

ASPECT BOOK
WATERS™



An Aspect Book for



THE DRAGON-BLOODED

Vertical text in a stylized, calligraphic font, likely representing the character's name in a non-Latin script.



ASPECT BOOK
WATER™

By IAN ELLER AND JOHN SNEAD

IN THE LINE OF DUTY

From the last message of Tepet Karala, Assistant Trade Legate of Chiaroscuro, to her superior Ragara Takar.

My friend and colleague, I hope that some level of informality may be acceptable in what is likely to be the last message I ever send. I hope that even if I do not manage to resolve the problem that has brought me here, the information in this message will allow you to both resolve the situation and avenge my death.

Not only are the irregularities in the Daka Clan's shipping records real, they are far more extensive than we thought when we first discussed this matter three days ago. The Daka Clan has been smuggling goods into Chiaroscuro for the last month in far larger amounts than we imagined. Firedust is only the most noticeable of the goods it is bringing in. The Daka Clan is no longer simply a tribe of mercenary desert bandits. If what I overheard was correct, the entire Daka Clan is now working for the Lintha pirates. The Daka have been simultaneously hired and blackmailed. The Lintha are paying them quite well but have also taken several clan elders and more than a dozen of their tribal leaders' children hostage. If the Daka betray the pirates, the Lintha Family will kill these hostages in one of the many terrible methods for which they are so famous.

I'm getting ahead of myself. My time is short, so I will simply recount the events that led me here. I was looking over the papers associated with the Daka in the Office of Taxation. As you know, the mix of goods they had been bringing in for the last month was unusual and the shipments larger. When I talked to several of the clerks there, one of them mentioned seeing similar sorts of shipments by another desert clan with which he wasn't familiar. Further questioning revealed that both he and two other clerks had all seen reports of three other groups of desert nomads who were bringing similar shipments of goods that were all supposed to be wine and dried fruit. That's a significant rise in the import of wine and dried fruit. Given your recent discovery of a cache of firedust inside two of the amphorae of wine brought in by Daka traders, I was naturally suspicious. I could not find the location of these shipments, but I was able to talk to the nobles who received the taxes on them. In all cases, the caravans contained one yeddim and eight camels, and one of the camels was blind in its left eye. The Daka nomads were clearly using disguises to discreetly carry in unusually large shipments. They forgot to also disguise their animals, however.

Next, I ventured into the hovels and ruins of the New City to see what information I could stir up about these various nomads. Except for the Daka Clan, I could find surprisingly little — it looked very much like the other nomads had simply appeared from the desert one day with no history or contacts. That confirmed my belief that they were the Daka Clan members in disguise. I was also in luck — several members of the Daka Clan were currently visiting the New City. Some discreet listening yielded fruitful results — the Daka talked among themselves in worried tones. They were concerned for their elders and children and were clearly working for someone on a mysterious venture that they knew almost nothing about. I managed to search one of their rooms while they were out having lunch. They clearly had a regular visitor in their rooms who was not a member of the clan. Looking carefully at one footprint in the dirt floor, as well as residue from their snacks allowed me to determine that this visitor was one of the Lintha pirates wearing the garb of sailor from Coral as a disguise. The marks of the knife on the orange peel as well as the shape of the visitor's shoe were both unique and distinctive to the Lintha Family. I am indebted to you for teaching me to recognize such signs.

I knew that I had to observe one of the Daka Clan's meetings with the pirates, so for the next two days, I alternated between watching the clan's house and talking with some of the locals about what these people had been up to. The later proved to be my undoing. There are reasons that no one crosses the Lintha Family, and even though the people I talked to had no idea that one of the people they were discussing

was Lintha, they knew that this person was not someone to be trifled with. I'm guessing one of them decided that the reward she would get for mentioning the questions I was asking might be even larger than the money I paid her. Of course, I might simply have been too careless in my tailing.

When the Lintha agent visited the Daka Clan members, I followed them all back to the Scallop Blossom Warehouse in the District of the Bent Tower. The Lintha agent inspected the goods that the Daka had brought there. I did not see what was in most of the crates, but I knew that the Lintha Family wasn't particularly interested in cheap wine and dried fruit. I didn't see any more firedust. Instead, I saw something far worse, a box containing three jade daiklaves. I have no idea if these were only part of the shipment, but they looked to be First Age relics. There is a definite possibility that someone has discovered a large First Age cache. I also saw three suits of some shiny First Age fabric, but I have no idea of their capabilities. The Daka nomads had a surprising number of well-trained guards on this warehouse, and from what I heard, this was only one of the warehouses the Lintha were using. I knew the daiklaves were vitally important, but I still had no idea what the pirates' plans were, and without knowing that, we might only get one warehouse out of a dozen or more, while also alerting them to the fact that someone had some hint of their plans. Not wanting to lose the opportunity that I had, I followed the Lintha agent back to his lodgings in the Old City. He had enough money to stay in one of the smaller towers — excellent accommodations for someone who valued his privacy and liked the idea of being able to keep intruders like me from rifling through his rooms.

I managed to see and hear in, but I had no way of getting past the guards employed by the tower in any sort of unobvious manner and possessed nothing that could make a dent in the tower's walls or windows. I never discovered the entire story, but what I learned was bad enough. The Lintha Family hired the Daka Clan, and possibly other groups, to secretly move large amounts of weapons and other supplies into the city. My first thought was that the pirates were going to stage a huge raid or even a full-scale invasion, but neither of these tactics seemed particularly like standard Lintha tactics.

Instead, I heard something much darker and more complex. The Lintha Family has proof, or at least good evidence, that the underways beneath Chiaroscuro contain something of great value that is heavily guarded. One of the primary reasons that its agents are being so secretive about their actions is that they have no desire for anyone else to find what they are looking for. I have not been able to discover exactly what they are looking for — it is either a cache of artifacts of great power or perhaps a cache of sleeping beings of similarly vast capabilities. Also, the pirates seemed quite certain that some type of exceptionally deadly defenses guarded this cache and that they would need extremely potent weapons and armor to stand a chance of defeating these guardians. In either case, I doubt that we, or anyone else sane, wish the Lintha Family to have more power — and especially not more power within this city.

It was at this point that I became careless. I understood the basic situation, but I only knew the location of a single warehouse and had no way to find the cache they were talking about. I should have reported in, but I grew prideful and greedy and wished to present you with the complete story. There seemed no hurry because they had not even finished assembling all of the weapons and other gear they would need to make their attempt. Therefore, I continued following the primary Lintha agent, who went by the name Grashak.

Sometimes, our Charms are more of a curse than a gift. As you taught me, I regularly checked to see if anyone was watching me — shortly after I observed Grashak enter the house of someone I suspected of being another Lintha agent, I noticed that four people were watching me. I casually moved in the direction of one of them, planning on taking them out one at a time. However, instead of ordinary mortals, I faced four Lintha God-Blooded who knew both what I was and who I was watching. I could see by the way that they approached me that they had fought more than one of our kind before. They positioned themselves as if they expected me to flee



toward either the main part of the Old City or into the harbor. Naturally, I did neither. I attacked the least experienced and rapidly left him unconscious with several broken limbs. Then, I ran — the information that I had was far more important than proving my worth against inbred, self-castrating pirates. Unfortunately, my plans came to naught. They seemed able to track me wherever I went, and half a dozen other pirates soon joined my three pursuers. I led them into the most ruined depths of the New City but was still unable to lose them. I would have come directly to you, but I could not both keep ahead of them and get into the Old City. Two of the pirates moved with inhuman swiftness, jumping from one ruined wall to another with the grace and daring of monkeys.

Then, I remembered the mostly ruined building where the Jaratan smuggler gang holed up last year — the smugglers had rigged traps to block each entrance to give them time to escape out of whatever entrances were safe. Fortunately, I knew my way around the traps and was pleased to see that no one else had used that building since we provided the tax records that had convicted that gang. I triggered the traps behind me as I went in. I was trapping myself here. I knew that I had no chance of escape, but I also knew that my familiar, Burning Wind, could fly out of a small break in the wall. Writing this message is the most useful thing I could think of doing. From the sounds outside, they will be through the break in the wall soon. I do not expect to survive, but with luck, I will send a few of these savages to the Yozi before I fall.

If I do not live to see the morning, I ask that you care for Burning Wind. This hawk has been my familiar for more than a century, and after performing this last duty of carrying a message to you, she deserves to enjoy a quiet and peaceful retirement.

Preserve the Realm.



From Ragara Takar:

My first indication I had that my friend and protégé was dead was her hawk flapping at my window. By the time I read the message tied to the hawk's leg, Karala was already dead. I hurried to the building she mentioned. I found her body crushed and broken under fallen debris. They made it look like an accident, and their work might have fooled a mortal. However, I examined the room and saw clear evidence of a brave but doomed struggle against overwhelming odds. The patterns of dust and rubble in the back and a bloodstain on the least ruined wall told me that one of the pirates had fallen and two others had been sorely wounded before they managed to kill her. I spent a few more minutes in the room — looking at the remains of a fight is an excellent way to get a sense of someone's exact height, weight and build. The badly wounded pirates could not conceal their trail as well as the rest, and so, I could easily tell where they went.

Karala died like she lived, a true Water Aspect — I could see from the evidence inside the room where she died that she might have escaped, but that she also clearly knew that she was likely to be captured or killed. If that happened, everything she had learned would die with her. Instead of grasping at a small chance to survive, she willingly sacrificed her life to make certain that I received her message. As is true with all of our kind, Karala determined her most important goal and made it happen. I wish that she had found a way that did not leave her dead, but she died with honor, and I will avenge her death.

I followed the trail of the killers, and while most of them went back to the warehouse I'd already read about, the two Karala had hurt went to a tower in the Old City in the company of one of the Lintha God-Blooded. Because I knew a Charm that Karala had not, I called for my secretary to alert the Chiaroscuran authorities. At my request, they sent a large contingent of their most highly trained guards. Despite the fact that I was, in their eyes, a mere bureaucrat, the fact that I was a Dynast of the Blessed Isle was sufficient to allow me to take charge of the situation.

