in honor of Sextes Jylis in communities around the Realm, even loosening its purse strings to provide entertainment and feasting. For most working folk, the trip to the nearest harvest festival is the farthest they will travel in their lifetimes.

True cultic worship of Sextes Jylis is rare among Dragon-Bloods. Certainly, groups purporting to be cults come and go on a yearly basis, but practically all are hedonistic or orgiastic societies claiming cult status for the added spice of transgression it brings to their revels. The All-Seeing Eye once watched such groups for signs of true philosophical dissent; but now, the wastrels and bons vivants party on without surveillance — perhaps hiding revolutionary ambitions behind their indulgence and rutting.





CHAPTER ONE

CHILDHOOD

AND SELF



The seeds of experience that are planted at the beginning of a Terrestrial Exalt's life often lay the pattern for the rest of the Dragon-Blooded's life. What appears as an insignificant event in the beginning of life can dictate what sort of person one of these beings becomes. Though certainly there are qualities that are simply nature, the way in which a Dragon-Blooded is nurtured and educated will often train the direction of their growth.

The following are accounts of the early lives of five Dragon-Blooded of the Wood Aspect. Some of their beginnings are rather simple and humble, while others were raised in the midst of privilege and opportunity unfathomable even to other Exalted.

RUTANJALI

The forest is, and will always be, my home. My people took everything they needed from the trees and animals of the wood. In the village of Carya Kos, the men and women would forage through the glades and greens, hunting the wild boars for meat and trapping squirrels, rabbits and foxes for their pelts. They built their houses from oak and pine and erected shrines they filled with offerings of flowers, bone and wooden statues and the massive heads of hunted beasts, so that the gods, who lived about us, would know our thanks. The spirits, most pleased with these rituals of appreciation and respect, would fill the forests with their life and power, bringing abundance to every glen and thicket.

I never knew my father, and my mother, called Shivastri, was a quiet and shy woman, whom the elders cared for as if she were a child. Her mind had come apart, it was said, and the shamans say that it was my father who made her that way. My father was a god of the forest, a fierce and terrible hunter with a face as handsome and perfect as that of any fae prince. It is said that, on his hunt, he came upon my mother who was singing a lament by a brook. So passionate he did become, the air glowed green about him and he could not keep himself away from this song that burned as lust about his heart. By that brook, he ravaged her body and spirit, leaving her broken upon the pebbled bank, bloodied and mad.

This is how I came to be raised by my Aunt Rinchen, who was a wise and beautiful savant, though many of the village women would call her witch and compare her cunning to the madness of my mother. Rinchen, a hearty and strong woman, with eyes like darting stars, brown skin and a gracefully curved body, was the subject of much gossip and unwarranted fear until need presented itself. When the shaman could not divine a direction and the elders could not find the way, Rinchen was consulted on every matter from what herbs would be best to sooth the dawn sickness felt by those with child to where to find the great stones on which thrived the blackfinger lichen that is brewed to make the dreaming paste our priests consume to speak to the gods. I remember sitting at Rinchen's feet,



playing with knots of twine, while she catalogued her lore and shared it with the people she loved so that their lives would be good and safe.

On sunny days and warm evenings, I would walk by Aunt Rinchen's side, collecting secret treasures from the forest floor as she educated me in their names and uses, teaching me charms and rhymes that carried the wisdom of her mother and her mother's mothers. It was during these little adventures that I came to love the forest in a way that a child raised in different circumstances could never have done. The trees, the brooks, the hollows and the glades were mine. I shared these things only with my aunt, the beasts and the unseen things to which I sang and gave offerings. With all the treasures of the forest as my playthings, I was the happiest little girl in Carya Kos.

It was on such a walk that I met Bima.

Bima was the son of Tharjun and Jadha. Tharjun, his father, was a respected elder with dark eyes who rarely smiled, and Jadha, his mother, was a kind woman who took care of my mother and often spoke to Rinchen about my care. Bima, however, was as wild as the woods themselves. Unlike the boys who competed in games of shunji and dreamed of being warriors, Bima was marked with the shaman's sight. This concerned his parents, who had seen what can happen when an aspirant is unprepared for such an initiation. So, being wise guardians, Tharjun and Jadha sent Bima to seek out my Aunt Rinchen.

Rinchen and I were gathering firewort from the roots of a great tree when Bima came upon us. He was handsome in his father's tunic, and he wore his family's ancestral dagger tucked into his silk sash. His eyes held some fear, as he had surely heard the rumors of my aunt's guile and wisdom. Nonetheless, he stood before her and presented himself in the traditional way an apprentice offers himself to a master. At first, Rinchen pretended to be insulted that such a boy would assume himself worthy of her teachings. Bima offered every manner of boast and promise in order to convince my aunt, and eventually, Rinchen nodded in acceptance of her new student.

Rinchen and I both came to love Bima. Rinchen loved him as a son, but I felt a strange and powerful desire for him. Eventually, Bima came to feel the same for me, and although we were too young to marry, we loved each other very much. Whatever time Bima did not spend with my aunt in the forest, he spent with me, talking and laughing beneath the banyan trees or spearing goldfins in the brook behind my cottage. At the time, I believed I would have this joy forever.

EXALTATION

The rain fell gently during the last day I was to spend in my village. Bima and I had been sent to fetch water from the brook, and on the way, we had stopped to pick wild ginger at the foot of an ancient willow, the trees long

green tails creating a private forest chamber for me and my love. It was then that Bima told me that he would make me his wife and that we would spend the rest of our days on walks just like this, living in the arms of the forest and wanting for nothing. It was then that I heard the approach of a great many horses, the shouts and howls of men growing louder and closer.

At first we hid, clutched together beneath the willow tree, not knowing what it meant, not knowing who these horsemen were that came to our village so deep in the wood. I told Bima to stay with me. I told him to wait until the men were gone, but his concern for the safety of the people of Carya Kos drew Bima out of our sanctuary, and I ran after him. I remember him running and shouting to me about how he needed to find his parents and how these men had come to hurt us. As we came close to the village, we saw smoke and fire and the bloodied, fleshy heaps of people we loved, hacked and butchered by these dark men on horses. Terrified, I stood motionless near the fire pit at the center of the square, while howling murderers bellowed to one another as their red, wet axes harvested the lives of all I had ever known since I had come to be in this world.

Suddenly, I saw Bima, limping toward me at a pained gallop, his leg slick with a grievous wound, as a green-faced brigand on horseback rose up behind him, his horse snorting steam like an angry demon. As the warrior's battleaxe struck his back, Bima's expression was that of awe and surprise — a look of wonderful confusion as he dropped face first into the mud. The rider, so fierce the moment before, looked upon me with dread as blood and leaves rushed about me in a snapping whirlwind, my expression frozen in all-penetrating despair. The rider fled as I felt my aunt's tight grip on my wrist, pulling me away as gore and forest rushed about me.

As we ran through the forest, I looked to my aunt for the meaning of what just happened, although she could not explain, her only thought being my safety. After what couldn't have been less than two hours of running, we cleared a hill and dipped into a depression where a stream ran peacefully, oblivious to the massacre in Carya Kos. With our backs against the muddy wall of the barrow, I looked at my aunt, her arm pressed against her guts as dark red stain spread through the fibers of her dress. "What am I?" I pleaded, torn between the confusion of my being and fear for the last person I truly loved in the world. "You are as your father, my child." Rinchen said softly, "As your father."

My father? Although her cryptic answer meant nothing to me at the time, it distracted me long enough to restore my bearings. Hefting my aunt onto my shoulder, we hobbled together along the stream's edge as I followed her quiet directions, the flame of her life slowly dimming. Though it seemed to me that our walk was endless, sure to leave me stranded, with my dying aunt, in such distant reaches of the wood that I would surely die as well, Rinchen

assured me that our course was sure. She told me that I would soon be safe.

When we crested the stream's bank, we entered a glade where I had never been before. The meadow was filled with grasses as high as my waist, and at its center was a poorly made cottage of remarkable size. At the time, it looked much like a pile of sticks built like the kindling stack at the center of the clearing. As we approached, my aunt stumbled, collapsing into the grass. As I knelt to help her, a warm wind began to blow in through the meadow, the great pile of wood rattling against itself as if it would be blown away. From the wood stacks rose a towering man whose head was as high as the trees — a man made of branches and leaves, brandishing a tree-sized club and an expression of undeniable annoyance.

As I turned to run, Rinchen's hand latched around my ankle, and I stopped dead. Using me for support, my aunt pulled herself back to her feet and turned to face the forest spirit, pleading in a language I had never heard. After much deliberation, the forest spirit unfolded its arms from its chest and nodded, slowly moving toward my aunt as she turned to face me, a look of longing and love on her face, "Rutanjali. This is the King of Endless Branches. I have made chiminage with what little life I have left. As I have told you many times, the forest can show you all the things that lie within it. The King of Endless Branches is the forest's greatest teacher and its sovereign lord. May you grow strong to avenge the people of Carya Kos."

What came next was beyond my imagining. As a strong wind came rushing from all directions, the creature's arms unfurled, bursting toward Rinchen. A writhing mass of twigs, roots and runners bored through my aunt's clothing, digging into her skin as her face fell forward, the sound of her last breath hidden beneath the swarming limbs. There was no screaming or panic as the Wood King devoured my aunt, consuming the very last of Rinchen's life force, her blood pouring from the convulsing thicket as the long grasses stretched up from the ground to drink it. With a rush of leaves, the arms retracted as quickly as they attacked, my aunt's bones rattling in the remains of her dress as they fell into the mud. When it was over, I stood in silence, angry and shaking. As I stared at the Wood King, the rush of leaves and blood burst out once again, lashing at the air around me, my heart screaming out at the trees. Tears burned my cheeks as my fury stirred. As I raged inside, I fell to my knees, crushed beneath the weight of the day's events. Between the death of my lover, the destruction of my village and the passing of my aunt, I could not consider what I had become. I remember looking at my new guardian, the humanness of my plight being completely alien to his ancient spirit's heart.

Eventually, my sobbing receded, and the King of Endless Branches and I walked out into the green vastness of the wood.



EDUCATION

It was during my time at the knee of the Wood King that the secrets of my nature were revealed. I learned of an island, far to the West, where many others of my kind lived and ruled, with great armies. I learned that there hearts and bodies are ruled by the five elements — air, earth, fire, water and wood — and that each element bore its own unique expression in these god-men of which I was one. Because of the closeness of my Exalted soul to life and death, the element of my center being wood, there could be no mortal who walked the forest that would be my equal. Like the spirits around me, I came to learn the secrets of Essence, although my gifts were different than those of the King of Endless Branches and those of his many and varied subjects.

The King of Endless Branches had watched me hunting deer in the alder groves for most of the afternoon but had kept his distance, not wanting the sense of protection he lent to the forest beasts to deceive my quarry, cheapening the hunt and depriving me of valuable experience and training. I had learned to pull the binding Essence of Creation to me, quickening my arrows, sharpening my senses and rendering myself invulnerable to the perils of the wilderness. I was sitting atop a deadfall, refastening the fletching of an arrow, when the Wood King came to me. He had taken another form, so I did not recognize him at first. The form of a young man came to me now, dressed in verdant leaves and bearing a bundle of furs tied with vines. It was his eyes that were the same, dark and ancient, unmistakable despite his youthful seeming.

When the King of Endless Branches kneeled before me, I realized what was occurring. This was a proposal of marriage, in the fashion of the elementals — no courting, no games — a simple proclamation of intent and the granting of the bride gift. The Wood King laid the bundle at my feet and opened it. A bow of green jade was my wedding gift. I took the ancient weapon into my hands, and I could feel it yearn for me as I became excited to use it. I nodded to the King, in acceptance of both his gift and his proposal.

At first, I thought I had thought my wedding gift was merely a token, albeit a powerful and deadly one. It was not until I awoke the next morning, when I woke beside my King, that I realized what I had been given — revenge.

CYNIS BELAR NORREN

Members of other houses, outcastes and the mortals that I have the — thankfully rare — opportunity to speak with all believe that my life as a member of House Cynis is some never-ending bout of pleasures interrupted only by the occasional need to sleep and shit. They seem to hold us in some sort of awe.

But, you know... during secondary school I encountered V'neef Shar, who'd grown up a lost egg among the

barbarians of the Far North. He told absurd stories about migrating across icy plains, carving temporary dwellings out of ice and snow and the like, but it deeply offended him when I referred to his childhood as "barbaric." He didn't see his childhood as barbaric, but rather, as perfectly ordinary. Indeed, he saw the whole of the Blessed Isle and the lives of the Great Houses as a gaudy embarrassment on the face of Creation by comparison to his own austere youth. Everyone sees his own childhood as ordinary and measures the rest of his experiences against it.

Say, therefore, that I find the rest of the Great Houses to be curiously prudish and unnecessarily restrained in their behavior.

I was born into the height of privilege among House Cynis in Pangu Prefecture, upon the Blessed Isle. My beloved mother, Cynis Belar Mina, was a Dragon-Blooded scion — a Water Aspect. My father, Cynis Wisel Pantos, was not so fortunate. Although he was my mother's legal husband, he was simply a mortal. Despite my father's lower rank, my family was held in high esteem in the eyes of my great-grandmother Cynis Belar and, it was whispered, in the eyes of my great-great grandmother as well.

I had no real concept of my family's wealth as a boy. As I suggested just a moment ago, everyone thinks his childhood is ordinary. I'm sure that a mortal who reads this account will be struck by the differences between his own childhood and mine. Who's to say which one is the ordinary one?

My earliest memory is the sight of one of my father's stewards fucking my nanny. I couldn't have been older than three. They showed no particular modesty — I'm led to believe that in other houses this sort of thing is frowned upon, but not in mine. The sight didn't traumatize me. They were obviously enjoying themselves. When they were done, my nanny made me lunch. Frankly, I remember the sliced sausage and warm bread more clearly than anything else that day.

My nannies, the stewards and the other servants of my parents' household had a far greater direct impact on my youth and development than my parents themselves did. Our household owned countless slaves, and managing that property on my mother's behalf occupied most of my father's time. I saw him infrequently — perhaps every 10 days, at feasts and great parties, and when he was home from his travels as overseer. He was not particularly affectionate, though he obviously had high hopes and high standards for me.

I saw my mother daily — most days for half an hour around dinnertime, though during great feasts, I might receive the privilege of spending hours in her presence. Rarely was I the center of her attention at such events. I loved my mother then even more deeply than I do now and was happy for any iota of her time that I might glean. Many nights Mina, my mother, indulged my childish need for physical affection, hugging or kissing me spontaneously

when I correctly recited a poem or demonstrated a new dance step.

I didn't learn until a few months into primary school that half my classmates had no memory of a mother's embrace. They seem to feel that this makes them stronger and sterner. Their loss, I suppose.

My tutor was a mortal and a slave. Ordul was his full name. Other than my parents, he was the only true constant during my childhood. My wetnurse was gone as soon as I weaned, and nannies and stewards swapped in and out like clockwork.

I remember quite clearly the nanny I'd had from my weaning until the Calibration in my fifth year. She was a slave — Dona. Young, in retrospect. Freckled. Smiled more than she scolded. She must have been attractive. Although my memory does not serve me here, my house does not hire unattractive slaves unless they have unusual and valuable talents, and skill as a nanny hardly qualifies. I loved her dearly.

She was taken from me just before Calibration, in my fifth year. I wailed; I ran and hid from the stewards and my parents and spent the first night of that Calibration hidden away in some no-doubt ghost-infested back room of our estate. The steward, Holton, found me. He never struck me — slaves never strike the blood of the Dragons, at least not in House Cynis. Both parents were angry with me — I'd been expected at a party they were hosting the first night of Calibration. My father struck me three times and then turned his attention to other matters. This stuck with me: For an infraction, punish and then move on. I wailed for Dona the next night, but I did not run. The new nanny arrived the first night after Calibration. I do not recall her name.

This pattern continued thereafter: One servant would leave my family's service the night before Calibration began, and a new one would arrive the night Calibration ended. For a long time, I gave no thought to what happened to those slaves after they left my family's service, though my first year of secondary school, I did consider trying to find long-lost Dona. Now that I know what became of many of them, I believe I was happier not knowing. But here I am getting ahead of myself. My childhood had a few surprises yet to come.

Three cousins were within two years of me in age. Cynis Wisel Myrana was closest in age, just a few months my junior. I couldn't stand her as a boy. This... changed as we grew older. The other cousins were older than me. Cynis Falen Debos, who has since joined the Immaculate Order, was two years my senior. Cynis Belar Grine was between Debos and myself in age. We were close friends and dire enemies throughout our childhoods. Most of the time, Debos terrorized the rest of us, locking us away in outbuildings far from the center of the palaces in Pangu or beating us on a whim. The girls were close, and at times, Debos and I were quite close as well.

Ordul was my tutor. Over the years, I learned that he'd been a wellborn son of the Scavenger Lands, though he never spoke of the circumstances that led to his enslavement. He was a stout man, bald and strong. He was no eunuch, I realize in retrospect, for his voice was low and strong, and he wore whiskers in the colder months. My mother was quite fond of him; his tutoring services to her were a minor part of his role in Pangu. Ordul taught me the fine arts: Poetry, dancing, song. He was stern but fair — a trait I learned to treasure after Exalting and finding myself surrounded by sycophants and idiots.

As I grew, the dancing lessons were supplemented by fighting lessons, and the poetry and song were supplemented by histories and lessons in mathematics and simple economics. Ordul taught some of these as well, but more often, another slave scholar arrived for a few months to pass on some important knowledge and then leave.

I also learned the mechanics and principles of physical pleasure, though even in our hedonistic house it was considered improper to begin any serious practice in this regard before primary school. Childish sex play was accepted, even encouraged, but we hardly performed upon one another. I attended a few orgies, but I was no more expected to participate in them than I might be expected to participate in a scholarly debate on the symbolism of the poet Trimbeline's latest ode. I hadn't the skill or desire.

Between the shuffling of stewards and nannies and the iterations of specialist tutors, I must admit that I no longer remember the names of most of those individuals who had the greatest influence on me as a boy. Save one: Berk.

Berk was a slave brought to teach me the epic poems of *The Lay of Emneth Ice-Conqueror*. To this day I have no idea who Emneth was, nor why he would choose to conquer a given patch of ice. Berk had been in my family's service for some six weeks when the attack came, in the middle of the night. I do not know what saved me from him. I ascribe it to the eye of Sextes Jylis herself. I believe that the Wood Dragon wished to test me. It was full dark, and I was in my room, asleep. Berk appeared, knife in hand. Somehow, the knife went through the cushion rather than my eye.

I rolled away from him and threw everything I had at him. Literally — blankets, pillows, candlesticks, the few toys I was permitted, books. Anything to pile obstacles between Berk and I. The debris stymied him, and my screams brought the house guard. Somehow, they subdued him without killing him. I wasn't privy to the interrogation that followed, but I did sit in a place of honor for Berk's execution the next day.

It took weeks for the family's spies to trace the path of Berk's employment back to the hand that truly guided him — a Tepet patrician named Meno, one of my father's rivals. The attack, I was told, was merely a message. I was expected to understand the political details at the time, but they have faded in the intervening years. I believe that men





under my mother's command had raided a Tepet satrapy for peasants to take as slaves. I know that, in retribution, a Tepet cargo ship was seized by Cynis men and its crew imprisoned or killed.

All this was back while the Empress was still alive, of course. I shudder to imagine how such a conflict might resolve itself in these uncertain times.

Ordul, my tutor, grew sullen and more protective after the attack. He obviously felt it was his fault the attack had happened and was probably concerned about his future in my parents' service. I promised him that, no matter what happened, I would always want him in my own service—a promise I ended up keeping, to my great surprise.

A few months after the attack, I was sent to primary school. I'd shown some affinity for sums and memorization, and my mother was determined that I would attend Illicar Academy in the Imperial City. She hosted numerous fetes and orgies during my eighth year, all aimed at ensuring my attendance at Illicar by swaying the school's directors and the bureaucrats responsible for entry testing to it.

My mother is very good at that sort of thing. I got in.

EXALTATION

I was 13. She was 15 and as devoted an adversary as I have ever known. She mocked me mercilessly all my days at Illicar. She mocked my clothes, my hair, the way I said certain words. We came to blows on more than one occasion in the early days of my education, and as children of that age always do, matters eventually made their way to discussions of sex.

Until I left home for school, sex had simply been a fact of life. It happened all the time—not to me of course, as I had little interest, but between the people around me. I learned (at what I now know was a scandalously early age by the standards of any but House Cynis) the mechanics of things long before I had a use for them. At school, it was a different matter. My classmates knew, of course, that I was of House Cynis and knew as well the reputation, deserved or otherwise, of my house as rife with debauchery and assumed immediately that I was a master of all such arts or a else a hopeless eunuch. Surely no one in that family would wait so long to indulge, or so their reasoning went. Mnemon Mora decided on the latter and, in the summer of my 13th year, decided to excoriate me for a eunuch. The harassment went on for a month until, at last, she challenged me to prove myself potent. I'll leave you to ponder her true motives yourself. Suffice it to say she took me to the topiary garden, a lush and secluded yard some way from the main hall of the school, to sort out the truth of things. Things certainly were sorted, but not in the way that she'd expected.

At first it was wounded pride and a fire for vindication that drove me to the deed, but once begun, another fire took its place almost immediately. I had learned a great deal from my tutors, it seemed, because soon she

was as consumed with lust as I, and as the moment of our passion reached its zenith, something else entirely filled me from within and burst. The hedges went mad, flowering with unearthly speed. The grass writhed beneath us, and the earth roiled with life. I could smell everything: myself, Mnemon Mora, the voles nesting under the lilac, a dog on the path half a mile away. I felt everything: my own breath and sweat, Mora's skin, the beat of her heart, the feat tightening her muscles around me. It all built to a fever pitch before exploding out of me in flood of iridescent Essence.

Mora spent a week recuperating in the infirmary. I was taken to the dormitory of the Exalted. I was never mocked again in earshot.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

Near the end of my first year at the Spiral Academy, I received a scroll from my mother. It seemed that I was not to return to Pangu Prefecture for the summer. Instead, my great-grandmother Cynis Belar had it in her head that I would leave the Blessed Isle entirely and spend the summer as the overseer of a few dozen slaves on an estate outside of Cherak. This enraged me — for I was just 15 and a Dragon-Blooded scion of a Great House. For my entire long (long!) life I'd obeyed the dictates of house and family, but I felt it to be quite beneath my prodigious talents to spend the summer shepherding a few dozen idiot laborers and whores.

I wouldn't have admitted it at the time, but the real reason for my anger was that I had greatly missed my beloved cousin Cynis Wisel Myrana through the year away at school, and I wished to spend as much time as I could with her at the Palace of Trees.

I did what any arrogant young immortal would have done: I left the Spiral Academy at the end of the term with no thought given to the ship that would take me to Cherak. I would travel to Pangu Prefecture under my own power.

The irony of all this is that my distant uncle Cynis Wisel Sitos took Myrana with him to the Imperial City through the summer, as Wisel herself assigned him to see to her family's affairs at court for the season. I would long for the isolation of Cherak before the summer was over. My great-grandmother made certain that the season was as educational as it was unpleasant. I learned a great deal that summer, not the least of which was never to be so bold in my defiance again.

I returned to the Academy a trifle humbler, but with a clearer sense of purpose. I fell under the tutelage of Master Sesus Agranum, the Academy's Chief of Forensic Accountancy. To say he took me under his wing would be an exaggeration. He did recognize my talents, however, and granted me a rare privilege — study outside the walls of the school. I was assigned to a local customs house with which the Master had a particular relationship. This was

hardly unusual, though most are tasked with labors that can be performed within the halls of the Academy. I suspected — no, I knew, though to say so then would have been uncharacteristically foolish of me — that this particular relationship involved details the Master preferred did not reach the ears of the Headmaster. Regardless, the assignment itself is peripheral to the story. It was on my return from an afternoon of “study” when I heard the news that the Empress had turned over a portion of House Peleps' shipping to my own Great House as part of the turmoil surrounding the creation of House V'neef.

As I was returning from my labors, I happened upon considerable hubbub in the central courtyard. Someone had thrown themselves from one of the library windows. Idiocy. It's certainly not the first time such a thing has happened. Anyone with even the least knowledge of the Academy's history knows the fall from the library is insufficient to kill one touched with the Dragons' blood. You cannot jump from anywhere below the fourth floor commissary if you're serious about ending it all.

It didn't take long to discover that the failed flier was Peleps Andronicus, the elder of the Peleps twins attending the Academy. He was arrogant, pompous and prone to boasting of his family's great influence. When he heard of the Empress' decree, he grew despondent (and stupid it seems, though I've heard that was a chronic condition with him from long before his plunge to the courtyard). He was sent back to his family estate very quietly. It took nearly an hour for the entire school to know. His sister, though... She was another story.

It was a month, to the day, after her brother's disgraceful dive to the pavement when she crept into my room and tried to teach me to breathe through my belly. There were no V'neef at the Academy yet, minor lines and outcaste families were just being grafted onto the newly formed house, but I was the youngest Cynis, and that was almost as good. She discovered quickly enough that I was not so vulnerable as she thought. I took the knife she meant for me and turned it back on her and added a special touch of my own. I'm told her trip home took several days and she was ranting with fever by the time she got there. She lived, but it was a long time before she was pretty again.

Little did I know that was merely the first Peleps blood I would shed. The next summer, Grandmother put me in the service of Uncle Lemmat, master of our newly acquired shipping interests. The venture had not proven so profitable as had been expected. Lemmat blamed lingering loyalties to House Peleps among the help. I was tasked with confirming this — and with eliminating those who hindered our proper employment of those assets.

I showed some talent in this. By the end of the season, I'd uncovered a dozen Peleps moles, three embezzlers, a small band of smugglers making use of our ships without offering the customary bribes and three Tepet plants on my



uncle's personal staff. What's more — I enjoyed it. Thus was my career path set.

I spent a season without obligation — a gift from my great-grandmother for the progress I'd made in the remaining years of my education. When I returned from my sabbatical, I became a Cynis rat-hunter.

SESUS NAGEZZER

Though I was never the favorite child, my life was not without privilege. My mother, sister of the house founder Sesus, was a domineering and powerful woman, as radiantly beautiful as any matriarch of the Realm could be. She was the fiery embodiment of her house ideal, and she had five children onto whom she would force her legacy — a legacy I would never live up to. Although most of the attention went to my fiercer, more athletic siblings, I still enjoyed the culture and pleasures of my mother's house. Among my mother's lovers was my father, an unExalted son of House V'neef and former Senator of the Lesser Deliberative. He too, was a disappointment to his house, having never Exalted. Nonetheless, my father was possessed of a keen and subtle intellect, and being his favorite child, he shared with me his understanding of history, philosophy and literature. Thus, while my sisters and brothers played at Immaculates and Anathema in the courtyard, bouncing about and screaming while bloodying each other's noses, I would enjoy walnut cookies with my father in the east library, books and sweets being our shared vices. While the others played and did their best to approximate battles they knew nothing about, I studied strategy, tactics and the annals of every significant war and battle from the tail end of the First Age up until the modern day. They were warriors and soldiers, while I was a general.

I was never a pretty or particularly fit child. In addition to my formidable grasp of martial lore, I was always unusually focused, undistracted by many of the things that make a child a child. This often resulted in a fair amount of ridicule at the hands of other children and was a cause of expressed worry from my mother and the other Dragon-Blooded who visited our home. Nonetheless, there were benefits. The first advantage that I noticed was the freedom this granted me. When my mother held feasts at our home, I was never chosen to be the performing monkey. Instead, I was left alone, uninterrupted, with my books and hobbies, the distracted child who existed out of sight and mind. This was far from the greatest benefit, however. For when, after these galas, my fair-faced brothers and sisters were led to the bedchambers of some visiting Cynis lord or the bath of our dear Uncle Sesus, I was left, dreaming in my very own bed, without a care in the world. Unfortunately, when the next morning came, and we gathered around the table to break our fast, the looks and jabs of resentment from my brothers and sisters were undeniable and lasting.

So, it was alone or with my father that I spent my youth. Along the paths of the Throne of Roses, my mother's Manse, I would walk — picking flowers, reading books on war and power and avoiding the torments of my siblings and their playmates. Despite my increasing knowledge of these things that held my attention, this pattern continued even after the lot of us were sent off to school.

EXALTATION

I think for Sesus Agon, one of my two older brothers, I was the focus of all his aggression and cruelty. It was not as if I had ever challenged or competed with him in any direct way, yet Agon felt driven to make my life as difficult as it could possibly be, using me as his personal effigy for Mother, Father or some other force that he felt judged him, further stoking the hidden, raging fires of his inadequacy. It was this disposition for harassment and bullying that placed us in the northwest courtyard of our dormitory on the seventh day of Ascending Wood of that year.

I was, as usual, minding my own affairs on the edge of the center fountain, hidden, so I thought, by a hedge of white roses. I was eating a candy, blowing the steam off of a cup of tea and reading a copy of Bara's treatise on flanking and the use of reserves, when Agon decided to perform for a gaggle of his moronic friends. I didn't even see it coming. I felt an incredible shove and went toppling backward, my arms flailing, as my candy, my book and my entire self splashed down into the fountain pool.

At that moment, I felt a painful stab at the center of my brain. My body, so used to softer stimulus, snapped and kicked like that of a wild horse. I stood, my robes sopping wet, and clenched my fists till blood trickled from them. Agon and his gang looked terrified, turning to run. Only by inches, I caught Agon by the nape of his collar, taking a heavy stone from the edge of the fountain in my other hand. The bully howled in terror as I pushed him onto his face, kicking hard at his ribs so he'd roll to face me.

"You are an idiot, Agon. You lack vision and integrity. You deserve this."

As I raised the rock with both hands, preparing to pound my brother's skull to an unrecognizable mash of bone and gore, my wrist was suddenly held fast. I spun on my heel as Agon scrambled to his feet and turned to face the insolent rat who had interfered with a vengeance so long in coming. I was surprised to meet the eyes of the Headmaster, who, despite my Exaltation, maintained his bearing of authority and wisdom. Agon ran and ran, as I threw my arms around the Headmaster's chest and sobbed for what seemed like forever.

After the debacle at the fountain's edge, the Headmaster summoned my mother to the school. Mnemon Aznam, a friend of my father, took me to the aerie terrace and told me to wait for my mother's audience. I sat, nervously,

mashing the pages of my sopping wet book with a pillow in an attempt to dry them out, when my mother entered through the southern arch. Mnemon Aznam intercepted her, explaining to her what had happened with Agon, in measured bursts of gesture, all of which my mother seemed to ignore as she honed in on me.

I will never forget the expression on her face. It wasn't so much the look on her face but rather the disparity between how she reacted and how I expected her to react. Mnemon Aznam had insisted that my mother would be overjoyed, elated, so very proud of the son that she had all but written off as an embarrassment that would float about her court until his sad mortal life expired. I agreed that she would be proud and relieved. Her little Nagezzer had been imbued by the Dragons and would become a lord of Creation. So, you can understand my surprise when my mother came to stand before me, the very image of disappointment and disgust, as if she had chosen a lottery tile that Exalted the wrong child.

"Rise Nagezzer" was all she said as she circled me, inspecting me like a newly arrived servant, occasionally placing a thumb against my cheeks and looking into my eyes as if there wasn't a person behind them. I was petrified. Her response to my gift so different from what I had hoped for that I half expected her to have me executed for some crime I could not fathom having ever committed. When she eventually ceased her scrutiny of every aspect of my physical body, she barked at a servant to fetch me some clean robes and then took my father, who had arrived during the appraisal of my person, to the other side of the terrace and ordered something at him that I could not hear. She then shot me one last discerning look, gave a grunted sigh and then turned on her heel and strode out of sight.

Once she was gone, my father turned to me with a look that almost asked for my forgiveness, as if he had somehow lead me to believe that my mother wasn't the callous, loveless creature that she was, that she wasn't the looming judge that I had known since I was capable of knowing anything. I felt like crying and my father knew it. I said nothing to him, he took my hand as if I were still human, and we left the terrace, making our way down several flights of stairs, back to the courtyard where I had Exalted. Little did I know that, on that sad stroll together, my mortal father would provide me with the first key to the actualization of my destiny, which would become the lynchpin of my future life's philosophy.

"My dear boy", he said, "do you think the Dragons fallible?"

Reflexively, I uttered "No."

And it was then that my father, a mortal man, explained the sense of my Exaltation. As I was not beautiful, graceful or strong, there must have been something within me that was to be favored by the Five Dragons. I accepted this as truth upon his speaking it. It was then that he told

me I would need to pack my things as it was my mother's wish that I leave for the House of Bells immediately.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

For me, the House of Bells was a necessary and humbling stone on my path to becoming. I say humbling for it was within the walls of that most revered and valorous academy that I would meet with humiliation and judgment the likes of which I would never experience again. It was at the House of Bells that I became even more focused and driven—without even Agon and my other abusive siblings to draw me into frivolous play. Nonetheless, I endured the trials of cruelty, and due to my masterful grasp of military tactics, strategy and martial philosophy, I worked toward becoming an officer.

Despite some social hardships created by my early admission, during my time at the House of Bells, I came into contact with individuals who would one day become the most loved and revered soldiers that the Second Age would know. Tepet Ejava, called the Roseblack, was indeed one of my classmates. In later years, it became interesting to me how we arrived at such similar destinies despite the gross differences between the paths we forged for ourselves.

After many hard years, I completed my officer's training and graduated into the ranks of the legions. Although my charges most certainly made jokes about my budding officer's pretense, they were certainly satisfied with my resourcefulness when providing them with intoxicants and courtesans for any appetite imaginable. Although there were certainly significant problems, my command of my talon was tightly by the book.

It was on an overcast day in the month of Ascending Earth that my destiny was once again altered beyond my imagining. My troops and I had gathered beyond the rise of a hill a bit to the east of a copse of ancient oaks. We had been called to the place to quell the activity of a particularly hostile spirit of the plains. The creature, called Wind Across the Savanna, had dematerialized after we had spent nearly six days tracking it. My men were exhausted and bored, most of them believing that this entire mission was futile and that it must have been something I had done to offend the higher ranks of command for our lot to be saddled with so useless a chore. So, in an attempt to calm their complaints and fantasies of conspiracy, I took up my breastplate and chopping sword and headed out onto the plain to cow this upstart spirit.

I never saw it coming.

My men found me several days later, lying in the field, crippled and broken. If not for my Exalted physiology, I would have most certainly been killed by the series of finger-thick, bloodless holes that riddled the right side of my body and the half dozen the width of a human fist puncturing my right thigh.