Torturing someone who has successfully castrated himself is rarely useful, so capturing the pirates and extracting the information from them would be futile.



Keeping the best of the mortal guards near by, I watched the room in the tower, while the other guards maintained a more discreet presence near the warehouse. I did not sleep and ignored my other duties — these barbarians had killed my friend and assistant, and the report that she had paid for with her life indicated that the threat might be of sufficient magnitude to endanger the Realm's interests here.

The end came swiftly. Two days after I first learned of Karala's death, I followed one of the uninjured pirates to a large meeting. Being 70 years older than Karala gave me the edge I needed to avoid being observed. Luck was with me. A representative of the Daka Clan was there, and they all discussed the hidden cache of artifacts — it was supposed to contain First Age war automata guarded by a celestial lion and several active war machines. Near the end of the meeting, I signaled for the guards with me to attack. I allowed them to overwhelm the Lintha pirates, while I protected the Daka Clan representative. I knew that he would trade whatever he knew for a chance to free his fellow clan members — and he knew they would certainly die otherwise, especially if I made certain that the pirates believed that he had sold them out. One of the pirates there had similar thoughts and attempted to kill the representative. However, I made certain that the pirates all died and that the Daka representative lived.

Between his information and the maps we captured, we had all we needed, and I turned this material over to the soldiers and the First Age scholars. The next week, I found out that the war automata were all useless junk. Once made aware of this fact, the celestial lion left for Yu-Shan. Regardless, Karala did not die for nothing. She died to protect the Realm.

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INTRODUCTION

The primary thing when you take a sword in your hands is your intention to cut the enemy, whatever the means. Whenever you must parry, hit, spring, strike or touch the enemy's cutting sword, you must cut the enemy in the same movement. Is it essential to attain this. If you think only of hitting, springing, striking or touching the enemy, you will not be able to actually cut him. More than anything, you must be thinking of carrying your movement through to cutting him. You must thoroughly research this.

—Miyamoto Musashi, *The Book of Five Rings*, The Water Book

Aspect Book: Water is a sourcebook designed to help you better understand the world of Water-aspected Dragon-Blooded. The Drowning Hands form the crucial logistical and bureaucratic foundations to Dragon-Blooded society. They travel the great whale roads of commerce, master its businesses (legitimate and otherwise) and meditate on and explore the secrets of the Exaltation. With the Empress absent from the throne of the Realm, the Aspects of Water are

thrust increasingly to the fore, as their Great Houses demand more efficient and more lucrative operations and seek to manipulate the bureaucracy of the Realm to profit the houses and lines.

And so, the Children of Daana'd wash the Realm forward on the tide of history, both pulling the institutions along with them and being pulled themselves by the pressure of house and institution. Like water, they lubricate, permeate and flow to match the shape

of their vessel — or in this case, their lack of vessel, as the institutions of the Realm fail, one after the other, through lack of oversight by their immortal mistress.

The Aspects of Water are the principals of planning, commerce and nebulous spiritualism within Dragon-Blooded society. They are sailors and businessmen and bureaucrats and monks. At their best, they are shapeless, unpredictable and flexible seekers of opportunity. At their worst, they are the universal solvent, seeking the lowest level, eroding all they touch, prone to tempests and departing without apology through the thinnest of loopholes.

Water-affected Dragon-Blooded are thus like the tide, for often the best and worst traits of their aspect coexist in the same being. Like all Dragon-Blooded, they seek to focus their elemental natures on the productive and the positive, and like all Dragon-Blooded, even the greatest among them is never entirely successful. Just as with any moody individual, the rages and the selfish moments contrast with the generosity and the understanding. Unfortunately for those around them, the Dragon-Blooded's temper is magnified by their Exaltation as much as their physical capabilities, and their moods are often as potentially deadly as the turning tempers of the sea.

But this book does not merely explore the lives of the Water Aspects. It also paints a picture of the Scarlet Dynasty and the Realm that it rules. The Drowning Hands serve the Realm as its traders, sea pilots and chief bureaucrats. Now, as the Age of Sorrows opens, they are the individuals who will be most responsible for the shape of the post-Realm Blessed Isle, as they destroy outmoded or weak institutions and attempt to erect structures that support their own goals. What will be the result, none can say, but the future rushes forward, as inexorable as the rising tide, and the Aspects of Water will move with the waves, for they know that no structure can fight the hammer of the tides with rigid strength. Only through flexibility can the sea grass weather the greatest storms.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Aspect Book: Water explores the personalities of the often-inscrutable Aspects of Water. Driven by the most flexible and changeable of the elements, many are too busy considering the Water Aspects mercurial enigmas to understand that they possess as much depth of character as any other individual. This text sheds light on how they live and why. This book also gives players some ideas on how to flesh out their Water Aspects, as well as new Charms and artifacts to use. For Storytellers, **Aspect Book: Water** will give

some insight on how Storyteller characters may react to the Drowning Hands in their games.

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

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

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

Chapter Four: Voices Not Our Own discloses the views others have about the Water Aspects. It gives a variety of opinions from friends, teachers, betrayers and servants, to name a few. Storytellers can use characters in this chapter to beef up the backgrounds of the Storyteller characters in their games.

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

Chapter Six: Miracles of Daana'd contains new Charms and wonders for Water Aspects to use. These expand the abilities of the Water Dragons to change the currents of destiny and to overcome their enemies. New wonders are also listed here.

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

Appendix II: Other Notable Water Aspects contains biographies of five other notable Water Aspects who can serve either as inspiration for a player or as Storyteller characters. These are mid- to high-level characters that may prove useful in a game of comparable players.

SOURCE MATERIAL

The Drowning Hands are the spiritualists, the monks and the natural sailors and merchants among the Dragon-Blooded. They govern the dark-tided seas of commerce, of Essence and of the soul. Outside



the world of **Exalted**, this is not a commonly occurring combination of traits, and attempts to find characters in sources who closely match this combination is difficult.

What is better is for Storytellers or players seeking to understand the Water-Aspected Dragon-Blooded to see what each of those individual facets is like and then compose their own synthesis. Obviously, there are five stories in this text that can provide a guide, but each of these Exalts is unique and has her own story.

For sailing Dragon-Blooded, first check out **Savage Seas**, the supplement about sailing and maritime technology in the world of **Exalted**, which includes an overview of the Realm's fleets, nautical practices and leading admirals. Any player whose character is a sailor and any Storyteller whose game involving sailing really need to read this book unless everyone is already knowledgeable about premodern sailing and navigation. Even in that case, it's details of the imperial navy, the technical specifics of navigation and the schematics of the various ships in use may prove handy.

In addition, real-world chronicles of premodern maritime trade and naval military operations will also

prove handy. Despite their Bronze Age trappings, **Exalted's** naval vessels are much more sophisticated than those of the Greeks or Romans. Nautical books such as Patrick O'Brian's *Master and Commander* are excellent places to start, as are accounts of early trade and military expeditions to the Americas, China and India or Viking voyages and accounts of the trading exploits of the Arab sailors who once ranged from Norway to China from their Mediterranean home ports. Likewise of use are tales of fantasy sailing, such as many of Fritz Leiber's *Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser* tales and especially Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* novels, as well as folktales such as the voyages of Sinbad.

Aspects of Water are also monks and spiritualists of an omniform, perceptive and receptive character. They are not the firebrands like the Aspects of Fire or intellectual zealots like the Aspects of Air.

Storytellers and players seeking to understand the Aspects of Water will gain more insight reading accounts of shamans and mystics and old wise grandmothers than they will reading accounts of prominent Buddhist monks. Players and Storytellers may find tales of the Taoist immortals and other Taoist fables good inspiration for this, as their naturalistic way of life resembles that of the Water Aspects.



ON DAANA'D AND THE DUTIES OF THE WATER DRAGONS

While the story of the Immaculate Daana'd sealing the souls of the Anathema in a great jade prison is obviously rooted in truth to some degree, the specific details are mostly fiction, designed for easy memorization and to reinforce the key lessons of the tale, not to accurately reflect the specifics of the event. Like most of the stories about the personifications of the Immaculate Dragons, it was manufactured by the founding Dragon-Blooded and Sidereals in order to providing a teaching tool for a crucial lesson of the Immaculate Philosophy.

Unlike the story of Hesiesh, however, the tale of Daana'd is aimed at other Dragon-Blooded as much as at Aspects of Water. The story highlights the crucial role of the Water Aspects in Dragon-Blooded culture or more clearly underlines their irreplaceable nature. Through this tale, Aspects of Water are made to understand how important their unique anima ability is to their fellow Exalts, and other Dragon-Blooded are taught to respect the Drowning Hands for their irreplaceable talents.

No ability is more crucial to the island-bound Dragon-Blooded than the freedom and mobility in water that the Aspects of Water's anima power lends them. With this ability, beings cannot hide beneath the waves to escape might of the Dragon-Blooded, and no naval force can seriously contemplate doing battle with the Realm, whose marines can swim submerged for hours to sabotage hulls or sneak aboard their enemy's ships on missions of mayhem. Through the power of the Aspects of Water, the Dragon-Blooded keep their sea lanes open without burdensome tributes to the Storm Mothers and other ocean gods, and no nation dares oppose the Realm's dominion of the seas.

Because of this, no aspect is as irreplaceable as the Aspects of Water. Every other aspect can serve most roles as well as any other, but only the Aspects of Water have the ability of aquatic survival as an inherent gift. Though other Dragon-Blooded can, of course, learn this gift, it requires time and effort, while the Aspects of Water need only wish it so. Master sailors, the Aspects of Water are such an integral part of the Realm's culture and its imperial infrastructure that their absence would be devastating. The Realm's vast fleets are manned by equally vast legions of Water-affected Dragon-Blooded, and the story of Daana'd makes this strength quite clear.

Until recently, this was the unquestioned way of things. House Peleps was allowed, even encouraged, to grow into a sprawling colossus with commercial and military interests that underpinned the Realm's entire economy. While every Great House had its own or allied patricians shipping fleets, Peleps controlled the Inland Sea, a beneficiary of the unquestioned Dragon-Blooded reverence for the Aspects of Water.

Just a few decades before her disappearance, however, the Empress began to become concerned with the unified power of the Peleps. This was prompted by no specific plot, at least, not one that is generally known among the Dynasty, but apparently, merely by the Empress' own paranoid musings and her reflection on tax revenue lost to the ability of House Peleps to smuggle at will. Thus was born House V'neef, whose control over the Merchant Fleet meant that the comings and goings of House Peleps to the Blessed Isle could be monitored more closely and that no one interest could have enough control over shipping security to land contraband at will along the coast of the Blessed Isle. The Merchant Fleet is no match for the navy of the Realm, however, except when the Empress' authority stood behind it. Now that she is gone, the Merchant Fleet can do little more than shadow fleet maneuvers near the Blessed Isle and raise a political clamor over the delivery of contraband goods during "marine training exercises."







CHAPTER ONE CHILDHOOD AND SELF



Although Exaltation is the beginning of a new and far grander life for the Dynasts of the Realm, it is also the beginning of far more responsibility than ever before. The Realm expects far more from its Dragon-Blooded rulers than from ordinary mortals. As they leave their old lives as ordinary mortals behind them, they must begin to become a part of the vast network of rivalries, obligations and expectations that makes up the lives of the Dynasts. The ambitious attend secondary school, which serves to

teach the young Dragon-Blooded how to be both members of the professions they aspire to and successful Dynasts of the Realm.

Out in the Threshold, the situation is often very different. There, the Second Breath is far more of a shock and often severs all of the new Terrestrial Exalted's prior social ties. Lacking a place in the Realm's power structure, these so-called "lost eggs" must instead make their own way in the world. Fortunately, their great advantages allow

them to become impressive heroes or terrible villains. The first years after their Exaltation is when they must learn how to survive in a world where they inspire fear in most mortals and find a way to use their unique abilities to build their chosen dreams.

PELEPS JAPHEN

I was born a scion of House Peleps, a child of strong breeding and the son of two influential households joined through marriage at the behest of Peleps Febaris and Peleps Taxin themselves. If that were all one knew of my origins, one would see my beginnings as no less than auspicious, perhaps even blessed. To my sorrow, however, there is far more to tell.

As those few cousins that deign to speak to me have related it to me, the households of Peleps Yrvine and Peleps Kijin embraced our house's philosophy of competition and intrigue with fervor. While neither was a household on par with Peleps Nalin or Peleps Danic, each possessed enough power in the Deliberative and wealth from trade alliances to be notable. Yet, these two households occupied the same niche, sought the same goals and engaged in their political games in the same arenas. They came into conflict often, both openly on the floor of the Deliberative and quietly in the alleys of the Imperial City. Again, as it has been told to me, these conflicts at first entertained the rulers of our house, but Yrvine and Kijin went too far, and blood was spilled, and revenues were lost. None dare speak the exact nature of the incident, but the repercussions were plain: the households of Peleps Yrvine and Peleps Kijin would be dissolved and combined. A marriage was ordered between the long time rivals. The two households became one, Peleps Yrvine-Kijin.

This was the lash, and my birth three years later was the lasting scar.

I do not recall seeing my parents before my fifth birthday, though I remember the names and faces of my many tutors and even my wet nurse. From a very young age, I was bright and precocious. I quickly mastered the games and toys meant to test and develop the mind of young Dynasts and both spoke and read as a child twice my own age. If my parents knew this, it was through reports of my upbringing from those that taught, cared for and served me. If my parents were proud of me, it was a silent pride hidden behind a veil of decorum. Sometimes as I small child, I would imagine them watching over me secretly, from hidden alcoves or through sorcerous means, smiling at my accomplishments and my potential. When I was finally presented to them, however, those fantasies fled, and I knew I was a bastard as surely as if I had been born in a brothel.

Peleps Yrvine was my mother. When she saw me that first time, dressed as I was in the ceremonial robes and standing erect with my head bowed as a respectful child

should, she merely frowned and said, "His ears are too large, and his arms are too thin." I met my father later that same day — in all my life, I have never seen my parents together in the same room, though I assume they must have been at least once for my conception — and he merely grunted and asked if I was dull like my mother. Other than those words I had been required to memorize and speak to my parents, I said nothing to them. This was but the first of many lessons in that vein: Speak only that which is required of you, for words beyond those can lead only to trouble.

I was sent to primary school in Sion. My natural inclination to read even the driest of histories and treatises was appreciated by the faculty there, if not by the other students. I was not then, and am not now, attractive by any stretch. My mother's assessment of me was mostly accurate, though she left out my wandering eye and overly large feet. The other students at the school in Sion made no such omissions. I had many names at school, and none of them were Peleps Japhen. My pedigree was apparently common knowledge among my peers, so I became known as the Well-Bred Bastard. In addition, I found solace only in my studies and in Gateway and its variations. High marks and a mastery of a competitive game did not engender friendship from those with whom I schooled. I suppose I should count myself lucky that my tormentors, in order to prevent trouble for themselves, left fewer physical scars than emotional ones.

EXALTATION

Alone at night in my bed, suppressing tears that would only cause me more torment, I often dreamed of my Exaltation. I would erupt in a brilliant display of crashing waves. The waters of my anima would become real, and all my tormentors, including my parents, would be washed away by the sheer brute force of my divinity. I believe all young Dynasts have these dreams because believing so makes me happy.

Coincidentally, crashing waves accompanied my Exaltation, but not quite in the manner I had imagined.

We were crossing the Inland Sea in the yacht *Naresh's Blessing* upon our return from the satrapy of An-Teng, where our instructors had taken us to witness first hand some of the glories of the First Age unspoiled by the Anathema and protected through the Ages by the power of the Realm. As we approached Arjuf, where we were meant to stay for a few days before moving on to Noble and then back to Sion, a storm broke. The wind and waves tossed our vessel despite the efforts of the crew and Nellens Baeden, the captain and an accomplished sorcerer. I was afraid. I admit this with no shame. Barely 12 years of age and knowing only the barest skills of a sailor, with no experience in the open ocean or in storm-tossed ships, I was certain of my doom. Doom did not come, but

rather, the touch of Daana'd graced me, and none too soon. I was swept over the side and instinctively drew upon the Essence within me, breathing easily beneath the chaotic surface.

It was strange under the water, once my fear was gone and I was able to think. Above me was a raging storm. But only a few yards beneath the surface, all was calm save for the occasional flash of brightness as lightning flashed in the sky above. I understood, then, that I was a part of the sea, and like the sea, I had both a surface and a depth, which need not have the same quality.

By the time my teachers and fellow students had fished me out, the storm had passed. So, too, had the storm within me. Though it would take a long time to master, the Essence that flowed through my veins was no longer a maelstrom. Nellens Baeden, also an Aspect of Water, even gave me a kind word, admiring how easily I had managed to save myself through my own Essence. "Master the sea as you have mastered yourself," he said, "and no port will be beyond your reach."

Even if I did not know exactly what he meant, I know this: He was the first Exalted adult to ever speak to me as an adult myself.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

My Exaltation came as a surprise to my parents. They called me home as soon as I had finished with primary school, throwing me a grand party for my 13th birthday. Other than a few relations whom I had seen one or twice, I did not know anyone there. I do not believe my parents ever spoke directly to me, but they spoke of me, and well, to the crowd that had gathered. Peleps Febaris was there and seemed pleased, as if a piece of some plan had fallen into place. The celebration was short lived, however, and I was soon faced with a new problem. My parents, who for so long had ignored my existence, had each centered all their attention on me. I was immediately aware that I had become a pawn in some game between them, and it was not a friendly game. The issue of my secondary schooling seemed paramount in whatever plans they formed for me and against one another. From what I gathered from servants, cousins and the meaning behind the words my parents used, I was promised to no less than three brides and two Great Houses as temporary ransom (one, I am sure, was Ragara for some slight my mother gave one of their Dynasts; I am certain I would have not liked that fate).

In the end, I was saved by luck and a friend I did not know I had. Nellens Baeden, immediately upon arriving in Arjuf, had sent an infallible messenger to the Heptagram regarding my Exaltation. Upon its receipt, the Headmaster of the Heptagram requested my records from the school at Sion. Even as my parents debated and strategized

as to my fate, messengers from the Heptagram arrived at our Manse. I had been accepted to the Academy of Sorcery. I do not know what other communications the messenger brought, but whatever they were, they must have been convincing: For the first time, and last as far as I yet know, my parents were in agreement, and I was promised to the Heptagram. I spent a brief holiday sailing, attempting to master skills I had so long neglected in favor of lorecraft, and saw neither my father nor my mother before I left for the Heptagram.

The study of sorcery presented me with challenges, both intellectual and physical, that I had never imagined. Whereas the study of mundane lore came naturally to me, the art of mastering my Essence and manipulating it through a combination of force of will and complex rituals was a more difficult road. I suffered many failures during my first few years at the Heptagram. At first, these failures weakened my resolve, and I wondered if I was indeed capable of becoming a sorcerer. There was a time when I thought I would not master my lessons and I would be sent home, a failure at even becoming a pariah in the eyes of my house. Looking back, I think I should have better been sent to the Cloister of Wisdom for all the looking inward I did. One day, however, I was struggling through a particularly complex ritual when I happened to look up and see the faces of my fellows. Each one wore a look hovering somewhere between determination and consternation. My short, sharp guffaw shattered the silence of the library and earned me a hard cuff on the ear, but I could not help it. The sight was not only ridiculous — 20 Princes of the Earth, all struggling to comprehend writing older than the Empress — it was illuminating: I was not alone in my confusion and fear of failure.