Through my mother's "grace," I was discharged with marks of honor and bravery and given refuge at the Cloister





of Wisdom. It was my father's idea that I should attend this most selective of institutions, given my mutilated state, as the teachings of the Immaculate Philosophy would undoubtedly better my self discipline and, because of my Wood Aspect, potentially heal the damage that the plains spirit had done to my body through the Immaculate martial-arts style of Sextes Jylis.

Although many of the monks at the Cloister found me repugnant because of my zealous soldier's temper and my broken body, I managed to earn the respect of a senior monk who became my instructor in the Wood Dragon Style. Autumn Spiral viewed my soldier's drive and appetites as a practice of my aspect, as brash as the urge to live itself. With this patient and curious monk's assistance, I learned the fundamentals of my style, albeit with little hope of higher mastery. Unfortunately, despite the healing qualities of the style's form, I was unable to restore my leg to full functionality.

Despite my efforts and relatively impressive accomplishments given my injury, my dismissal from the Cloister was much anticipated by its abbots. Nonetheless, my time of contemplation and healing had given me a vision of my future. Though as a child I had reveled in fantasies of leading glorious cavalry charges in the Empress's name, I knew that the greatness of my future would be known by few, if any. I would have to forge my own army, my own legion — an elite force that would exist unseen and underestimated throughout all of Creation.

TEPET EJAVA, THE ROSEBLACK

I was born while my mother was on campaign. Tepet Ellora was a stubborn woman as well as a strong leader. When her unit was delayed in returning home by a protracted siege (the besieged commander being too stupid or proud to see that his refusal to surrender only delayed the inevitable), she refused to retire to the baggage train or accept an escort home. Her armorers rigged the best protection they could for her swollen belly in the last months of her pregnancy, and she continued to lead her troops from the front ranks, as is the Tepet way. I was born between sorties, the quickest and most painless birth of any of my mother's children thanks to the surging thrill of war. There are no wet nurses of good breeding to be found on the battlefield, of course, only menials, slaves and whores. So, my mother bound me to her own breast and returned to the command tent. Yes, it was quite scandalous, the subject of gossip for years. But in those few, short months I spent at her breast, I drank in the voice of command with my mother's milk. I learned the weight of the armor on her broad shoulders. My tiny hand felt the Essence coursing through the haft of her daiklave and the smooth, singing wood of her bow's stave. Every Dragon-Blood has war in her blood; I have war in my heart.

THE JOURNAL OF CATHAK GAREL MOLS

I, too, was unsure of the purpose of my years-long project. If it was merely to blood my pen, it would seem a great imposition on House Tepet for such a small matter. If it was to keep me busy, or perhaps to get me killed, then it succeeded admirably at the former and too near at the latter. Though the woman known as the Roseblack acceded to my presence and my questioning, she did not sit still for it. I have traveled to the Far North and sailed the islands of the Southwest with her, as part of her retinue. I was there when Ejava was ordered to stand down before the fatefully Northward sally that cost Tepet its legions. I watched as she accepted her battlefield promotion, seizing command of the troops and turning a rout into a retreat that saved those few souls left to flee. And I am here now, as the vultures of politics circle over what remains of House Tepet, waiting to hear its last, rattling gasp before swooping to their meal.

It seems clear now, in the aftermath, that someone in the House of Bells did, in fact, expect Ejava to come to an untimely end. Perhaps there were dark portents or unsavory dealings behind closed doors. My meager writings would then be the only record of her genius.

Or perhaps I was merely meant to be a spy. If so, I was poorly motivated (and certainly underpaid). I have removed from my account several events and remarks that have no bearing on the Roseblack's military campaigns, but would be needlessly inflammatory in the social or political arenas. In the years I have followed her (during which I have learned how to patch a sail, how to construct a trebuchet and how best to put a mortally wounded man out of his misery — how bloodless the library seems to me now!), Ejava has earned my loyalty, just as she has earned the same from every soldier under her command. Whatever aid an unExalted historian can give is hers for the asking.

I hope that, one day, my descendants may write a new volume, companion to this one, encompassing the Roseblack's exploits in the defense of the Realm. But I fear there are dark days ahead before such books may be written, for Tepet Ejava and for the Realm entire.

It makes me wonder why we raise our children the way we do. Is a wolf's cub any less a wolf because she suckled it and taught it to hunt? Would she give it to a mare to raise and teach it to stalk? When I consider child-raising as a problem of logistics and supply lines, our traditions make a great deal of sense. But I cannot escape the sense that we are missing something important, something primal.

The unusual circumstances of my birth also brought me to the attention of my grandfather, Tepet Arada. He had largely retired himself from the affairs of the house, as was his earned right. Granddaughters, great-nephews, relatives of various degrees were born without his input or notice — a grandfather is hardly necessary to the process. But the scandal reached even his ears, and he made the trip to my mother's home to excoriate her risk-taking with his bloodline. Once confronted with a granddaughter in the flesh, he could not entirely extricate himself from the process of raising me. I saw him rarely, but a word from Tepet Arada was still potent enough to bring the best tutors to our home and to open the doors to the best militarily oriented primary schools.

EXALTATION

Exaltation is a gift from the Dragons — not the power of it, which is our right by blood, but the placement of it in the span of our lives. It is as important as birth or death. Yet, who among us can remember her birth or cares to endure a slow, thoughtful death? The events surround-

ing the moment may be violent, serene, frantic or filled with fear, but the moment of Exaltation stands alone in memory, a prism of Essence that colors all that went before and everything that is to come.

My own Exaltation came upon me on a hunt in my 11th year, mere weeks before Calibration. I had returned to my family's country home to learn proper hosting manners. Our visitors were rapacious that year, I recall, and I was sent out into the wild (with a fair number of retainers and household slaves) to bring back fresh meat.

We found a wooded area that looked likely to have abundant game. The slaves began to work their way around our chosen patch of forest to drive the game before them, while the retainers and I settled quietly in the greenery to wait for some hopefully delectable prey to bound in our direction. Soon, all was quiet but for birdsong and the rustling of the trees.

I was not alone, of course. Even my mother, as blind to personal risk as she is, is well aware that there are creatures who live beneath the forest's boughs that would happily make a meal of a young girl, even (or even especially) a Dynast. Less than a pike's length away on both sides was an armed man, willing to kill or die to protect his charge. But they were hidden beneath a spell of green and brown, and it seemed I was by myself, for the first time in longer than I could remember.

I was deeply enraptured by the magic of the forest when I became aware that we were not the only hunters



afoot that day. A great cat, dappled and tawny, padded silently to the edge of our killing field. I was transfixed by the creature: the soft camouflage of its patterned fur, the muscles rippling beneath its hide, the curved ivory of its teeth — a perfect predator for its environment. The beast sat, still and noiseless, once it assumed its position; were I not enfolded in the forest's breath that day I might not have seen it. If any of my entourage saw it, they gave no sign; no one rose to chase it away from our hunt.

Some time later (minutes or perhaps only moments — I had lost all track of time in my contemplation of the lithe killer so close by), the cat tensed, its nostrils flared infinitesimally. A spare second later, I heard the crashing of our quarry through the undergrowth. The instincts of the hunt took over. I stood and pulled my bow in one fluid motion. But no surprise, the cat was faster. As the deer bounded into our small clearing, the great cat leapt at its flank, one massive paw wrenching the deer's head and neck around while the momentum of the strike carried them both to the ground. The forest was in an uproar — branches breaking, birds screaming, men shouting — but a suffocating silence fell as the cat rose from its kill and turned its amber, slitted eyes on me.

The cat could have reached the place where I stood with one powerful bound. An arrow from my bow would have only angered it. My protectors rallied themselves, but would they have been able to interpose themselves in

time? It does not matter. The cat did not attack. But when its eyes met mine, and locked, it was though a spark was struck, a flicker of recognition, one predator to another. That spark kindled my soul, and by the light of that fire, I saw the forest and the creatures around me in a whole new way. I felt the push and pull, the give and take, of life — the demanding hunger of the cat, the fluttering pulse of the dying deer, the life and death struggle of so many crawling things in the leaf litter below my feet. The rush of power and need and fear was overwhelming. When a second deer blundered into the clearing, driven by the servants, I dropped my bow and bolted after it, maddened by the flood of primal urges. They found me, many minutes later after what was apparently quite a chase, curled next to the cooling body of the deer.

I was terrified of my new life at first. In the fog that surrounds the piercing moment of Exaltation, I feared I had become Anathema, one of the animalistic, barbaric killers that roam the edges of the Realm, that I would be hunted by my own family, that my life would be short and brutal. Of course, anyone with any sense could sense the kiss of the Wood Dragon about me or identify the anima that would blaze into being, fueled by virescent Essence, and just as quickly judder out of existence. In the time it took me to come to my senses, and then to bring my anima under control, I did an extraordinary amount of damage to the gardens around my family's



manor and, later, to the Headmistress's floral plantings when I returned to school.

It was there that I earned the name "Roseblack," as all her lovely rosebushes withered and died at the root. It was a name bestowed in mockery and jeers by my erstwhile peers, made jealous or afraid by my Exaltation; but I chose to embrace it, and I have never regretted that choice. It is a constant reminder to me of that time in my life, in all its exhilaration and fear. It is also a reminder of the path I have chosen in life: I am a warrior and a general, a defender of the Realm and a scion of House Tepet. I bear a daiklave, not a scribe's brush, a poet's lyre or a healer's pestle. If I act rashly or decide poorly, thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, may die, and all the good I have done will be worth nothing more than a sickly rose on a blackened, withered stem.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

Coming to the House of Bells was like coming home. Most of my immediate family had spent some time in the legions at one point or another. Many had led illustrious careers, and still did, fighting for the Scarlet Throne. No matter the occasion, talk at family functions always found its way to military affairs, be it debating strategic philosophy or simply recounting old war stories oft-told and well embellished. I spent my early years dreaming of going on bivouac and staging mock sieges of the house servants quarters with my cousins. That first week in the House of Bells, for all its hazings and hardship, was joyous to me. It was the first real step I had taken toward a life in the legions.

RAGARA BHAGWEI

It has always been that my auspicious lineage has preceded both my person and deeds for as long as I can remember. It was as if I were the most treasured and rare of stars hidden by two bright suns. As a child, I was never bored. The wonders of Creation were mine to behold and know, and it was my father Ragara's promise that this would always be the case, and my mother, called Cynis, would assure this.

It was very important that my birth remain unknown, as each of my parents was the founder of a Great House. If I had been claimed as an heir for either house, my life would likely have been shortened significantly. Thus, I was declared stillborn by the midwives who attended to my birth and given into the care of my father's oldest human consort to be cared for as a son of his house. The Cynis midwives were drowned shortly thereafter, and the origins of my being were left known only to my mother and father, who would never speak a word of it.

So, it was a special care I received, openly praised and protected by my father who, I think, held a place for me in his hard heart, and sent gifts and letters from my mother, who despite her decadence and alleged cruelty, kept a softer part of herself for me, her secret son.

During my solitary days as a child, I spent most of my time talking to strangers in my grandmother's house. Diplomats, courtesans, warlords, merchant princes and every manner of savant visited the Imperial Court, and it was with great zeal that I pursued their knowledge of places far flung and the exotic people who lived there. This was all just passing fancy until I made the acquaintance of Oakthorn, a physician from the East of my mother's house. He had wandered the Far East as an itinerant of the Immaculate Order for the previous 10 years, all the while studying under the shaman of the barbarian tribes, learning the strange cures and medicinal formulae directly from the songs and tales of the people who discovered them.

So taken was I by this monk from the East, I begged my father to retain this Oakthorn as my tutor. Ragara, seeing the opportunity for me to receive both a primary education and indoctrination into both medicine and the tenets of the Immaculate Philosophy, allowed me this wish with enthusiasm and his blessings. And so, I spent my childhood at the feet of my first teacher — a man of medicine and philosophy with countless tales and a clarity of wisdom that I would not encounter till much later in my life.

EXALTATION

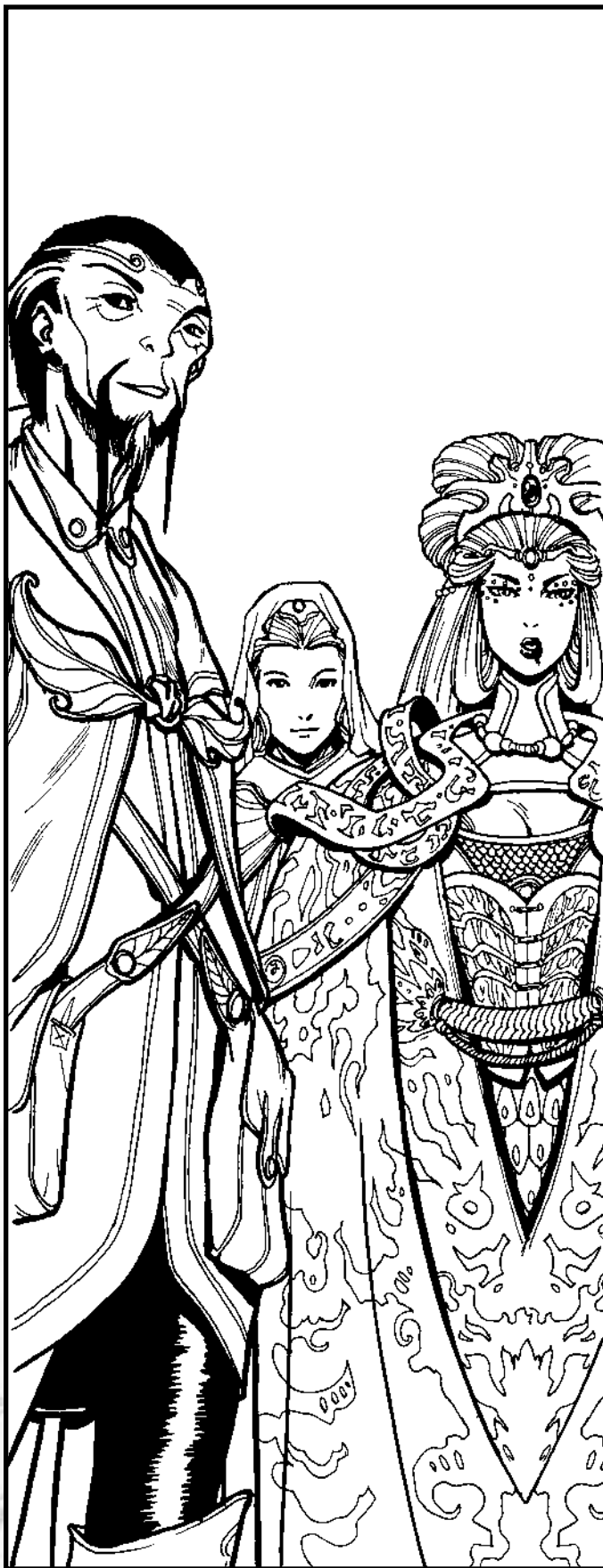
The effect that Oakthorn had on my bearing and mien was apparent to all of those who cared for me. Even my father, who it seemed was perpetually indisposed, managed to notice the distinct detachment that I had developed since my new tutor had assumed direction of my studies, causing him to grin in that sardonic way that expressed his satisfaction. I was overjoyed and could think of no finer way to spend my days than learning from this doctor from the East.

It was a day of clear skies, in the month of Descending Wood, when I was called to meet with my father in his council chambers. I assumed he wished to speak to me about the progress of my studies, taking evermore pride in my prodigal grasp of lore of life, disease and death. So, you can imagine my utter surprise when I gleefully flung open the door to see my father standing beside his mother, the Empress of Creation.

To the Empress's right was beautiful girl wearing a dark robe and a dour expression. Her eyes followed me, hopefully, as I approached my father and the Empress. I bowed to the Empress and acknowledge my father with a anxious sigh and smile. The nature of this meeting was then made known to me through no less than the Empress herself.

"My son Ragara has told me that you are the brightest child he has ever known. He has told me that you have outstripped your tutors, even the Immaculate Oakthorn, who is considered to be one of the finest physicians in Creation. Because of this, I offer you an opportunity that could announce your mastery or spell your demise."





The opportunity, as the Empress called it, was a riddle of the most dire sort. The young girl, a favorite lover of the Empress, had been poisoned. The poison, both unknown and seemingly incurable, was slow-acting but lethal. The Empress' physicians had toiled ceaselessly in an attempt to preserve this girl. Through the astrology of the Scarlet Empress' seers, it had been divined that the girl had no more than five days remaining.

It was then made known to me that the girl's life was to be put in my hands. If I did not cure her before she died, my death would follow shortly thereafter. As I had no choice, I accepted the task and rushed off to Oakthorn, who was nowhere to be found, having left, by my father's orders that same afternoon. I would face this ordeal alone.

For four nights, I poured over the codices and records of every instance of poisoning I could find in the imperial libraries. Though distraction certainly presented itself, I moved through the books with focus and discipline, only considering the pieces that applied and synthesizing new hypotheses as quickly as they crumbled. Alas, I found no cure.

Consumed by despair at both my failure and my death, I sat upon the ground as Oakthorn did — my legs folded beneath me with my hands palm-down upon my thighs. I then let my mind relax, as if it were falling into the abyss for which I was destined. It was in this place that I Exalted, the roots of my consciousness expanding infinitely outward, rolling like ball lightning through the mind of all Creation. It was in this place that my doubt vanished and my solution was found.

When I stirred from my meditation, I felt changed on a fundamental level. As I prepared the antidote, I grinned self-appreciatively, knowing that I would have two proud gifts to set before my father and his unfathomable mother. As to be expected, Ragara was pleased at both my success and my Exaltation. His mother, after feeding the tincture to her lover and then summarily slashing the girl's throat for her troublesome carelessness, nodded and told my father that I was to gather my things. I would be joining her own daughter in the halls of the Versino, where I would continue my medical studies as well as taking up the magical arts.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

My experience at the Versino was beyond my imagining. The resources of the ancient institution were seemingly limitless, and the roster of instructors read like a catalog of the greatest minds of the Second Age. In addition to the teachers and masters of the Versino, the college also hosted a large number of Immaculate monks. Between discourses on healing

techniques, magical theory and informal chats concerning the sacred teachings of the Five Dragons, I was content as I had never been before.

The only disturbances I experienced during my schooling were the work of my young aunt, Mnemon. Although the school was designed to possess an atmosphere conducive to the expansion of thought and the contemplation of reality, my father's ambitious sister was not happy unless she was the very center of attention and concern. While I was diligently working toward a complete understanding of life and death in an attempt to remedy Creation of its most cruel and unforgiving plagues and fevers, using only enough magic to facilitate my research and the processes of healing, Mnemon was binding demon slaves and working the spells of war and glory, all the while devouring both the physical and teaching resources of the school. In some ways, I was pleased that our goals were so disparate, as it gave little reason or occasion for interaction.

During my time at the Versino, I found the secret passion of the rest of my days. Of all poxes, fevers and plagues, there was one that towered over all other ailments. The Great Contagion was a legend, a piece of terrible history, not

a disease by the standards of most historians and physicians. Despite the fact that I was attending a school that taught both medicinal lore and sorcery, it was largely agreed on by the staff of the Versino that pursuing the cure of such a thing as the Great Contagion was nothing more than a grand waste of time, unfit for sorcerer and physician alike. Nonetheless, I made that horrible plague the subject of my personal research, always managing to conceal the intent of my many hours spent buried in the stacks.

As fate would have it, I was interviewing a well-established healer in Chanos when the Versino was consumed in infernal fire. Although I could not conceive of a way such a thing could happen, the cause of the disaster was made real when I heard of the catastrophe's only survivor — my aunt, Mnemon.

I was furious. So much research, so many masters, so many secrets destroyed by the impetuous will of a rash and violent child. I decided, at that moment, that I would build where she destroyed, cultivate where she smothered. That night, while still holding the letter that declared the ruin of my beloved school, I had a vision — a vision of a tower of magic, lore and secrets and the way I would build it.





CHAPTER TWO

A LIFE OF OBLIGATIONS



The teachings of Sextes Jylis impart a lesson that no Immaculate or Wood Aspect can deny. The Dragon-Blooded, divinely mandated by their very nature, must tend to the growth and well-being of the world around them. Such power is envied by many who dwell in the world around them, yet the Terrestrial Exalted bear a load of responsibility that is difficult for those outside of the structure to fathom. This chapter imparts the sense of meaning and purpose that these five narrators have taken from the experience of that burden. Though the scope of the duty may vary, all of them hold some portion of Creation's fate in their hands.

RUTANJALI

My husband's forces were awakened at the rise of the morning sun. We gathered in the thickets not far from the village in which I was born. Had it been so long that I did not recognize the place? So wrought with stone houses and wooden walls that it resembled a fortress more than anything I would call a village. I had thought that razing the place of my birth would be unconscionable and cause me a great pain that would echo through my years like a scream in deep caverns. This, however, was no home of mine. And as I waited, as my verdant lover called out to his subjects, rousing them into form with a soft but regal tone, I fingered my bow in preparation for the many lives I would take from Creation that day.

On my husband's mark, we gathered at the tree line, all manner of beasts, spirits and wild children. This force, a menagerie so beautiful one would find it hard to believe it was meant for war, was seemingly endless to my eyes; a spectrum of color and bestial savagery unlike any this wood had seen before. It was as if a command was bel- lowed, though none was, that the assembled creatures began to growl, howl, roar. The air filled with the sounds of stomping hooves, beating wings and scraping hooves, tusks and horns.

It was then that the village went silent as the guards in their towers despaired at what moved toward them like a seething tide of nature itself. The forest, which they had hacked and burned and sullied with their self- ishness, now rose up against them like the fulfillment of an ancient curse.

The stampede of my husband's subjects crashed hard against the timber wall and reduced it to splinters in seconds. Once beyond the wall, the wails of women and children shot out into the morning air, and I almost hesitated in memory of my own people's cries when the founders of this new place so mercilessly killed them to the last woman and child. But as I loosed an arrow into the neck of a panicked man holding his screaming child, the confusion caused by my memories was washed away by animal satisfaction and an all-consuming desire to remove this wretched village from the forest I so dearly loved.



As I watched the violence swirl around me, I became a part of it. I was the boar that shook the twitching woman I impaled with my tusks. I was the bear that chewed at the red innards I had rent from the bellies of these terrible men. I was the terrible spirit that drank the Essence from the terror that poured out from this place like the waters of a flooded river.

This was a just war. This was a war that would leave no trace, each and every life consumed by the beasts and spirits of the wood. This was my war, and it was for love that I waged it. It was for the sanctity of my home, my lost people and the subjects of the wood that I had come to rule at the side of my powerful and sacred husband.

ROMANTIC LIFE

When I was first given to my husband, I was terrified. I mean, who wouldn't be? The King of Endless Branches is a terrible thing, indeed. Though he is both my husband and liege, it is hard to call what I feel for him "love."

In the beginning, there was no complexity to our relationship. He was a god, and I was nothing but a terrified child, given unto him in a moment of desperation by the woman I had considered my guardian and mother for all of my life. I would spend most of my time avoiding him, attempting to find peace in this wilderness world of which I was now some strange sort of queen. However, he was always near, watching me, as I hunted for meat or walked through the forest in search of herbs and mushrooms. It was almost as if I were more curious to him than he was to me.

It was not until I overcame the King's presence that I realized the nature of his love. A spirit does not cultivate love like any other being. A spirit understands mutual exchange, but as a trade of commodities, not as a relationship as other beings do. If you love a spirit, you give the spirit a votive offering, and in turn, the spirit provides a gift. Most often, this gift is safe passage or a bountiful harvest. Sometimes, if the spirit is truly great, it will grant rare gifts or hidden knowledge, though these are far less common. It was a strange thing then, to have been the gift once given to this spirit groom of mine.

Our exchanges are genuine, I believe, if a bit alien to my mind. Though I am no less a god than he, his nature is wild where mine is, at its root, bound to the human girl that I once was. In some ways, I am more than he. In others, I am small and limited and weak. It is for this reason, that I seek communion with him. I seek communion as a woman seeks the love of a man, not as a pilgrim seeks to express her love of a god.

It was while I searched for this human love, that I became the mother of three sons.

FAMILY LIFE

The greatest joy in my life has been to watch my three sons grow and become strong. Bearing the blood of two gods, my children are exceptional in every way. Though

only one Exalted, all three are magnificent creatures with unique gifts and rare talents.

My first son, called Bima after the boy I once loved, is stout and dark of complexion. He is the most like his father of the three. His words are soft, but he is very strong and thick of build. Bima is the strength at the bottom of a massive tree, unflinching and as steady as the great oak itself.

My second son, who's name is Emerald Arrow, is a lithe and green child, as fast as the wind and as cunning as any of the forests hunters. It is in this boy that I recognize my own past and also my present place. Emerald Arrow is dearly loved by all the spirits he encounters and speaks the language of birds and beasts.

However, it is my third son that embodies both my most secret wishes and my darkest fears. It is my third son who Exalted when he was but 12 winters in age, whose anima flashed with such intensity that it flayed the bark from the trees and the flesh from the onlooking beasts. It is this son, called Sundraya, who is most strangely familiar to me.

So it was my saddest day, when my sons, who I had raised to know the lore of my kingdom, were sent forth into the world to find their fate. Bima was sent north into the cold, Emerald Arrow was sent to the South, and Sundraya was sent to the West to seek the world of civilized men. It was on that day that I bid farewell to the fruit of my life and blessed them in the name of their father's might.

FUTURE PLANS

Years have past since I have seen my children, and it is every day that I wish to seek these children whom I so dearly treasure. If not for the oath once made to the King of Endless Branches, I would not remain in this place. It has crossed my mind, on more than one occasion, to plead for release from the Wood King. How could I think this? Was it not he that saved my life and gave me the sons for which I now yearn?

But it is not so strange. My husband, as the years have passed since my sons set out on their journey, has grown distant. It is if our love was but an instant in his infinite life, not the very pillar of his life as a mortal man might see it.

It is now that I find the course of my life in my hands for the first time. How I will choose, I do not know.

CYNIS BELAR NORREN

These days, I am surrounded by idiots, incompetents and assassins.

No, I never really learned to swim. Or to sail, for that matter. Why should I? I was 16 years of age when the Empress granted control of a portion of the merchant navy's ships to my grandmother and this house. Before that date, there was little reason for me to concern myself with such things, and since then, I haven't really had time. I'm not interested in recreational boating — any ships I take have perfectly capable crews, and I'm happy for things to remain that way.

I was already at the Spiral Academy when a number of Peleps' ships became our ships. I thanked the Dragons every hour on the hour for a fortnight for the Scarlet Empress' timing. Had she been but a few years earlier, I might have found myself relegated to a wretched life aboard some stinking slave scow shuttling chattel from one dreary pier to another. Considering I was firmly ensconced in the Academy when the decree was made, a life in the merchant marine was out of the question. I find the ocean air as pleasant as anyone, but I much prefer to taste it with earth under my feet, thank you very much.

I spend my days quietly observing my house's business interests, examining ledgers and conducting interrogations that are never recognized as such if I do my job properly (and I do). I hunt the customs houses for cheats and swindlers, spies, smugglers and other agents of our adversaries.

Along with my duties ferreting out the agents of our enemies, I have begun assembling a portfolio of sensitive and valuable information regarding a great many of my peers. I offer these interesting tidbits to my superiors at opportune moments to mitigate the rare error on my part or to sweeten a lackluster success or to remind them of just what I can find, if I so desire. The choicest I reserve in anticipation of needful times — one must not neglect one's own surety of place and personal security, and for that very reason, I keep my own set of books. Information is power, in the right hands. The proper words in the proper ear can start wars or kill kings. Certainly, I would never dare do either of those things. I mention them only in the interests of illustrating a point. Really, the question isn't "Would I?" but "Could I, if I so chose?"

Aspirations? Certainly! I aspire to be Emperor. What Dynast doesn't? I do not expect to be Emperor, but it is very nice to dream of it now and then. Realistically, I set my sights just a trifle lower. I aspire to serve the Realm, my house and my family to the best of my ability in whatever role they require. That is what I am supposed to say, isn't it? I have enjoyed the past few years in my current capacity, but I grow bored with chasing greedy clerks and skimming satraps. Grandmother keeps me busy most of the time, but in the rare moments when I am left to my own devices, I have found the feasting halls and amphitheaters of the Blessed Isle thick with secrets that could prove most profitable were I given the time to properly cultivate and harvest them. I feel like a wolf cub grown too large for the den. I've had my fill of hunting mice on the doorstep. I'd like to try my teeth on more succulent prey.

I have considered, from time to time, entering the service of the empire, but the Thousand Scales does not seem particularly enticing. I much prefer acting more directly in the interests of myself and my family. The Realm has a great many eyes looking out for it. It does not need mine. On the other hand, should the matter of succession be resolved in, say, our favor... I would certainly not turn my nose up at a post at the head of one or another of the ministries.

While I have the utmost respect for the service they give the Realm, I am clearly not cut out for the legions. I can handle a sword as well as the next man, but my talents lie elsewhere. As for the Immaculate Order, it is simply not for me.

There is one thing I am completely certain of; one goal I hold in my mind at all times. I mean to marry Cynis Wisel Myrana. I have loved her since we were children, and I love her still. Her father has proven difficult. It seems he alone among House Cynis stands against marriage between cousins. Or perhaps he stands only against me, I don't know. Soon enough, it won't matter. Uncle Sitos has been a rather naughty man, I've found. I've an entire ledger devoted to his secrets. I await only the opportune moment to put them to use. Soon enough, he won't have a choice but to grant me Myrana's hand, his priggish scruples aside.

ROMANTIC LIFE

I certainly don't suffer the burden of celibacy. In my family, it is near impossible to do so, really. Orgies are a significant part of the social life in House Cynis, and my grandmother is adamant that we attend and play our roles. Even without benefit of the fertile hunting grounds of the family boudoir, my bedchamber is just as full or as empty on any given night as I wish it to be. There is always a party or a concert or a religious observance to attend. And should I not wish to leave the halls of my home, there are dozens of suitable slaves on staff ready at my slightest word to attend to my pleasure.

I have more than my fill of assignations, dalliances and seductions, but I have only one love, and I will have no other. That summer I spent doing penance for disobeying my grandmother is when I first realized it. I longed for Myrana so terribly. As children, we were close. By necessity, we grew apart in our adolescence. She went on to the House of Bells, I to the Spiral Academy. Distance did not dampen my affection for her, though. Indeed, it only stoked the fires higher. I could scarce contain myself on those rare occasions when we could be together through our respective educations. I had the usual gamut of trysts with schoolmates and acquaintances, but they were only ever rehearsals for the day when I would finally have Myrana to myself. That day has yet to come, but it grows closer with each passing season.

Does she love me? Perhaps, I think, though she may not realize it. She is a practical girl, though, and she holds herself to high standards. Once we are married, she will see the right of things, and I'm certain the old affection of our childhood will quicken again and bloom all the brighter. Oh, we will be a glorious pair she and I. The Realm will tremble with our footsteps when at last we are united. I long for that day and hoard my passion in anticipation.



RELIGIOUS LIFE

I attend services ... religiously, one might say. I find it sheer folly to ignore one's religious obligations, really. What harm does going to services do? Curry favor where ever you may, I say. And who can honestly say they don't care to have the favor of a god? It's like saying, "No, no. Keep your beautifully laden table, strewn with delicacies and offered only for the asking. I would rather eat the rats, beetles and worms I can catch myself." Who can't afford the moment or two it takes to pay one's respects to the spirits of a place? I don't really see how one can afford not to! It's just good business, really.

I find irreligiosity particularly strange among the Dragon-Blooded. I have actually heard some claim to be atheists. Preposterous! How can this be so? We are living proof of the will of Heaven. The evidence of the Perfected Hierarchy is all around us. The work of the Immaculate Dragons is everywhere. It takes a special sort of mind to deny what a blind man can see. Faith or the lack thereof aside, those who fail to attend services clearly lack the dedication necessary to prosper in the game of politics. Tending to one's spiritual health is only one reason to be a regular and faithful congregant. Everyone there is looking at everyone else, noting who has come and who has not, who is seated next to whom and who speaks with the officiant or does not. It certainly doesn't hurt to leave the occasionally exorbitant tithe in the collection box, so long as the Immaculates see it. They are men and women just as we are. They remember. The temple is a place of power like any other, and with power comes intrigue and opportunity. Anyone who does not attend forfeits vital ground in the struggle for power. Really, I ought to thank them for it. All the easier for me to press the advantage when my opponents don't even bother to offer resistance.

I am not a studious believer. I do not spend my free time poring over the Immaculate Texts gleaning pearls of wisdom to further my own enlightenment, but I have been known to go on retreat now and then. Pay no mind to those that say I only deign to attend when it is politically advantageous to do so. They are only jealous of my knack for finding advantage where they see none. Advancing my own enlightenment is, however, one of my more important pursuits. A Dragon-Blood who does not is a fool. Power comes in many forms, and one of the most blatant is our mastery of Essence. That mastery arises from our spiritual connection to our elemental aspect, which, in turn, arises from our degree of enlightenment. The one area in school where I did excel was mathematics, and this calculation is exceedingly simple. Religious devotion begets spiritual enlightenment. Spiritual enlightenment begets power. If you are Dragon-Blooded and haven't made this connection, shame on you. Get thee to temple, infidel. Or don't. I will be happy to take your share for you.

SESUS NAGEZZER

Upon my mother's death, I inherited what was to become the base of all of my future operations. My home as a child, the Throne of Roses, was left to me, as was proper. As much of an embarrassment to my mother as she claimed I was, one does not leave a Manse to mortals when one has an Exalted heir. So, it was in honor of her impeccable character and loving nature that I transformed her sanctuary into a den of hedonistic debauchery the likes of which the Realm had never seen, making the mothers of Cynis and the lords of Nexus blush in fear for their very virtue.

Through the relationships I established while serving with the legions, I had countless leads on which to actualize my fortune. Between the brothel lords of the Imperial City and my merchant contacts in Chiaroscuro and Thorns, I had access to every nectar or whore that one could fancy or want. From the exchange of these commodities, as well as the sale of my mother's useless heirlooms, I set up houses throughout the Realm as well as major cities in the River Province, including Lookshy, Nexus, Greatforks and Greyfalls. Once things abroad were set in motion, the jade become nigh uncountable as I directed it to accounts throughout the Blessed Isle.

Now that a supply line had been established, I set the third stage of my operation into motion. I contacted two old friends to assist me with this portion of the project. First, I made a handsome donation to the Cloister of Wisdom in exchange for the indefinite loan of one of its martial-arts masters. It was in this way that Autumn Spiral came to serve me as my personal advisor on matters spiritual and philosophical while also providing me with a personal trainer to refine my very basic grasp of Wood Dragon Style. It was next that I contacted my cousin, Sesus Warru, a hot-tempered drunkard of a soldier who successfully toured with the Red-Piss Legion for over 10 years, spitting his disgrace back into the faces of those who condemned him even as he won dozens in battles for the greater glory of the Realm. It was Sesus Warru who would enable the true might of my organization.