For me, that day was a turning point. I no longer became frustrated and depressed by my failures, but instead, accepted them, examined them and learned from them. Soon, I was once again mastering lessons far faster than my peers. While I was certainly proud (and I imagine Nellens Baeden was proud to, if he was, as I suspected, watching my progress at the Heptagram), this accomplishment served to erode any progress I had made in actually making friends. Once again, I was the brightest student, the one whose light cast a shadow over the others' own accomplishments. Once again, I was a target: of ridicule, of cruelty and of sabotage. It was harmless, mostly, save for one incident that taught me not only how dangerous adolescent jealousies can be, but how dangerous this art I studied really was.

It was my first summoning. Mnemon Sivos was the instructor administering the exercise. She often required other students to witness such summonings as an instructional tool, despite the deep reservations of many of the other instructors and all of the students. Among them was the fool Peleps Joro Kendal, a distant cousin I did not know





from a minor line in some nearly forgotten satrapy who, apparently, felt I upstaged him as the most unloved scion of House Peleps. Whatever his motivation, it was he who sabotaged my binding powder, I am certain of it, mixing the ashes of blood lotus into it when I was unaware. I am only lucky that Mnemon Sivos was there. As midnight struck, the erymanthus began to crawl out of Malfeas. It sneered at me, almost knowingly, and leapt free of the binding circle with a lust for my blood in its eyes. Even Sivos was frozen in surprise for a moment. The demon batted me aside with its scythe-like claws, and I fell into unconsciousness. I remember thinking how disappointed Nellens Baeden would be to hear that I had died by failing a simple summoning — with the aid of an instructor even.

I awoke some days later, alive but terribly scarred across my torso. I was told that Mnemon Sivos had destroyed the demon, but not before it tore through the rest of the students. Peleps Joro Kendal and another student, a scion of House Tepet I think, were killed before our instructor could defeat the demon. I agonized for days over the guilt I felt for wishing I had not fallen unconscious before it killed Kendal. Eventually, the feelings, of guilt at least, faded.

The remainder of my time at the Heptagram was less eventful, due in no small part to the fact that Mnemon Sivos had quietly retired from her position. The incident put a scare into my other tormentors — and also into those

who might have otherwise approached me as a friend. I remained lonely for those years, consoled by the lore I devoured in the libraries while the others passed their few free hours talking and sneaking wine in the dormitory. I could converse with some of the more liberal faculty and heard many stories of times and places very far removed from my own by listening to the words of some of the bound spirits, demons and elementals.

I complain too much. I learned more than I could have ever imagined in my time at the Heptagram, and friends would have been a waste, anyway. The hours I spent in the libraries and laboratories would not have been better spent with alcohol, sexual experimentation or gossip. Even had I made friends, I would have lost them upon commencement, for in House Peleps, “friend” is only another word for “opportunity.”

RANYA PETRIS

There’s nothing much to say about my early years. Gethamane is a pretty quiet place in which to grow up. Except for the occasional trouble with something crawling up out of the underways, not much ever happens there. The big excitement of my life was going out the watch the Haslanti air boats dock.

My parents were jewelers and did good work. They specialized in glow-stone jewelry, using stones flown in

from Crystal or that some poor fool found in the underways. I helped in the shop and dreamed of leading a more exciting life. There wasn't much to distinguish me from any of the other young girls growing up in Gethamane. Outsiders sometimes say it's haunted, but mostly, it's just very, very old and way too quiet. I never possessed the gift for coaxing beauty out of metal and stone, but I could sell almost anything and, from a young age, was helping to talk traders and the wealthy into spending more than they'd planned.

EXALTATION

My Exaltation came in my 14th year and was a complete surprise to everyone. I've heard stories of it happening for others as part of a great act of heroism, but as for me, it was nothing more than a fairly minor incident of the sort that happened every few months. Every jewelry store has to contend with thieves. We hired a guard to watch the place at night and invested in Haslanti feathersteel locks. As a result, the main problem we faced were clever-fingered folk pocketing items and leaving before we noticed the loss. Occasionally, at the end of the day, something small turned up missing. More often, one of us noticed the loss and called the watch. Because we paid our taxes and bribes regularly, we usually got the piece back, and the thief either ended up exiled or missing a hand.

On an especially busy day, shortly after a Haslanti caravan arrived, I saw someone pocketing a small glowstone broach. I yelled, but he was out of the door swift as a falcon. I hadn't gotten a good look at the guy's face, but his plaid cloak was unmistakable. I vaulted over the counter and took off after him. He was a large man, and I was a fool. The halls were so crowded that everyone ignored my cries of "stop thief," and he clearly knew where he was going. I barely caught site of him turning down one of the deserted hallways off of the Flecked Granite market corridor.

He was really fast and knew the deserted back corridors better than I did. Because I couldn't identify him, I knew that, if he got away, there was no way the watch would catch him. I pushed myself and ran faster than I ever had in my life. He looked very surprised that someone as small as I was caught up with him — turning quickly, he grabbed me, and I could see that he meant to kill me and dump my body in one of the empty rooms off of this narrow and deserted passage. He pulled out a knife, and in desperation, I lunged forward and grabbed him. He was far larger, but I held on and squeezed. Fearful of feeling a knife in my back, I soon felt him begin to gasp and weaken. He fell down, and then, I noticed a blue-green light around me.

Not thinking of how much he weighed, I carried him back into the Flecked Granite market corridor. As soon as I appeared, everyone backed away from me — the two

members of the watch there looked like they were about to run. Then, I heard the murmurs, Water Aspect, Exalted, Child of Daana'd. Several people knelt before me, and the rest retreated. My father came out to see what the commotion was about and stood in silent shock. I'd seen him look like that when a Dragon-Blood from Whitewall had once bought one of his finest jeweled circlets. Gradually, I began to understand my new state, and in those few moments, my life changed.

My parents still loved me, and no one ever raised a hand against me, but I knew that I was no longer welcome there. After three months, I saw that my parents could no longer deal with the constant whispered comments whenever I walked down a crowded corridor. They started to avoid me. That made me sad, but I also knew that my own dreams could finally come true. Although I was still a few months shy of 15, when I asked to become part of the crew of a visiting Haslanti air boat, I was instantly accepted. In a week, I was as good as sailors who had been with the *Jade Condor* for several years, which explained why they were so eager to have me aboard.


A NEW LIFE

I soon discovered that the distinction between air boat crewmen who are traders and those who are smugglers or occasional raiders comes down to nothing more than desperation and need. Ordinary trade is safest, but sometimes, other more lucrative options are needed, even if they are also way more dangerous. I heard stories of impressive raids, but while I was on board, we never did anything more than hit a few caravans not associated with either the Haslanti or the Guild. Smuggling, however, provided much of our profits even in good months.

It was a small ship with a small crew, and so, everyone did everything. I was the youngest on board but also the most powerful. My first duties were obvious, since I was more dangerous than any ordinary person, I guarded the captain or the cargo master during negotiations. The captain also saw I had an eye and a tongue for sales, so he made certain that I spent enough time with the cargo master learning the job. Captain Jellik liked the idea of an Exalt who could bend customers to her will, and it's not like I had any problems with that idea.

After the captain trained me a bit with saber and crossbow, we did more raiding. As soon as I learned the knack of using Charms to help disguise myself, I helped with that. Several times, we followed the edge of a blizzard, watching for a small caravan that had nothing to do with the Guild — Captain Jellik wasn't a fool and, therefore, didn't beg for trouble from the Guild. The clouds and snow kept us invisible and when we were near such a caravan, the crew let me down on a rope. I disguised myself as a lost and frostbitten lone traveler who was clearly no Exalt and staggered toward the caravan.





The paranoid caravans had their best guards come forward to look at me and try to chase me away. I'd kill the guards, while the *Condor* would let down more people to take out the few remaining guards and grab the valuables. I sometimes felt a bit worse about the other caravans, the people who actually took me in and fed me. I made sure not to kill any more people than I absolutely had to there. No one expects a frostbitten half-captive to be able to slip a sleeping draught into the stew pot. We robbed these caravans too but didn't take any of the supplies they needed to survive.

We didn't do too much raiding, if you get a big rep as a raider someone starts hunting you, and that never ends well. Most of the time, I was a guard and studied with the cargo master. She was starting to get old, 15 years older than the captain at least — she didn't mind the idea of training her replacement so long as she got a good bonus when she retired. Seeing as she owned a share in the *Condor*, Captain Jellik wasn't about to try to slight her. She worked with me on bargaining and forgery, and it wasn't very long before I learned some Charms to help me with the latter. By then, I was assistant cargo master and had my own share of the ship. I was only 16, but they all knew exactly how good I was. I never saw much point in modesty. Being an Exalt is like having a special knack for stealing or crafting — you can do things other folk can't.

My first good trick made smuggling into the Coastal States a whole lot simpler. The customs inspectors there seem to only come in two varieties, the uptight ones who won't take bribes and the ones who require huge bribes and may still turn you in anyway for the bonus they get. Most of the smuggling down there is high-end stuff by the Guild. Small operators come and go, but mostly, they go and end up in shackles farming opium or so broke that they wonder why they are bothering to try to smuggle anything. After watching one of the squeaky honest inspectors on several trips, I developed a serious dislike for him, especially after he tried to feel me up when I was hiding the fact that I was an Exalt. I came up with a plan to get him working for us. His name as Varin Dalis — I'd seen his stamp and knew the papers we had to get for bringing various good in by heart, and I also knew he was almost as greedy as he was honest. He was one of the inspectors who was just a bit too scared to take bribes to break the rules, and those sort can be used.

We were hauling a load of rasp spider venom down to Cherak, and there was no way we were getting it past the inspections unless we suddenly got a whole lot better at concealing things than any of us were. The plan I came up with was a two-part deal. We got into Cherak late one night — standard policy is for Realm soldiers to guard the ship and have a nice large squad of legionnaires escort everyone leaving the ship to and from the traveler's inn and not let them go anywhere else or get into any trouble. They would inspect the ship the next morning.