Between Sesus Warru and I, we had enough favors to establish barracks, of a sort, in two cities. Chiaroscuro was the obvious first choice, and it was not long before we decided on Pangu as the second. We opted for Pangu over Thorns simply because we wanted our resources to be easily accessible from both the outlying regions and the Blessed Isle itself. It was shortly thereafter that Warru contacted the remnants of his original unit, as well as other soldiers he had had the pleasure of serving with in a less official capacity, and informed them of our intentions.

Veterans of campaigns for both country and coin, our new army was based at two optimal points and available to those we deemed worthy. Despite my own indulgences, Warru's being a drunkard and Autumn Spiral's less than



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optimistic outlook, we managed to create an efficient cell structure that could handle any number of requests and imperatives.

The purpose? Although it is certain that each of us had personal motives in all of this, our primary intention was singular. In an atmosphere of political infighting where there is such difficulty in commandeering a functional military body, we would protect the Realm. Our military was not as vast as the legions, but it was ours and ours to command at a moments notice for any cause we deemed worthy.

However, this would be known only to us. Our “glory” would be a common comfort between us and would not be known to the heads of state and the ministers of the court. Let it be known, however, that we did not create a common criminal syndicate such as those found in Nexus and the South. We serve the Empress’ Realm and nothing else. Although I most certainly harvest the benefits in the short term, it is for Empress and country that my every effort is made.

ROMANTIC LIFE

I have never lacked lovers, only love. I suppose my mother’s rejection of first my father and later me laid the template of my early concepts of affection. As one would expect, I opted to focus on joys other than affirmation, no matter to what degree I longed for it.

Eventually, I discovered the joy of prostitutes and courtesans. Without mess or consequence, I whored with the best during my military term, a virtual brothel master when it came to referring the best, the prettiest and the most daring to my men and commanding officers. Why tarry with a single, nagging, noble’s daughter when an entire spectrum of succulent flesh lay bare before you for no more than a few coins and a smile?

It was not until the establishment of the new Throne of Roses that I made the acquaintance of the concubines who would be my primary carnal comfort and personal assistants. It was Peleps Grondy of the Coral Archipelago that brought me my dear, dear twins, whose eyes were like the watery land from which they had been taken. To Grondy, they were an offering in payment of services rendered by Sesus Waru’s forces. For me, they were a calm day’s dream and a point of soft fascination.

Spinda and Echo were born of a tribe of wild men on a small island to the west of Onyx. As is common in such remote places, the twins were deeply affected by the currents of the Wyld. It was said that Spinda and Echo were actually a single girl split between two bodies, each bound to a shared mind that is as serene and graceful as blossom on the wind. I was warned, when I took them into my charge, to never separate them. Grondy stated that he had once made this mistake and

that the savage temper that unfurled from each of the girls was nothing like he had ever seen in a creature that walked on two legs.

Although I am free with my affections, it is to these twins that my heart answers, albeit to a creature or creatures beyond my understanding. Nonetheless, they are focused only on my desires and well-being and are dedicated, unflinchingly, to my care.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I am a loyal subject of the Realm, and therefore, I abide by the philosophy of the Immaculate Order. These matters are mutually dependent. Although I certainly question and contemplate the paradoxes and axioms of my beliefs, I do not shake the walls in which they dwell. For I am Dragon-Blooded, a child of the Dynastic House of Sesus, and faith in both my heritage and the nation to which I am loyal are set like jade in a mountain — perfect and unshakeable.

On the matter of my basic grasp of the teachings of Sextes Jylis, I am a man of action, not prayers or long meditations. Although I spend my days in opium dreams or entwined in a mass of courtesans I find myself too high to count, I feel that what I do serves He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass' greater purpose to as great a degree as the Wood Dragon's finest monks. This is because I am sworn to care for the Realm as others hack at its foundation with their arrogance and thirst for power. This is because I nourish the Realm as others strip it bare of its fruit, leaves and bark. This is because I create where others would destroy.

It is for this reason that Autumn Spiral convinced the abbots of his monastery that I was a worthy expenditure of effort and teachings. Autumn Spiral saw the truth of my actions and vision and has followed me, leaving the Cloister, to pursue the action of his faith as well as his personal convictions.

FAMILY LIFE

My father was the only support or true family I ever had. Although my mother was the very embodiment of what was considered great and mighty in the eyes of House Sesus, it was my father who gave me the guidance that I know has made me great. For my father was possessed of the mind of a general, though he lacked the courage, while my mother wielded the might of a warrior, while her vision was that of animal incapable of escaping its immediate circumstance, chewing off its foot in a rage of no meaning.

I believe I am living the legacy of the martial House of Sesus. Although it is below the cast gaze of magistrates and ministers, I command one of the most accomplished fighting forces in Creation, making up for its lack of numbers by way of its excellent training and

impeccable focus. It is to my father's honor that such a thing has come to be.

FUTURE PLANS

There is no greater hope in my heart than the return of the Scarlet Empress, to whom I am undyingly loyal. For it is by her will that the Realm that I so treasure came to be, and it is by through her person that it shall live forever.

Upon her return, I shall offer my continued assistance without hesitation, and it is to the glory of her Realm that my every action is dedicated.

TEPET EJAV

I entered the legions three months after my graduation from the House of Bells, much to my grandfather's consternation. Arada has a difficult time seeing past his own nose some times, at least when it comes to me. "See the world," he said. "Live a little before you make your decision." What he didn't seem to understand was that my decision had been made from the moment I picked up a sword. I would see the world — in the Empress' service.

That first commission was a petty one, justly so for one such as I, fresh from the House of Bells with no more real battle experience than a schoolyard scrapper. A peasant uprising in Chanos Prefecture. It was a minor thing, butcher's work. I was given command over a scale of recruits — a test. We went in green, but we came out well-blooded and eight soldiers short.

Afterward, the local prefect held a gala in our honor, though I must admit the honor was all his. Dinner was plain, the musicians hadn't bothered to learn a new song since before my Exaltation, and the company was lackluster at best. There were only two other Dragon-Blooded in the place: a pompous, arrogant boy and his shrew of a mother. I did not dance. The boy made a ridiculous attempt at assignation, treating me as if I were some awestruck milkmaid falling over my skirts to spread my legs at the sound of his voice. I managed to extricate myself without killing him. It would be many years before we would meet again, the fop and I. Fortunately for him, I did not recognize him. Oh, he had not shed the dandy entire, but he had grown a great deal since then. His eyes had sharpened, his tongue had smoothed, and he had found some hidden store of intellect in the years since. We have dinner now and then, Ragara Nova and I, when our paths cross. He is a devil at Gateway, and he sees a great deal more than he lets on. I have few enough friends these days. He is one.

That first mission had been far from an auspicious victory, but it did teach me one thing: Men and women fighting for their homes, their mates or their children are the match of any soldier. Those peasants never had a chance. They knew it, and so did we. And yet, when

they went down, they went down hard and took eight of ours with them.

From there, I went on to see the world, just as I'd planned.

I spent a year in the West chasing pirates, three months in Gem reminding Rankar VI that the Empress had not forgotten their arrangement. I hunted heretics in the North, barbarians and Fair Folk in the East. I spent some time in Lookshy, attached to a diplomatic envoy. I've been nearly everywhere at one point or another.

From time to time I would return to the Blessed Isle for a season, two at most, to keep up appearances and to pay my respects to house and throne. Each time I did, it was with another promotion under my belt.

My rise through the ranks was not swift, but it was steady. In time, I had risen to the rank of winglord, with 250 soldiers under my command. Then came the Battle of Tamrin Plain.

It began innocently enough. Certain members of House Nellens had invested heavily in beef raised by the plainsmen and, when the inevitable banditry threatened their profits, went weeping to the Scarlet Throne for help.

I don't begin to understand the subtleties involved in the political maneuverings that went on, but somehow, they managed to convince Her Imperial Majesty of the need for intervention, and so, we went.

OPERATIONAL PLAN, SHARKTOOTH LANDING

I have some good news to tell all of you, which is that we have discovered the location of the pirate haven of Sharktooth through the use of intelligence assets that I'm not at liberty to discuss. What we have pushed off on isn't a dress rehearsal for an eventual landing, it is the attack itself. I certainly hope if any of you have been faking up readiness reports, that you can make good on them by the time we hit the beach, because this is the real deal.

This is a limited forces operation. I haven't brought the entire field force along because we haven't the sealift to move them, and in any case, even if we could transport the men, there's no way we can hold up the logistical tail of our entire battle array on some arbitrarily remote stretch of coastline. I'll leave it to Abiri to thank me later.

We'll be landing in two waves. Our target is a U-shaped harbor facility with wooden quays and no significant breakwater. Maps will be provided shortly. First to hit the beach will be the three heavy dragons of the Red Piss currently aboard the First Squadron (Mixed). Thank the navy for the ships we're going to wreck, because this will be a combat assault. The First Squadron will operate with our self-powered escorts *Inestimable Twilight Archer* and *Resplendent Golden Cuttlefish* to neutralize any harbor defenses. The First Age ships will stay outside the harbor mouth as per swabbie SOP, while the First Squadron will proceed to the beach with all due dispatch. This is going to be an assault landing, so expect to hit a hot beach. We've practiced this, and I know we've had problems with it before, but the formations we have along are the best in the field force at it, and we're just going to have to trust in our surprise effect, the thoroughness of our reconnaissance and the love the Dragons have for brave men.

The second wave will land 15 minutes after the first, as the tide is starting to slip out, and will consist of our mercenary auxiliaries — the Red Wolf Legion, the Delzahn Volunteers and our landing-support logistics ships. The auxiliaries will land to perform the urban assault and screening duties they are respectively so well-known for, aided by the remains of the three dragons from the initial assault. Ships in the first wave probably aren't going to be seaworthy after the landing, so after we unload the logistics ships, we're going to pack back on them to go home. This makes force protection on the second wave our number one priority after successfully consolidating our beach head. If things go bad for the first wave, the second wave will combat assault directly to their support, but I have to say, if three dragons of heavy infantry can't crack this shoreline, I don't see that we're likely to do it with mercenary peltasts.

The number of people who know our destination is still very small and is going to stay that way until almost the moment we're ready to strike. Suffice it to say that you'll get specific orders when the time comes and that certain things we've been practicing for a while will make a lot more sense when you see what we're doing. Even our pilots will be briefed separately when we're closer to the big show, so please don't pester them for more information. Not that I don't trust any of you individually, but I'd prefer nobody knew anything more than they have to at this point. Even away from shore, I'm sure you all know that there are plenty of ways to get messages out, so to preserve operational security, we're probably not going to tell you exactly where we're going.





The bandits were bandits. We tracked them down easily enough. Three days march, and we'd laid siege to their encampment. They should have folded in no time, but they weren't alone.

The Anathema came down on us just after nightfall, a towering, beastly creature. It had the arms and torso of a man and the head of a great stag with a rack of twisted antlers a spear's length to either side. At the waist the man-torso joined the body of a great elk with black hooves and a sable pelt. With it came 500 of its howling, twisted thralls.

I won't trouble you with the details of a story told far better elsewhere. Suffice it to say, we thought we had them beat until the Fair Host came down on us. Ground between the Anathema and the Fair Folk, 900 legionnaires died that night, among them General Sesus Fallot and three of his dragonlords — my own commander among them. I lost half my wing, in total, but managed to turn the blood-maddened barbarians onto the Fair Ones long enough to give us time to make lines and attack. The Anathema escaped that day, but his slaves died to a man. The Fair Folk vanished with the morning mist. As for the bandits, we razed their camp to the ground but left enough of the stockade standing to crucify the survivors.

My next promotion made me a dragonlord in the service of General Cathak Tilis Mallon. It is poor manners to speak ill of the dead, so I will say this of Cathak Tilis Mallon: She was a fine lutist. I do not know why she sent me away when every soldier in the legion knew we would face a hard fight in the Varajtul before the month was out, but send me she did — to petition the Regent for funds and fresh troops.

Nova believes it was jealousy — my reputation had already grown far larger than myself, and Mallon was surely not deaf to it. If not that, then sheer folly — or perhaps some clandestine plot far subtler than I can conceive? These are the thoughts that plague me in the small hours of the morning. Would I have been able to secure the victory, or would there simply be one less Tepet on the earth and one more in it?

I arrived in the Imperial City three days after news of the Battle of Futile Blood. I came to beg for jade a dragonlord. I left a beggared general of a tattered legion in the service of a shattered house. They lined the streets as I left the Imperial Manse for the docks and watched me take my leave of the Isle. It was the first and last time I have ever felt ashamed.

The time since has been hard. There was a great deal of work to do in rebuilding the legion. Their bodies had been battered, and their spirits broken. It was a year before I dared put them in battle again. We won, and then, we won again. We rebuilt our strength. We healed. I took them as far from the place of their wounding as I could find, and we've been here ever since — building. I'm told

that in the halls of the powerful they speak of me with pity — the great dragonlord, resigned to the command of the Red-Piss Legion. I tell you, I wouldn't have it any other way. These men are my men. They have each of them been cast off by every other family they had. The legion is their family, their home. They have healed the wounds of the North, and they have grown strong. One day, one day soon, the world will see them for what they are, and the world will tremble.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I have precious little time or inclination for navel gazing, but the men appreciate the comfort faith gives them, and I can do no less than respect that. We observe the holy days and make the proper offerings. At any one time, we have a dozen monks in our ranks tending to the spiritual needs of the rank and file. I see no need to keep one on my personal staff. Arada chided me for my secularism, but I have found my place in the world myself, and I mean to keep it that way.

EXCERPTED FROM TEPET EJAVA'S SPEECH TO HER OFFICER CORPS UPON ASSUMING COMMAND OF THE REMNANTS OF THE TEPET LEGIONS

...We have been dealt a blow, to be sure, but we live yet and will continue to do so. We will regroup. We will reform. We will rebuild ourselves and our men and be a house made new. We will be stronger than ever before and wiser for the mistakes of the past. We must for the memory of our fallen kin and comrades. We will heal and grow again, and we will remember. We will remember those who left us to disaster and despair. Shattered swords will be reforged. Battered soldiers will be renewed. We will replenish our strength, and then, those who spent our blood so carelessly will tremble for fear that we will repay that debt in kind.

Know now, each and every one of you, that there is nothing for us outside of these walls. There is nothing beyond the ranks of this legion. We are all that we have. Each man goes as does his brother. None shall have glory lest that glory is shared by all. No one shall have victory unless all do. From this day forward, we are not men or women. We are soldiers. From this day forward, we are not Cathak or Tepet, Cynis or Ragara. We are not outcaste or Dynast, Exalted or mortal. From this day forward, we are but one thing. From this day forward, we are legionnaires, and let all who stand against us tremble and despair.

THE JOURNAL OF CATHAK GAREL MOLS

I have thought long and hard on whether or not to speak on this matter. It goes against my better judgment, but I can't help feeling that my observations on this matter might provide valuable insight into Tepet Ejava's character. I witnessed two of the General's three romantic endeavors and found tales easily enough of the third. They are all of them tragic tales I would not wish on anyone. It does cause one to wonder, though, if her reasons for eschewing the entertainment of romantic overtures isn't more personal than the lack of time or opportunity she cites. I myself have noted the interest of several visiting eligible potentates in Tepet Ejava in my time with her. I'm quite certain she noticed as well, and yet, she ignored them all in turn. I dare not speculate as to her reasons, but I cannot help but feel some small sorrow on her behalf.

The first and only Exalted, I've discovered, was undoubtedly Sesus Kajak Milada, youngest daughter of Sesus Kajak Marcellus and Talonlord of the Eighth Legion under Cynis Pelath. She was an exceptional officer in her tenure, respected among her subordinates and well liked among her peers. She was slain in battle by barbarians of the East two years into her service.

The second was a young mortal by the name of Beret Oxbow, a shipwright and sailor in the service of the satrap of Cherak. The pair of them made for many a tale in their months together. He went north with the legions against the Bull and was slain.

I wrestled long and hard with the decision to include the third. I would truly hate to give aid to those who plot against the General, but in the end, it is my mission to chronicle her life in all its particulars and it is not given to me to choose what is and is not too scandalous to include.

In the early days of her exile, Tepet Ejava pursued a pirate captain who had roamed the seas long years before Ejava's coming. He was her first great quarry in the Southwest. For three months, she chased him. A dozen times they met in battle and he slipped from her grasp until, at last, she caught him, by luck alone, asleep on his ship. His crew was captured or killed. He was made prisoner that the General might wring the whereabouts of the other two ships in his flotilla that were not anchored with him. Though her torturers brought him to the brink of death a dozen times, he would not speak. She sent them out and spoke alone with the captain, called Redfoam. She emerged briefly and ordered her cabin to be undisturbed. For three days, the door remained shut, and she permitted no visitors. On the fourth day, she emerged. Redfoam was tied hand and foot and keelhauled until he was dead. Within a week, the other two ships were found and burned, their crews slain to a man.



Exalted



What need have we the Dragon-Blooded of priests anyway? I ask you. We are touched, each and every one of us with divinity. We wield the very Essence of Creation with no more than an effort of will. Of what use is the teaching of some mortal priest, who has never once felt the thrill of shaping even the least Charm, to me? Arada, for all his vaunted hermitage, has more opinions on how the world should be than the busiest of busybodies and admonishes me for speaking heresy. I call it practicality... and just good sense, but I do so quietly.

I am no atheist, nor do I hold myself up as some sort of demigod on loan from Heaven for the benefit of Creation, but I have never once been inspired by the sermons of the Immaculates. I feel far closer to the divine when I am in the forest hunting boar with nothing but a good spear and the senses of my body. I am far closer to Heaven, literally and figuratively I suppose, at the head of a column of men I've trained, leading them to battle. Life and living inspire me — the dirt and blood and stink of it all. You can keep your cloisters and celibacy and your sacred texts. I read the will of the Dragons in the earth and the sea and the air. I feel them move in me as I fight and hunt and fuck and shit. What monk or priest can do better than that for me? None.

ROMANTIC LIFE

Romance? If I have no time for spiritual contemplation, what makes you think I have time for poetry and love play? I have not been wooed since my cousin Tepet Niat proclaimed at my uncle's, his father's, funeral that he needed a wife, now that he was the eldest living male of his line, and I would be his spouse. He was all of six years old, and I two years his junior. Now, I have few opportunities and fewer prospects for romance.

I have had lovers now and again as circumstance and situation permits, but not for some time. My life these days is not entirely my own. My duties require much of my time, and I am forever surrounded by subordinates. Some officers I know take partners from the ranks of their legions, but not me nor any under my command. I find the practice hopelessly disruptive to the proper workings of a unit and frankly abhorrent.

These days, if I take the pleasures of the flesh, it is a matter of an evening's dalliance or perhaps a festival tryst, nothing more. Duty is a poor lover but a devoted one. Ragara Nova has on several occasions attempted to seduce me, but with him, it is more a game we play — a tactical exercise. More like Gateway than love-making. Perhaps that is why I find it so fascinating. Still, that particular game is still in the opening gambits. No point contemplating the endgame just yet.

Loves? I have had three in my life. The first I met at the House of Bells. We were of a size and were paired for fencing drills and close combat. She was a daughter

of Sesus Kajak Marcellus and beautiful as a bank of embers on a cold Northern night. She gave me the first beating I'd ever had at the hands of another, and she dressed my wounds and massaged my bruises that night in the dark of the barracks. She graduated a year ahead of me and went into her family's service. I have not seen her since.

The second was a young shipwright I met while stationed in Cherak. A great bear of a man, he was. Red-bearded and ruddy-skinned. We drank in contest that first night, and he succumbed long before I did. I rode him into the dawn as my prize. We spent three months on the shore there before the legion was called north and I was sent south. I never saw him again either.

The third I will not speak of but to say our time was short together, and I remember it bitterly.

I'm certain one day I will be married, if I am not killed on the field of battle before. It is my duty to bear children for the future of the Realm, and I hold duty in high esteem. My only hope is that it be to a man I can stomach and not before I'm ready. My elders have taken to writing suggestive letters, hinting at the benefits a good marriage would have for the house. Each letter I receive mentions likely suitors and profitable opportunities, but none have dared openly urging me to matrimony yet. I've made it clear that there is a great deal more reaping to be done before I begin sowing, and I'll not be rushed from one duty to the next without a fight.

RAGARA BHAGWEI

The construction of the Heptagram and the recruitment of its administrators and instructors would be the defining act of the early part of my life.

Through my father, I was given audience by the Scarlet Empress, to whom I proposed the building of this new university, which would later be called the Heptagram, to honor the seven masters upon whose teachings the school's traditions would be built. The Empress accepted and charged me with the organization of every aspect of the project. Much to my delight, the Empress made special mention that her daughter Mnemon would be busy with matters of the Realm and unable to assist us with our work.

Insofar as the building of the campus, the Heptagram would be built to the far north of the Versino's ruin, on the same island. Above the crashing waves of the Great Inland Sea, the tower of the Heptagram would rise like a pillar of wisdom presenting itself to the rolling blue. Housing for the college's students would be situated around the tower and along the cliff's edge, always serving as a reminder of the precarious nature of the path of true knowledge. I believe it was the failure of the instructors of the Versino to truly reinforce the importance of this concept that led to my aunt's destruction of the school.

Locating the instructors, however, would be another matter altogether. With the protection of two monks of the Immaculate Order, an escort managed by my friendly dealings with the members of their order who had served at the former institution before its untimely destruction, I left to search the Realm for its finest sorcerers and savants, both mortal and Exalted. After 24 years of diligent searching and painstaking research, I assembled the six masters who would join me in laying the pattern for the new school. Two were mortal, versed in history and common thaumaturgy, three were Dragon-Blooded sorcerers who had served the Great Houses and were offered a chance to become independent of their lines, and one was a strange gentleman whose mastery of astrology demanded that he serve the Heptagram. Beneath these seven masters, another 30 teachers of varying knowledge and skills would form the remainder of the staff.

To prevent the dilution of the students' experience at the academy, I restricted attendance to no more than 80 students at a time. In this way, each student would have the special attention and supervision that would assure her optimal development.

With everything in order, we opened the doors of the Heptagram for the first time in the month of Ascending Wood RY 428, enrolling 20 students. This way, the students of the second year could enter a sponsored relationship with the students of the previous year, establishing a tradition and lineage of students that extends into the present day. The senior student would live with the new student throughout the first year, guaranteeing the novice at least one undistracted ear and mind that could provide him with answers concerning the schools operation and policies.

When I stood in front of those 20 faces who would in time wield the greatest powers to be had in Creation, I smiled a deep inward smile. I had built this. I had made this so.

ROMANTIC LIFE

Throughout my life, though it has been long, I have had but a few consorts who I would call lovers. Though it is strange for a prince of House Ragara, let alone a son of Cynis, to be deprived of fleshly pleasures, my situation demands it. I have no time for intrigue, games and courting or the complications they so quickly invite. No. The life tasks of Ragara Bhagwei have been laid clear, and I will not be diverted from them.

Nonetheless, my work, by its very nature, is the task of unmasking the patterns of life and death. I have had need, from time to time, for experimental consorts. During one of my much-needed breaks from intense investigations into the Great Contagion, I considered the interplay of male and female polarities and the role that these elements play insofar as the conduction of

Essence. I had been considering that, perhaps, the flow of fate that was tracked and delineated through the arts of astrology and the casting of lots could perhaps be microcosmically modeled and deciphered through the analysis of Essence play during the reproductive act itself. I had considered that, perhaps, the potential for Exaltation could be directly affected through the exercise of sexual postures that would lead to the correct configuration of Creation's force, thus assuring the couple the blessing of Exalted offspring. Of the few colleagues that I approached with my theory, all made recommendations that I implemented on one of the school's captive neomah before experimenting on Dragon-Blooded daughters of the Great Houses.

For this, I would require excellent subjects, and I could think of no better pool than the Exalted prodigals who attended my beloved Heptagram. Due to the nature of our work at the school, there would be little scandal. Indeed, how could one condemn such methodologies in the face of such things as necromancy and demon summoning? It was through this naïveté and oversight that I created what could potentially have been the largest scandal of the Heptagram's history, and would have been, if not for some truly adept maneuvering on my part.

The vessel in question was a daughter of House Tepet; a talented girl by the name of Oshina, versed in numerous Social Charms and an appetite for rich, old Exalts near death from old age. She had bragged to one of her classmates that her intensity had actually sucked

THE TANTRIC CATASTROPHE

There were no Charms developed from Bhagwei's experiments. Though the Realm's savants possess extensive knowledge concerning male/female Essence polarities and the nature of Essence exchange during sex, the disaster that occurred due to the addition of a powerful focusing artifact opens some interesting doorways, though not necessarily into the realm of divination or the prediction of Exalted births.

Nonetheless, Ragara Bhagwei's work need not end with his final report. As several Dragon-Blooded Charms grow more powerful when several Terrestrial Exalted work together, the use of amplification artifacts during tantric rites (or other such group rituals) could be used to create powerful Charms for a character who chooses to pick up where Ragara Bhagwei left off — though wise characters should opt to begin their experiments with bisclaverets or neomah as guinea pigs instead of the daughter of a powerful Great House!





the vital life from her first two lovers, both of which she had before she was 20 years in age, and it was this exaggeration that led me to invite her to participate in my project.

In preparation for the primary operation of the working, I requested that Tepet Oshina perform an extensive list of preliminary meditations and exercises to prepare her body for an intense experience of raw Essence. This was no arrogance on my part, as I too would be doing the exercises as part of my already full daily regimen as well. This was, in part, due to the intensity of the operation and also because of my implementation of the Sabras Pearl—a volatile Essence-amplification artifact that would intensify our Essence-play tenfold.

She had sworn to me that she had done the exercises. Although she was not emphatic in her convincing, her casual and confident assurance led me to believe that she had prepared both her body and her mind for the rigorous experiments that lay ahead. She had not, and as a result, she was stripped of consciousness and corporeal form.

We had been sitting entwined, engaged in slow, rhythmic acts of sex when I began to circulate my Essence through her, the Sabras Pearl all the while humming in our lap. She in turn, followed with the proscribed mantra and began to circulate my Essence back into my mouth. With no discursive thought in my mind, I began to experience a similar sensation to when I had Exalted and, based on my sense of her breath and focus, so had Tepet Oshina. As my sense of separate self began to dissipate and my mind merged with the lattice of Essence between us, I felt a horrible clenching around my neck and waist as Oshina's fingers clawed into my back, through the skin, embedding themselves into the muscle beneath. As my eyes snapped open, the girl was beginning to breakdown, her eyes glowing the purest white as her body began to fluctuate between various levels of solidity, eventually convulsing in a piercing resonance that shattered every window, mirror and glass in my bed chamber as Tepet Oshina dispersed in a rippling nimbus of Essence and the Sabras Pearl crumbled to dust. It was apparent, once my senses fully returned to me, that she had not prepared as I had asked.

After a private discussion with my fellow masters, it was decided that Tepet Oshina's death would be reported to her house as an accident of carelessness on the part of the girl. After all, this was true. It was also decided that I should not continue these experiments within the Heptagram. I agreed and logged my progress up to the point of the Tepet girl's demise as a third person account that I had witnessed during my travels to Nexus.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

It was my first tutor, Oakthorn, who first conveyed to me the teachings of He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass. During the years of my early learning, I was given a great

bit of instruction in the tenets of Immaculate Philosophy so that I would have access to a wisdom equal to my academic intellect. I believe that it is the lack of this very thing that leads many Dragon-Blooded to ruin and madness — revelation without realization.

During my first formal lesson with Oakthorn, when I was still living in Ragara's Manse, I believed that I had it all figured out. I had memorized countless herbal remedies, codices of anatomy and scroll after scroll of diagnoses and firmly believed that, if I held this course, I would achieve total mastery by some duly appointed date. I considered medicine and healing to be disciplines of pure reason, as easily charted, logged and understood as any art or academic specialty. I could not have been more wrong.

I was working on a short paper that covered the traditional treatments of the Mountain Pox, a highly contagious ailment found primarily in the mountains of the Far South, when I became horribly confused by my own calculations. I had used a method of formulation that had been tested true during the pre-Contagion reign of the Dragon-Blooded Shogunate. This method, considered the correct and irrefutable way to approach all matters of medicine, was frustrating me to no end. It was during this moment of pitched anxiety that Oakthorn walked in behind me.

He asked me what I was trying to achieve, and I laughed at his idiotic question. What did he think I was doing? Was it not obvious? Patting the ground next to him, he gestured for me to sit as he did.

Quietly, from the center of the darkened room, Oakthorn told me to breath in empty space and to allow it to expand inside me. Regardless, I didn't want to perform this idiotic exercise reserved for mortal Immaculate aspirants. That is when my old teacher made clear what was hidden.

Instantly, my eyes dilated as the radial patterns on the floor erupted around me, annihilating my previous surroundings and replacing them with the labyrinthine walls of a shimmering Essence mandala. In the distant voice of my most perfect teacher, my mind walked along the paths of mandala, my own thoughts and long-forgotten lore rendered upon the golden walls that made up its design. It seemed like days that I was immersed in this maze of my own frustration. Accepting my predicament, I ran my fingers along the raised characters on the walls as I walked, rapidly sifting through the contents of my head. After what seemed like an eon of trivial thoughts and days of memorized lore, I

located that shard of the Immaculate Wood Dragon from which my Exaltation radiated. It's pulsing green light was not so comforting as it was nauseating, as if those bodily humors that quench pain had suddenly flooded all levels of my being. Taking control of my discomfort, I plunged into my Exalted core.

Though I awoke with no conscious memory of the experience, I emerged from the pathworking to see Oakthorn leaving the room. As my vision focused, the Mountain Pox's remedy was scrawled upon the parchment that lay on floor in front of me, in the brushstrokes of my own calligraphy.

FUTURE PLANS

Though I have spent much time contemplating what the years ahead hold for my old bones, my study of the Great Contagion will most certainly be the subject that commands my passion until my final breath. It is the lack of progress that I have made in this arena that drives me so. Between sorcery and healing, there are few things that I have not researched as either a tangent of my concentration, or as a subject of interest in its own right. Nonetheless, there is a matter concerning this work that has implications I had never considered.

It was recently that I sent emissary to Sijan to retrieve a tome from it's great library at the cost of a profound amount of jade. This text, called *The Thousand Veils*, was reputed to be a Shogunate-era transcription of a manuscript penned by Anju Cinnibar, a scribe and scholar of the necropolis at the time of its founding. It has stood since time out of memory. It was my theory that the histories contained therein held the key to my true work. As one could imagine, I was overjoyed when the book was delivered to me with no complications.

I had spent the entire night pouring over the text, but though I spent all evening immersed in this endeavor, I found nothing to give my research direction. Exhausted, I retired to my bed.

It was in the early hours before dawn that Righteous Cloud and Cold Bastion, my Immaculate bodyguards, woke me from my rest. Shortly after I had gone to sleep, the pair had apprehended an assassin who had come for me in the night. The creature, now laying dead on the worktable at the far end of my bedchamber, was a child with black lips and chalk-white skin. Although I suspected the nature of the child immediately, it was not until further examination that I was positive what it was. The coming of a such a harbinger was certainly a grim affirmation that my true work had begun.





CHAPTER THREE

THE WORLD WE RULE



In every Dragon-Blood's life, there is a decision that is made, whether it is one that arises from the depths of serene meditation or a choice made from the compulsion of one's very nature. To create or destroy, these are the possibilities. Though some do one with the intention of the other, the life of a Wood Aspect is often defined by a passion for creation and cultivation. In the following accounts, the philosophies and views of the narrators are laid plain, expressing the many facets of their goals and destinies.

RUTANJALI

THE EAST

The forest is all I have ever known. When I was mortal, the forest was like a quiet neighbor, a place I could visit when the bustle of the village wore on me, a place to explore and discover when I was in need of entertainment or a place to simply sit and think upon the world as I stretched my body across mounds of soft moss. It was in this forest that I walked with my aunt and hid with my love Bima before his life was cut away by the swords of evil men. This forest was a forest of pleasant mysteries, bird songs and wildflowers.

When I was fleeing for my life, clinging to the arm of my wounded Aunt Rinchen, it was a place of terrifying speed and confusion. As we ran, the entire place became a whirlwind of greens, browns and grays punctuated by the

bright crimson blood that covered me and spilled from Aunt Rinchen, the only sounds being our labored breath and the crunching of sandaled feet running over leaves.

Upon being given to the King of Endless Branches, the forest became a very still place. My husband, the Wood King, was the center of a place I had known all my life. This being was the sacred guardian of that which has nourished, educated and protected me since the beginning of my years. To be wed to the forest's heart is truly a strange thing, even for one so tied to the trees and the life that dwells here as myself.

But even farther east, there is a place I have been to only once. To get to this eastern place, I had traveled nearly a month on foot. I had heard that beasts of extraordinary size made their home near the region of the northern forest that the spirits call the Bordermarch. A few of my King's subjects warned me against going, though I was not particularly concerned as spirits impose such strange rules on themselves and others.

I had been hunting throughout the better half of the morning, and the first odd thing I noticed was that the sun had not risen to its noontime position, the morning remaining as if moonlit, never brightening for a moment. There were no clouds above the canopy, and the creatures of the nighttime forest continued to chirp and buzz late into the afternoon. It was then that I spotted a glorious bristled boar, one of the largest I had ever seen, scrambling



through the thicket, its black tusks shining like obsidian in the moonlight. Slowly, I crept toward it, my steps completely silent on the mushroom-covered ground. Suddenly, a screech like none I had ever heard sent me scrambling backward, as a titanic owl dove at the quivering boar, its arm-length talons cutting into the beast's tough hide as if it were made of brittle leaves.

I slowly rose to my feet, amazed by the glory of this kill, making sure to stay close to the ground as I watched the owl feed. Its great beak jerked free a dripping bundle of organs when its eyes, quite deliberately, met my own. For a moment, I felt a deep acceptance — a desire to run to the east and live in this place as its child. But it was in the owl's eyes that I, for one fleeting but vital moment, saw that this place was not, and could never be, home. I knew that if I stayed in this place, I would become a mad thing, with nothing left to call Rutanjali.

SPIRITS

I remember my when my Aunt Rinchen would tell me of the spirits of the forest. She showed me the proper way to make offerings, the correct manner in which one addresses a tree before harvesting its leaves and the proper way to thank an animal's spirit once you have slain its body. These things, while appealing to a small child walking with her aunt through the woods, will not save you in the presence of true and powerful gods.