By this point, I knew enough Charms to easily sneak past the guards. I'd previously found out where Varin Dalis lived and went over there carrying a load of jade in a sack that I put in the garbage midden behind his house. He wasn't dumb enough that he'd miss seeing it there, and the captain was certain that he'd keep the jade without reporting it. The captain guessed that Dalis would think he'd stumbled upon a blind drop where two criminals were secretly passing money without having to meet. Before that, I'd created an exact duplicate of the inspection papers signed by Varin Dalis, certifying that he'd inspected the *Jade Condor* and had found nothing illegal on board. The next morning when he came on board, Varin Dalis looked to be in an unusually good mood — he'd obviously found the jade and thought he was having a really good day. He looked a whole lot less happy when Captain Jellik presented him with approval documents signed and sealed by him. He was about to turn us in, when the captain reminded him that, while turning in people after taking the bribe was perfectly fine, using one's seal and then regretting this fact was a whole lot touchier and often resulted in both a demotion and the loss of the bribe. As I said, Varin Dalis was a greedy one, and he took the bait. To prevent us pulling the same stunt again, he simply started taking our bribes. We paid him well, but not nearly as much as the other inspectors would have demanded. I always made certain to have the documents prepared, signed and sealed before we landed.

RAGARA TAKAR

I was born to a minor family in the charming city of Lord's Crossing. My youth was much like that of any other child whose Exalted parents hope may become a blessed member of their kind. I most remember the mixture of rigorous training, combined with the occasional whispers about whether any particularly noticeable success or failure might be some indication that I was or was not likely to become like them. As I grew somewhat older, the nervous looks and the comments increased, and even the servants began to examine me with a speculative eye. I later learned that many servants bet with each other about which children the Dragons of Heaven will choose.

EXALTATION

Initially, I was a great disappointment to my parents. I remained stubbornly mortal for the first 16 years of my life and was well on my way to learning to become the sort of useless failure I have seen in so many other families. Increasingly certain that I would forever remain mortal and was at best fit for possibly fathering an Exalted child, I consoled myself with drink and mindless entertainments that I told myself I enjoyed. As company, I had others who found themselves in a similar state.

Although we all ostensibly went to school, so long as we met the minimum expectations, no one cared what else we did — we simply were not good enough to attract the notice of the Immaculate Dragons. Late one night, my companions and I went out boating upon the Lantern Gate River in a rented pleasure craft. We all had considerably quantities of money and excellent families, but all of us would have gladly traded our many advantages for the sublime touch of the Second Breath. That night, I was so blessed. We were all quite drunk, and one of my comrades who was even drunker than I fell overboard — I have forgotten his name, but it is no matter, as he is certainly long-since dead. Seeing him sinking rapidly, I dived in after him. The water was bitter cold, but I soon ceased feeling it. Worried that the cold might soon overcome me, I swiftly dived down to reach him. While I could swim well, I was fully dressed, wearing heavy boots that I had drunkenly forgotten to remove and in icy water — I expected to have far more trouble than I did. Although it was night and the lantern on the boat was quite small, I could see clearly and had no trouble breathing. I easily grabbed my companion and came back to the boat. As soon as we reached the surface and he was no longer in danger, I instantly knew what had happened. As I approached the boat, the looks in the eyes of all my comrades confirmed the reason for the strange ease I had felt in the water.

There was no more drinking that night — the youth I saved sat at the front of the boat and cried. His tears were mixed with mutters of how it would have been better to have let him drown. My other two companions said little, but their looks spoke of their anger, envy and shame. Abandoning the other castoffs, I made new friends among the ranks of the newly Exalted. My parents were naturally overjoyed, but my transfer from my previous school to the Spiral Academy left me little time to see them.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

After a short discussion with my illustrious mother, we both decided that my family and I would both be best served if I attended the Spiral Academy — I had little interest in sorcery and even less in being either a soldier or a monk. Also, working at the ministries was a family tradition, and so, my own wishes and those of my mother aligned quite well. Frankly, there is little reason to talk about most of my time in the Spiral Academy. I excelled at my studies, but so did many others, so I graduated eighth in my class — very good, but I did not consider myself to be exceptional, merely highly motivated.

During this time, I studied the intricacies of finance and bureaucracy. I had always enjoyed reading and always knew that I had a flair with mathematics, and here, both talents served me exceptionally well. I also learned how the various abstract concepts applied to the actual administration of the Realm, and those complex details truly

awakened my interest. Well before any armed revolt, foreign trade embargo or the discovery of massive embezzlement that leaves a department's treasury mysteriously empty, there are always subtle signs, trails of small discrepancies and minor inconsistencies that show up in all of the records associated with the problem. Just as the gods write all of our futures in patterns of stars that skilled astrologers can read, every major earthly trouble is first indicated by patterns of finance and record keeping. Learning to read such patterns is the greatest and most important task of every clerk — if we do it well, then we are more powerful than all the soldiers and sorcerers on the Blessed Isle because we can eliminate problems well before they even become noticeable.

My enthusiasm for solving these sorts of puzzles did not go unnoticed. By the beginning of my second year, the fact that I was also fiercely loyal to the Realm as a whole and largely kept myself outside of the many foolish and petty inter-house rivalries that occupied the free time of so many students earned me a late night audience with a pair of hooded figures. I had heard enough rumors and stories to know that these were members of Scarlet Orchid, one of the most mysterious of the Realm's secret societies and, supposedly, also one of the most powerful. Needless to say, they said very little except that I might be worthy of joining their number but that I must first prove my value to them before I would be allowed to join. I expected some challenge involving humiliation or debauchery, but what they asked of me intrigued me far more.

As part of their course work, senior students must work with actual imperial records. Some of the more exceptional second-year students, like myself, work with the seniors both to help check their work and to learn from their example. Those seniors lucky enough to have a second-year apprentice gave us all of the most tedious work.

Since I worked with agricultural records involving both foodstuffs and agricultural equipment, my test by Scarlet Orchid was to alter the records so that a piece of First Age weather-control equipment was moved from one imperial storehouse to another. After that, I would then need to put in a request to move this artifact back to its original location, all without alerting any of the ministers who keep careful track of these artifacts. If I failed to properly conceal what I had done, the heads of the Spiral Academy would have me dismissed or possibly even imprisoned. However, if I succeeded, I would belong to Scarlet Orchid and would have truly proven my worth as an exceptionally skilled clerk. Naturally, I accepted this offer and set to work.

Altering the records and getting these alterations past the student I was ostensibly working for was extremely simple — she looked over my work in a desultory fashion, since she already knew that I was both smarter and more



careful than she was. However, the difficulty in making both sets of changes would be the Headmaster of Records, V'neef Marik. He performed regular spot checks of everyone's work, and one glance at the wrong page would result in utter ruin for me. If I had only needed to make one set of requests and changes, I might have trusted to luck, but two sets were far too risky. Fortunately, he had a weakness for attractive young men. I am in no way implying that he normally allowed his passions to interfere with his duties, but he did occasionally enjoy indulging them. Since I had the good fortune to be considered moderately attractive, I decided to use this fact to my advantage.

With his typical efficiency, he checked over his students' work immediately after they brought it in, usually with the students standing there waiting for his criticism or, more rarely, his praise. Two weeks before I made the first change in the records, I began taking our work to him alone. He already knew that I was doing slightly more than my share of this work and was more interested in my own progress than the rather mediocre ploddings of my alleged senior mentor. In addition to making certain to ask detailed and intelligent questions about his criticisms, I also gradually began moving closer to him. When I shook his hand upon leaving, I allowed

my finger to touch his a few moments longer than necessary. On several occasions, I also made certain to brush against him while coming into and leaving the room. After a week and a half, my gradual teasing was clearly having an affect. He became mildly flushed when I walked in the room and missed three obvious but trivial mistakes that I deliberately introduced into my work. After two weeks, I was certain that his eyes would be more upon me than upon my work, especially since, with the exception of those three deliberate errors, I had made certain that my work was completely error free and had even corrected several mistakes made by my mentor. The day came to deliver the request to divert the weather machine from one storehouse to another — he had no suspicions, and the fact that I brushed against him upon entering the room and stood even closer than usual caused him to do give my work no more than the most cursory glance.

The next few alterations in requests were similarly easy. To avoid undue suspicion, I knew that I had to wait at least two weeks before transferring the artifact back to its previous location. I continued my subtle teasing of my instructor during this time but only did so when I brought him my reports. At first, the process of transferring the



weather-control artifact back went equally easily. Then, disaster struck. Headmaster V'neef carefully looked over the last report I had altered to finalize the transfer of the artifact back to its original storehouse.

He looked up me and gave me a far too knowing smile, "I am curious about the transfer of this particular sky mantis tower. I have heard nothing to indicate that this transfer is necessary." I said nothing and struggled to breathe evenly and to keep my worry off my face. His smile then became more of a leer, "I suppose it's nothing. I would normally be inclined to investigate it, but I do suppose that there are more enjoyable ways to spend my time, aren't there?" I knew that he would not report me if I paid his price, which was a fairer deal than I had any right to expect. I agreed and dallied with him a few times before he was taken with another, more attractive student. I did not succeed in quite so elegant a fashion as I had hoped, but five weeks after the pair from Scarlet Orchid first approached me, I had passed my test.

Two nights later, I was again woken up quite late by a pair of people in hooded robes who told me that that they were there to take me to the initiation ceremony. I dressed rapidly, and the three of us crept down the hallways and into a carefully hidden doorway. I walked down a bare corridor, allowed my companions to open a heavy, jade-bound door and walked into a large, dimly lit room filled with more than three dozen people all wearing hooded robes. The two who had brought me recounted my accomplishments, including a number that I thought no one else knew of. Then, they described Scarlet Orchid to me. It was an organization dedicated to the preservation of the Realm and the power of the Empress by any means necessary. It recruited members from all four secondary schools, and members had to swear to give both their own lives and the lives of others if doing would help to preserve the Realm.

They then presented me with a contract, a pen and a knife — after signing my name in my own blood and taking their oath, everyone else took off their hoods, and we proceeded to get exceedingly drunk. During this part of the ceremony, I noticed that a few of the people present were instructors at the Spiral Academy, including V'neef Marik. The entire exercise made considerably more sense at this point, and I learned a bit more about the methods of Scarlet Orchid — the sky mantis tower had never been moved, and the entire exercise had been free of any risk except that of failing to get into Scarlet Orchid.

Joining Scarlet Orchid altered the course of my life. I was now less concerned with my personal advancement, as I was a member of a group that was practically a large sworn brotherhood of Dynasts dedicated to protecting the Realm. I also knew that my career in the ministries would be considerably more interesting than I had previously expected.

PELEPS DELED

My first memory is of entering the Temple of Daana'd in the Imperial City. Regardless of my youth, I was enraptured by the power within. I was awestruck by the living water that danced in the basins, and I marveled at the fluid form of the temple itself. I was too young to understand that this place was a Manse and that its shape was designed to direct the power of Daana'd, but I was aware on some level that it was holy beyond its mere artifice.

My parents had no time for religion, as they were constantly distracted by the politics of House Peleps. So it was that my uncle Peleps Deham brought me to the temple that day. He showed me where to sit and how and directed my attention with kind but firm words and gestures toward the Immaculate monks who delivered the wisdom of Daana'd in their chanting. Deham was an Immaculate himself, an Itinerant of Water. He did not return to House Peleps often, and this was the first time I had met him. Yet, I felt safe with him and reverent of him immediately, almost instinctively. His sea-green skin and black hair and his eyes that seemed to pull you in and almost drown you should you stare into them too long entranced me. My parent were of strong breeding, but even they did not bear the marks of Daana'd as overtly as did Deham. Perhaps I had known on some level what it meant to be Dragon-Blooded before then, but Deham's presence made it palpable.

He only remained with us for a few weeks before having to leave again, but in that time, he made certain that I would be schooled in the Temple of Daana'd. My parents, of course, did not argue. They had often referred to me in jest as their "little monk" for my contemplative nature. Now, I would be taught what it meant to be truly contemplative and to know what power blessed our house. I resolved, as much as a child so young might, to be like my uncle in all ways. Such is the mind of a child: As children, we worship such heroes and gods as we can see. Only in adulthood do we find them within ourselves.

The education I received at the hands of the monks was both thorough and enlightening, if not always gentle. Like my peers who attended private schools or had servants tutor them through their primary education, I learned the basics of mathematics and philosophy and the history of the Realm. I was taught to read from the Immaculate Texts — though the portions reserved from us, I would learn later, were far greater than those shown to us, and I enjoyed basic instruction in the simplest forms of the martial arts. Moreover, I was surrounded by wisdom and piety, and I often dreaded going home, for there was so little of either among my cousins and within my household. My elders would ignore me or, at best, laugh and pat my head when I spoke the wisdom I had learned in school. Those of age that were given secular



educations would often deride me and even make up blasphemies to taunt me.

It was such blasphemies that instigated the first true fight I had in my life. Certainly, I had sparred with the other children under the tutelage of the monks, but these were exercises of mind and body, intended to bring us closer to ourselves. One day, during a short break from school when I was nine years old, four of my cousins found me sitting by the pool in our garden. They ranged in age from nine to twelve, and though I was not a small child by any means, all of them were larger than I. They had been raised in the purest manner of House Peleps and saw in me an ample opportunity to practice their lessons. It began with simple jibes, and I did not give them satisfaction by responding or even looking up from my contemplations. They realized quickly that insulting my sexual maturity or my temple hair cut would not rile me, so they moved on to insulting my faith, my schooling and my uncle. When they finally insulted *our* Immaculate Dragon, I could sit quietly no longer.

Even in my anger, I knew that these children held no true blasphemy in their hearts. They were simply attacking a target, as they had been taught. Nonetheless, I knew that heresy and blasphemy were the cancer that would eat away not only House Peleps, but also the entire Realm. It could not go unpunished. Suddenly, I was among them, surprising even myself with the speed and ferocity with which I attacked. Yet, I did not flail and spit and scream as they did when they fought. What little I had been taught in the temple remained with me, overtook me. A few minutes later, four of my elder cousins were crawling away with bleeding noses and lips and one with a broken arm. As they did, I made certain to tell them, in the same placid voice with which the monks would give their lessons, why it was they had been beaten.

A few hours later, I was summoned before my parents and the parents of those cousins who I had beaten. Though there was a spark of approval in my father's eyes, it was otherwise obvious that I was the villain in all their eyes. "To protect the house," my father said, "is the first obligation of a Peleps. No one's personal ambitions or faith must be weighed heavier than the health and grandeur of House Peleps. You broke Peleps Fordam's arm. He was to ride against Ragara Melina tomorrow in the Spring Race, and now, he cannot. Much depended on that race, Deled, and your zeal has cost House Peleps an important victory."

And so, I was beaten, a rare punishment for a young Dynast. I was beaten for being stronger, better and more faithful than my peers. I knew then, unequivocally, where Daana'd stood in the hearts and minds of House Peleps.

After my beating, Peleps Deham came to me in the garden. He was returned for a short time and had witnessed both the fight and my punishment. He had chosen not to involve himself, as he was neither my parent nor a parent

of any of the other boys involved. But that did not mean he would not respond in the way most appropriate for an Immaculate monk: He would make certain that I was rewarded for my strength and faith and promised that, upon the day he returned from his next pressing mission as an Itinerant, he would see to it.

EXALTATION

My childhood ended when that day came two years later. I looked long into the eyes of Peleps Deham, and I saw there was truth there, smoldering behind a mask of compliance with the commands of the house. I resolved in that single moment that, like Deham, I would serve the Immaculate Dragons first and House Peleps and the Realm second. Where they met, Peleps would be stronger. Where they crossed, there was no question as to where my loyalties would lie.

"Teach me," I begged Deham, and he did.

I learned but one kata that day, the simplest one that was taught to monks on their first day in the exercise yards of the Cloister of Wisdom. I grasped it swiftly, save for the last few movements. At first, I did not understand why. I could not comprehend the very concept of those last few steps and strikes. My body simply did not move *that way*. And upon realizing that, I understood.

Deham showed me the kata once more, and I performed it with him. When we reached those last few motions, I fell as I had the first times I tried it. He looked me squarely in the eyes and said, "This is for Dragons," and he walked away, leaving me in our own exercise yard, me in my personal Cloister of Wisdom within the walls of my family's Manse. I knew then the truth of Deham's words: *This is for Dragons. This is for Dragons. This is for Dragons.*

I neither slept nor ate for six days. I did not rest except in the brief moment of meditation between one performance of the kata and the next. The kata took 10 minutes to complete from start to finish, including the meditation. I performed the kata one thousand times. As the sun began to rise on the seventh day, I forced my shuddering limbs to perform the movements one final time.

On the one thousand and first attempt, it happened. My limbs flowed and my body bent in ways that they had not, could not, before. What I thought at first was perspiration poured from my skin and rained down on the grass beneath my feet. My heart beat with the crashing of waves on cliffs, and my blood was a raging river. I had been seeking my whole young life, but in the end, it was Daana'd who found me.

This is for Dragons.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

Deham found me unconscious from exhaustion on the evening of the same day as my Exaltation. When I awoke, I saw in his eyes for the first time a respect for me, for what



I had become. He said that, while the blood of all Dynasts carried the gifts of the Immaculate Dragons, it is our individual wills and righteousness that bring it forward.

I stood with Deham as he spoke to my parents a few days later, after the celebration of my Exaltation and the reassuring fear and deference of those cousins who had not Exalted. All were in agreement that the Cloister of Wisdom was the best place for me, and I too felt that there was no better choice for my schooling. There, I would learn not only the art of mastering my Essence and necessary martial skills, but I would be prepared for my inevitable, as far as both I and Deham were concerned, acceptance into the Immaculate Order. It was apparent that my parents did not believe in that inevitability, but they did feel that a child trained at the Cloister would be preferable to any of the other alternatives: House Peleps has quite enough bureaucrats already, and they certainly did not want me to become a sorcerer, little more than a pariah in my house, or a soldier, who was far more useful to the Realm at large than House Peleps in particular. As such, the requisite applications had already been made, and after a few short interviews, I was accepted into the Cloister.

I was neither brighter nor duller than the vast majority of my peers at the Cloister of Wisdom. We listened to the same lectures, engaged in the same exercises and took the same tests. Where I differed from most of them, however, was in my realization that what we were learning within those hallowed walls was the foundation of righteousness. It was obvious to me that even most of the instructors had allowed truth to become mere knowledge, to be memorized and regurgitated upon command. For them, the Immaculate Philosophy was a part of their heritage and history, something that united Creation after the Anathema were cast out of this world and allowed the Realm to be born in the ashes of the Contagion. For them, it no longer lived — it was something that had been, not something that yet was. And they were wrong.

Despite the obvious gulf between me and my fellows, I managed to avoid the sort of outcaste syndrome that seems to befall so many with different — and in my case, correct — presumptions about the world. We were youths on the cusp of adulthood, and for many of them, it was the questioning of what they had thought they had known for their entire lives that drove them to learn. I spent many long hours arguing philosophy with my peers, and each time a discussion ended, I retreated to the libraries and searched through the Immaculate Texts until I found that, despite their protestations of their own rightness, they were wrong. Over time, I became more impatient with them. I could not bear to repeat myself over and over, to point out the same passages in the Texts that showed them how their thinking was flawed. Even as I called many of them friends, I could not endure their inability to see that I was showing them the truth. It was

worse with the instructors, who would not recant themselves when I pointed out flaws in their teachings. I was always respectful, for at the time, I was the student and they were the masters, and the order of things demanded I not question too loudly. Yet, even in private, they would argue against the truths that were plain on the parchment and ink before us.

So, those discussions became less and less common. As they were my primary interaction with my peers, so I became more and more alone, left to contemplate the truths that others refused to see. In my last year at the Cloister, I rarely interacted with my peers, and when I did, it usually ended in a brawl. Considering so few of them had mastered their own Essence and learned the martial skills as well as I — more evidence that supports the truth that martial skill is a function of righteousness — these conflicts were often short and painful. I was chastised and punished many times, but I bore these punishments knowing that I was right. In the end, the weight of my marks and my will outweighed the demerits and written warnings, and I was allowed to graduate from the Cloister of Wisdom.