Gods are interested in exchange — a gift for a gift — and nothing else. It is this simple principle that makes them creatures of balance and nature. Nonetheless, it is always far better to give too much than too little. A spirit who is given too much will simply leave what it does not want, and left apples and carcasses will rot on the shrine. However, to give too little? This is surely an unfortunate thing. When a god is not given its fair share, it will surely take what it wants, from where it wants, in any way that it wants. This is the way of gods and the world in which they live.

MORTALS

Both my fondest and most terrifying experiences occurred in the company of mortals. As a young, human girl, I knew the love and safety of a human community. Together, the villagers eked out a life in what some would call wilderness while caring for each other and the land around them. Beneath dark branches and the moonlit sky, they would tell stories by the fire that veiled the feelings of their lives, becoming frightened, amused and illuminated together. During the day, they would mend houses, gather water, work at woodcrafts and hunt together, sharing what was made and found for the betterment of the tribe, divided so that each member of the community would have her share of what they had. And amongst this industry, there was love. Not the cold, strange love of spirits and animals, but a warm, soft love of peace and acceptance, of inclusion

and need. It is these people for whom I have made a shrine in the place they once lived.

And there are bad men. There are men who move through the world like a terrible fire, burning the life and beauty out of every place they come upon. With greed, wrath and arrogance, they kill one another and the world around them, as if they were the only mouths that needed feeding, the only bodies that needed clothing, and possessed of the only desires that needed satisfaction. It is these men who came to Carya Kos when I was but a girl and burned it to the ground, choking the love and peace from the place like a thick smoke flushing brightly colored birds from the trees, leaving nothing but a blackened tangle of charred branches. With their weapons of iron and their snorting horses, these men cut down their own kind, raping, murdering and pillaging as they went. It was these men for whom I did not shed one tear as the army of the King of Endless Branches devoured their flesh and scoured Carya Kos of their taint.

Now, my only tie to humanity rests with my sons, who themselves are not so human. With their father's blood in their veins, all of my sons shall live long lives and possess a certain edge over mere humans. Is it a mortal thing that I miss them so? Maybe. I suppose it is also a mortal desire that I feel I will soon follow when I go to seek out my three sons in the vast world into which they have wandered.

FAIR FOLK

In the deepest recesses of the terrifying East, there are creatures that hate Creation. These creatures, in their natural state, are formless and mad, but in this world, they ape the forms of men and mock their pastimes with cruel comedy and terrible tricks. Once, while hunting near the edge of the green expanse, I was approached by one of these creatures, so lewd and deranged I thought it a nightmare. He was tall and handsome in a wicked way, with a long emerald cape made from leaves and blossoms. On his face, he wore a mask with a long, rude nose and arching brows that exaggerated his piercing eyes. He had been dancing his way west when he came upon me, and he entreated me to walk with him.

His name was Voluwangle, and he claimed he was some kind of a prince among his tribe. He told me he was off to Great Forks in search of a prize promised him by a tale told by a god who lived there. This "Spinner of Glorious Tales" had told a story that assured this strange, long creature a woman meant for another. A trick of fate, this Voluwangle called it.

Growing tired of the odd thing's lies and bragging, I bid him farewell and began to walk my own way. In a blink, he appeared before me, nagging and incessant in his bid for my company. For the entirety of the day, I attempted to elude this annoying creature, and for the entire day, I failed. It was not until my husband came that Voluwangle agreed to depart.

Although I thought little of it, the King of Endless Branches seemed deeply disturbed by our meeting and warned me never speak to such a creature again.

CYNIS BELAR NORREN

THE REALM

The Realm? What is one to say of one's mother?

The Realm has given me everything I have. It nursed me from infancy, fed and clothed me, taught me all that I know and all that I will learn. I love it as I do the woman that birthed me. Frankly, what's not to love?

The Empress raised the Realm at a time when chaos and catastrophe threatened to unmake the whole of Creation. There is no overestimating the impact of that act. How can anyone not stand in awe of such an accomplishment? It is beyond my comprehension, and yet, some do. Assuredly, those who do not see the Empress' actions as they should are, by and large, ignorant barbarians, diabolical Anathema or their mind-sick cultists, but even some among the Dynasty have their doubts. I do not share them, nor do I understand them.

If not for the Empress and the Realm, where would we be now? Ground under the heel of the monstrous Anathema? Or perhaps in the thrall of the Fair Ones, mired in the boundless chaos of the Wyld, the souls of ourselves and our children no more than meat for their twisted tables, our hopes and dreams distilled to fine liquors to quench their thirst as they ride in hunt of those of us who got away. Would that have been a better fate?

I will grant the doubters this: These are dark times for the Scarlet Empire. The Empress' absence has left the ship of state rudderless and adrift. We would be in much better straits were she back at the helm guiding us through the waters we now sail. But she is not. The struggle we play out each day, house on house, family on family, is all a part of her plan. She laid the foundations for the Thousand Mazy Paths. She begat the Thousand Scales and the All-Seeing Eye. Who are we to question her wisdom? It is our place to have faith in her plan, to hold true and play our part and, in so doing, strengthen the Realm by cutting weakness from the fold. In fire is steel forged. What Empress would we want who could not survive the machinations of the Great Houses anyway?

The Realm is like a well-tended orchard. It grows for a time, blooms, bears fruit. Then, it dies back for a time, branches fall, resources are conserved for the next growing season. The power of the Realm recedes as the energies of the Dynasty are turned to strengthening root. The unfaithful are exposed that they might be excised. Weakness is rooted out. When the spring comes, it will grow again and be all the stronger.

I hold my duties in particular as sacred and vital to the continuance of the Realm. In service to my house, I seek out those who would weaken the empire with infirmity,

intemperance, incompetence or infidelity. My counterparts in the other houses do the same on behalf of their kin, and I praise them for it. Our struggle cuts the chaff from the wheat, and in the end, should the Empress not return, her one true successor will rise, tempered in the kiln of intrigue, and lead us to a new age of glory.

HOUSE CYNIS

Did I say the Realm was my mother? Tsk, tsk. I suppose then that I must have two mothers. How is one to choose? If fortune smiles upon me, I'll never have to.

House Cynis has a certain... reputation among the Dynasty. They call us many things: debased, decadent, debauched. Hypocrisy, pure and simple. Honesty is what they criticize, though they will never admit it. We are honest in our dealings with mortals, honest in our acknowledgement of the urges of the flesh, honest in our ambition for the Scarlet Throne. They look on our lack of shame and call it loose morals, and yet, they clamor at our doors for invitations to our parties and fill our coffers with jade for the slaves we provide. If you ask me, they would benefit from a little honest self-scrutiny. But given the choice, I'd prefer they go right on fooling themselves and padding our margins.

My great aunt has even made catering to the more twisted pastimes of the other houses a profitable venture, though, obviously, she doesn't advertise that fact. Her discretion is a large factor in maintaining her profits, and these days, every coin is a treasure, and every favor owed is precious. The struggle for succession is expensive in all ways, and our business interests have been slacking off of late. The lands of the Threshold are our chief suppliers of fresh slaves. Since the Empress' disappearance, their interest in sending bodies to the Blessed Isle has slackened, their prices have risen, and our supplies have dried up. Some of my more creative kin have managed to staunch the flow of jade from our coffers with clever gambits and new sources of revenue, but those are only stopgap measures. A true solution will only come when we have a new Empress on the Scarlet Throne to wield the might of the Realm once again. And maybe it's overstating the obvious, but my preference would be to have a child of Cynis at the helm of our little ship of state.

MORTALS

The Dragon-Blooded are Princes of the Earth. There is no hubris in that title. It is simply the truth. We who have been Exalted by the Dragons were given divine title and lordship over all of Creation. All that walks or crawls on the earth, all that swims in the sea or soars through the sky falls within our bailiwick. It is given to us to protect, preserve, cultivate and manage all these things in such a way as to promulgate the will of Heaven and glorify the Elemental Dragons. I believe it must be obvious to anyone with even a rudimentary education that this of course includes mortal men and women.





It may be coarse to say, but it is no less true: Mortals are a resource to us like any other. Wait! Wait. Hear me out. It is true they are not animals to be led to the slaughter for a meal or the bounty of their hides. They think and feel and love and hate. These things are not to be ignored. This is precisely why we... we do not grant anyone dominion over them in any sense beyond that necessitated by the most rudimentary governance. Only Heaven's Exaltation can grant that authority. Thus it is that only the Dragon-Blooded are permitted to own slaves. Thus it is that only the Dragon-Blooded are permitted command rank in the legions. The true legions, I mean — not the Vermilion, which has little business claiming the name Legion at all. Our laws and customs reflect the Perfected Hierarchy, as they should. Thus, only those Exalted by Heaven have the will, the wisdom and the divine authority to rule so fully over the lives of other men and women.

I know the worth of a mortal life. I see it in the ledgers of House Cynis every day. I know further that only a fool throws valuable resources away after whim and folly. Cruelty and brutality in the treatment of those under one's care are not only distasteful, they are quite simply bad business. Just because we are given dominion over the lives of mortal men and women does not mean we must be careless with them. You do not buy a glass vase just to break it, if you have any measure of sense. No, we must grant them the respect they deserve. Spend their lives wisely, punish them justly, and they will repay you with faith and respect.

ANATHEMA

Demons are not consigned only to Malfeas and the sanctums of sorcerers. They walk the earth, in flesh, and they wield terrible powers ripped from Heaven by means of dark rituals and evil practices. I've never seen one, personally, and I'm grateful for that. They haunt the Threshold exclusively — I'm quite certain Heaven would never permit such a creature to sully the soil of the Blessed Isle with the touch of its feet. It's convenient, too, if you ask me. Better for all if they stay out there, where the Wyld Hunt can track and kill them without fear of innocent citizens of the Realm getting in the way. Honestly, what matter is it to me if a few Thresholders get scorched alive by some poxy, demon Anathema? None, I say. Perhaps things would be different if they knew their place and offered up more than the obligatory lip service that's generally given to vows of fealty.

That business in Thorns, though. That is rather bothersome. Once the matter of succession is resolved, I'm quite certain Thorns will be scoured of the filth that's taken up residence soon after. Again, though — it all goes back to the matter of acknowledging the proper authority of the Realm. Satraps and tributary lords who fail to bend knee in good faith to the Scarlet Throne are asking for this sort of madness to be visited upon them. How can we be expected

to make the necessary investments in funding forces to prevent such occurrences? What obligation have we to them when they don't bother to fulfill their own obligations to us? We give as we get, as is just. If they would provide the required tribute, honor and obedience, perhaps the Realm would pay a bit more attention to their security. As it is, we have more important things to worry about anyway. The matter of succession must be settled, and the Great Game takes time, money and resources. It would be irresponsible of us to divert attention from matters as important as that to pursue wild adventures half a world away.

THE FAIR ONES

They are jackals, and I say that without rancor. They lurk at the edges of the world waiting for some small morsel to slip out from under the watchful eyes of the lion, and when one does, they snatch it up and run away to eat it at their leisure. Certainly, they are more dangerous than true jackals — I don't mean to say they are harmless — but they haven't the courage to be a genuine threat to a strong and vigilant Realm. And they can be reasonable.

Honestly, put yourself in their shoes. They hover out there, exiled to the roiling cauldron of the Wyld, longing to take hold of Creation and carve themselves a piece of it. The only thing preventing them from doing so is us — the Dragon-Blooded of the Blessed Isle. Along comes a terrible war and then a devastating plague, and all of a sudden, there is all this land with no one on it and no one guarding it. Anyone who is honest with themselves at all knows that, if the situations were reversed, they would do the very same thing the Fair Folk did.

"But they eat people's souls!" you say? Well, we all have our appetites. What is distasteful to one is a delicacy to another. Do you begrudge the jackal his dinner of carrion simply because you would not eat it yourself? Of course not. The jackal only acts within his nature. So, too, the Fair Folk.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you should invite them to your table and offer your maidservant's soul as an appetizer. Surely, you should not. I'm just pointing out that they have needs in accordance with their nature. Provide them with what they require, and they will gladly repay you in kind. There is no reason we cannot have an amiably and profitable relationship with them, given the proper precautions.

SESUS NAGEZZER

THE REALM

The Realm has been the most important thing in my life since I was very young. There is nothing I wouldn't do to protect, expand and perfect the imperial presence, strength and prosperity. The Realm has made me a wealthy and powerful man, yet I have done nothing to harm it. This is a rare thing in our present time.

The very young Dragon-Blooded have grown quite different from what we were when I was a child. Exalting during the absence of the Empress, they are nationless bastards without a tie to the only thing that can make them what they truly are.

We are the Ten Thousand Dragons, and our duty is clear. To violate the peace and wellness of the Realm is unforgivable and can not be tolerated. If even one of our number forsakes his Immaculately intended destiny, all of us suffer. I am fully loyal because nothing less is acceptable. Therefore, there are those among us, myself being one, who must separate the weak from the strong, throwing the weak to the lions as well as being one of those lions when necessary.

But there are benefits to be sure. I protect the Realm from greedy men because my well-being is best served by its wholeness. With my free companies, which are especially effective as the Realm's armies no longer have dispositions that match them, I can apply support to the satrapies without taxing the Realm's core forces. In instances where the Realm's forces are too tangled by the bickering of my brothers and sisters (meaning at all times right now), I have been known to apply focused resources at vital points to assure stability and the continued flow of commerce. Without bureaucratic confusion and the corruption endemic to today's imperial legions, my men can engage preemptively at a moments notice, sometimes not even making their presence known.

Loyal Dynasts with integrity and courage may at some point have need of forces that terrified politicians are loathe to lend them. In these situations, an interview is arranged, either with Autumn Spiral or myself. During such an interview, I do not have time to evaluate the outcome of the entire campaign being proposed, so I evaluate the man or woman who is proposing it. If their words convince me that their intentions are pure, loyal to the Scarlet Empress, founded in the Immaculate Philosophy or otherwise in the best interest of the Blessed Isle and its satrapies, then arrangements will be made. However, if the intentions, no matter how grand, are engineered for family or personal gain — recognition by the Imperial Court, as a political maneuver to outshine competitors or other such hollow glories — the interview will be drawn to a close, and if all goes as planned, the one who is interviewed will find immovable obstacles on her road to glory. This is my way, and I go about it diligently and without need of recognition. I am a tool of the Realm in the Empress' absence and will continue to be so upon her much awaited return.

What about the drugs? What about the courtesans? What about the orgies? It is well known that I possess such appetites. I have always indulged such desires with shameless abandon, and these things, I do for me. However, these things are not without their patriotic applications as well. The Dragon-Blooded are a passionate race, and thus, the objects of passion — opium, wine, whores and

decadent social affairs — are often the key to their cooperation. When a Senator of House Ledaal, in the midst of her drunken debate with an emissary from House Ragara, catches the sight of a lovely courtesan from the Northern shores, at that instant, a route to the core of her desire is made known. It is through openings such as this that great victories may be won, though no soldiers have marched, no charges have been sounded, and no blades have been drawn. Since I can no longer triumph on the field of battle, I must find new fields on which to win these conflicts.

Besides, the flow of vice binds the weak and keeps them content. Is it cruel to provide a salve to the many who are unable to make a difference? Is it wrong to provide distraction to those who could not bear the truth of their own realizations? Not at all, and I would not judge this gluttonous lot, for I am certainly one of their number.

HOUSE

It has been a long time since I have had open and true relations with the leaders of my house. A house divided five ways can only have so much order. Nonetheless, my brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles among the Sesus have done well to gather theirs from the satrapies, keeping fair order among their own. I am sure they are loyal to their house and kin, and that is all that most would ask from a child of the Scarlet Dynasty.

I must admit, I do not see this familial solidarity as at all adequate. Aside from my cousin Warru, who has been so loyal and true to my cause, I hold strong doubts concerning the loyalty of the Sesus lot. I believe that the Dragon-Blooded of Sesus, as is the case with many of the other Great Houses, are only as patriotic as their own safety and prosperity are concerned. I will not deny that I take full and constant measures to assure my own comfort, but if I were put in so dreadful a position that I was compelled to decide between the Realm and my fortune, there would be no decision. The Realm must always come first.

It is no rare thing these days that the health of a house supersedes the well-being of the Realm as a whole. On more than one occasion, I have seen what supposedly great men will do at the expense of the Realm on behalf of their houses. For the good of a house, they would sacrifice the safety in which it rests. Do they not see that one is merely a part of the other? Does one not see that if the Blessed Isle's head is hacked from its shoulders the limbs called houses will simply wither to their graves? If the Scarlet Throne's hold is broken, all of the Great Houses are surely damned as well.

All of my wealth and power rest upon this simple and obvious foresight.

THE GUILD

As a man of commerce, I have had my share of dealings with the Guild. At points, this arrangement has been cooperative, whether it be my mercenaries accompanying





envoys between the satrapies and the leaders of the Guild or the wholesale purchase of exotic nectars from the East and South, so difficult to obtain without the assistance of the merchant princes.

However, the Guild is also my enemy. As the Great Houses cannibalize the Realm from within, the Guild gnaws at its edges. Through its operations, the Guild creates need for its commodities where there shouldn't be any, diverting the balance of jade, slaves and drugs to whichever locale will make it the most profit, unconcerned with the effect that will have on the Realm's economy as a whole. And why not? To destabilize the finances of the Realm would benefit the Guild unimaginably, as it would become the undisputed pillar of wealth throughout all of Creation. And while this is all well and good for the Guild, these conditions should not be tolerated by any son or daughter of the Dynasty.

I am sure that such degenerate and traitorous states as Lookshy would be pleased to see the Guild consume our livelihood, like a dog eating off the plate of its sleeping master. It is exactly this type of treason that I seek to prevent. Though the master is asleep, the dogs will behave.

MORTALS

Humans are amazing creatures. From the streets of the Imperial City to the barbarian hordes of the North to the weasel-eyed jade-counters in Nexus, they lead fast industrious lives that leave no trace upon the face of history lest they excel beyond their capabilities. Each mortal life strains toward its end, striving for significance at the feet of gods and Exalted.

I feel it is our responsibility to protect the mortals. Though many of the Dragon-Blooded use the unExalted to feed their appetites, not caring one way or the other as to how they are treated, I consider it the duty of the strong to care for the weak. This does not hold true for how one treats Dragon-Blooded however. We are greater and, therefore, must be responsible for our own goals and aims, tested by our elders so that we may fully manifest our might and hold the Realm till the end of our time.

However, far be it from me to underestimate the mortals. To overlook their potential because of their apparent shortcomings and weaknesses would be an offense to a man of my upbringing and faith. If I had a legionnaire for every time a young Dynast considered me a fat cripple not worth his thoughts, the army I would command would not fit within the confines of Creation. No. What those not blessed by the Dragons can achieve simply requires more of them — as armies, generations or as an institution of philosophy spread throughout the world. It is because of their ability to forge their mediocrity into something greater that I retain them by the hundreds for my own purposes. Some of my finest servants — merchants, brother lords, alchemists, courtesans, mercenaries, spies and assassins — are from this

herd of lessers that is so often overlooked. It is the fact that they are so underestimated, much like myself, that they are invaluable to my work and to the well-being of the Realm.

THE IMMACULATE ORDER

The Cloister of Wisdom was a place of healing for me. Although it was a complicated and involved matter to enroll there, especially in the condition that I was in when I arrived, the serenity and clarity of the Immaculate purpose gave me what I needed to decide my own fate. My gluttony surely repulsed the majority of the monks who were cloistered there, but in their disdain, many gave me hard words to contemplate, providing me with a mirror in which to see the failings of my life. As I cleared the debris from the surface of the mirror, the truth of their worlds helped me realize the full scope of what I would dedicate my life to. For this, I can not thank them enough, despite how cruel they seemed at the time of this lesson.

Do I regret my failure at the Cloister of Wisdom? More so than any other failing in my life including the poor judgment that rendered me a physical cripple. I feel this way because there were no factors other than my inner weakness and physical degeneracy that I could not make the grade. I was too lazy, too weak, too uncommitted and too distracted to become an Immaculate, and I can blame no being but myself.

However, I did gain many things from the Immaculates that I have kept with me to this day. The fundamentals of Wood Dragon Style were not completely lost on me. I did achieve the basic levels of initiation, and I did learn the first several techniques. It was merely the form that was beyond my grasp. In addition, I also came by Autumn Spiral, who has been much like my own personal Cloister of Wisdom, but with a personality and patience that is conducive to my own as well as being tolerant of my lifestyle and methods.

I am also quite devoted to the philosophy of the Immaculates and the teachings of He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass. Although I am unfit to serve as one of Sextes Jylis' elite spiritual warriors, I am devoted nonetheless. It is with this in mind that I bow to the masters of the Immaculate Order and to the clarity of their wisdom.

ANATHEMA

The demons who were Creation's oppressors in the First Age are always a pressing concern. Although they are not something of which I am deeply educated, they are a pox upon the Realm and, therefore, my enemies. Though Sesus Warru feels that they may be the greatest threat to the Realm, I am quite sure that such evils from the past will never again see their former glory. Though word has it that they are once again growing in number, I am quite sure that an increase in Wyld Hunts is all that is truly needed to prevent their menace.



TEPET EJAVA

THE REALM

The Realm is a hen house. It was not always thus.

Once, it was strong, powerful. A lion in the world. There was order, law and honor. The Empress built an empire out of ruins, and she did everything she had to do to maintain it. But now, we see the fruits of her labors squandered by the children who have forgotten why the empire was raised. They know only that it is vast and rich and that they want it for themselves. But they are only shadows of what begat them. I see no new Empress or Emperor in the ranks of the Great Houses now. I see schemers and spies, assassins, politicians, despots and worse. How I long for a leader in whom I can have pride and serve joyfully.

The Realm is a hen house, and 100 foxes wait with mouths open on our doorstep while we squabble and peck, warring amongst ourselves for the high perch. Each passing day, the foxes creep closer, snatching up those on the outskirts of the Scarlet Empire. In the Threshold, those who once bowed low before the might of the Empress grow bold in their defiance. In her absence, they fear no consequence. They can see that the eyes of the Realm are not on them but on itself. The legions are splintered, scattered to the houses, remade as petty personal armies rather than the fist of a nation. Oh, the transformation is not complete, but the course is clear.

I am a prisoner to the struggle for primacy. I am held in high esteem, they say. I am an invaluable asset to my house and should be guarded carefully. So, they keep me out here, in the far reaches of the world, hunting bandits, pirates and smugglers, far from any danger. They call it a great service to our house. I call it a sentence undeserved. What use are assets if they go unused? The battles against the Bull of the North robbed us of much of our strength, yes. But the lion that hides in her cave for fear of the hyena starves and feeds the very thing she fears.

I have not spoken with Arada in months. When I saw him last, I spoke imprudently and honestly, as I am speaking now. He was unimpressed. He berated me for disloyal talk and warned against loose tongues and listening ears. Against whom might I be committing treason? The Empress is gone, and were she to return, I would be the first to offer my life in thanks to the Dragons for her guidance. My uncle the Regent? He could not tear himself away from his self-sanctification long enough to muster the steel to level charges. As for disloyalty, I say that my words spring directly from my loyalty to the Realm. I am as great a patriot as any there ever was. It is my loyalty that, when I look upon the shambles that the Realm is becoming, forces me to speak. The Anathema are rising again, and the Deathlords stumble out of whatever hell that birthed them to spread their plague across the land. The tributaries grow fractious and test the





will of the empire to punish those that stray. We have seen what happens when the Fair Ones sense weakness. Inaction is unconscionable. We do not have the luxury of ignoring the world across the Inland Sea in favor of our pursuit of power here on the Blessed Isle. There is not time enough to let the subtle wiles of the Great Game winnow the field of aspirants. We need a true scion of the Empress. Someone with the will to yoke a nation, the strength to draw the Great Houses in line and the wisdom to strike soon and swiftly. The tree of empire has grown in on itself. Left to its own devices, it will choke itself to death. A great pruning is on the horizon. I pray that we survive it, for the world's sake.

HOUSE TEPET

Say the word “Tepet” today, and you will certainly hear the words “Battle of Futile Blood” soon after. It was a defining moment in the fate of our house. We had little choice in its timing. We do have a choice in what we are to become in its aftermath.

Our elders counsel patience and passivity. They put me far from the Blessed Isle to collect petty victories with which to rebuild our political strength. This is not my way. We are a military house, or were. Before the war in Halta, there was conflict, tension. The caution of the elders tempered the willful temper of the soldiers. We were balanced. But the soldiers are gone now. We lost three senior officers out of four and near all of our strength in the counsels of the house. Arada could sway the tide, but he is too busy frowning in his ale and counting his scars. In his place, the others fret over their lost prospects and scabble for aid among the very houses that left us to die against the Bull. Great House indeed.

Hope lies in youth and the will to act. The elders have lost the fire to make great deeds. They have lost the courage to risk everything on a slim chance of glory and a slimmer chance at victory. Like starving men clinging to a scrap of bread while a feast lies a step away, they will not reach for what they could take for fear of losing what they have. I am not them.

I am not afraid. I know the worth in risking the loss of a village to gain a palace. I see that it is not scraps we still hold, but air and nothing more, and I would gladly risk that to bring glory back to our house, to repay those that betrayed us and the Realm for their petty games of power.

MORTALS

It is an old story oft told, but no less true for being familiar. I have fought shoulder to shoulder with Exalted and mortal alike, and I can tell you the Blood of the Dragons is a gift of power but no guarantee of courage or valor. I have seen porters stand against an army with nothing more than a yard of wood in their hands when their Dragon-Blooded masters turned and ran. I've seen mortal soldiers hold a pass when their commanders deemed it hopelessly lost just to prove them wrong. Courage does not come in

the blood, but in the temper of the spirit. What courage is there in facing a mortal man when you know the favor of Heaven is with you? Courage does not lie in any power of magic nor Charm nor enchantment of the bygone Age. No, and let the Eye strike me down for saying it if I am false, true courage lies in facing your foeman with naught but the steel in your hand, the strength in your arm and what luck you can make between you and death.

I hear a great deal of ill feeling toward me for my use of mortals in command. My answer to them is that each and every one has earned the rank they hold. Mortals are not fit to lead, they say. Only the blood of the Dragons can make an officer. I say the blood of the Dragons gives us wings to rise while mortal men are left to climb as best they may without. If a mortal man meets my test of rank without the benefit of Exaltation, then I say he is at least as fit as one who does so with it. I'll not pass him over because his mother and father made the mistake of coming from common stock.

Others speak of the obligation of Exaltation, but it seems to me that, coming from them, it's nothing more than a platitude spoken to placate the sorry souls they tread upon. I say mortal men and women deserve our respect, all the more so because we have been lifted above them. When was the last time you walked through the slums of the Imperial City? When was the last time you looked your valet in the eye? Yes, we are above them. We are gifted with powers beyond their imagining. When their children's children are old and dying, we will have many years yet left to us. By the sweat of their bodies and the toil of their hands are our palaces built, our litters borne and our tables laden. While we dine on succulent fruits from across the sea, they scabble in the dust for a few roots to stave off death by starvation. Yes, we have been blessed by Heaven, but for what? Our own glorification? No. We are Exalted in the service of the Dragons. We are given power that we might wield it in the preservation of Creation, that we might use it for the good of all humanity. It is our duty to shepherd humanity toward glory, to guide them toward honor and to guard them against the dark hazards that threaten them. We are given power toward that end, but we must not forget why it is granted.

Exaltation is a promise. It is a promise of what humanity could be. It is up to those of us who receive it to live up to that promise and live a life worthy of the gifts given to us.

ANATHEMA

I don't know a lot about them, but I do know this: They fight like devils and are purest hell to kill.

Arada seems to think they deserve our pity, some of them anyways. I've never seen anything in their eyes but a great hunger for my death. But then again, I can't imagine my eyes hold much different for them. That's the way of the battlefield. When I meet them, it's over crossed swords



and the corpses of my men. I'm not generally in the mood to assess the quality of their person, nor do I have time. By the time we are within range of a conversation, we've already decided matters are going to end with one or the other dead. So far, I've always come out the live one.

The Order says they are irredeemably evil. Maybe so. It says they gain their powers through dark rites and black magics. I have no idea, but I do know the last one I killed looked like nothing more than an urchin boy out of any market in the Realm. He didn't look much like he knew anything of rituals and rites and magic, but he was quick as quick can be and as hard to catch as a shadow at midnight. I killed him as I did all the others, but I can't say it made me proud to do it.

I kill them where I find them, but I take little joy in it. I've known many a Dynast to do things as dark as the Anathema are accused of, and we don't

hunt them. I know power begrudges power, and the least of the Anathema holds as much power as the best Dragon-Blooded. I hunt them because it is my duty to do so. I hold no grudges against them but for the blood they spill.

RAGARA BHAGWEI

THE REALM

I have lived a long time, even by the standards of Dragon-Blooded, and it is true, the Realm knew greater glory in days past than it does at present. What is the cause of this? Many would say it is the absence of the Scarlet Empress, so great in her majesty and wisdom that she built a dynasty that could not last without her hand wrapped thick with its strings and reins. Others would say it is the selfishness and recklessness of the Great Houses, each one plotting against the other in a knot of intrigue that could result in no end other than the total crippling and debasement of the Realm. Either argument has deep-running philosophical implications. My feelings on the matter are manifold.

Will the Realm be devoured in the absence of the Scarlet Empress? It is certainly possible. The Empress was undeniably the heart of the Blessed Isle and all lands over which it holds dominion. She was, for all intents and purposes, the pattern of all that the Realm currently is. It is from her that all things imperial take their shape and come in and out of existence. Of course, the Empress is the center of her empire, but she is certainly not the only entity who could hold this office.

Would the empire change? Certainly. The new Realm would take shape around its new monarch, and many things tailored to the Empress' whims would fall from being. However, many new things would come to be as well, expressing the shape and form of the new ruler. It is from the Great Houses that such a leader could arise, a bold, new monarch of the Empress' blood who carries with her a renewing vision that could fill





the yawning emptiness left by their mother's disappearance. Or one such being could crawl from the pool of bubbling mortality that expands around us, a bastard son or daughter of the Dragon-Blooded, ascending to majesty as the Empress herself did, saving the one and the many from the doom that so many imperial savants foretell.

The reality of this? The Great Houses are strong, and the process of infighting is necessary insofar as it weeds out the weak and the unsuitable. Much like ideas fighting for significance in the mind of a wise savant who has given consideration to far too many of them. Many panic and rant about the end merely because their conception of the Realm is threatened by dissenters in Lookshy and other regions of the Scavenger Lands. Perhaps a new Dragon-Blooded Empress, or Emperor, will rise from the common places and seize power. Nonetheless, the nature of the world is cyclical. There is nothing to fear from so natural a thing, though death and change are certainly the sources of many a great man's darkest nightmares and fears.

All in all, I am content. I am quite old, and my only concern is the focus of my work. As recent events have revealed new territory in my work, I am sure that, due to the nature of such ominous things, I will continue till the very end, whether the Realm still stands or not.

HOUSE

Ah, the matter of house.

It has been the greatest mercy that my lineage is known to none. Such foresight on the parts of my father, and especially my mother, can not be commended enough. As I have no interest in contesting the wise leadership of my younger half-brother Banoba nor the machinations of the triumvirate of Wisel, Belar and Falen, I bow my head to the clarity of decision on the part of my progenitors.

Certainly, however, the thought has crossed my mind. What would happen if I, Ragara Bhagwei, were to become a player for the Scarlet Throne?

Would I have a rightful claim? Being the eldest son of the heads of two strong houses, as well as the chief administrator of the Blessed Isle's most elite institution of wisdom and magic, I most definitely would.

Would I be capable of taking it? This is a more precarious question, but as no less than hundreds of Dragon-Blooded capable of summoning demons from the depths of Malfeas and wielding unimaginable magical powers have called me master at one time or another, owing their power and abilities to me, I feel that a sound backing would be a somewhat simple thing for me to cultivate.

But that is neither here nor there. Why should I seek a part in so treacherous and wearying a game when my life's calling is so far from answered? There are many who have power aspirations and have been training and murdering

for their standing from the moment they Exalted. Am I so unwise that I would become a part of that?

THE HEPTAGRAM

The Blessed Isle's magical college remains the greatest accomplishment of my long life. If I was to give a name to the center of my pride and esteem, it would most certainly be the Heptagram. I firmly believe that the staff and students of my school — past, present and future — hold the salvation, destruction and renewal of the Realm in their hands.

I do not find it vain or daring to say that sorcery, and the ways of hidden lore, are the most powerful forces to be had in Creation. It is because of this fact that so many young Dragon-Blooded have taken up the study of such things. Unfortunately, these students are a pale reflection of those who attended the Versino — though it is our hope to groom the elite among them into the closest approximation of that past excellence.

Although the vast majority of these students are driven solely by motivations of power, there are also those who understand what magic is for — those who “get it.” The practice allows us to do such things as bind demons, summon elementals and harness the divine elements to hypnotize courtesans, acquire jade or smite enemies. Magic is the instrument of our evolution, the supreme dance of Essence that will unlock all forms that at this time seem beyond us. For it is in the body of the Exalted that Heaven and Creation meet, and it is because of this union within us that all things are within our custodianship.

So it to my master's masters and the Five Immaculate Dragons that I dedicate my work, for the benefit of all the creatures of Creation, to relieve the suffering of mortals and to actualize the godhood of my own kind.

MORTALS

Normal men were once my fascination. For in any matter of anatomy, one first must know the simple, the base, before one aspires to apprehend the complex. From the young lover of the Scarlet Empress to the many who I cured and treated during my many travels, I am indebted to humankind. Though they live short lives and, with few exceptions, are incapable of wielding the Essence of Creation, I bow to the simplicity of humanity, as it is from their stock that the Dragon-Blooded arise.

The human struggle never ceases to fascinate me, however. In multitudes, they are born, grow, procreate, grow ill and die, so many unnoticed, unrecorded souls run through the cycle like the gossamer swarms of river flies that become for merely moments. In my compassion, I once searched after an end to their toil, moving from village to village in an attempt to research, treat and cure their fevers, plagues and poxes. It was a source of some disappointment for me, as I feel it is my duty to guard over my lessers, for no matter how many I treated and saved, there

were 10 times as many who would die alone in their beds, eaten with boils and simple illnesses that I could not find time to treat. Such is the lot of mortals, though it be my wish that they glean great wisdom from this suffering and ascend to a place of greater fortune amongst the Perfected Hierarchy.