My parents and Peleps Deham were on hand for my commencement ceremony. If it had been my choice, I would have walked directly from the Cloister to the Palace Sublime to present myself as a postulant. Unfortunately, as is always the case with House Peleps, there were other obligations. First, there were parties at my household's Manse to show me off as a fully mature member of House Peleps. Then, there were the masquerades and matchmaking, wherein my parents attempted to rouse my interest in any number of possible wives, in an attempt, I am certain, to distract me from a life in the Immaculate Order. At least I was given a voice in each of these celebratory events, and during each one, I was allowed a sparring match. My parents thought it wonderfully amusing and chose the best young martial artists from among my cousins and our allies. Deham saw it for what it was and was pleased. I wished not only to distract myself from the drunkards, suitors and politicians, but to test myself against my peers.

Of the 16 bouts I fought at various functions in the season between graduating the Cloister of Wisdom and leaving for the Palace Sublime, I lost none. Only six of my cousins were seriously injured, and none died.

Eventually, my parents realized the inevitability of my becoming an Immaculate monk, and the attempts to dissuade me ended. I said a few brief good-byes and left our home with Deham to travel to the Palace Sublime.

PELEPS ARAMIDA

Today, my childhood is nothing more than a distant memory. My father administered our estates and was active in politics, while my mother served in the imperial navy. The navy was important to her, and although I only





saw my mother a few times a year, the stories she brought back of epic battles, glorious victories and the constant threat of pirates, monsters and foreign fleets both made me proud of her and filled me with a fierce determination to follow in her footsteps.

I suppose that, in many ways, I was closer to her than to my father. While he was always around, he was also always busy. I regularly received messages from my mother and she spent much time with me during her short visits. When I was 12, she bought me a small boat that I could sail in the bay and a slave to teach me how to do so. That was the last time I saw her.

EXALTATION

My Second Breath was touched with tragedy and forever set the course of my life. Most of the rest of my childhood is now a blur of scattered images, but I will always remember that particular day. I had been practicing with my small sailing boat for several months — my slave Ranuf and I had been out working on tacking close to the wind in relatively strong winds. That day, the breeze whipped up the water in the bay into waves tipped with blowing streamers of white spray. The boat was mine to command, and I was sailing against the wind for the first time without help. I had tamed both the wind and the waves, and my first thought was how proud my mother would be when she saw me do this. Then, I saw old Vakacis, my tutor and servant running down to the dock. The last time I had seen him run was when I was six — I'd almost fallen out of a cherry tree and hung there a dozen feet above the ground, feeling my grip begin to slip. He ran up and caught me.

Worried, but also pleased with my handling of the boat, I brought it smoothly back to the dock, only faltering when I was close enough to see the tears on Vakacis' face. As my slave tied up the boat, Vakacis quite literally jumped on board, put his arm around me and told me that pirates had sunk my mother's ship. I later found out that she had led a small and completely secret attack on one of the strongholds of Kaigan, and that the Wyld, the pirate's Fair Folk allies and the other outcastes working for them had proven too much for my mother's ships. As the rest of her force fled, she held off pursuit with her trireme, sacrificing her life and her crew to save the other five ships.

I knew none of this then. I only knew that my mother was dead. She had died in the line of duty, fighting the enemies of civilization. However, at the time, I cared more than she was gone from my life and that I would never be able to show her how much I had learned or hear her lovely brave voice again. I screamed in grief and rage at the savages that had slain her. Then, in an unthinking instant, I dived over the side of the boat and into the windswept water of the bay. Later,

Vakacis told me that the transformation was already upon me when I dove into the water. I worried afterward if I was a coward and had sought to end my life, but I remember feeling only a mindless need to touch the water that was now her grave.

Although it was more than 60 feet below the dock, I swam down to the bottom and stood there weeping, until I realized exactly what I was doing. Although even then I knew it was foolishness, it felt like my mother had passed her Exaltation on to me. Like her, the Immaculate Dragons had selected me for a life of service and glory. Even amidst my grief, I felt more alive than I ever had before. Worried that Vakacis and my slave would think me dead, I swam up to the servants and announced my new state and went home to help make funeral arrangements.

After the funeral, I rarely saw my father. He retreated further into his work and seldom had time for me. Instead, there was much study at home and new classes when I went back to school. Naturally, I associated mostly with the other Dragon-Blooded at the school—and especially with those few who also hoped to attend the House of Bells.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

The path of my life was crystal clear, study at the House of Bells, followed by a life of service in the imperial navy. My mother and her grandmother had both done this, and so would I. I started there when I was 15. It was hard, but I already knew that would be the case—mother had told me of the time she broke both her left arm and her right leg in a training duel and then continued to fight until she won. I allowed her tales to inspire me and, therefore, was prepared to attend a school where more than one in 100 students die before they graduate.

Magistrates, politicians and scholars occasionally talk about how brutal the House of Bells is to its students, and periodically, some parent complains about the injuries her child received. What none who have not faced battle realize is how vitally necessary this discipline is. We are not training to sit behind desks or to sip tea and engage in complex and poisonous discussions with our rivals. We are the people charged with protecting the Scarlet Empire with our lives and the lives of those who serve under us. There is no place for weakness or fear in anyone doing this.

I still vividly remember the first time that I saw someone die. We regularly had mock naval battles—the

ships were deliberately weakened, and the waters were shallow, but these were actual naval battles. Small galleys fired padded ballista bolts at one another and used their rams to strip each other of oars, before one side boarded another and battles were fought with padded wooden weapons. I was with the second-year students on a galley, where we were fighting the third-year students. Everyone expected us to lose—this was only my team's second battle. We had already lost many of our oars, and our ship was far too slow. The other team was closing in to ram. I awaited the sickening crunch of wood and the harsh blows from their barely padded swords.

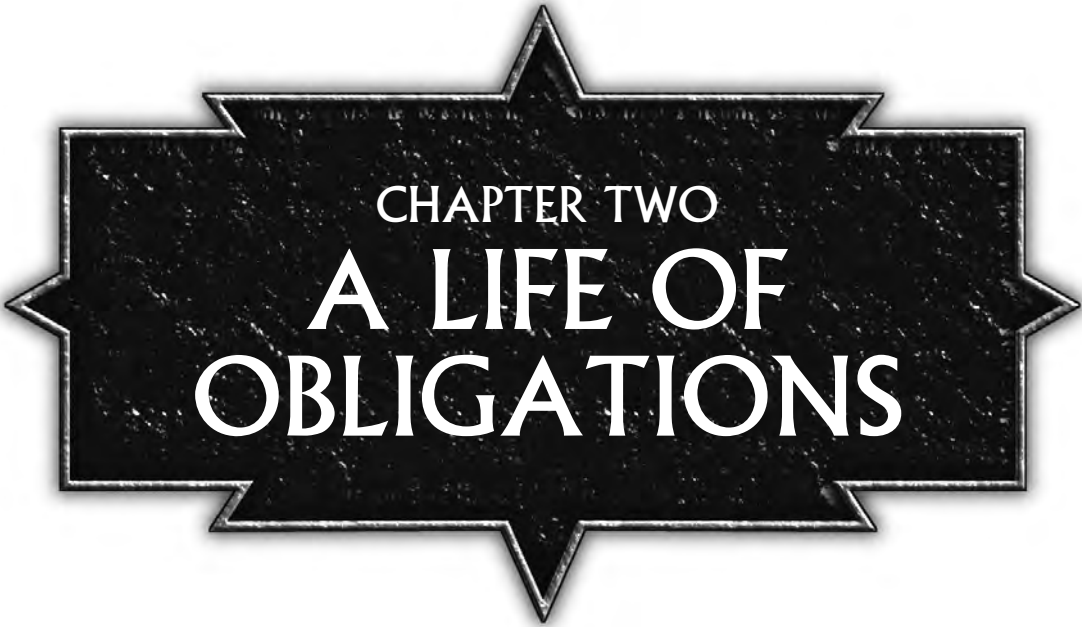
We all stood frozen, except for one short and squat cadet we often referred to as Stump. I am both pleased and saddened to remember that he was also a Water Aspect but have forgotten his real name. He wasn't the brightest student, and the rest of us frequently teased him, so he was determined to prove himself today. He was incredibly strong and knew Charms that enhanced his strength even further. At the last moment, before the other ship hit, he jumped up, held onto the gunwales, and quite literally kicked the ram. It was metal and far too tough for him to break, but he pushed with sufficient force that both ships pivoted slightly. The other vessel came alongside our own, rather than breaking our ship in two. For an instant, we cheered, and then all sound stopped. Stump had clearly planned to jump or fall into the water afterward, where he could swim as well as a fish and might even stand a chance of boarding the other vessel. Unfortunately, he miscalculated. Instead of falling free after he kicked the other galley, his body was mashed between the two ships like olives in a press. Both sides were stunned for a moment, but I was not about to let his sacrifice be in vain. I gave our battle cry, and we stormed the other galley. We were victorious that day, and that night, we all drank many toasts to Stump. As befits a Water Aspect, we buried him at sea.

He had the heart of a warrior, he knew his duty, and he sacrificed his life to help his comrades. I suppose that is the best that any of us can be asked to do. I hope to live to a ripe old age, but as long as I stand before the mast, I know that I may someday be called to make the same sacrifice. It's best to live through a battle, but if the Immaculate Dragons decree that it is my time to die, I wish to go out a hero.





Shane '04



CHAPTER TWO A LIFE OF OBLIGATIONS



Water can erode or find away around any obstacle. Likewise, Water Aspects excel both in determination and in their ability to find ways to resolve any difficulty. They usually combine extreme flexibility with an unusual degree of devotion to the people and causes that they hold dear. As a result, Water Aspects can be exceptionally useful and steadfast servants of the Realm. Like all Dynasts, they lead lives of service and devotion, but many find unusual and especially vital roles to fulfill. They may not always be in the spotlight, but the subtle and determined efforts of the many Aspects of Water are essential to keeping the Realm safe and strong. Those Exalts born outside the Realm use these same qualities for other purposes. However, all Water-Aspected Dragon-Blooded are exceptionally skilled at working with others and helping their comrades do their best.