Regardless, for one who delves so deeply into the mysteries of the life-giving processes and the circumstances of incarnation, it has been many years since I have enjoyed close relations with mortals and have since been unable to draw clear lines of commonality between my self and these less enlightened beings with whom I share Creation. Ah, certainly the servant girl, who many call my mother, tended to my basic needs, but even in the case of this surrogate parent, I remember little of her nature, although I, at the time, was human as well.

ANATHEMA

In the past, unlike most of my siblings and kind, I was not so concerned with the threat of the Anathema, despite the urgings of the Immaculate Order. Though I certainly feared such beings and fully supported the work of the Wyld Hunt, it was never a matter at my back door. It was never an urgent thing by which I felt imminently threatened.

That has all changed now.

As I saw the sole copy of *The Thousand Veils* being hurled into the ocean's foam, the nature of the Anathema threat became all too immediate for me. Because of a moment's lack of vigilance, an Anathema demon invaded my sanctuary, snatched the very key to my life's work and destroyed it before I had a moment to recover my senses. This experience has taught me much about the nature of the Anathema threat, to be sure.

However, many endings lead to new beginnings.

When Righteous Cloud and Cold Bastion recovered the eviscerated body of the Anathema from the rocks of the seawall, I at once recognized the Old Realm inscription on the back of the child's neck. At the time of the creature's capture, it was immediately evident to me that this unholy thing had ties to its past, a past that threatened the very existence of the Realm and all that it contained. However, this creature did not quite resemble those I had read about in the Hunt's accounts. So, I took it upon myself to begin a more thorough investigation.

Righteous Cloud and Cold Bastion assisted me in transporting the body to the anatomist's amphitheater in the western dome of the campus. The demon resembled a human girl, no older than 10 or 11, who's skin was bluish white like that of those drowned in cold water. Her body was adorned with pieces of black steel, etched with serpents and the images of predatory beasts. Her head, shaved clean, was adorned with radial circular patterns around the eyes. Aside from her scant clothing, the child

carried nothing else. Being very careful to avoid any further damage to the body, the monks spread the child out on the examination stone and prepared to wash it when I noticed a film of bluish-black algae adhered to the Anathema's boot.

I carefully removed the sample and placed it in a porcelain crucible and headed for my private laboratory, leaving the two monks dumfounded as I left without a word. Once I made it to the chamber, I set the sample to float in a bowl of fresh water. Taking up an obsidian scalpel, I made a small incision at the tip of my finger, and I watched as a globule of blood formed red in the candlelight. With unbearable anticipation, I dribbled the blood into the water bowl. As the blood plumed in the water, and in accordance with my expectation, the algae began to swell as slow-moving tendrils extended and sucked the red from the water. Leechmoss — an incredibly rare specimen to be sure, as it is only found distantly to the East, in the swamp called the Noss Fens.

It was then that I requested the assistance of Ledaal Verro, one of the Heptagram's seven masters who had spent exhaustive efforts compiling First Age treatises on animal and spirit Essence emulation to the end of inducing functional atavism. Although I considered Verro more of a scholastic than a true seeker after the light of wisdom, his essays concerning animal atavism were some of the most fascinating and well-researched of their kind. So, through application of to Verro's well-proven formulae, one can wrap one's self in the skin of a slain animal and become that animal, absorbing its soul, senses and memories.

So it was from the skin of this pale child that I, with the assistance of Ledaal Verro, fashioned the Harrowed Daughter's Paleskin Cowl, a soft hood made from the skin of a child whose stomach was gorged with human blood at the time of her death. When donning this cowl, which I rarely do in plain sight of the uninformed as its very existence disturbs and frightens those among the living, I can see into the realm of ghosts and dead spirits. It is my belief that this artifact of my own creation will undoubtedly play a key role in future revelations.

So it has been since the capture of the Anathema's corpse, a time of fascination, excitement and horror. So, among other horrors, this is what serves in Thorns? Could it be that, as the Dragon-Blooded are the inheritors of the Essence of life, these dark beings are the black mirror of my kind? What are the implications of dark Essence? Is what they wield the same or an altogether different energy yet to be discovered? What is their magic like? Are they afflicted by life as we are afflicted by death? Though ancient records detail the workings of the Underworld, the existence of these deathknights beg many new questions.

There is so much to discover, though I have become so old and weary.





CHAPTER FOUR

VOICES NOT OUR OWN



It is no exaggeration to say that Terrestrial Exalted rule Creation. Though their hold may now be precarious, their roots hold firm to the Realm and the lands beyond. As the Dragon-Blooded walk the land, they cultivate structures of power, items of wonder and fables and tales of their struggles and heroism. From these tales, many beings take inspiration and are transformed by the legends of the Five Dragon's children. It is also common that beings of such power make many enemies. As much as their allies, the Terrestrial Exalted cause amazing events to blossom in the lives of their adversaries as well. What follows are the testimonies and experiences of those who have encountered the Dragon-Blooded narrators, their hearts marked by the lives of these great beings, whether they be mortals, fellow Dragon-Blooded, gods or more mysterious beings.

MORTALS

BIMA THE ELDER, FROM A WRITTEN FRAGMENT RECOVERED BY THE RAIDERS OF CARYA KOS

Today, I was accepted as apprentice by the sage woman of our village. At first, she rejected me, waving her knotted cane at me as she furrowed her brow, expressing her displeasure with me and my lack of wisdom and conviction. However, I knew she'd use these tricks to test me, so I was relentless in my pursuit. Eventually, she conceded, telling

me to travel to my father's house to gather my things so that I could come and live with her, learning all the while I kept her house and assisted her daughter with her chores and other tasks.

Her daughter is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. Her skin is a soft brown, and her body is as supple and free as a doe in the meadow. Like the leaves of the trees during the rainy season, her eyes are green and caring, knowing little fear or confusion, unlike others of her age. Though I have not yet learned to cast the bones as Rinchen does, I am sure that my fate lies with this forest girl, as I can not imagine my life without her.

She loves the forest as I do, perhaps more. The other day, she told me that she never wanted to leave this place, and I asked her why, and she would not say. She simply looked at me, over her shoulder, and smiled as if such a reason was unnecessary and absurd. Indeed it was. Seeing her in the forest makes me understand what is to be alive.

I love this girl, and one day, we will marry.

EMERALD ARROW, SON OF RUTANJALI

Between my mother and father, my mother is the more frightening. Although my father is a god, he is a slow-moving spirit with a long and ancient purpose that is not unlike watching the forest grow. He is powerful but predictable, unchanging in his way and purpose. My father is the King of Endless Branches and will always be exactly that.



My mother, however, is a rash and terrible thing, quick to anger and even faster to slay that which offends her. A spirit in my father's court once told me that my mother murdered her entire village, so overcome with wrath was she. He told me that she stacked the corpses, wrapped in guts and blood, placing them in a great, red mound at the center of the town. She then called the beasts who fed upon her people as she stood by and smiled. This is why she frightens me.

But she is also my mother. She taught me the ways of the forest and taught me how to survive. She taught me how to make arrows, wield a bow and track the wild boar through thicket without being gored. She applied poultices to my wounds when I was cut or bitten, and she rescued me from wolves when they came upon me in the glade. She etched glyphs into the earth and taught me their meanings, although I thought I'd never have a use for such things in the forest.

It was when she sent me off to find my fate that I realized the importance of all she had taught me.

ISELSI MOAD, AGENT OF THE ALL-SEEING EYE

If a weasel and a viper were to mate, their progeny would no doubt resemble Cynis Belar Norren in many of the particulars, though I suspect it would not be quite so ruthless as he. He has great potential, that man. His investigative skills are impeccable, his grasp of the finer points of accounting excellent. I have seen him interrogate a skilled patrician in the middle of a festival gala while dancing, with nothing more than a glass of wine and his eyes, and his subject never once realized the secrets she was giving up. He is a consummate hunter, and his stalking grounds are the courtyards, ballrooms, gardens and counting houses of the Dynasty. Frankly, I'm surprised he hasn't been recruited into the Eye by now.

Then again, perhaps he has, and I have simply not been made privy to his membership, though I doubt it. His patriotism is unquestionable, unshakable and unreserved, but it is filtered thoroughly through his unwavering loyalty to his house. To his mind, House Cynis is the Realm, and it is his job to reveal this truth to the rest of us. He assumes as well that he has counterparts among the other houses, and he is correct to a certain extent, to be sure. He sees the struggle for power as a sort of winnowing of the Scarlet Empire: The chaff will be shed, weakness purged, and in this crucible of intrigue, a leader will rise to lead the Realm to glory greater than ever known before. It is, in my opinion, an admirable philosophy, if somewhat naïve.

He is opportunistic. To date, his official duties reside solely within the purview of the holdings of House Cynis, but given an opportunity to gather intelligence outside of his normal assignment, provided that opportunity presents no undue risk, he will readily, even eagerly, pursue it. He has been instrumental in a number of minor coups on House Cynis' competitors that have netted several small

victories in matters of influence. It is my belief that his elders lean toward expanding his assignment in the near future to external intelligence, though I have little hard evidence to support this analysis. Call it a hunch, but I suspect he was put in line for a promotion after the Windward League affair.

I'm quite certain he keeps several sets of books. One, obviously, he keeps for his superiors — the fruits of his labor, duly submitted. The second, which I have seen, hold a number of minor secrets, typically scandalous and of mixed value in the court of influence. A personal cache, you might say. One might surmise that this cache is the one that his personal overseers are intended to find. The third I have not seen, and cannot find, much to my own consternation, but I know that it exists. The third, I submit, contains the choicest secrets that he has harvested, some even from his own kin, and that he harbors against some unforeseen event in the future or toward some end I have not yet deduced.

If he has a great failing, it is in the confluence of his extraordinary self-confidence and a peculiar lack of discretion in certain matters. He is absolutely ravenous for intelligence. He is constantly gathering, weighing, calculating. He has so far made careful use of the intelligence he acquires, but with each victory, his confidence grows, and his choice of opponents becomes more dangerous. Soon, I suspect, he will attempt a truly dangerous gambit against a foe far more formidable than he. If he does, I expect he will be in for a rude awakening. If he survives and learns the lesson of his failure, he will become all the more potent a factor. If somehow he manages to triumph, he most certainly should be considered for the Eye. If he is not brought into the fold, he should certainly be eliminated lest we risk fostering our own demise. It is not inconceivable that, should he survive his ascension, his talents and the resources of his house could form the basis of an independent bureau in opposition to our own.

SEREN, SLAVE OF HOUSE CYNIS

I came to this household 10 months ago, just after Calibration. I was summoned to the Master's bedchamber three weeks after my arrival. There were clothes laid upon the dressing table and combs and perfumes. I was commanded to dress, and I did so. Under the Master's direction, I combed and pinned my hair and put on perfumes and kohl. He assisted me, as I was unable to heed his directions to his satisfaction. He did not strike me, and for that, I was most grateful.

I went then to the bed, as I had expected he had business for me there, but my lord bade me sit upon a grand divan, the like of which one such as I has never laid upon. I did so, of course, just as he asked, and he came to me there and kissed my knees and my feet. He washed my feet with precious oils. When he was through, he took a lyre from the cabinet across the room and sat upon the carpet at the foot of the divan. He played and sang the sweetest

songs in tongues I did not know, but one word repeated again and again in all of them: Myrana.

I would not dare to speculate on who it was he sang of, but I can only guess she was his love — a lost love, perhaps? No, I dared not speak of it with the other servants. I feared for my life should any of them make mention of it to the Master. He must have loved her terribly for he... he wept, my lord. As he sang. And he sang so wonderfully.

He did not take me into his bed for a fortnight, and when he did, he drank a great deal of wine before. He was most gentle, my lord. I have acted before as a concubine, for other masters, and none before have been so generous, so kind. He does not simply take his pleasures, I mean. Certainly he does, but he visits those pleasures upon me as well. He is kind and well skilled in the arts of love-making. He is patient. Since that first time, I have been summoned to his chamber three or four nights each week, but for when he is away traveling. Each time, there are new clothes, precious perfumes and oils. Each time, he sings to me or reads poetry before lifting or leading me from the divan to the bed. I do as I am bid happily, only I do not speak. This is his rule. I must never speak a word in his hearing, and I have not. He brings me gifts, but I may not remove them from his chamber. He keeps them there for me, safe from the jealous eyes of the other slaves and servants, in a wardrobe he has set aside.

I do not sleep in his chamber. Should I fall asleep after he has finished with me, he wakes me, bids me undress and return to the servants' chambers. The cook and the common-floor maids whisper about me and cast looks, but they do nothing in my hearing. Certainly, they know what my lord is about with me, but if they suspect the particulars, none have made mention of it.

Please, my lord, I beg you. Do not speak of this to anyone. I am bound to tell you, this I know, but please! No, if you know who this Myrana is, do not tell me. I would not know. The Master is a good man, a generous and just man. I would not have this harm him. He has been kind to me, and if I can ease his heart in her absence, I am grateful to do it.

JUNIPER CRANE OF RUBYLAKE, SLAVE TRADER

Yes? Yes. I have many dealings with House Cynis. Yes, I am their principle supplier here in the East. We provide the highest quality Haltan stock to be found. Hardy, strong. Take them south, and I assure you, they can work twice as long as any slave raised on the Isle. They are excellent kennel masters. With whom? Sell to the Fair Ones! By the Five Dragons, no! Of course not! That is strictly illegal. Why? Who sent you? Cynis Norren?! I've done nothing wrong. Please. I swear it. I gave that up the last time! By the pillars of Heaven, don't kill me. I have five daughters and three sons. I have a family to support! I beg you, please. I have heard things. I have not told him everything, it's true, but I will! Just let me live in peace!

JERRO HALLAH, MERCENARY LIEUTENANT, TO LEDAAL KES, ON NAGEZZER

Sesus Nagezzer? You mean the Slug. Ha! Are you serious? What would you want to know of that limping ball of pudding and wine?

A hero? Please. Personally, I can't understand why so many tolerate his ongoing existence. My captain, for one, thinks that the Slug is the salvation of the Blessed Isle. Of course, this be his opinion because Sesus Warru, brave as he may be, is a drunken mess of a man who can barely keep his head on most of the time.

Met him? Yeah, I've met the Slug. It was about a year ago, after we returned from a scrap in the South, that we were given audience at his so-called Throne of Roses. What a den of whores! I mean, I was expecting something like a palace, lots of statues of important people and all sorts of plunder from past conquests and stuff. That, my friend, is not what I saw. What I saw were whores and men so deep in their cups that it would have taken an act of sorcery to sober the place up. I mean, anything you could imagine was happening in that orgy hall though you couldn't see more than 10 paces because of all the smoke.

And who would you guess would be at the very center of this perversity? Of course, it was Sesus "The Slug" Nagezzer floating atop a heap of pillows while these weird twins oiled his corpulence and filled his pipe with hash. So wise was he that he couldn't even speak a word, just muttering about to the people around him. Some hero!

SPINDA AND ECHO, THE SLUG'S TWINS

Nagezzer is a man simultaneously deserving of both respect and pity. Although he is trapped within the body of a fat cripple who feeds daily and nightly on sweetcakes and opium, for those who know this man, there are few wiser, stronger and more devoted to their own vision, with convictions as unwavering as that great mountain that lies at the center of Creation. We, however, know him very well. For this reason, he is our master, lover and father.

His body is a disguise, not a prison. We have seen many men and women who thought Nagezzer their lesser perish because they thought he was too high, stupid or fat to follow their simple, selfish plots and schemes. Young toughs of martial houses preen about like moronic birds not knowing that who they mock so surely holds their short lives in his hands. It is a shame, we think, that so many of them pass from this world without knowing that it was our Nagezzer, the "Slug", who has sent them to the reward they so deserve.

And love? We know no love but that which Nagezzer gives us. Some look upon us as his possessions, his unthinking servants, his whores. This is how Peleps Grondou thought of us, how he treated us, and that is why we hated him, and that is why we killed his children. I suspect we were given to the Nagezzer as some sort of a trick, expecting





such a thick and decadent man to be inconsiderate and rude. However, Nagezzer treated us as true and desired lovers, though he admits to not understand the truth of “we.” He does not need to, we feel it.

GULL THE TAILOR

I have been with my lady for two years now. We spend much of our time aboard ship, chasing these malcontents over the sea. I have learned to shop quickly and to work in very small, oft-tipping quarters — an education unlooked for and not entirely welcome. But duty is not what we ask for. It is what is given to us. So, I try to make the best of it. I might ask for a trifle more duty, though. By the five poles, I have precious little opportunity to make use of my skills out here. The General is not the sort of master I was accustomed to servicing in the past. We make port in a place civilized enough to require proper dress perhaps once a season, and even then, it’s a miracle if I can convince her to peel off that wretched armor of hers and wear something flattering. To make matters worse, fashion here in the Southeast is almost nonexistent. Everything is a sarong or a wrap or some folded loincloth without even the slightest opportunity for style. I would beg her at the price of my life if she would permit me to make her a kimono just once!

Oh, if this is to be my lot, I can at least take some solace in the fact that it is a pleasure to dress her when I do get the opportunity. She has a grace of which she is entirely unaware, and her figure is as close to perfect as I have ever seen. Some women who take up arms wind up shaped more like their swords than the scabbards they keep them in — all lines and hard angles. Not the General. No, she sweeps and curves and swells. Silk hangs on her like a waterfall when I can get her to wear it. Her brown skin might be a bit difficult to accommodate farther north, but down here, there is precious little that doesn’t look beautiful against her flesh. But for all that, I would still rather be dressing her for dinners and concerts and readings among her kin on the Blessed Isle. A friend of mine in Pangu wrote with a morsel of hope that the time of my exile is near finished. Rumor has it that Tepet Ejava is to be called back to the Imperial City. Oh, to be back in the heart of Creation again. I do hope it’s true. I’ve been away for so long I’m afraid they may have forgotten me.

ROOTED ALDER, VILLAGE ELDER OF THE VILLAGE OF SHALE, ON BHAGWEI

I am an old man. Here in Shale, our town, I am an elder of my people, and we are prosperous and blessed. I, however, am old enough to recall a time when this was not so.

It was almost 50 years ago, when I was a small boy. A terrible pox fell upon Shale. We had had a prosperous harvest that year, and I had helped my father stack the

apples and pumpkins high on our cart and in the cellar as food for the long winter. I had just finished up in the barn when I heard my father crying through the window of our cottage. I ran to find out what had caused my father to weep, as he was a hard man and not given to such crying.

When I opened the wooden door to our stone home, I found my father by my parent’s bed and my sister and mother were laying in it. On their faces were splotches of brown, and they did not look well. My father and I had only been gone since the morning, and it was too much to think that this could have befallen our family in a single day.

It was later that evening that we found that all of the women of the village had suffered this same blight. My father called a meeting, and all of the menfolk came to the center of town, and we sat around the fire pit and discussed what had come to Shale. It was decided that we would send a man to Cherak to find a doctor who could help.

By dawn, three women had died, and many were close to dying. We were without hope.

Then, through the cold morning air, a man on horseback came over the hill to the west of Shale. He was a tall man, plain of face but much like a king, with eyes that held no fear of anything they saw. When he entered our town, he climbed off his horse, rubbed its ears and then turned to face our gathering with a warm and comforting smile. And for a moment, we felt as if this terrible plague had never come to our village. My father, pale and full of sadness, looked upon the stranger and told him of our horror, of the disease that would surely take our wives, mothers and daughters before the next morning.

The stranger placed his hand upon my father’s shoulder and told him not to despair, that he would save our village and that no more pain would come to us. My father looked angry at first, but having no other choice, stepped aside as the stranger moved toward our home. My father ran after him, and I did as well.

When we entered our cottage, the stranger had removed the blankets from my mother and sister. Warming his hands before he touched their skin, the stranger felt each of their heads for fever as he spoke softly to comfort them. My father and I looked on in wonder at this being who showed such compassion to those he had never met. However, it was with amazement that we witnessed what came next.

While singing softly, the stranger’s hands began to glow as wonderful symbols of light appeared upon my mother’s body. Each moved like a leaf falling to the ground, and one by one, the boils disappeared, and her pallor vanished. My sister was next, and in moments, both stood well and smiling.

One by one, this saint from another land healed each and every one of our women. After Abros’ daughter was healed, the very last, the stranger called to his horse, spoke a blessing we did not understand and rode off beyond the hills. A million prayers to the Five Immaculate Dragons

for sending into our midst the most benevolent and compassionate of their children.

OTHER DRAGON-BLOODED

SUNDRAYA, SON OF RUTANJALI

My mother is deeply devoted to the forest and my father, the King of Endless Branches. My brothers, Emerald Arrow and Bima, will surely return to the forest one day and live out their half-god lives among the trees and birds. My father is eternal, and to say much else of him is presumptuous and potentially a lie for my own comfort.

My mother, however, does not belong in the forest. I traveled far to the west, and now, I know what we are. I have learned that there is an Island called the Blessed Isle, the Realm by others, and it is a place that is ruled by our kind. She does not need to be the bride of the Wood King to be a goddess. For on this island, she would be revered and worshiped by the common man for the Essence that she commands.

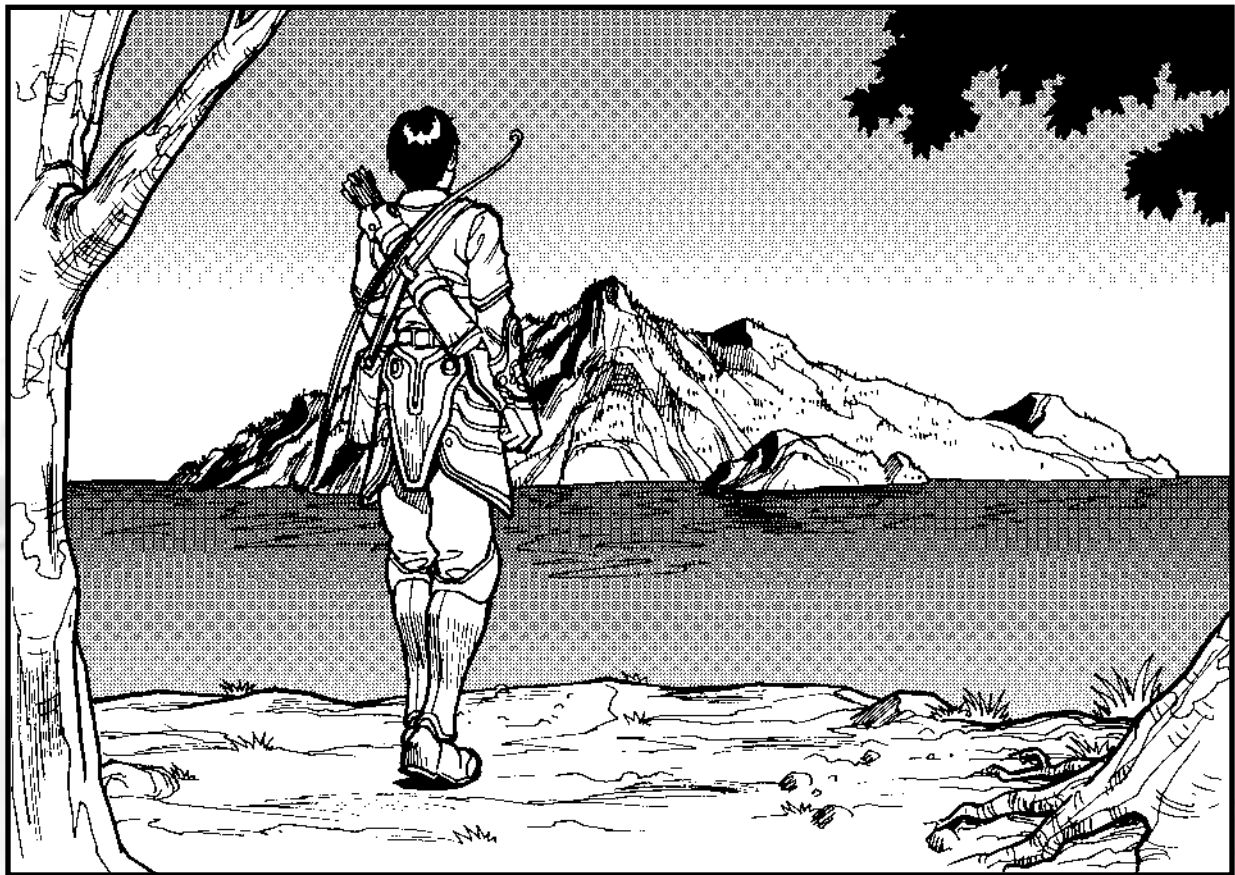
My mother once told me that I reminded her of her father, though she claimed never to have met him. She told me that he savaged her mother and left her mad on the banks of a stream in the woods. Though I do not see myself as this sort of man, I can relate to this magnitude of passion. Sometimes, I feel such passion will burn me

and leave me mad as well. That is why it is good that my mother sent me West and why I have now, I believe, discovered the place of my ancestors.

I wish to find my grandfather and learn from him the ways of our people. If I do not find him, I will be no worse off. Besides, wandering the vast reaches of Creation is a far better way to spend one's days than talking to trees and sitting on your hands in the woods.

CYNIS WISEL MYRANA, TALONLORD OF THE THIRD LEGION

Norren? He's my cousin. Of course I know him. Since childhood, yes. We are of an age, or nearly so. Why are you asking me these things? Yes, I know of his feelings for me. No, I do not share them. Why not? Because I do not. There is no why. We played as children play. Must there be more? We were close as children near in age and proximity are close. As we grew older, things changed, as they do. He went to the Academy, while I attended the House of Bells. He is in our house's service now, verifying revenue and rooting out embezzlers. I have taken office in the legion. His is a useful occupation, certainly. Blessed little glory, but there you have it. Not all of us are destined for such things, after all. That's right. It was little surprise to anyone, really. As a child, he wasn't precisely extraordinary. He wasn't terribly interested in achieving anything. He was a quiet boy, always





watching things. He was not a remarkable student, either. We shared tutors occasionally. There was precious little he pursued with any great fervor except, perhaps, spending time with me. He had a knack with mathematics, as I recall. And he helped me in economics, etiquette and language, but that was the extent of his scholarly talents. He was a passing fair musician.

At the moment, I have no intention of marrying anyone, let alone him. I am an officer of the legions. My father receives numerous invitations to my betrothal every season. I'm quite certain I will have ample prospects from which to choose when the time is right. If Norren is serious about his wish to marry me, he can prove his case just as any other suitor would. Right now? Ha! No. He is a terrier hunting rats in his grandmother's garden. He will have to rise high indeed before I or my father will seriously consider such a match. If he does so before I choose a husband, then certainly I would entertain the offer. Until then, to think of it is folly.

Love? In what way does love come into it? Love is for poets and peasants. Norren is a romantic. I am a realist. Marriage is an alliance like any other and must be made with the proper consideration for the benefits to be had by both parties. It is our duty to marry in such a way as to further the goals of our house. If marriage within the house is deemed the most advantageous course, then it will be so. If not, woe to he who dares thwart it. I will not disgrace my blood and future progeny for so petty a thing as love. I am far above such ridiculous notions.

AUTUMN SPIRAL

There are many who mock me for taking on a hedonist as my primary student and charge. Why take a disciple who refuses to follow the most basic tenets concerning sexual misconduct, diet and the consumption of mind-affecting drugs? Why aid a man so fat that he becomes short of breath after a single flight of stairs to learn the techniques of the sacred Wood Dragon Style?

Perhaps it is because this man understands the soul of Sextes Jylis far better than I ever will. Maybe it is because Sesus Nagezzer actually does what He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass has prescribed in every letter of his perfect teachings.

Nagezzer tends to the Realm like no other man I know. He is no king who sits upon a throne, barking edicts and mandates at his court. Nor is he a cataphract who sits upon a horse while the footmen around him charge to their deaths. No, Nagezzer is like a brilliant artisan, whose face is rarely seen or associated with his work, but whose influence can be seen in everything he has touched. He does the work himself, albeit with the assistance of his friends and their men. Nagezzer considers himself inseparable from the Realm. I hope there never comes a day when the Realm abandons him, as abandoning his support of the Scarlet Throne would never occur to him.

Yes. Nagezzer is my friend and student. But in matters of the Immaculate Philosophy, it is his actions that give heart to the words that I teach.

TEPET ARADA

My granddaughter suffers from an extreme lack of self-doubt. Ejava is entirely too sure of herself for anyone's good. She is stubborn, willful and irreverent. She also happens to be a damn fine commander. The problem is, she hasn't got the sense for politics it takes to be a successful general.

Oh, I don't mean winning battles and killing your enemies. There hasn't been her like in those areas in all my years, and that's a fact. I'm talking about success off the battlefield, in the Realm and among the Great Houses. It takes a different hand to manage those fights. A different mind. And I'm not saying she's dim. Not at all. Takes brains a-plenty to do what she's done with the sad-sack scraps of a legion she has to work with. But the Blessed Isle is an entirely different sort of battleground, one that she's seen precious little of in her years.

We talk about it, on the rare occasions when we're on the same landmass together. Usually, it's the last thing we talk about — I tell her to sit tight and let the sea carry her to safer shores, and she goes off on her anti-passivity lecture. I call her an insolent upstart bitch, she lays into me with "tired old dog who gave away his own teeth." Then, of course, there's stomping and spitting, and we go back to wherever it was we came from.

The thing is, I've been where she is. I came to it later in life than she did, and so, I could afford to stick my finger in the eyes of the mewling bastards and their barbed tongues and subtle knives. Ejava's got more than half her life ahead of her, and that's a long time to be a pariah among your own people. But she just can't stand to be in the traces, harnessed to the cart of house politics. She can't help but kick.

The last time we talked, I got the feeling she'd come to some sort of decision. Since then, I've started to think I might know what sort of decision it was, too. The scariest thing about it is that I think she just might be able to pull it off — the battle, anyways. I said she's a damn fine commander, but that really doesn't do her justice. I'm a fucking genius in the realm of fast-attack tactics and execution. I'm better at it than she is, in fact, but only just. In every other arena, she out-shoots my abilities by a bowshot, easy. Same is true for just about any other general you can name. They might best her in one or two areas, but there's no one better than Tepet Ejava when it comes to the whole gamut of war. But I'm getting off the subject...

She could do it. I think she could. She's made those Red-Piss boys and her mercenaries into a force to match her skills as a leader. Those are some of the best soldiers I've ever seen, and I've seen a few. If she did decide to do what I think she's considering, the fighting would be the easy part. It's what comes after that worries me.

Then again, the Empress started life as a soldier, too. Ejava's always been full of surprises. Maybe she's got the grandmother of them all up her sleeve right now.

MNEMON SELAKA

The Roseblack? That woman is threat to the Realm, her house and the world. Why? Why, a blind man could see it a league away. She has not the smallest inkling of where her place is. She's spent far too long out in the Threshold. She's forgotten what it is to be a proper citizen of the Realm. No surprise really, given her bloodline. Where has the great Tepet Arada gone but into hermitage (as they call it) to thumb his nose at the empire that lifted him to high station and draped him in honor and glory all the days of his life? Tepet Ejava pays only the most perfunctory lip service to the wishes of her reputable elders. My cousin Mnemon Ruel, an auditor with the August and Generous Bureau of Provisioners and Cartwrights, went south last spring to review the General's most recent requisitions for validity. When she came back, she said the Roseblack dined with her only once the entire time she was there and was dismissive to the point of contemptuousness throughout the meal. Preposterous! These are not the qualities one expects from a general of the legions. Especially one at the head of the Vermilion Legion.

And that's another thing — it wouldn't be nearly so bad if she were at the helm of a legion of loyal soldiers who could be trusted to thwart any mutinies she cooked up in her bitter, Tepet mind. But no, she stands at the head of a vicious assemblage of cutthroats, mercenaries and thieves. Reprobates and traitors in the making, and every single one of them is loyal only to her. On top of that, she's made them some of the most effective and deadly cutthroats, mercenaries and thieves this side of Bluehaven itself. That, I'm not ashamed to say, frightens me terribly. That she, a woman who clearly has no respect for the proper authorities of the Realm, nor even her own kin, has at her disposal a full legion of brutal, heavily armed men of questionable conscience and suspect loyalties is an invitation to rebellion. Certainly, were she to attempt anything of the sort, she would be immediately put down, but she could certainly cause a great deal of chaos at a time when the Realm least needs additional complications.

Really, the woman is just far too proud for anyone's good. She must be made to bend the knee, or be broken, for the good of the Realm. One would think the debacle in the North would have taught her a lesson, but I begin to think she is incapable of learning the least measure of humility. The test of that will come soon, I think. I've heard that she's to be called back to the Isle soon to answer for her actions. We shall see then if the Roseblack is indeed a good and faithful servant of the Realm or if she lives up to her name as a blight upon the bloom of empire.

OAKTHORN

In all my years as tutor and physician in service to the Dynasty, there have been no other children as astute and perceptive as your son Bhagwei. That is to say, I have met no father more blessed than yourself, Lord Ragara.

The boy demonstrates an acute concern for the well-being of life. When I say concern, I do not mean that he cares for it or studies it as some sort of philosophical abstraction. It appears as if the boy has some strange connection to the currents of living Essence that connect all things, as if he can see the lines of Essence though he has not, and may never, Exalt.

This is both a blessing and a curse. For it seems that Bhagwei experiences a constant and irrational anxiety arising from this connection. He feels, in his own words, that he must tend to the imperfections of this pattern and make them well for the sake of all beings. Surely this could be seen as base and childish arrogance as other boys his age make megalomaniacal boasts about being generals or emperors. However, your son seems willing to do the work.

Last evening, I found him, your boy of 11 years, reading from the classic *Of Blood & Marrow*, taking copious notes all the while. My Lord, the book in question is written in three different languages, large sections of which are written in the script of the First Age.

I have never taught your boy Old Realm.

I recommend that you spare no expense on the boy's education. I am quite sure, whether he Exalts or not, that he will make you proud, placing honor after honor upon the House of Ragara.

CYNIS FALEN ON BHAGWEI

Albeit unfounded, I am concerned about our brother Ragara Bhagwei. Though mother's chamberlain bid me not speak of it, just as I have bound you both to secrecy, I feel that there are possibilities that cannot be left in silence.

It has always been my mind, since I was very small, that Bhagwei was barely a creature of the Realm. He does not engage in politics, he does not visit court, and he expresses no claim to the leadership of House Ragara, though he is its eldest son. His wisdom, though penetrating and clear, is the sort of scholars, not kings, and he seems content to mull about in his own head while the world of power moves around him.

Nonetheless, sisters, he is a looming threat and will remain so. Though he favors our house as he does his own, he is careful to express it only in action rather than anything of an official nature for fear of being pulled into a position of responsibility. I am not afraid that he would play for our administration of House Cynis. I am afraid that he could, if so moved, make our position irrelevant if he were to present himself in grand enough fashion.

But think of it, he is the son of Ragara and Cynis, his claim to the throne would exceed all but those made by the Empress' children themselves. Surely even Mnemon



would fear the coming of a sorcerer, though only slightly her senior, that possessed the secrets that Bhagwei, Lord of the Heptagram, would hold.

RAGARA BANOPA ON BHAGWEI

Save for Heral, there is no man in Creation who is closer to my heart than my brother. His mind is like no other I have encountered; at once a perfectly still and unwavering pillar and, simultaneously, a darting flight of raptors, far-reaching and inescapable. I remember on one occasion when Heral and I had called our council to chambers in order to decide the allocation of resources for 11 distant satrapy holdings of House Ragara. This was something I thought impossible at the time, and the entirety of my council felt so as well.

Along comes my brother, an old man even then. He was eating a peach at the time, rivulets of juice dripping from his chin and moustache. Doddering and humble, he made his way to the planning table and casually greeted the satraps and heads of lines that surrounded him as his eyes darted over the piles of charts and figures, even being so bold as to seize personal records from the hands of those still reading over them. He turned to me, smiled like a madman and then took my chair, scribbling in a frenzy while talking to himself. After no more than a quarter of an hour, Bhagwei sighed and handed me the culmination of his dabbling. A major

crisis of the Realm's economy had been resolved in less than a half an hour by a doddering old man with peach juice on his face.

My brother is a deeply compassionate being with an undying love for all life and life in and of itself. He is considerate, sensitive, patient and wise. For this reason, Ragara Bhagwei should never rule the Realm.

ABYSSAL EXALTED

SHOAT OF THE MIRE'S LETTER TO THE DOWAGER OF THE IRREVERENT VULGATE IN UNRENT VEILS

As your most loyal servant, I beckon you, my liege, called Untamed Kethet of the Swarm, to hear tell of what I have discovered.

It had been a fortnight since I departed from the Noss Fens, and I arrived in Sijan at twilight, taking refuge in the crypt of Marius Widowmaker of the First Age. His sepulcher had been well scavenged and his sarcophagus was bare. I took my rest and recovered my Essence before making my way to the necropolis proper.

The Thousand Veils was removed by an emissary of the Dragon-Blooded. A man called Seragul Wince, human but canny enough to convince the Sijanese librarians that they should sell him the book. He simply stated that



Ragara Bhagwei of the Heptagram wished to have the book and would pay whatever was necessary. He traveled with an envoy of Dragon-Blooded monks, and I did not wish to test their martial capabilities. I stowed away on their ship that evening, wrapping my anima around myself as I was sealed in their cargo hold.

By the time we made landfall, my Essence was dangerously low, too low to fight, but just enough left to achieve my objective.

Tomorrow morning, we will arrive on the shores of this Heptagram, and I will have the book in my possession. This is my final report. In one month's time, *The Thousand Veils* shall be cast into the Well of Udr never to trouble you again. I, the Shoat of the Mire, swear this.

SPIRITS

BRAMBLEWRATH ON RUTANJALI

I speak on behalf of my lord's court when I say that Rutanjali is dearly loved. Though few of us understand her, we would protect her, unquestioningly, with or without our king's command.

There have been times when even the gods of the forest have forgotten the balance when Rutanjali has not. She is a child of the forest and always will be, though I do not think her place is here for long.

It does not take a god to see that she is alone. Even while surrounded by a teeming number of creatures who all consider her their queen, she walks without

companionship in the forest. Yes, there are any number of wondrous beings who live within these glades and thickets. Everywhere, there are birds and beasts of every color and shape. But all are mere novelty to Rutanjali, who I think, longs for the companionship of her own kind.

Her sons, Half-Spirits themselves, were her true companionship; each one was a facet of what she truly wants. Bima is her past, named for the lover who died when the raiders from the west brought her village low. Emerald Arrow is the joy of her present, for Rutanjali feels most alive when she is dashing through the green and shooting arrows after darting prey. Sundraya, though he is quick to anger and cold in his affections, I feel is her future. It is only Sundraya who bears his mother's gifts, as lean and as beautiful as the queen herself.

Although it shall break the heart of my dear king, I do not think it long before Rutanjali wanders after her brood. On the day they left, the Wood King and Rutanjali stood on the mound at the edge of the wood and watched as they left. When the three boys disappeared into the distance, the King turned and left, untouched by the departure of his three sons. Rutanjali, however, stood and stared off into the distance. It was not until the next dawn that she turned to walk away. The ground where she stood was made mud by the tears she cried, so many they were and for so long she cried them.

No. Though Rutanjali be a forest child, I think her destiny lies far, far from this place.





CHAPTER FIVE

RECORDS OF THE BEFORE



Though the visions of the Solar Exalted convey a personally relevant glimpse of a world they once ruled, it is the extensive endeavors of the Shogunate period scribes and savants that facilitate a knowledge of the past for the Terrestrial Exalted. This pre-Contagion Shogunate period is widely held to be the golden era of Dragon-Blooded history. In these annals, meticulously recorded fragments of the days when Terrestrial Exalted daimyos clashed upon the field of battle exist right alongside handwritten instructions concerning the special method a mortal craftsman used to weave baskets from the reeds found near the edge of the Meander River. What follows is a selection of these records provided so that your Dragon-Blooded characters and stories can include pieces of what once was.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF POPLAR REEF

Some damned fool had improperly calibrated the surge inhibitors on the vitality cannon. One by one, the lines of the Gilt Tiger Confederates swelled and burst, their flesh unable to contain the massive influx of Essence. The battlefield instantly became a bog of blood and bone and flesh. Hode cursed the technicians for dogs and swore vengeance on them. The Rose saw her opportunity and surged. Gossamer marauders flooded the gap gliding across the gore as if it were a carpet of silk over a stone floor. They were four ranks deep in the middle of our formation before they actually met any resistance. The

Tiger Confederates, what was left of them, had routed in the face of a full-on Fair Folk charge and left a corridor 60 yards wide straight through to our rear. From where I was on the ridge, it looked like we'd manage to lose the war before the battle even started. Keelhind and her twin brothers saved us the ignominy of defeat, though. The three warstriders met the charge with a wall of scorching Essence, and the scent of cooked dream-flesh rose in a column of blue-white smoke. A roar went up from the men to either side of the now-flanked host of the Rose. The appearance of the striders had shaken them out of their paralysis. Their commanders finished the job. The order was given and each wing of the formation turned in on the other. They collapsed on the overextended Fair Folk and cut deep into their flanks. The corpse-bog was the only thing that saved the enemy column from complete decimation. Our men just couldn't get through it to kill them before they'd fled back the way they came. Even so, they left three out of five on the field dead or dying. Another cheer rose from the men as the last of the Rose's column died or departed, but the howl of the Sparrow sky-skiffs flying over reminded us that the day was just beginning. As they sped across the morning sky trailing streamers of glittering Essence, something came toward us through the forest. Something very, very big. It was going to be a long day, and many more would die before the day was through.

NOTES ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF LIFE

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

During the First Age, the Anathema created many kinds of life by abusing Essence to construct aberrations — beings that had parts of various different animals combined together in them. These terrible creatures were often able to breed true, and many of the terrible beasts that are scourges of the Threshold in the Second Age are a result of these terrible experiments. From the eight-tailed mole hounds to the simhata lion-horses, these fierce beasts blight Creation to this day.

Obviously, this is laying a great deal that came afterward at the feet of the Anathema. It is certain that the Shogunate conducted many experiments in the creation of life, some successful, especially in the early period after the destruction of the Solar Deliberative, but the Shogunate-era Dragon-Blooded never proved the equal of the Anathema in the modification of living things to suit their wills.

Clearly, the destruction of Solar-created life was a major priority for the early Shogunate, but it had nothing to do with the immoral nature of creating life (though such artificial life is currently taught to be offensive to the Immaculate Order).

The problem, which led to many purges, was that it quickly became evident under close scrutiny that it was not only the mechanical wonders of the Solars that were so dangerous. Many of their prodigies were found to possess programming on a fundamental level that rendered them hereditarily loyal to the Twilights, the Deliberative and the Solar Anathema. As a result, it was considered necessary to destroy them as a form of prophylaxis.

This is often considered to be one of the worst “sins” of the Shogunate. The fact of the matter is that this decision was undertaken after a number of uprisings and sabotage events rendered it evident that the issue was not related to individuals and would not be settled even by mass behavioral modification. In addition, while many of these beings were sentient or nearly so, most demonstrated a profound lack of spiritual components. They were not reincarnated, did not descend into the Underworld — they were, in fact, merely fleshy automatons, cut off forever from the cycle of reincarnation and from ultimate communion with the Dragons. These unnatural beings were better off extinct, rather than living a tortured, soulless existence with no hope of an afterlife.

The means by which these beings were created was constant and explains why so many of them can breed — parts of various animals were disjointed by black sorcery and knitted together again by similar magics. During the process, other sorts of sorcery would sustain the pieces and the donor beasts, so that the portions of animal were sustained as if they were still attached to the original animal. After the magic knitted these

animal portions together, the creatures produced were, of course, often confused and sick, as they were the independent, still-living parts of the various animals that had provided the tissue. Then, the various donor animals would be kept alive through sorcery until the composite creature could be bred with another such creature of the opposite sex and offspring carried successfully to term. Then, when true creatures were created, the sorcery supporting the original hybrids would be terminated, and they — and all the donor animals — would die, and the offspring would be bred as the progenitors of the race. To provide variety, the Anathema breeders might do this hundreds or thousands of times to populate a new species. In other cases, host organisms would have specially prepared artificial genitals grafted on in the place of their own. These practices were exceedingly inhumane, revolting and offensive to the Dragons, and it is because of them that the Immaculate Order forbids such experiments.

Again, obviously, the reality was somewhat different. The processes described for creating patchwork creatures was in fact used, but it obviously is not efficient and required powerful sorcery that not even all of the Anathema could muster. It was used by a few eccentrics. The process of grafting artificially pre-prepared genitals onto beasts that are to be used as incubators for the young of other beasts is still practiced by some agricultural sorcerers in the Realm today.

FROM THE JOURNALS OF VERSHAK DIEN

Another setback today. We lost Xiao in an uncontrolled Essence eruption.

I think we are going to need to make significant progress on the vim inhibitor and Essence feed designs before we can make this damnable thing work. If I had a talent of jade for every test subject that's burst on the platform like a tick I would simply buy my immortality.

All jollity aside, I have reached the limits of the current system and they are simply insufficient. The deveneration chambers require a certain amount of power just to start the humeric oscillators turning. Below that level, the bloody thing is just a big stone bed with some unusually pointy accoutrements. The problem arises in the move from active status to functional. At 8 motes per second, the dais is active but dormant. It has power, but not enough to generate the fields necessary to engage the revivification coils and begin the wear-reversal process. At 9 motes, there is vim-field bleed-through of catastrophic proportions. Given that, our recourse is either to discover some means of harnessing Essence at the submote level, thereby allowing us to calibrate the total vim feed much more accurately (strictly impossible given our understanding of the nature of Essence), or to increase the sensitivity of the vim inhibitors by an order of magnitude or more. Our choice is clear. We must redevelop the vim inhibitors

to function at a much finer degree of sensitivity. My will to do so, however, flags.

I have been at this project for almost nine years now, and I am not convinced mastery of such things is possible. Furthermore, I am less and less convinced that it is right. Three hundred years is not so bad, really. We certainly have it far better than the mortals. Do we really need to have more if it means thwarting the will of the Dragons themselves? I don't know. The others will no doubt curse me for a superstitions fool, and no doubt, I will laugh with them and fold. Duty is duty, and this pays the bills better than lancing boils in an apothecary.

Whatever happens, I'm going to need more slaves. We wasted eight of them on that last test, and Xiao besides. And I'll be damned if I'm cleaning up the lab myself.

LOCAL GODS

Braze —

We have successfully encouraged the local god to accept our proffered consort. The price wasn't inconsiderable — the specifications were quite complex — but the slave appears to be an excellent mate for the beast. I had previously never considered it to be a sexual creature — it is a mass of pipes and hoses after all — but it certainly appears virile enough. I hope that if she doesn't survive whatever sort of union the thing contemplates, it is realistic about the difficulty and expense of procuring women of such specific appearance and character. The god's cooperation with our rule of the neighborhood is definitely worthwhile, but not if it's going to entail making such outlays repeatedly.

In any case, I just wanted to let you know how things are going on our little project. I've been trying to communicate with you all along the way — I don't want to get you into any expenses that you didn't agree to in advance. However, things are running up to the wire. I know we can't communicate via sorcery — it's much too easy to listen in — so by the time you receive this, matters may well have reached a crisis. This god of ducts and piping apparently cannot keep itself free of this diversion, and if there can be a fruitful union, we'll soon see it. Given how inhuman it is, I think that if it's going to kill her, it will quickly do that as well.

I'm going to drive a hard bargain if it kills her and demands an immediate replacement — it isn't getting any sacrificial maidens any other way, and if it wants to cost us a fortune, it's going to do a lot more than pump water in the Manse. We're going to get some help in the agricultural works department as well, and any other place in the area we want to see water moved. I remember the negotiation parameters we talked about before I came here and intend to follow them, I'm just keeping you up to date and making sure that some assumption hasn't changed between then and now. Please contact me with your reply as soon as possible through our regular means of private communication.

INSURGENTS UNLEASH SHEEP PLAGUE ON THE STEPPE, MILLIONS DEAD. WOOL MARKET CRASHES!

Excerpted from the agricultural journal Husbandry Weekly

"How am I to feed my children? My whole flock is dead! These Sisters, do they have any idea what they do? They have destroyed our lives! Winter is not far away, and there will be no wool for blankets. No wool for coats or hats or stockings. What are we to do? Even if we do not starve, we will freeze! And for what? Liberate the sheep? What has the world come to?!" Weft of Highholm, shepherd.

A terrible shock went through the wool market today as the Sisters of the Tetrapodal Masses claimed responsibility for unleashing a devastating attack on the flocks of the North. Another 130,000 animals were reported dead today, pushing the total number of sheep lost to just over two million. The wool markets dropped precipitously as a result, and there were hints of growing panic in the populace at large as the ramifications of a devastated wool harvest become clear. As the astrologers forecast a bitter winter, the price of wool has soared as high as three koku for a single bale of wool. Petitions for price relief made to the Bureau of Trade and Commerce have fallen on deaf ears, and rumors of cooperation between the Bureau and the Furriers Guild grow louder with each passing day.

The Shogun himself has come forth to condemn these acts of sabotage and to call for the assignment of a special magistrate council to investigate. He went on to say that anyone with information regarding the whereabouts of the Sisters of the Tetrapodal Masses or their associates would be granted three years amnesty from taxation if their information proves fruitful. Leads have flooded the office of the Minister of Just Inquiry since, and our sources report that the magistracy is confident the culprits will be apprehended soon and brought up for execution.

Though it is not yet clear that the plague has run its course, this incident has already been named the single worst act of sabotage to strike the agricultural sector in several decades, and the worst act of sabotage of any kind to strike the North in over a century. Before this that honor was held by the Great Ratcatcher Massacre of Morenhiel, when the Skintail Liberation Front managed to kill over 30,000 ferrets and terriers in a single month. The resultant surge in the rat population caused the evacuation of over 900,000 inhabitants of Morenhiel and the eventual destruction of the city.

PRUNING THE TREE

We of the Right and Faithful Society of Axes tell you now. We have marked you, and the Night of Hooks and Bills will be upon you soon. We have seen your abomination, and on our oath, we will cut it from the world as you might cut a worm from an apple. You who would yoke the





life urge with foul sorcery, we know you. You who would halt the proper course of the seasons that you need not know the winter, we know you. We know you, and we have marked you. Soon, you will be cut out that the tapestry of all life will no longer be sullied by your presence in it.

To all things is given a season. All that lives must die. All that begins must end. You have taken from the world without giving back. Your gluttony will be chastised a hundredfold. A Great Pruning draws near. You who would deny the proper turning of the years will be called to account. You who would harness dark powers to stave off death and live beyond your season, we know you. We are as the grass on the plains. We are all about you, but you cannot tell one of us from another. Our knives will end your abomination, and you will not know it until your blood has been let out to replenish the earth you owe so much.

ON THE SEALING OF THE GREEN PAGODA AND THE DESTRUCTION OF SEMIOT REEV

Master, it is over, and we have prevailed.

Surely you know this by now. News of it spread before us like a fire on the savanna. Not surprising, really — the Anathema's death curse sent a pillar of silver fire a mile into the sky, and blood rained down three leagues in every direction.

When first we approached the Anathema's lair, I thought perhaps it had foreseen our coming and fled in fear of its life. All was quiet and still. There were no sentries to be seen upon the ramparts nor pickets in the trees. My officers and I approached the structure cautiously and tried the door. It swung easily and opened on an empty corridor. We called our squads and ordered the warstriders to hold the outer court.

The silence was unnerving as we entered the Manse. The air was thick and cloying, like a stable or barn that's been shut up through the heat of the day, but there was no sign of the Anathema to be seen. We pressed onward, moving with care, every nerve alert for ambush.

It came as we crested the stair to the third tier of the Manse. What we had taken for sculpted grotesques placed as horrific decoration came to monstrous life and began killing us with a fury. Our mortal cohorts died almost immediately, torn to pieces by the sorcerer's abominable creations. We of the Dragon's Blood replied in kind, Essence scorching the air, daiklaves cleaving through vile flesh at every turn. Those that survived fled the halls with pieces of our dead in their teeth, gnawing.

The second wave came down from above, demon killers summoned from Malfeas to serve Semiot Reeve's twisted will. They came, hooded and in shadow, wielding flame and raking our flesh with envenomed claws. Two of us fell before we drove them back. We were near to the top of the pagoda, but the Anathema had yet to show himself. We would not have to wait long.

As we climbed the final stair, the floor shook beneath our feet. Some new menace, come now from below? We were not certain, but since no enemy appeared to harass us, we continued our climb. The pinnacle of the tower consisted of a single chamber that occupied the entire length and breadth of the structure's footprint. There at the center, shaping some vile spell, stood our quarry. Fain loosed a barrage of arrows to no avail, each one burst into flame a yard from Reeve and was ash before it reached him. He laughed at us and brought his hands together with the sound of a hundred thunderclaps. Something burst up through the center of the pagoda. Something vast and reeking, the color of pig flesh but moist and hairless. It split the structure in two, sending one wall and a third of the building to the ground in a heap. The roof exploded upward and outward, and the Anathema attacked.

The fight itself was a riot of blood and Essence. The worm of infernal terror's thrashing crushed one of the warstriders before the other two roasted it to death. Reeve squeezed Fain's head clean off and swept Mot over the edge to his death with the corpse. While the Anathema laughed, the rest of us struck. My axe cut him a glancing blow, but Farhat had better luck. Her daiklave bit deep into Reeve's shoulder and spun him around. Eyes blazing with rage and power, he began an incantation, a killing spell, no doubt. I summoned all the strength I had and struck again and struck well.

I wish I had done better by my tutors in the field of sorcery. Perhaps I would have thought better of striking when I did. But then again, perhaps not. There was little time for thought. The jade of my daiklave bit deep into his side. Blood flowed out in a torrent, and the Essence gathered between his hands that had been meant for Farhat blew the top three levels off the pagoda in an instant.

I was fortunate. A kindly old fir tree broke my fall, along with both my legs, a wrist and three ribs. I lived. Farhat was not so fortunate. I trust she died quickly, but I cannot say for sure. She landed beneath the dying worm. I imagine she was crushed, but there was not enough left after the monster's vile blood had its way to tell.

Reeve had survived as well and stood atop the ruin of his Manse gathering his wits for another attack. By now, the 'striders had done with the worm and, finding the sorcerer in reach, pounced. It was over a moment later, as Meena did unto Reeve as he'd done to Fain. As the Anathema expired, his lair trembled and fell, collapsing in on itself. As the last stones tumbled to the ground, the earth erupted in a pillar of argent flame a mile high. It burned that way for nearly an hour before vanishing as if it had never been. All that remained of the Manse was a scorched and smoking crater and the smell of smoldering flesh.

I am healing now. The surgeon says it will be three weeks before I can travel under my own power. I hope to prove him wrong, but I do so at the risk of my legs, he says. I have considered my future, Master. I do believe I am

ready to take you up on that offer of a place in the ministry, provided it remains open. I've had my fill of blood.

WOOD WISDOM AND THE MANY MONKS TALE

From The Forty Willow Sutra by Sozei Hirohatai, Advisor to Daimyo Nazuru Kamkai

Long ago, a powerful and cruel demon queen, called Poison Eye of Discord, lived in a forest near Rathess. One hundred Immaculate monks meditated in the a sacred grove nearby. By means of her terrible spells of dark and corrupting Essence, the demon queen took on the forms of myriad creatures, forms as countless as the leaves of the wood, so that she could distract these holy men and women who had come to find clarity and achieve a greater mastery of their Essence. Some, she seduced in the forms of beautiful men and women. Others, she frightened to the brink of insanity through the evocation of terrible Yozi specters and scenes of dreadful horror.

The first of the Immaculates, called Wind of Hollows, lost his thoughts, all memory washed from his mind. Another monk, called Coruscating Flame, became drunk and reveled about like a fool who had drank too much wine. A third devotee of the Immaculate teachings, called Stonehand Guardian, fell fast asleep, his senses unable to be roused to awareness. And a fourth, called Merciless Wave, became consumed with an immeasurable grief, so consumed with unbearable sadness, that he ran off into the wilderness. In this way, the demon queen triumphed over the goodness of the monks, and evil spread throughout the forest.

Until an abbot of the Order called Unmoving Root remembered the teachings of He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass and the advice his own master had long ago given him to understand this teaching. Remembering the mantras of his patron Dragon, he meditated upon the deeds and words of Sextes Jylis, who brings life and peace where there is destruction and evil, and in a vision of transcendent bliss, He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass revealed his infinite body of leaves and flowers and instructed Unmoving Root in what he would have to do.

Illuminated by the words of his Supreme and Perfect Teacher, the monk took sharp nails of green jade and, meditating on the essence of Wood, drove them into the many trees that surrounded the sanctuary in which his brothers and sisters meditated. From that moment on, whatever deceptive and corrupting specters Poison Eye of Discord created, the Immaculates would spontaneously envision as nothing other than the Supreme and Perfect Form of the Lifegiver Sextes Jylis, He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass. In this way, Unmoving Root made safe the meditation grove, and Poison Eye of Discord was never to be seen again.

By way of the glory and serenity of the Immaculate Wood Dragon, the faith of the Immaculate Order spread throughout the region near Rathess.



LETTER FROM MASTER ARTISAN KENSHI KAWA NORBU TO DAIMYO O-SHI RENZU

...concerning the restless territories of Panja, Chan-Ji and Xipe Kadoll

Most Honored and Revered Master of the Many Groves of Willows,

I hope this letter finds you well and that your holdings prosper. Last evening, I made use of a magnificent treasure given as a gift by a longtime friend and advisor from the East. This instrument of prophecy, crafted in accordance with principles of the First Age, bestowed upon me a vision that I must share with you, for your own sake and for the sake of those who rely on your guardianship in these times of war.

In my vision, I was sitting in a single tower of the purest white jade, from which I could see for leagues in all directions. Before me, there was a table on which sat four crystal bowls, each filled with blood. From the balcony of this high tower, I could see four great armies each resplendent in their heraldry, standards flying boldly.

Three of the armies flew banners marked with the icons of snakes, one red, one black, one green. The third, My Lord, was marked with the symbol of a diamond locked in the jaws of jungle cat. The three serpent armies moved onto the field and, as if they were fighting, shifted through each other's ranks, a frenzy of green, red and black. They moved so quickly that their forms dissolved, becoming a vast, teaming pool of metal and darkness. Once the movement ended, the mass congealed into the form of an enormous viper, as long as a river.

At once, the fourth army rallied its troops and set to charge the terrible serpent that was black as pitch and covered in shields like scales. As the noble soldiers of the diamond cat galloped toward the monster, it fell upon them like a great wave of venom and fear. The serpent's body sent the brave warriors tumbling to and fro, the army scattered and defeated.

Great Lord O-Shi Renzu, Sovereign Protector of the Jaguar Gates, I know that this standard is none other than your own, and given current tensions with Panja, Chan-Ji and Xipe Kadoll, I fear for the worst. Please consider this warning, however cryptic it may be, and slay this serpent before it comes to pass.

JOURNAL OF A SIMHATA BREEDER

by Shiki-Ran, Stablemaster of the Daimyo Gouw-Wo of the Third Province of the Southern Prefecture

It has been nearly two years since we've been able to breed anything close to the steed that we located in the Far South almost 12 years ago. Though we have struggled with the specimen, we fear that the traits most desired will no longer manifest in future foals.

Initially, Taizei Henshu's unit was sent not far to the south to request the assistance of the Southern agrarian

states, hoping that at least one among them would be able to provide the location for where our current specimen was recovered. The Horselords, who had grown rich from the fruits of their incomparable stables, was initially uncooperative for a reason that was shortly revealed to us. I believe that a Dragon-Blooded diplomat may fair better, but I would not be willing to bet anything of value on the outcome. Nonetheless, Henshu's men returned empty-handed but for a few strange suggestions made by one of their most renowned trainers. The trainer revealed that the simhata specimen was not, in fact, bred by the Horselords. Rather, this man believed that there is, or was, a temple of some significance, where sacrifice could be made in order to earn the favor of spirits who would then reward the tribe with the secret of the simhata. Taizei Henshu, being a devout adherent of the Immaculate Philosophy, set out to demand a stable of simhata from this insolent spirit. However, upon arriving at the isolated temple, there was no spirit to be found.

Our initial attempts began with an effort to breed the simhata with mares taken from the finest stock of the Southern Horselords. The Horselords required an inordinate amount of convincing to provide such a beast, but a mead-sworn oath to provide them with written record of any potentially beneficial findings resulted in a mutually satisfying arrangement. Thus, we procured two mares with which the simhata stallion could breed. Unfortunately, this stage of the project did not turn out as we wished. When we first introduced the thoroughbred mares, we placed them in a pen next to the simhata, but the simhata all but ignoring the mares. We thought, initially, that this would mean the difficulty would be in urging the simhata to go anywhere near these inferior specimens, though they be the finest horses the Second Age has to offer. When the first mare was introduced to the simhata's significantly sized pen, the simhata fell upon the mare in seconds, tearing out her throat with his fangs as his claws eviscerated her stomach, spilling a steaming heap of offal out onto the stable floor at which it fed peacefully as if nothing dreadful had occurred. The second mare was introduced after the simhata was heavily drugged with a mixture of green hay and opium gum. Again, the experiment failed as the reproductive habits of the simhata seem to be tied directly to its aggressive behaviors.

Sorcery facilitated our next attempt as we called upon the shamans and savants of tribes and cities that were known for working with the unusual breeding of livestock or horses specifically. Yet again, we contacted specialists from the bountiful towns of the South as well as breeders from the East who specialized in breeding livestock to endure a colder range of climates than would be acceptable for any given breed. Using incantations typically used to weave one or more creatures together, a handful of terrifying and fascinating outcomes were achieved.

The first beast born live was more avian than equine, bearing a feathered coat and a sort of useless patagia that webbed the back legs to the front, making it difficult for the creature to move about. The animal also possessed a coat of thin quills, a failed manifestation of feathers. The beast was put down as it seemed to possess a skeleton that was too weak to hold its significant mass.

The second live-born outcome was born without sex. Although this creature possessed the size and power of the simhata, it does not possess any other offensive or defensive traits of the original steed. We decided to give this beast to the Horselords as payment for their cooperation with the breeding endeavor and decided to have no further contact with them. The third creature, I am pleased to tell you, was magnificent. Not only was the creature simhata, but it was far superior in size, strength and resistance. This animal, which we have named Five Tempest Stallion withstood the punishment of both spell and blade as well as my own lashing anima and the burning anima of Shudana Kreese. However, it is this same Dragon-Blooded who was thrown from the beast's back and disemboweled in one ferocious bite. The creature then slew both stablehands and, using its massive talons, ripped through the wooden stable wall and then, using the top of its enormous head, smashed through the stone outer wall and escaped its paddock. The creature then bolted out over the perimeter fence and vanished off into the distance. It is for this reason that I believe such methods will resort only in these insane and feral specimens. We will attempt this experiment again, and I expect that we prevail as there are still several potent methods that we have not yet implemented.

Insofar as my formal report, I believe the simhata as we once knew them are forever vanished. Without a female of the breed, we will not have reliable methods to produce healthy simhata offspring. Though the insane superior breed is certainly possible, it would take a Dragon-Blooded of superior will and empathy concerning such sorts of beasts to control one. Though we have considered the possibility of Marukan horses being given some sort of artifact-based protection from the flaring of our animas, I think the cost to create such magics in large enough numbers may also be prohibitive.

I apologize for my failing, Daimyo Gouw-Wo, but without a miracle of sorcery or the recovery of a simhata mare, the breeding of the true simhata has met its end. But for the wonders of the First Age that this were not true.

ESSENCE'S EFFECT ON CELLULAR TRANSPORT MECHANISMS

Excerpted From Introductory Organic Mechanisms and Essence Flows, Third Edition

...Key to understanding the specifics of Essence's effect on cellular transport is the fact that at no point

do actual Essence interference effects take place. One of the most common misapprehensions of the beginning student is that, in order to enhance activity, Essence motes will be bound into the cellular transport chain at some point, usually during three-sugar synthesis, in the place of bound sugars.

Of course, nothing could be further from the case. Motes are an indivisible unit, and, like all Essence, they interfere with the physical world only rarely. However, the effects engendered by the release of bound Essence motes from the Exaltation or sorcerous construct provides potential physical energy, which, when directed by the arms of Essence-channeling forms or constructs, flows through and enhances various physical processes.

The archetypal effect is the provision of regeneration through the form of the war-optimized Lunar Exalt. While the roots of this process are poorly understood, taking place as it does inside the black box of the Exaltation, it sets the benchmark of efficiency for such effects. During the war-transformation, the Exaltation cycles Essence internally, with the effect of increasing the energy released by the disunion of three-sugar transport modules, but not altering the mechanism — in this as in many other mechanisms, Essence follows the path of least resistance, performing the most subtle miracles possible under the constraints. This accounts for the supernatural character of the Lunar's war-form capabilities in general, and the Exaltation can clearly be seen to demonstrate adaptations to the various demands of the war-form, most specifically in the healing process.

Obviously, the process extended by the Deadly Beastman Transformation is incomparably efficient — even against the other salutary effects on health provided even by the Lunar Exaltation, nothing can compare to its relative costlessness. More extreme forms of healing, which bypass the cellular process, typically require much more Essence to flow through the designs...

ON THE DESTRUCTION OF THE HUNDRED WATERFALLS MANSE

Imperial Intelligence Service Monthly Regional Force Summary

During our campaign throughout the Eastern territories, our primary adversaries have been the Wyld barbarians who make their homes throughout the seemingly endless forests. Our primary tactics in this instance involved standard skirmishing formations and the use of energy lances and the warstriders called Beckoning Heaven and Pillar of the East. Supported by heavily armored infantry equipped with fine war gear selected from Boshi Kenfo's armory, there were no doubts concerning our speedy victory. Ultimately, all our conflicts with the barbarians were effortless but for a small handful of true challenges.





Talons were set up on both sides of the hill where we made camp. Patrols were established, and the two warstriders were at the ready. Central to both flanks, Boshi Kenfo's Dragon-Blooded heavy infantry made camp. That way, the elites could support either flank if we suffered an ambush. Despite forward thinking on behalf of our commanding officers, we failed to deflect the brutal assault we suffered that evening.

The sun had just set when we heard the first howl. As is the procedure, we lit torches and marked out the perimeter, setting lookouts at every fifth torch. We then lit four additional fires around the center campfire so that we'd have maximum visibility within the base camp.

We didn't even hear a second howl. It was the alarm issued by the detachment on the northwest corner of camp that alerted us. A third of Kenfo's elites took up their daiklaves and darted for the contact point, followed by Pillar of the East, arriving in time to see no less than a dozen beastmen clashing with what was left of the detachment. The elite unit engaged the beastmen and made short work of them. I don't know what it was that gave them the idea, but one of Kenfo's officers let out a shout that sent the other two thirds of their unit dashing for the opposite corner of the camp. When they made their destination, waiting for them, with silver fangs bared, was a massive she-wolf whose front legs became arms as she rose to

her feet, a spear of unnaturally bright silver sparkling in the moonlight.

When it became apparent that we were confronting a detachment of Anathema, the mortal troops broke, leaving only the 12 Dragon-Blooded elites to defend the flank. The elites met the Anathema head-on, anima banners blazing in the darkness of night. After the fight, five of the elite soldiers laid dead. However, the head of the Anathema hung from the belt of Shiru Gamme, a victory that will forever honor his family.

Three evenings later, we arrived at the Hundred Waterfalls Manse at the very northern tip of the Rock River near Kajeth. After several nights of unsheltered patrol, our men were very thankful to be treated to a hot meal and warm, dry beds. We had just hunkered down for wine and talk when an explosion like lightning rippled through the Manse as if its very foundation had been compromised.

The Shogun's forces gathered in the central turret and at the four radial gates. Shiru Gamme, having remained sober, gathered the others of his unit and took to the field in heavy armor with powerbow marksmen taking up the rear and the savant Nanda Pushpa providing support. When they broke the base perimeter and established a spearpoint on the northern drawbridge, they saw the lean and terrible image of a Fair Folk warrior equipped with the largest silver axe that any of the men had seen.

Before Shiru Gamme could engage, the Fair Folk let out a terrible laugh and brought the axe to bear on the grounding pylon of Hundred Waterfalls Manse, severing its geomantic link and shattering its integrity. As the elites rushed forward, the Manse collapsed behind them, leaving all within either wounded or dead.

Nanda Pushpa made the first attack on the Fair One. Using mantras of the First Age, the sorcerer summoned a torrent of cold iron spikes, which gathered like a tornado around him. Upon uttering the last syllable, the whirlwind bucked and whipped, sending a barrage of lethal darts at the creature. With not so much as an expression of effort, the Fair Folk adversary raised his axe, which crackled and snapped with a deafening boom, causing the wave of darts to dissipate as if they were no more substantial than breath on a winter day.

Despite this awful display of power, the actual conflict was over after a short burst of combat. The Fair Folk lord, it seems, was not so much the threat as his weapon, which did decapitate two of the elites before Shiru Gamme, again, impaled the fae upon his daiklave, taking the fae's terrible weapon as a trophy.

The loss of Hundred Waterfalls Manse was a terrible blow to the Eastern territories, namely its guardian, Daimyo Nawari, who was killed in the collapse. Based on the translation of the strange, scratch-like glyphs on the weapon's head, it is called "Death at the Root." We

can only hope that there are no more such weapons in the faerie arsenal.

FROM THE DRONE OF THE SOWERS

We are those who walk behind the fruit wagon, seeing that the harvest is not wasted. We are those who waste not, so that we might give to those who have nothing. We are those who do not rest, so that our children might. For every three mouths, there is only one bushel of rice. For every family, there is only one growing child's portion of meat, and the meat is not good meat. This is the truth of the world as it is, but not the way of the world that must be.

Sextes Jylis strew grass after the war against the Anathema, that the world might be verdant and refreshed. So shall we plant green things after sickness, making gardens in the boneyards and parks among the fallen houses of the time before. Not for us is mourning — we who have lost all are sprightly and travel light. To us is given the renewal of the world.

We are the sowers, the strewers of grass, and through our hands are sown the seeds of tomorrow. Give to the sowers, brother men, that we might go sowing our seeds among you. Who has that which they do not need, that they can give over to the garden of the Dragons? Who will sacrifice to us that the provender of the land might be multiplied? Come out from your houses, sample our fruits, and give us seeds for sowing boneyards!





CHAPTER SIX

MIRACLES OF SEXTES JYLIS



The scope and power of Wood Essence, many Wood-aspected Dragon-Bloods believe, is yet to be revealed. As the very mysteries of life and death reside within the currents of the Wood Dragon's energy, the possibilities of application are seemingly without limit. Aside from the symbolic facets of Wood Essence, there are also quite literal uses of the element that enable to user to become the deadliest of predators or canniest of prey in a woodland environment. What follows are a handful of well-known and less common Charms, Hearthstones and artifacts designed to empower, amuse and terrify any series using Wood-aspected characters. As always, which of these items or Charms makes an appearance in your series is completely up to the Storyteller, as some of the Charms and artifacts are particularly powerful.

NEW CHARMS

ARCHERY

UNOBSTRUCTED HUNTER'S AIM

Cost: 2 motes
Duration: Instant
Type: Reflexive
Minimum Archery: 3
Minimum Essence: 2
Prerequisite Charms: Harvest of the Hunter

Using this Charm, the archer infuses an arrow with her Essence, harmonizing it to the element of wood. An arrow so imbued will pass through obstacles of wood or plant unimpeded. With Unobstructed Hunter's Aim, the arrow soars through densely wooded and overgrown terrain as if it were being launched across an empty, open plain.

An attack made with the use of this Charm ignores ranged cover modifiers granted by any obstacle consisting of wood or other plant matter. This Charm is even capable of bypassing the defense provided by wooden shields and timber fortifications, regardless of their thickness. This effect does not work on enchanted items containing the Five Magical Materials.

RAVENOUS THORN TECHNIQUE

Cost: 3 motes
Duration: Instant
Type: Supplemental
Minimum Archery: 5
Minimum Essence: 3
Prerequisite Charms: Life-Swelling Sap Strike

Feared by those who know of it, this lethal attack awakens the Essence currents in a wooden arrow, transforming its pattern into that of a root seeking the nourishment of rich soil. Through the use of this Charm, the Dragon-Blooded turns his projectile into a growing, twisting missile, alive with runners and hungry roots that



bore through the archer's victim.

If the initial archery attack causes damage, the arrow sprouts roots and creepers which bore into the target's body, inflicting the base damage of an arrow (minimum of 1) of the appropriate type at the beginning of each subsequent turn. This damage ignores armor and may only be soaked with Stamina and other natural soak. This effect persists for a number of turns equal to the archer's permanent Essence or until it is removed. Successfully removing the arrow requires a Dexterity + Medicine roll with a difficulty equal to the permanent Essence of the archer.

MEDICINE

VERDANT CURTAINS OF SERENITY

Cost: 5 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Medicine: 5

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Purity of Mind Method

Through extended insight meditation and the reining of the mind's wandering tendencies, a Dragon-Blooded who has mastered this technique may wrap his consciousness in bands of resilient Essence, affording his sanity a fortresslike protection through which only the most persistent psychic effects may penetrate.

A character using this Charm may add her permanent Essence to the difficulty of any supernatural effect that seeks to sway her emotions, control her mind or induce madness. This Charm has no effect upon the Great Curse.

JADE CRUCIBLE METHOD

Cost: Special, 1 Willpower

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Medicine: 5

Minimum Essence: 4

Prerequisite Charms: Dread Infection Strike, Grievous Wound Alteration Energy, Purity of Mind Method

As one of the most dangerous and powerful of the internal medicine techniques devised by Dragon-Blooded savants, the secrets of this Charm are closely guarded and known to very few. Wise use of this technique will allow a truly adept practitioner to access a hidden wellspring of Essence within himself. By sacrificing the integrity of his physical form, he releases a portion of the Essence that gives him life, liberating it for other more direct uses. Despite the power of this Charm, its manifestation is quite subtle, as its effects are invisible to the casual onlooker.

The player of the character using this Charm chooses how many health levels he wishes to convert into Essence and then rolls his character's permanent Essence + Medicine. Each success on this roll grants 1 mote of Peripheral Essence per health level expended. These health levels

are not lost until after the roll is made, and therefore, any wound penalties accrued from their loss do not affect this roll. Essence gained in this way may cause the character's Peripheral Essence pool to exceed its normal maximum levels, but any such excess Peripheral Essence is lost at the end of the scene, returning to the natural essence flows of Creation.

MOST BENEFICENT SEED OF THE FIVE DRAGONS

Cost: 8 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Medicine: 5

Minimum Essence: 5

Prerequisite Charms: Jade Crucible Method

As the five elements intertwine to form all things within Creation, so too does each Dragon-Blooded contain a piece of all five elements within his Essence. As a master of life and death, a Dragon-Blood wielding this Charm may cause the seed of another element to blossom within himself, providing him with some of the benefits of that aspect.

The Dragon-Blood must select which type of elemental Essence he wishes to emulate when this Charm is invoked. For the duration of the Charm's effect, the character's aspect is considered to be of that type for purposes of Charm activation costs, anima effects and immunities or resistances specific to beings of that elemental aspect. The character loses access to his Wood-aspected anima power while this effect persists and must pay the out-of-element mote surcharge on any Wood-aspected Charms. The character may opt to end this effect at any time, as a reflexive action, but ending the Charm's effect will cause any benefits from non-Wood-aspected anima powers to end as well. This Charm does not effect which skills are considered favored by the character for experience cost or training time purposes.

PERFORMANCE

HIDDEN PETAL ARIA METHOD

Cost: 2 motes per subject

Duration: Special

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Performance: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Memorable Performance Technique

In the courts of the Dragon-Blooded, the love of musical and theatrical performances is commonplace. A character skilled in the use of this Charm can manipulate the nuance and subtext of his performance to communicate secretly with audience members of his choice.

During the course of a performance, a Dragon-Blood may use this Charm, expending 2 motes for each audience

member he wishes to communicate with secretly. For the duration of the performance, he may pass information to these audience members as if he was delivering a slowly spoken monologue. Some types of specialized or technical information may not be communicated through the use of this Charm, but general topics of conversation can be transmitted. The Charm only facilitates communication from the performer to the audience member or members.

BLOSSOM HIDES THORNS

Cost: 3 motes

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Performance: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Dance of Flashing Swords

The Dragon-Blooded are social creatures, enamored with culture and art, but they are also creatures of violence, passion and cunning artifice. It is upon the ground where these two spheres of interest meet that this Charm is most useful. With a graceful dance step or an artful flourish, a Dragon-Blood skilled in this technique may mask an attack as part of a performance, taking her foe unawares. Treat this attack as an ambush attempt (see *Exalted*, p. 238) unless the ambushed character employs a Charm that makes him aware of attacks against his person. Players of

such ambushed characters must make the normal Wits + Awareness roll for their characters to react to the ambush, but they must add the permanent Essence of the character using Blossom Hides Thorns to their difficulty. This Charm may not be used once combat has begun.

RIDE

ELEMENTAL HALO'S MERCY

Cost: 3 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Ride: 4

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Great Heart Companion

The powerful elemental anima of a Dragon-Blood often injures all those nearby. This is especially problematic for Dragon-Blooded who employ mounts. By way of this Charm, a Dragon-Blood may protect his steed from the damaging effects of his anima flux. With but a moments concentration and a touch, the Dragon-Blood may infuse his mount with a portion of his own Essence, shielding it from the damaging of effects of his elemental banner.

For the duration of the scene, a mount affected by this Charm will suffer no damage from the Dragon-Blood's anima flux.



SURVIVAL

NATURE'S HEALING BOUNTY

Cost: 1 mote per two dice

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Survival: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Wild-Wandering Forester Charm

Wood-aspected Dragon-Blooded are known for their great expertise in herbalism and natural healing lore. With the use of this Charm, a Terrestrial Exalt may supplement his healing skills through the use of medicinal plants and wild herbs. The Dragon-Blood can improve his Medicine dice pools by two dice for every mote of Essence spent but can add no more dice than his Survival Ability (plus any relevant specialty). The character must spend a full mote of Essence even if his player wishes to add just a single die (as might be the case if the character had an odd Survival score).

HEARTHSTONES

GODSPEAKING TRILLION (AIR ••)

Trigger: None, constant

A godspeaking trillion resembles a square-cut piece of milky blue topaz. This Hearthstone causes its bearer's voice to ring and resonate in the ritual tones of the Council of Winds, granting him the attention and a measure of respect from spirits and elementals. A godspeaking trillion grants two bonus dice to all Social rolls when dealing with spirits and elementals (not including ghosts or demons). When Dealing with air elementals or spirits belonging to a court specifically concerned with the element of air, this bonus is increased by an additional die, for a total of three dice.

COLD IRON BAUBLE (EARTH ••)

Trigger: None, constant

Beads of black iron, these Hearthstones are relatively common on the Blessed Isle, springing forth from the ordered Earth Essence that flows around the Imperial Mountain, but they are most needed and greatly treasured in the hinterlands of the Threshold. Any weapon fitted with a cold iron bauble inflicts aggravated damage to Fair Folk, just as if the weapon were constructed of cold iron. Furthermore, the cold iron bauble adds 1 to the difficulty of any Fair Folk powers used against its bearer.

OPAL OF THE HUNTED (WOOD ••)

Trigger: None, always on

The opal of the hunted is a glistening orb of scintillating green and violet, with flecks of gold that move like light shining through the forest's canopy. This Hearthstone adds three dice to all rolls made by the bearer's player to

detect ambush and, should the character still be successfully ambushed, adds three dice to the roll to act during the combat (see **Exalted**, p. 238). In addition, the stone adds three dice to all rolls to evade tracking and pursuit (see **Exalted**, p. 245).

TREE-STRIDING EMERALD (WOOD ••)

Trigger: None, constant

The tree-striding emerald makes its bearer totally at home in the heights of a towering canopy. While under its effects, the character's weight will be borne by even the smallest branches, and his feet will find easy purchase even among the most twisting boughs. The character can move through tress as easily as if he were walking on flat ground and may even dash up the vertical trunks of trees at his normal movement rate (with a successful Dexterity + Athletics roll made by his player). The bearer of the stone may also add two dice to any rolls to resist being knocked down or knocked back while standing or perched in a living tree or plant of significant size, typically the character's height or greater.

ADDER'S EYE (WOOD •••)

Trigger: None, constant

This gold and black veined wedge of serpent stone was highly desired by the Night Caste Solars of the First Age. In current times, Dragon-Blooded assassins and huntsmen insert these stones into their artifact weapons to give them the advantage over powerful prey.

The adder's eye envenoms any weapon it is set into with a coat of deadly poison. This poison acts as poison snake venom (see **Exalted**, p. 243) and must be resisted any time a wound is inflicted with the weapon. This Hearthstone is only effective when set into weapons that draw blood, and weapons fitted with it are easily detected as being envenomed.

DRAGON WILLOW AGATE (WOOD •••)

Trigger: None, constant

The dragon willow agate is a faceted half-sphere of agate, shot through with veins of green and dark amber. This stone enhances the anima power of Wood-aspected Terrestrials. A Wood-aspected character possessing this Hearthstone may use his anima power twice in any given turn. Exalted who do not possess the Wood-aspected anima power and Wood-aspected Dragon-Blooded whose anima powers are not activated add two dice to Dodge and Athletics checks while they possess a dragon willow agate, although these bonus dice may not be used to grant the character reflexive Dodge or Athletics actions in the way that the Wood Aspect anima power can.

GLADESTALKER'S STONE (WOOD •••)

Trigger: None, constant

This deep red cabochon of garnet pulses, quick and shallow, like the heart of a terrified beast. This Hearthstone

empowers the character's arrows, making them fly swift and true like hunting falcons. Any Archery attacks made using a powerbow in which this stone is housed add three dice to their attack pool and a +1 bonus to the arrows damage modifier.

ROSE OF MILLIONS (WOOD ••••)

Trigger: None, constant

This Hearthstone takes the form of an eight-sided pink and black tourmaline cross section, with eight facets around the edge with perfectly smooth faces. This Hearthstone weaves beauty and grace around its owner. In addition to adding five dice to all Presence and Performance pools, with a successful Wits + Performance check (difficulty 3) by her player, the bearer may seamlessly avoid embarrassing or humiliating accidents or social errors. The stone does not protect the bearer from ridicule, though it does make such attacks seem grossly inappropriate and cruel to those who witness the exchange.

ARTIFACTS

CHALCEDONY CHAMBERLAIN'S FLUTES

(ARTIFACT • FOR THE PAIR)

Fashioned from a single piece of green serpent chalcedony, these drinking glasses are indistinguishable from one another. Originally crafted during the Shogunate Era, these items are highly desired within the halls of the Dragon-Blooded courts. Aside from the exquisite artistry invested in their crafting, the flutes do not appear to have any magical properties, and don't, until an Exalted attunes to their subtle power. Once attuned to the glasses, the Exalt is unaffected by any poison or drug that fills them, including the recreational and pleasurable effects derived from alcohol or hallucinogenic elixirs. The applications of these glasses, though not as immediately grand as many of the artifacts of the First Age, are incredibly versatile — allowing the attuned character to remain sober during drunken negotiations or to poison an enemy with no great effort. Chalcedony chamberlain's flutes require a commitment of 1 mote of Essence for the pair.

HARROWED DAUGHTER'S PALESKIN COWL

(ARTIFACT ••)

This morbid garment was crafted by Ledaal Verro under the eye of Ragara Bhagwei as a tool for Ragara Bhagwei's use. Using shamanic principles adapted from barbarian tribes, the flesh of the previous Shoat of the Mire was flensed from her carcass and cured in an preserving elixir that strengthened the physical substance of the skin and awakened its latent magical properties.

The Cowl enables its wearer to pass unnoticed by ghosts, the walking dead and other denizens of the Underworld. While wearing the cowl, its owner will be

treated as if he were one of the dead by creatures of the Underworld. Any attempt to detect the character as being anything other than a common ghost or walking dead by such beings has its difficulty increased by 3, and any attempts by the character to disguise himself as a creature of the Underworld gain three automatic successes. The mask also grants the character's player a three-die bonus to all Social rolls pertaining to inhabitants of the Underworld. Neither of these bonuses apply to Abyssals or Deathlords. Furthermore, while the Cowl is worn, the character may perceive unmanifested ghosts. The terrifying and morbid mien of the Cowl is unsettling to the living, however, and the character suffers a 3 dice penalty to all Social rolls not related to intimidation while dealing with the living. The Cowl requires a commitment of 4 motes to use.

BLACK WIDOW RAZORS

(ARTIFACT ••• FOR THE PAIR)

Prized by assassins and believed to have first been created by the same artisan who conceived the automaton assassin, these razor claws always come in pairs and appear to be a set of fist-sized spider statuettes, wrought in exquisite detail. Once attuned, however, they animate, crawling across the wielder's skin at her mental command. When "active" the wrap their hind legs around the owner's wrists and extend their four razor sharp forelegs into a set of deadly claws. When not in use, they will climb up the owners arms, secreting themselves on her person. What makes the black widow razors truly terrifying, however, is the potent venom that they may deliver. The wielder of the claws may spend 2 motes of Essence on any attack made with the razors, before the attack roll is made, to envenom the strike. If the attack succeeds in inflicting damage then the target's player must make a Stamina + Resistance roll, difficulty 3. If the roll succeeds, the target suffers an additional level of lethal damage that may not be soaked. If the roll fails, the target suffers an additional effect, based on the Magical Material the black widow razor is constructed from:

Orichalcum: Orichalcum black widow razors carry a venom that causes the victim's flesh to ignite in golden flames, which wash across her body, immolating her. If the Stamina + Resistance Roll fails, the flames cause four dice of lethal damage to the victim at the beginning of every subsequent turn, for a total of three turns. Against demons, the dead or creatures of darkness, this damage is aggravated. Multiple applications of this venom does not increase the damage caused by the flames but will increase the duration of their effect.

Moonsilver: Venom from moonsilver black widow razors causes the victim's flesh and bone to shift with liquid fluidity, rendering him very susceptible to injury. If the Stamina + Resistance roll fails, the character suffers an additional die of post-soak damage from any successful





attack for the duration of the scene. Multiple applications of this are cumulative.

Jade: The poison of jade black widow razors induces fatigue and lethargy in its victims. If the Stamina + Resistance roll fails, the victim suffers a two-die penalty to all actions for the duration of the scene. If this penalty ever exceeds twice the victim's Stamina, he collapses into a comatose slumber for a full day.

Starmetal: Starmetal black widow razors deliver a venom that attacks its victim's sight, blinding her. The eyes of those poisoned by this venom take on a shining grayish black metallic sheen. If the Stamina + Resistance roll fails, the victim is blinded and subtracts two successes from all attacks and treats all attacks as being made from behind (see *Exalted*, p. 238). This venom has no effect on creatures that do not see. The effects are permanent, except on beings of magic, who suffer blindness for only three scenes.

Soulsteel: The venom of soulsteel black widow razors taints the victim's soul with the Essence of Oblivion, enveloping him in a spiritual miasma of sorrow and despair. If the Stamina + Resistance roll fails, the victim may not regain lost or spent Willpower, nor can he channel Willpower through his Virtues. (Exalted may still channel Willpower through the Virtue associated with their Virtue Flaw.) Players of mortals struck by this venom must also make an immediate Willpower roll against a difficulty of 3. Those whose players fail are struck with suicidal despair, either collapsing to await their inevitable end or seeking to kill themselves by the most expedient means available, depending on their nature and temperament.

Rumors exist of other, more powerful versions of the black widow razors that may function independently of their wielder. Black widow razors require a commitment of 6 motes of Essence for the pair.

SARAM SARU'S ORACULAR HOOKAH

(ARTIFACT ●●●)

Assumed to be of the Shogunate era, this Southern-style water pipe stands about a yard tall. Although awkward to transport when assembled, the jade and starmetal body of this apparatus separates into seven pieces to be stored in its ironwood-and-jade-inlay box. According to its Sidereal creator, Saram Saru, the water chamber of the device was fashioned according to First Age talismanic principles and acts as a prism of sorts. Effectively, the "prism," when filled with pure water, grants its user dreamlike visions that can provide a small measure of insight into the workings of fate. When the Hookah is filled with any smoking mixture — tobacco, marijuana, etc. — the inhalation of the fumes induce strong and detailed visions of importance to the smoker. The visions, however, never reveal the identities of the people in the vision, nor does the experience reveal whether the vision is from the past or future. The player

of the character using the Hookah must make a successful Occult + Essence roll (difficulty 3) to experience a genuine vision. A roll of five or more successes results in a staggering vision of great significance to the character. A failed roll results in a normal experience of whatever was smoked through the Hookah. Saram Saru's Oracular Hookah requires a commitment of 4 motes of Essence.

DEATH AT THE ROOT (ARTIFACT ●●●●)

This moonsilver grand grimcleaver was crafted in the aftermath of the Usurpation, by the mad Lunar Suki Yommi. Tales say that the Lunar was driven mad by the death of his mate at the hands of the Dragon-Blooded Host. Deprived of victory by the righteous might of the Dragons and deprived of his honor by his flight in the face of their onslaught, he ended his own life in a ritual suicide rather than face an existence of shame and defeat. Death at the Root is the child of this ritual, a weapon filled with all the rage and despair of a defeated demigod, bent to the destruction of the very bastions of Essence that shore the walls of the real from the frothing chaos of the endless Wyld. Suki Yommi bequeathed the axe to a mighty lord of the Fair Folk, in return for which he extracted an oath that the lord would never turn the grimcleaver against a Chosen of Luna. It is said that Death at the Root was later reclaimed during a Wyld Hunt that ranged deep into the forests of the East and brought to the Blessed Isle.

In addition to being a fearsome weapon in the conventional sense, Death at the Root is able to deform and break the very flow of Essence through Creation. A character wielding Death at the Root may attempt to disrupt a Demesne or Manse (requiring a successful Essence roll against a difficulty of the Manse's level + 1 or the level of the Demesne). Success indicates that the Manse or Demesne is disrupted, severing all attunement to it and neutralizing any Hearthstones generated by it. Every success on this roll beyond the first reduces the level of the

Manse or Demesne by 1. Reducing a Manse to level 0 in this way destroys the Manse and may cause a backlash of Essence stunning anyone attuned to the site or causing its Hearthstones to explode catastrophically.

The wielder of Death at the Root may also use it to attack the very threads of Essence sustaining a sorcerous effect. Doing so requires that the character be able to make contact with the area of the effect using the axe and is the character's diced action for the turn although no roll is necessary. This attack disrupts any ongoing Terrestrial or Celestial Circle effect and can also disrupt spells in the midst of being cast. Spells disrupted using this ability always cause an Essence backlash, as if they had been countered by countermagic of the spell's own circle.

The wielder of Death at the Root may always channel Willpower through his Conviction Virtue while using it. Death at the Root requires the commitment of 10 motes of Essence to attune it.

THE PREY STALKING BOW (ARTIFACT ●●●●)

This short green jade powerbow is said to have been carried out of the forests of the Far East by the King of Endless Branches at the end of the Shogunate Era. It is delicately wrought from almost translucent green and blue jade. The first arrow fired from the Prey Stalking Bow in combat emits a piercing shriek, announcing the impending doom of its target. The subject of this attack is transfixed by the sound, unable to move. This attack may not be dodged, though it can be parried normally. Any target wounded by an attack from the Prey Stalking Bow is attached to it by almost insubstantial thread of air Essence, which allow its bearer to track him more easily. For the remainder of the day, or until such time as the wounded character immerses himself completely in an element other than air, add three successes to all attempts to track and pursue the wounded character made by the bearer of the Prey Stalking Bow. The Prey Stalking Bow requires a commitment of 8 motes of Essence.

EXALTED

Name	Speed	Accuracy	Damage	Defense	Minimums
Black Widow Razors	+1	+1	+4L (+ poison)	+2	D●●
Grand Grimcleaver	-6	+1	+13L	-1	S●●●●
Death at the Root	-5	+2	+13L	-0	S●●●

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Name	Speed	Accuracy	Damage	Defense	Rate	Minimums
Black Widow Razors	+0	+1	+5L (+ poison)	+1	6	S●, D●●
Grand Grimcleaver	+8	+1	+14L	-3	3	S●●●●
Death at the Root	+9	+2	+14L	-2	4	S●●●●



APPENDIX I

SIGNATURE

CHARACTERS

Aspects of Wood are the nurturers, healers, huntsmen and performers of Dragon-Blooded society. Though their intents manifest in strange and unpredictable ways, each reflects a facet of the wood element's gifts.

What follow are the game statistic's for the book's five central narrators. Each is an experienced Terrestrial Exalt, presented for the benefit of Storytellers running Dragon-Blooded games so that they might see how advanced Terrestrial Exalted characters may develop over the period of an extended series.

For the purposes of determining power level, Sesus "The Slug" Nagezzer and Tepet "The Roseblack" Ajava are middle-aged Terrestrial Exalted, with Tepet Ajava being far better outfitted for games involving intense combats. Ragara Bhagwei is the embodiment of the Heptagram's ideal, a master among masters. Although Bhagwei's powers are certainly extraordinary, his story is near its end, though its ending could certainly form the basis for an entire Dragon-Blooded (or other Exalted) series.

RUTANJALI

Quote: *I am the bride of this forest, stranger. From my womb the sons of this place were born. You have violated the boundaries of my sanctuary and this I can not bear. Now run!*

Prelude: When you were born, your mother was already insane. The other villagers told you how she had been raped by a spirit of the forest and left to die on the bank of a brook. Raised by your wise Aunt Rinchen, you learned everything you know from the forest and have learned to depend on it. What you lacked in formal education, you made up for with your natural cunning and incredible grasp of the forest's lore. You fell in love with her apprentice, an aspiring shaman named Bima.

Everything you treasured was destroyed when the raiders came. They pillaged and looted and killed everyone you had ever cared for, including your love, Bima, to whom you were oathed to wed. Upon your lover's death, you Exalted and were rushed away by your aunt. Your aunt, torn and bleeding from the raid and exhausted from your flight, brought you to a hidden grove deep in the forest. There, she died and left you as bride to the Wood King.

As a wedding gift, your husband gave you two things. The first was your bow of green and blue jade, and the second was a promise of revenge on the men who wronged you. On the following day, your husband's army of beasts and spirits gathered by the forest's edge and laid waste to the town built on the wreckage of the village of Carya Kos.

Since that time, you have had three sons, one of whom Exalted. You raised them and educated them with all you knew, and then, you sent them to off, each in a different direction, to find their fate.

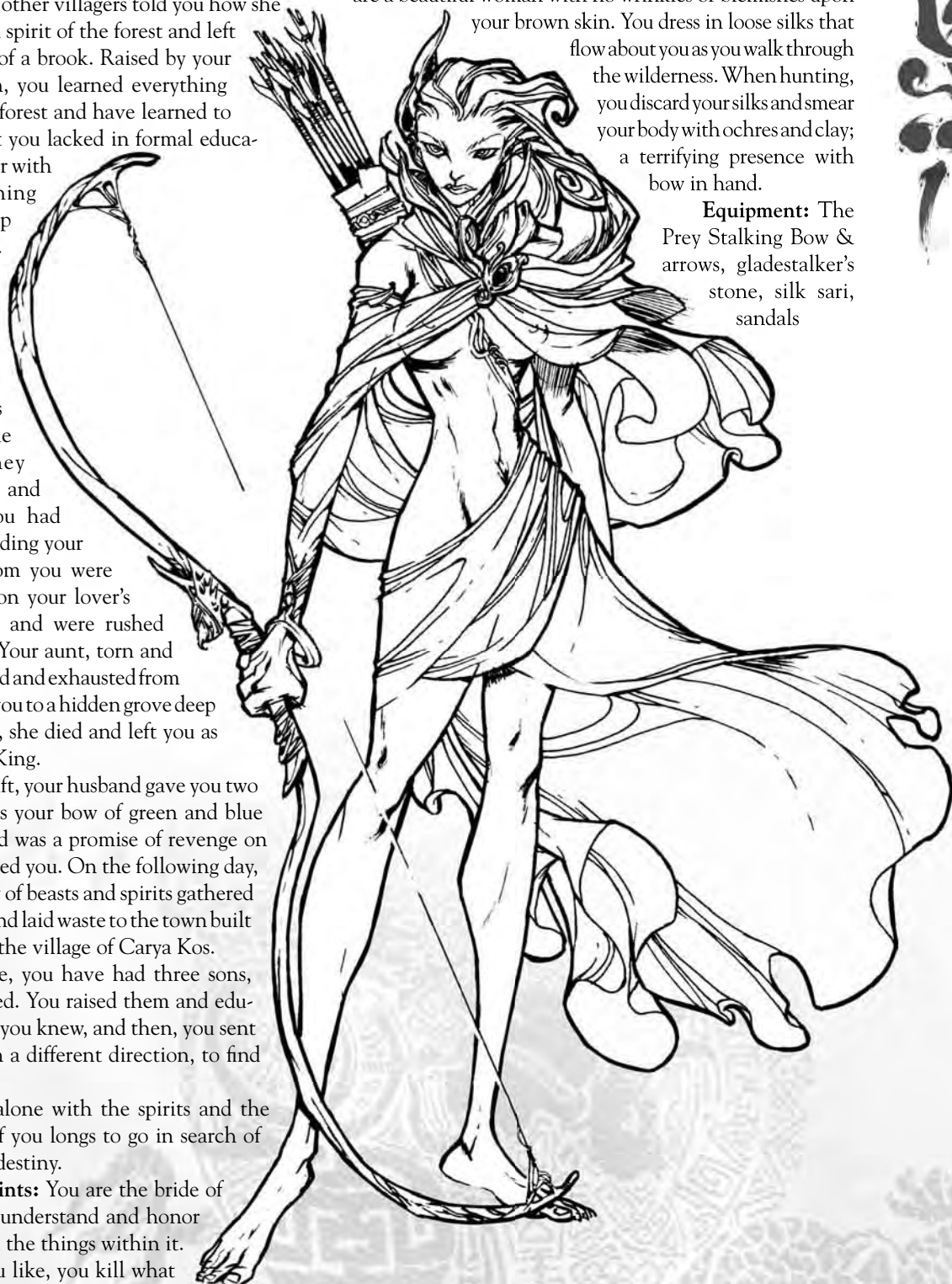
Now, you are alone with the spirits and the beasts, and a part of you longs to go in search of your sons and your destiny.

Roleplaying Hints: You are the bride of the forest, and you understand and honor the sacredness of all the things within it. You hunt where you like, you kill what

you like, and in all cases, you do what you like when you like. You are a beautiful woman, and the spirits of the forest love you like a queen. Though by most standards you are on the verge of being feral, there is a grace and beauty to the predator you have become.

Image: The object of desire for fae and gods alike, you are a beautiful woman with no wrinkles or blemishes upon your brown skin. You dress in loose silks that flow about you as you walk through the wilderness. When hunting, you discard your silks and smear your body with ochres and clay; a terrifying presence with bow in hand.

Equipment: The Prey Stalking Bow & arrows, gldestalker's stone, silk sari, sandals





RUTANJALI

Element: Wood

Concept: Bride of the Forest

Nature: Survivor

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 3, Temperance 2, Valor 3

ABILITIES

*Archery 5 (Woodland Environments +2), Athletics 2, *Awareness 3, Brawl 2, Dodge 3, Endurance 1, Lore 1, *Medicine 1, Occult 2, *Performance 2, *Presence 4, Resistance 2, *Ride 1, *Stealth 4, *Survival 5 (Hunt +2), Thrown 1

* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 5, Backing (Woodland Army) 5, Breeding 2, Manse 3, Reputation (Queen of the Wood King) 4

CHARMS

Archery: Harvest of the Hunter, Life-Swelling Sap Strike, Ravenous Thorn Technique, Spring Follows Winter, Unobstructed Hunter's Aim

Awareness: Precision Observation Method

Dodge: Flickering Candle Meditation

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique

Occult: Spirit-Detecting Mirror Technique

Presence: Aura of Invulnerability, Glowing Coal Radiance

Stealth: Feeling-the-Air Technique, Soundless Action Prana

Survival: Forgiveness-of-Nature Invoking Prana, Nature's Healing Bounty, Wild-Wandering Forest Charm

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 9

Attack:

Punch: Speed 9 Accuracy 7 Damage 3B Defense 7

Kick: Speed 6 Accuracy 6 Damage 5B Defense 6

Knife Speed 12 Accuracy 5 Damage 4L Defense 3

The Prey Stalking Bow: Speed 9 Accuracy 15 Damage 7L (Rate 3, Range 300)

Dodge Pool: 8 **Soak:** 1L/3B

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

Essence: 3

Personal Essence: 11 **Peripheral Essence:** 19 (27)

Committed Essence: 8

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 9 Accuracy 8 Damage 3B Defense 9 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 6 Accuracy 8 Damage 6B Defense 4 Rate 3

Knife: Speed 9 Accuracy 6 Damage 5L Defense 3 Rate 4

Dodge Pool: 11

CYNIS BELAR NORREN

Quote: *You can get what you want if you really want it. Believe me. You just need to apply yourself.*

Prelude: You were born the privileged son of a decadent and wealthy house, son to an Exalted mother and a mortal father. Your childhood was relatively unremarkable short of one assassination attempt you obviously survived. You attended a prestigious primary school as much by dint of your Exalted mother's influence as any perceived talents on your part. You Exalted in the midst of your first true experience with the pleasures of the flesh at the tender age of 13 with a classmate two years your senior.

It wasn't until well into your tenure at the Spiral Academy that your true talents came to light. You had a peculiar knack for drawing and thwarting attempts on your life and for sniffing out those who might consider such a thing. With schooling and experience, you became a skilled spy and counterspy. You operate officially as an auditor in your family's service. Unofficially, you guard your family's secrets from those who would seek them and collect the secrets of both friend and foe, and you use all the wiles the Wood Dragon granted you, and a few he did not, to meet that end.

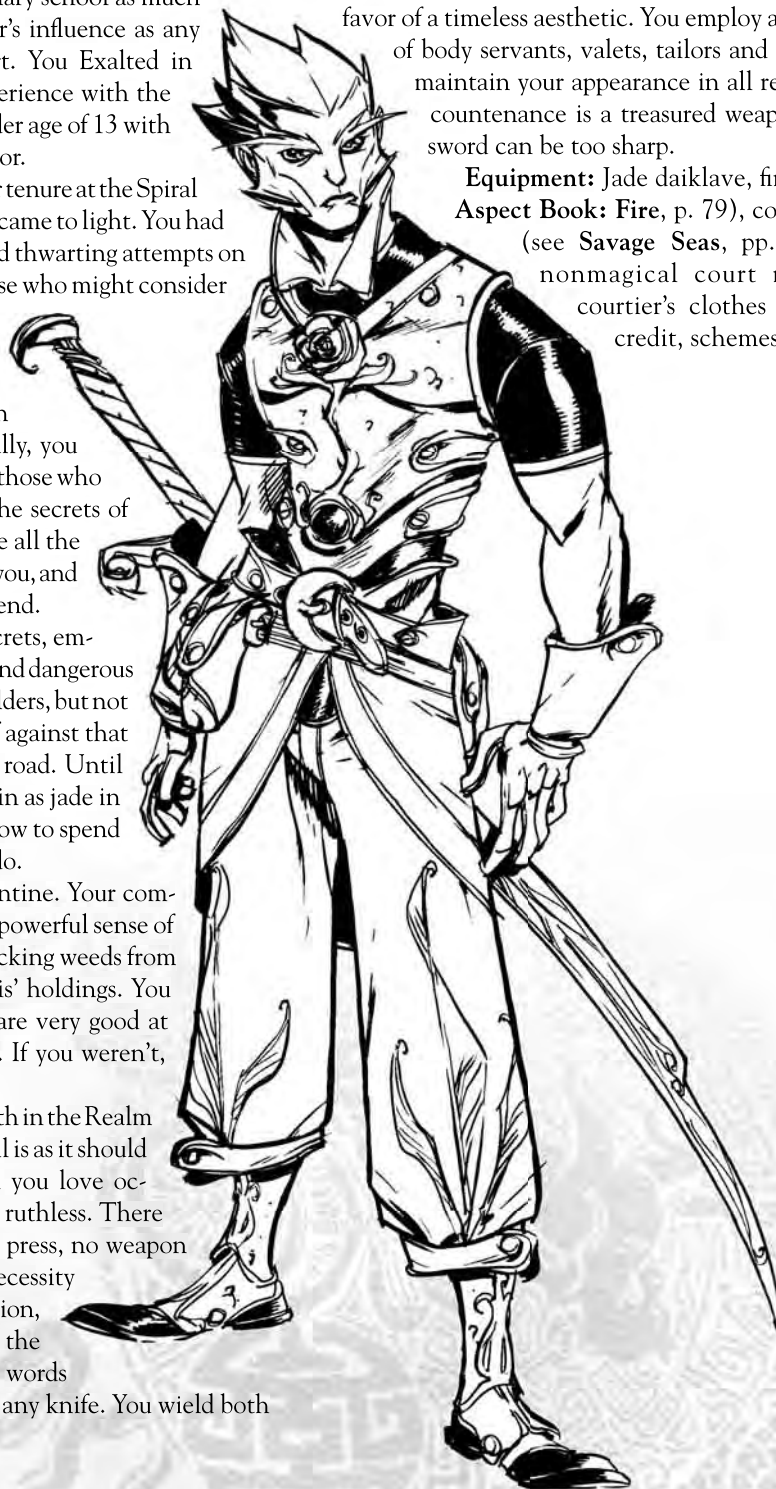
You know a great many secrets, embarrassing ones, shameful ones and dangerous ones. You offer most up to your elders, but not all. Some, you keep for yourself against that inevitable rainy day down the road. Until that day, secrets are as rich a coin as jade in the hands of those who know how to spend them, and you most certainly do.

Roleplaying Hints: Serpentine. Your composure is matched only by your powerful sense of purpose. You are a gardener plucking weeds from the fertile fields of House Cynis' holdings. You are a snake hunting rats. You are very good at what you do, and you know it. If you weren't, you would already be dead.

You have an unshakable faith in the Realm and the Perfected Hierarchy. All is as it should be. You know your place, and you love occupying it. You are patient and ruthless. There is no advantage you would not press, no weapon you would not wield, should necessity demand it. Assassination, seduction, ridicule and scandal: These are the tools of your trade. The right words in the right ear are as deadly as any knife. You wield both with great expertise.

Image: Not too tall, not too short. The Dragons blessed you with the perfect physique: unobtrusive when you wish it, but not so much that you are invisible in public. With the proper attire and grooming, you draw as many eyes as you wish, and as the situation warrants. Hair of chestnut, copper-colored skin just touched with a patina of iridescent green and eyes like black jade. You tend toward classic fashion, eschewing the seasonal trends in favor of a timeless aesthetic. You employ a small army of body servants, valets, tailors and masseurs to maintain your appearance in all regards. Your countenance is a treasured weapon, and no sword can be too sharp.

Equipment: Jade daiklave, fire pearl (see **Aspect Book: Fire**, p. 79), cord of winds (see **Savage Seas**, pp. 125-126), nonmagical court mask, silk courtier's clothes bought on credit, schemes



CYNIS BELAR NORREN

Element: Wood

Concept: Spy

Nature: Survivor

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 2, Temperance 3, Valor 2

ABILITIES

*Archery 1, Athletics 1, Awareness 3, *Bureaucracy 4, Dodge 3, Endurance 1, *Investigation 3, Larceny 2, Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Low Realm, Riverspeak) 2, Lore 3, Martial Arts 1, *Medicine 1, Melee 2, Occult 2, *Performance 2, Presence 1, Resistance 2, *Ride 1, *Socialize 3, Stealth 3, Thrown 1
* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 2, Backing (House Cynis) 2, Breeding 3, Connections (The Houses) 2, Connections (The Thousand Scales) 2, Reputation 1, Resources 3

CHARMS

Awareness: Precision Observation Method

Bureaucracy: Benevolent Master's Blessing, Confluence of Savant Thought, Thrashing Carp Serenade

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique

Investigation: Indisputable Physical Analysis Technique, Scent-of-Crime Method

Larceny: Observer Awareness Method

Lore: Elemental Concentration Trance

Performance: Memorable Performance Technique

Socialize: Loquacious Courtier Technique

Stealth: Distracting Breeze Meditation

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 7

Attack:

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 4 Damage 2B Defense 4

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 3 Damage 4B Defense 3

Jade Daiklave (The Confessor): Speed 13 Accuracy 7 Damage 7L Defense 7

Knife: Speed 10 Accuracy 5 Damage 3L Defense 3

Dodge Pool: 6 **Soak:** 1L/3B

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

Essence: 3

Personal Essence: 12 **Peripheral Essence:** 23 (28)

Committed Essence: 5

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 5 Damage 2B Defense 6 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 5 Damage 5B Defense 1 Rate 3

Jade Daiklave (The Confessor): Speed 17 Accuracy 8 Damage 8L Defense 7 Rate 5

Knife: Speed 7 Accuracy 6 Damage 4L Defense 3 Rate 4

Dodge Pool: 9

SESUS NAGEZZER

Quote: *I am the Realm's humble servant, my Lord, and I do not doubt that you are as well. Let us now consider the repercussions of what you ask, and whether or not I will be able to assist in the matter.*

Prelude: Even as a child, you were underestimated. While other boys ran about, preoccupied by physical contests and trite competition, you filled your head with the works of strategists and the philosophies of the savants. Even after you Exalted in a show of force, you were considered the least of your kind by your despotic mother. Encouraged by your father, you attended the House of Bells and graduated with high marks.

Once stationed, you had a terrible accident while attempting to apprehend a powerful spirit as your unit failed to back you up. Horribly crippled by the confrontation, your family arranged for you to heal at the Cloister of Wisdom, where you earned the name "The Slug" from your fellow aspirants. Though you failed to complete the basic mastery of Wood Dragon Style and earned the disgust of many of the ranking monks, your teacher affirmed your personal take on the Immaculate Philosophy and the truth you had realized during your meditations at the Cloister.

Accompanied by your teacher, you left the Cloister of Wisdom to actualize your plan for the safety and security of the Realm.

Drawing on numerous favors and the assistance of your cousin, you have established a hidden empire over which you hold undisputed control. Your personal wealth is now comparable to a minor Great House, and your dead

mother's Manse serves as your base of operations.

At the center of the orgy hall, you recline upon silk cushions, flanked by your twin lovers, while your Immaculate bodyguard closely watches all who approach you. Though you may be deep in the recesses of an opium dream, you are unflinching in your guardianship and care of the Realm.

Roleplaying Hints: You are a devout and loyal servant of the Realm. Though you are a hedonistic drug addict with a penchant for overeating, you are never to be underestimated. Your grasp of both diplomacy and social dynamics are prodigal, to say the least, and any who enter your web had best mind her words and actions. Despite your success, you are often consumed by feelings of failure and self-pity, no matter how supportive





your courtiers may be. Regardless, you are a force to be reckoned with, and the frequency with which your fellow Dragon-Blooded overlook this fact is an endless source of amusement for you and those who are close to you.

Image: You are an enormously fat man dressed in brown robes and layered silk kimonos. A scholar of history and strategy, you wear your hair and moustache in the style of the Shogunate era. When you walk, you do so with a noticeable limp, using a walking stick of banyan wood to assist you as you move about.

Equipment: Short jade daiklave, rose of millions, jade reinforced buff jacket, Saram Saru's Oracular Hookah, extensive array of drugs and associated utensils, robes, enormous Manse estate populated by courtesans and personal elite guard

SESUS NAGEZZER

Element: Wood

Concept: Patriotic Schemer

Nature: Hedonist

ATTRIBUTES

Strength 2, Dexterity 1, Stamina 4, Charisma 4, Manipulation 5, Appearance 1, Perception 4, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 4, Temperance 1, Valor 3

ABILITIES

*Archery 2, Awareness 3, Bureaucracy 4, Endurance 3, *Investigation 4, Larceny 3 (Drugs & Vice +2), Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Guild Cant, Riverspeak) 2, Lore 3, Martial Arts 3, *Medicine 2, Melee 2, *Performance 3, *Presence 4 (Command +1), Resistance 4, *Ride 2, *Socialize 5
* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Allies 3, Artifact 3, Breeding 3, Command 5, Connections (The Guild) 2, Connections (The Merchant Marine) 2, Connections (Outlaw) 4, Connections (The Threshold) 3, Henchman 2 (The Twins), Manse 4, Resources 5

CHARMS

Archery: Spring Follows Winter

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

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique

Investigation: Falsehood Unearthing Attitude, Indisputable Physical Analysis Technique, Revelation of Associates Hunch, Scent-of-Crime Method

Larceny: Observer Awareness Method

Martial Arts: Eyes of the Wood Dragon, Mind-Over-Body Meditation, Spirit Walking, Spirit Sight, Wood Dragon Vitality

Presence: Glowing Coal Radiance, Phantom Fire-Warrior Horde

Socialize: Brother-Against-Brother Insinuation, Loquacious Courtier Technique, Seizing-the-Tongue Technique, Smoothing-Over-the-Past Technique, Sweeten-the-Tap Method, Warm-Faced Seduction Style, Wary Yellow Dog Attitude

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 4

Attack:

Punch: Speed 4 Accuracy 4 Damage 2B Defense 4

Kick: Speed 1 Accuracy 3 Damage 4B Defense 3

Jade Short Daiklave (Dragon's Fang): Speed 8 Accuracy 5 Damage 6L Defense 6

Dodge Pool: 0 **Soak:** 9L/14B (Jade reinforced buff jacket, +7L /+10B, -1 mobility penalty)

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

Essence: 4

Personal Essence: 15 **Peripheral Essence:** 26 (36)

Committed Essence: 10

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 4 Accuracy 5 Damage 2B Defense 6 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 1 Accuracy 5 Damage 5B Defense 1 Rate 3

Jade Short Daiklave (Dragon's Fang): Speed 10 Accuracy 7 Damage 6L Defense 4 Rate 6

Dodge Pool: 4

TEPET EJAVA

Quote: *It isn't how you talk that sets your place in history. It's what you accomplish. Show me how you'll earn your page in the books.*

Prelude: You were, quite literally, born into battle. You are the product of a military household in a military house. Your mother was a storied commander, your grandfather one of the most famous generals in recent memory. Your course was set long before you had any inkling of it. War is as mother's milk to you, and nothing brings back fond memories of childhood like the smell of blood on the air and the crackle and boom of war-worked Essence.

The House of Bells was home to you, and though your lack of tact in the face of wrong-headed mentors brought more grief upon you than most, none could deny your talent or the fact that, when you corrected your teachers, they needed correcting. You went directly to the legions and distinguished yourself at every turn. You did not win every battle, but you never lost to the same enemy twice. And yet, when your Great House faced its greatest fight, you were not there. The "what ifs" haunt you day and night. Could you have turned the tide and prevented the cataclysmic defeat that came to your family, or would you have been just another grave tale of gallantry?

In the aftermath of the Battle of Five Fangs and the death of so many of your elders, you were given command of the Vermilion Legion, an ironic turn of events if ever there was one. In the years since, you have taken that band of cutthroats, rightly reviled by the rest of the empire, and turned it into a fighting force to be feared. Your house keeps

you in reserve, waiting for the right moment. You keep your men from being idle by hunting brigands and pirates, knowing that when the time comes to act, you and your soldiers will be ready.

Roleplaying Hints: Some may be better at certain aspects of war, but none surpass you in the all-around. You are direct (some would say intemperate) and honest. You have little time for the subtleties of Dynastic politics,

though you can rise to the occasion given no other choice. Everyone knows you

can kill as easily as breathing,

including you. You

feel no need to prove

yourself. Your

loyalty to your

men, your

house and

your empire

is nigh unshake-

able, but the last

few years have

tried even your

patience. You

long for the

chance to

take ac-

tions that

m e a n

something

rather than

biding your

time hunt-

ing smugglers

and sea rats in

order to "build political capital."

There are things you could do, and if your elders do not put you in the field to do them, you may very well take it upon yourself to do so.

Image: Beautiful and terrible. Ejavagoes armed and armored nearly every moment of the day, as is just for a general of the legions. Her features are stern, sharp some have said, and her figure lush. She takes few pains to sweeten her seeming, but little is



needed. Her one vanity is a head of luxurious red hair that falls about her face and strikes an alluring contrast with the emerald tint of her skin.

Equipment: The freedom stone, salt-gem of the spirit's eye, stone of healing, jade mask (see **Savant & Sorcerer**, p. 41), green jade daiklave, green jade articulated plate, army of elite troops

TEPET EJAVA

Element: Wood

Concept: General

Nature: Architect

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 2, Temperance 3, Valor 2

ABILITIES

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

* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Allies 2, Artifact 4, Backing (House Tepet) 1, Breeding 3, Command 5, Connections (The All-Seeing Eye) 3, Connections (The Houses) 3, Connections (The Legions) 3, Henchmen 2, Manse 3, Mentor (Tepet Arada) 2, Reputation (Hero of the Realm) 3, Resources 4

CHARMS

Archery: Spring Follows Winter

Athletics: Effortlessly Rising Flame, Fiery Prowess

Awareness: All-Encompassing Earth Sense, Precision Observation Method

Dodge: Flickering Candle Meditation

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

Investigation: Indisputable Physical Analysis Technique

Linguistics: Wind-Carried Words Technique

Lore: Elemental Bolt Attack

Melee: Dragon-Graced Weapon, Stoking Bonfire Style

Performance: Memorable Performance Technique

Presence: Aura of Invulnerability, Blazing Courageous Swordsmen Inspiration, Glowing Coal Radiance, Phantom Fire-Warrior Horde

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

Socialize: Loquacious Courtier Technique

Stealth: Distracting Breeze Meditation, Trackless Passage Style

Survival: Wild-Wandering Forester Charm

Thrown: Vengeful Gust Counterattack, Whirlwind Shield Form

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 6

Attack:

Punch: Speed 6 Accuracy 5 Damage 3B Defense 5

Kick: Speed 3 Accuracy 4 Damage 5B Defense 4

Jade Daiklave (Thorn): Speed 12 Accuracy 9 Damage 8L Defense 9

Knife: Speed 9 Accuracy 7 Damage 4L Defense 5

Dodge Pool: 5/3 **Soak:** 13L/17B (Jade articulated plate and target shield, 12L/14B, -2 mobility penalty, +1 difficulty to hit)

Willpower: 7 **Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Essence: 4

Personal Essence: 14 **Peripheral Essence:** 17 (33)

Committed Essence: 16

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 6 Accuracy 6 Damage 3B Defense 7 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 3 Accuracy 6 Damage 6B Defense 2 Rate 3

Jade Daiklave (Thorn): Speed 16 Accuracy 10 Damage 9L Defense 9 Rate 5

Knife: Speed 6 Accuracy 8 Damage 5L Defense 5 Rate 4

Dodge Pool: 9/7

Hardness: 3

RAGARA BHAGWEI

Quote: *Oh, child of the noble family of the Immaculate Dragons. Do not despair. Though your mind is fevered and your senses are not with you, know that you will be made whole. For many years I have plumbed the mysteries of life and death. For all my life I have meditated upon the mysteries of the healing hearts. Now, let go of your fear.*

Prelude: You are the son of Cynis and Ragara, children of the Scarlet Empress herself. At an age where most children are still playing games in the courtyard, you were researching the cures to Creation's rare diseases. Under the tutelage of your Immaculate instructor, you quickly acquired the skills and knowledge of a profoundly accomplished physician.

On your father's suggestion, you were tested by a trial devised by the Empress herself. You would die if you failed. In the midst of the ordeal, you Exalted peacefully, realizing the answer to the Empress's conundrum and winning yourself a place within the Versino, the premiere school of lore and magic of that time. During your time at the Versino, you studied the magical and healing arts. While studying these disciplines, you realized what would become your life's work, the quest for the source and cure of the Great Contagion.

The unexpected and untimely destruction of the Versino motivated you to seek the Empress' sponsorship in a project that would result in the founding the Heptagram. After gathering its seven masters, you opened the doors to what is now the premiere magical academy in Creation.

Though many ordeals have presented themselves, you have grown ever wiser throughout the years. Not long ago, a clue to the source of the Contagion presented itself in the form of a book, which was unfortunately taken from you by an Anathema. However, the corpse of the Anathema provided clues that you would have otherwise never discovered, and these have placed you in

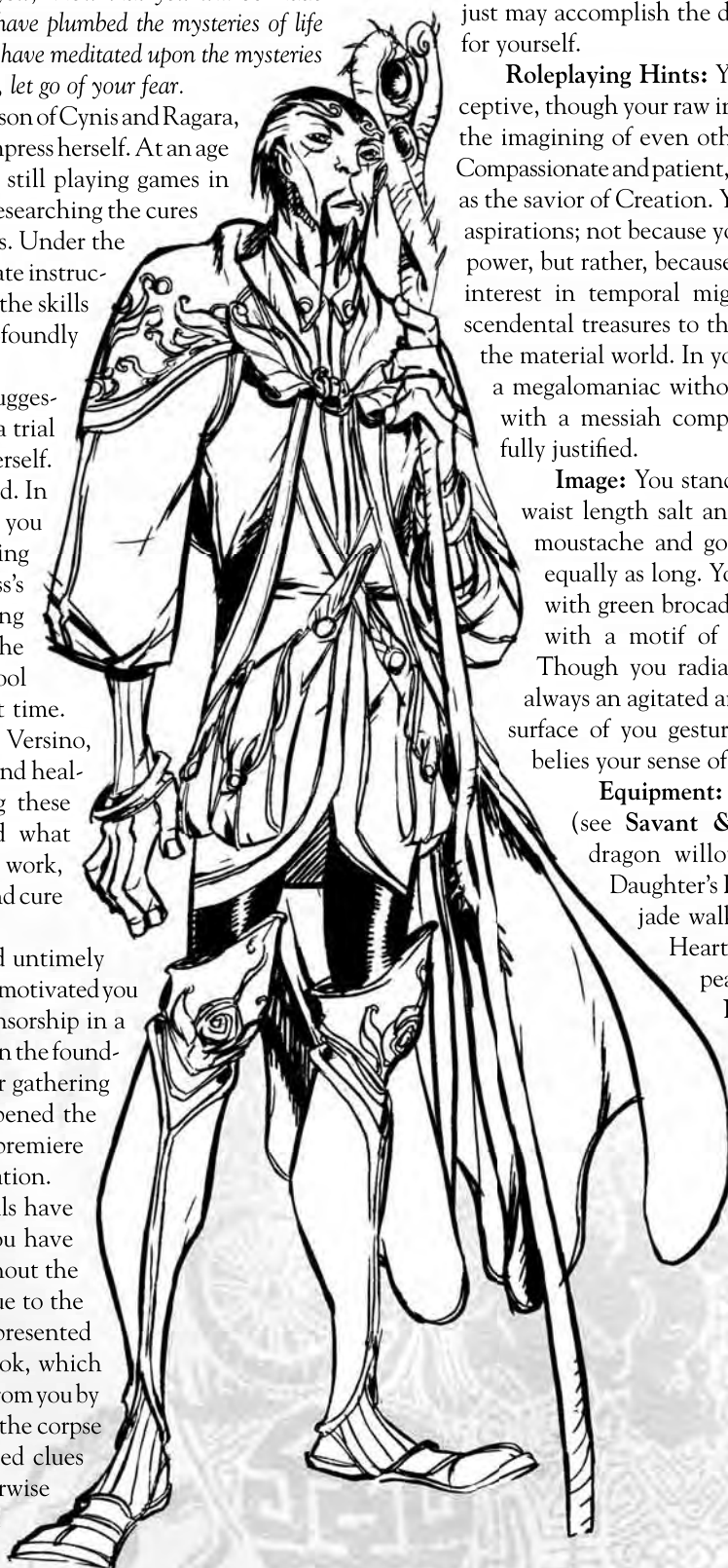
danger you would not have otherwise encountered.

Now, near the end of your years, you stand at the threshold of the final answer. If you can avoid becoming embroiled in the plots of your brothers and sisters, you just may accomplish the destiny you imagined for yourself.

Roleplaying Hints: You are wise and perceptive, though your raw intelligence is beyond the imagining of even other Dragon-Blooded. Compassionate and patient, you envision yourself as the savior of Creation. You have no political aspirations; not because you have no desire for power, but rather, because you don't have any interest in temporal might, preferring transcendental treasures to the fleeting rewards of the material world. In your own way, you are a megalomaniac without equal, a demigod with a messiah complex that you feel is fully justified.

Image: You stand tall and thin, with waist length salt and pepper hair and a moustache and goatee worn thin and equally as long. You wear yellow robes with green brocade intricately worked with a motif of leaves and flowers. Though you radiate serenity, there is always an agitated ambition beneath the surface of you gestures, an urgency that belies your sense of little time left.

Equipment: Stone of easy breath (see **Savant & Sorcerer**, p. 68), dragon willow agate, Harrowed Daughter's Paleskin Cowl, green jade walking stick (with two Hearthstone sockets), fire pearl (see **Aspect Book: Fire**, p. 79), scholar's robe, acupuncture needles, assorted pills and medicines and assorted artifacts, as Bhagwei sees fit



RAGARA BHAGWEI**Element:** Wood**Concept:** Sorcerer-Physician**Nature:** Architect**ATTRIBUTES**

Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4, Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 4, Intelligence 6, Wits 4

VIRTUES

Compassion 4, Conviction 3, Temperance 4, Valor 2

ABILITIES

*Archery 3, Athletics 2, Awareness 3, Bureaucracy 4, Dodge 3, Endurance 2, *Investigation 5 (Research +2), Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Old Realm, Riverspeak, Skytongue) 3, *Lore 5 (History +2), Martial Arts 4, *Medicine 6 (Plague +3), Melee 1, *Occult 5, *Performance 3, Presence 3, Resistance 3, *Ride 3, Socialize 3, Survival 3

* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 4, Backing (The Heptagram) 5, Breeding 4, Connections (The Heptagram) 5, Manse 4, Reputation (Savant) 4, Resources 5

CHARMS**Archery:** Spring Follows Winter**Awareness:** Precision Observation Method**Dodge:** Flickering Candle Meditation**Endurance:** Ox-Body Technique (x2)**Investigation:** Falsehood Unearthing Attitude, Indisputable Physical Analysis Technique, Scent-of-Crime Method**Lore:** Elemental Bolt Attack, Elemental Concentration Trance, Elemental Empowerment Technique**Medicine:** Disease-Banishing Technique, Dread Infection Strike, Grievous Wound Alteration Energy, Infection-Banishing Prana, Jade Crucible Method, Madness-Analyzing Stare, Most Beneficent Seed of the Five Dragons, Purity of Mind Method, Verdant Curtains of Serenity, Wound-Closing Touch**Occult:** Spirit-Detecting Mirror Technique, Spirit-Grounding Shout, Terrestrial Circle Sorcery**Spells:** Becoming the Wood Friend, Burning Eyes of the Offender, Death of the Obsidian Butterflies, Demon of the First Circle, Emerald Circle Banishment, Emerald Countermagic, Incantation of Spiritual Discretion, Paralyzing Contradiction, Stormwind Rider, Summon Elemental, others**COMBAT STATISTICS****Base Initiative:** 7**Attack:**

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 7 Damage 2B Defense 7

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 6 Damage 4B Defense 6

Dodge Pool: 6**Soak:** 2L/4B**Willpower:** 8**Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap**Essence:** 6**Personal Essence:** 18**Peripheral Essence:** 41 (47)**Committed Essence:** 6**EXALTED POWER COMBAT****Attack:**

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 8 Damage 2B Defense 9 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 8 Damage 5B Defense 4 Rate 3

Dodge Pool: 12

APPENDIX II

OTHER NOTABLE WOOD ASPECTS



V'NEEF CELTIS

A rebel son of a rebel house, V'neef Celtis spared no time in making a name for himself. He was Exalted in the midst of an impromptu performance of original songs, each one written as a biting mockery of the faculty of his primary school. The performance inspired a near riot that resulted in the expulsion of no less than three students (himself included) and the destruction of the institution's prized fountain on which were depicted the figures of notable faculty and alumni. From there, he went on to several other primary schools, earning himself an invitation to seek other means of education from each. He finally graduated from the Scarlet Institute in Bright Obelisk, having at last found teachers and lessons to suit his interests. His time at the House of Bells was short, despite considerable talents in personal combat. The Cloister would not have him, nor the Academy. It is said that when his mother's envoy took ship for the Heptagram, the sea and winds themselves rose up and drove the vessel back. For good or ill, Celtis' formal education was over.

Since then, Celtis has lived a life of merriment, by all accounts. His exploits in the North are legendary, not for their valor, but their excess. As rumor has it, it is not uncommon for his binges to last a month or more. In and of itself, this would not be remarkable but for his singular talent for satire and the great abundance of music that is created in the midst of these sessions of debauchery. It has



become a game of sorts among the powerful to wager on which of the Dynasty's prominent figures are best skewered on V'neef Celtis' pen when news of another of his parties reaches the Isle.

His choice of targets obviously does not endear him to his fellow Dynasts, but it does bear fruit in the halls of

the common man. Among those not blessed with high station, he has become something of a folk hero. For the time being at least, V'neef Celtis appears to be content to lob darts at the powerful from the relative security of the North, drinking and hunting and singing. Wagering on when he will step too far against the wrong people and wind up on the wrong end of a knife is almost as popular among the Dynasts as singing his songs is among the common folk.

CATHAK CACEK MARN

Cathak Cacek Marn earned her initial fame at the House of Bells by being the first first-year student to go an entire term without being defeated in Gateway. By the end of her tenure there, she had authored a new gambit — the Marn Deceit — and was entered into the official rolls of the Masters of the Field.

Immediately upon graduating, Cathak Marn was commissioned into the legions with a scalelord's rank. Her grasp of small-unit tactics and wilderness survival earned her great respect from her superiors and a never-ending flow of dangerous, deep-penetration assaults. She earned lasting notoriety at the Battle of Three-Stones Tower.

A hunting party of Fair Folk nobles rode out of the forest of the East on the morning of a winter's day. They overran an old, lightly manned outpost, took the legionnaires stationed there captive and carried them off into the forest. Marn, temporarily assigned to deep-woods training duty in command of a scale of green recruits, caught wind of the assault and made chase. Under her command, these recruits tracked, overtook and ambushed the hunting party. Cathak Cacek Marn herself met the leader of the Fair Folk

party in combat and put him down at the cost of an eye. Marn was decorated for valor and excellence immediately after, her shirt still bloody from the fray.

She continues to serve with distinction, now as a winglord, in the forests of the East. It is rumored that she is penning a manuscript on mobile-force tactics that will no doubt be very well received in the halls of military learning on the Isle. It is further rumored that they have already reserved quarters at the House of Bells for her in anticipation of her return as an instructor.

V'NEEF KEERSA KALLA

Among the Dragon-Blooded, the ability to create intense and lasting experiences of beauty is, in some cases, as desirable as skill with a daiklave. Within the highest courts, such beauty must be perfect in its execution and form, impeccable in its transcendental expression. V'neef Keersa Kalla is a performer who has gracefully overstepped this standard.

Keersa Kalla was born in Lookshy, the daughter of a two humans. Her first words took the form of song as she imitated the lullaby her mother would warble to her as she slept in her cradle. As a young girl, Kalla's father would take her to drinking halls to perform for onlookers. Upon stacks of wine crates, she would sing to the onlookers, who would fill her father's hat with bits and coins.

There came a day when one such onlooker was Willful Diamond, a wealthy patron of the arts from Nexus. Upon hearing the young Keersa sing, Willful Diamond made an offer to her father that would allow he and his wife to live comfortably for the rest of their days.



After the jade changed hands, Keersa Kalla and Willful Diamond made their way to the great river city of Nexus. Her new benefactor's theater was like nothing she had ever dreamed of, and she reveled in the reality that she would soon be performing upon its stage, though not as soon as she thought, as her voice was still raw and mostly untrained. Willful Diamond's coffers assured her the best coaching possible.

It was during her first performance of "The Desert God's Lover" that she Exalted, sending flowered ribbons of Essence out over the hypnotized onlookers during the opera's aria climax. Now that Keersa Kalla was one of the Dragon-Blooded, she was invited to perform in their courts, where she has entertained the Dynasts for years.

Since coming to the Blessed Isle, she has taken three husbands, the first of which was the Wood Fleet Trierarch V'neef Gallus, standing as his sole inheritor after his heroic death in battle, taking his name in honor of his noble sacrifice. Her other husbands were of House Nellens and House Tepet, neither of whom held her heart for long. Many say that there is no man to which such a goddess of the stage could be completely loyal.

They would be wrong.

Since her childhood, Keersa Kalla has been absolutely loyal to one man, and that man is her uncle, Danshi Koton, a high-ranking officer of Lookshy's military intelligence division. It is in his service that she has performed throughout the Realm, conveying what she learns on her tours to her number one fan.

AUTUMN SPIRAL

The monk known as Autumn Spiral was born to House Ledaal and was given the name Ansharu after the Shogunate hero of the same name. From an early age, Ansharu demonstrated an incredible capacity for both physical and mental strength, excelling at both academics and athletics with an ease uncommon for young men several years his senior. Seeing the child's natural potential for the martial arts and academic excellence, Ledaal Porem and his wife donated countless jade obols to the Immaculate Order in an attempt to draw the favor of the Five Elemental Dragons. During the 14th year of their son's life, their prayers were granted as Ledaal Ansharu Exalted by the grace of Sextes Jylis.

Upon his becoming one of the Dragon-Blooded, Ledaal Ansharu dedicated himself completely to the study of unarmed fighting, even shunning the gift of his father's daiklave. While his cousins played at court and aspired to positions of power throughout the Blessed Isle, Ansharu honed his power, offering every effort to perfecting his body and mind. Because of this asceticism, Ledaal Ansharu was a cause of concern among the members of his household. Seeing this as a potentially serious problem, Ledaal Porem took his son to the Cloister of Wisdom, where he was tested by the abbots both mentally and physically. Needless to



say, the prodigal son of Ledaal Porem was accepted on the basis of a unanimously perfect review.

As if it were his only function, Ledaal Porem embraced the teachings of He Who Hath Strewn Much Grass and rapidly acquired mastery of the Wood Dragon Style, apprehending the final technique of Soul Mastery before his 40th year. Upon reaching this unthinkable level of excellence, Ledaal Ansharu abandoned his birth name, taking on the title Autumn Spiral. Accepting the responsibility of his deeply actualized power, Autumn Spiral took up his bow and awaited assignment to the Wyld Hunt.

It is likely that Autumn Spiral would have met his death at the hands of the Anathema if it had not been for the unexpected arrival of a crippled Sesus who was called "Slug" by his companions. The man had been injured in service to the Realm during an attempt to subdue a powerful spirit. Although his superiors did not wish to accept this putrid glutton into their school, Autumn Spiral accepted the challenge and tutored Nagezzer in his mastered style in an attempt to help the man unlock the healing powers of his own Essence. Though the training eventually reached a dead end due to physical weakness and hopeless lack of discipline on the part of Nagezzer, the two realized a shared philosophy that would bind their destinies together.

Still in service to the Immaculate Order, Autumn Spiral serves as the personal councilor of Sesus Nagezzer, living with him at the Manse called the Throne of Roses. Here, Autumn Spiral spreads the teachings of Sextes Jylis to visitors and residents alike, protecting the Slug from harm as the Nagezzer insures the survival of the Realm.



CYNIS ANBOR

Cynis Anbor was always the favorite child of his mother, the Lady Gripana. From the moment of his first breath, his mother obsessed over him and gave him anything he wished, no matter how unthinkable. It was when the baby Anbor marveled at the eyes of his wetnurse that the first life was taken for his passing pleasure. It would not be the last.

It was on Anbor's 11th birthday that Cynis Gripana took her son as her lover, assuring the boy unconditionally, as a loving parent does, but through means that any parent should shudder to think of. Dressed in the finest clothing — always green for Anbor, always red for Gripana — they would travel from court to court, the doting mother with her angel-faced child, preening and flaunting the wealth of their family.



The Exaltation of Cynis Anbor was no less dreadful than any other aspect of his existence. While entwined with her son and two mute boys from Gem, Cynis Gripana inhaled the pit of a Haltan plum, choking to death, blue and awful, before her son and the two slaves. The realization of his mother's death was too much for Anbor to bear, and as his mind shattered from the weight of it, he Exalted. His Anima, a lashing black mass of thorns and sharp vines, eviscerated the two slaves as he wept on his mother's twisted corpse.

Sent to the River Province on permanent assignment to manage the slave trade for his house, Cynis Anbor now runs the largest drug and slave cartel in the city of Great Forks. As insane and cruel as he was as a child, Anbor feasts on the depravities of others just as he indulges his own. From Lookshy to Greyfalls, Cynis Anbor travels from gala event to festival, from salon to brothel, making backroom and bedside deals with the powers that be of the Scavenger Lands. Though he is flamboyant and mad, he is as cunning and ruthless as any Dynast upon the Blessed Isle, capable of dealing with obstacles through either honeyed tongue or through the edge of Beckoned Harvest, his green jade reaver daiklave.

Nonetheless, Anbor does possess one pastime that has, from time to time, been the subject of scandal, regardless of how desperately his servants struggle to hide the ugly truth. When he is so moved, Cynis Anbor arranges for several children to be brought to his Manse in Great Forks, where they are greeted by a strangely muscular woman dressed in red silks and wearing a red veil. In his mother's long flowing gowns, Anbor entertains the children, giving them candy, toys and anything else their unwary hearts could desire. Upon the earning of their hard-won trust, Anbor entreats the unsuspecting boys and girls to his bed chambers. It is here that unspeakable things are unleashed on innocent minds and bodies. It is always in the early hours of the morning that his servants find him, in a room strewn with small, strangled bodies, weeping hysterically for his long-dead mother.

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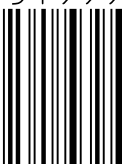
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