PELEPS JAPHEN

I did not know what to expect after I completed my schooling at the Heptagram. My entire life up until that point had been defined by education, and suddenly, that was finished. Of course, I knew what was expected of me from my house: I was to find employment in some out of the way place or perhaps spend a few years stretching my legs in the Threshold. Since I was never very adventurous in any sense of the word, I resolved to examine my options for employment and service to the Realm. First, however, I

would return to Arjuf to see Nellens Baeden and perhaps even take a short holiday in An-Teng, for I had been far too young during my first visit to enjoy the truly sumptuous pleasures of that place. As would happen many times in my life, fate intervened, and my plans were made for me.

It was my third day in Chanos following my commencement ceremony at the Heptagram. Each of my parents had sent representatives to the academy to witness the ceremony and congratulate me. They even showered me with gifts and jade and sent a bodyguard of 100 soldiers to see me home. That they each did so individually, without consultation with the other as to which one of our Manses qualified as “home” and hired men from firmly established rival companies was all neither surprising nor amusing. I had hoped that my training as a sorcerer would have soured my parents enough on me that neither would want to use me as a pawn against the other any longer. Of course, I was wrong, and their newfound adoration was more troublesome than their (at best) apathy. It was less painful to me, though that might be more a function of my own maturation than a softening of their ways toward me. Nonetheless, I was trapped between the two. Were I to leave Chanos with one company or the other, assuming they did not come to blows over who was to escort me where, I would be slighting one or the other of my parents, which would be a victory for the other and most assuredly a defeat for me.

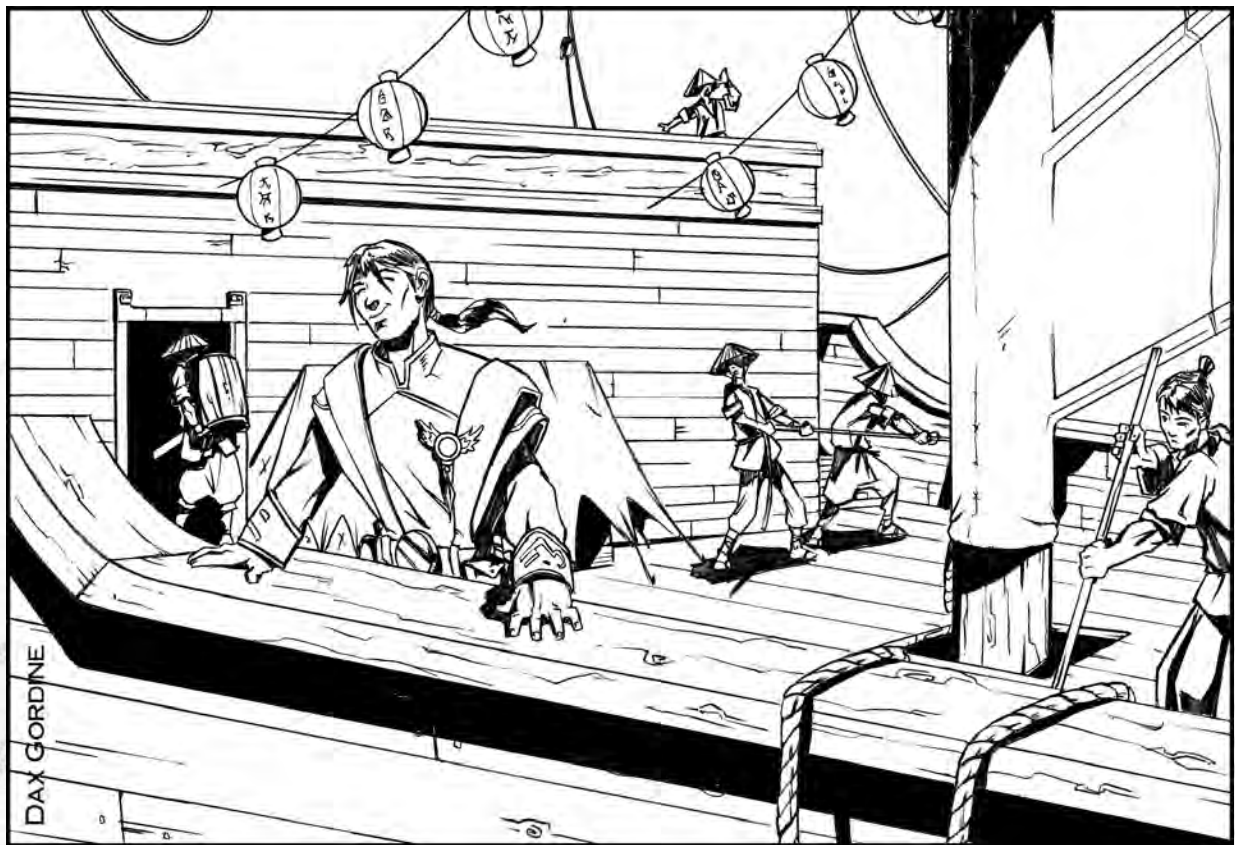
I once again had Nellens Baeden to thank for saving me that day. While I was listening to the two guard captains argue heatedly over dinner, a messenger for the imperial navy found me and delivered to me my orders. At the command of Peleps Eralin, Admiral of the Earth Fleet, I was to remain in Chanos for 13 more days until the First Age light warship *Wave-Cutting Wind-Racing Saber* arrived in port, at which time I was to report to her captain for assignment as a young officer in the imperial navy. Peleps Eralin, who I knew of but had never met, was known as “the Sea Witch” and was among the few politically powerful sorcerers in our house. Some months later, when I finally managed to make my way to Arjuf during a patrol and earned enough time to have dinner with Nellens Baeden, I learned how these orders came to be.

As a sorcerer herself, Peleps Eralin held a special place in her heart for Peleps sorcerers and, indeed, all Water Aspects who choose to turn their gifts to commanding the sea. Nellens Baeden, when he was young, found himself in the position of midshipman to Peleps Eralin. Though the two never became friends, she respected him and found him to be a skilled sailor and sorcerer. Baeden saw the same thing in me, I suppose, when I Exalted on his ship, and he pulled what few strings he could to get me accepted to the Heptagram and then made Peleps Eralin aware of my existence, before my parents turned me into a piece in their never-ending game of Gateway. The admiral, who I

have heard was no fan of my parents’ households and had, in fact, urged Peleps Febaris to have them banished to the Threshold rather than joined, desired to see me made useful to both House Peleps and the Realm and expedited my assignment to the Earth Fleet. It was some strange luck, but I had no reason to fight this fate.

I am a sailor. Each day, I wake to sound of the sails snapping in the breeze, and each night, I fall asleep to the sound of waves lapping against the hull. While I am an Exalt of a Great House and a sorcerer to boot, I am not spared even the most mundane tasks of a sailor. My captain, Ragara Oord, believes that even the highest officer should understand the skills of the lowliest swab, and I cannot say I disagree. How can one direct a man’s work if one does not understand what it is that man does? For the first time in my life, I have strength in my back and arms as well as my mind, and my skin is a shade of brown I have only ever seen on the skin of a sailor. My hands are callused, and I smell of the open ocean even when my anima is not flaring. Strangely, I find this life good and find the work of drawing sails and driving rowers rewarding.

Yet, I am still a sorcerer. For every hour I am on the deck working with or observing the crew and my officers, I am below in my cabin for two hours. None of the other young officers have their own cabin — and once again I feel as if my peers are jealous and even a little fearful of me — but mine is my laboratory and library as well as my



quarters. This ship is a wonder to behold, but it takes a great deal of care to keep it running. My primary responsibilities are as assistant to the master thaumaturge. That leaves me little time for pursuing my own interests, but the remnants of the First Age are so fascinating I hardly notice. Every day, as understand more about her and uncover her secrets, I think of the *Wave-Cutting Wind-Racing Saber* more and more as mine.

I have seen my friend Nellens Baeden once since I have joined the imperial navy, and we write one another regularly. When the time and energy can be spared, we trade infallible messengers. I owe so much to this man who has no reason to have ever helped me, who has no stake in my future and who is not part of my house. We do not share a love of the sea or even a life of sorcery, for he gave me those things and so, if anything, he shared them with me. All we truly share is the blessing of Daana'd. Nonetheless, it seems enough. Our letters are never too long or too short, and they never taper off into things best left unsaid. I find him intriguing, not only for what he has done for me, but for his keen mind and unusual skill as a sorcerer. It will be many years, if ever, before I can choose my own path in this life, but once I can, I think I will choose a path that meets Nellens Baeden's.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I must admit that I am not very devout. For most of my life, books of lore dating back to the Shogunate have been my Immaculate Texts, and the words of instructors have been the sermons on which I have reflected. This is not heresy, but simple truth: I am a Prince of the Earth and a scion of Daana'd, but neither of those things has brought me the love and acceptance of my parents or standing in my house. What has made me significant is my intelligence, knowledge and skill, and so, it is those things that I hold dear to my heart where other people keep that thing called faith. I do contemplate at the shrine and do give due homage to the Immaculate Dragons, the gods of my house and the spirits of the sea, each as they are accorded in their right, but none of these actions bolsters my spirit as perfectly as translating an esoteric dialect of the tongue of the Old Realm, as comprehending a piece of my ship that I had previously been confounded by or as mastering a new spell.

I humbly hope Daana'd approves.

ROMANTIC LIFE

Never in all my youth did I ever experience the love of a woman. Prior to my Exaltation, I was too young and had nothing to offer even the most base of partners save some family wealth. After, I was always too busy with my studies. Certainly, I experimented on occasion, but I was never part of the groups and never attended the kinds of gatherings that lend themselves well to youthful exploration

of sexuality. The first time I saw a woman naked was during a particular ceremony in the summoning room of the Heptagram, and since I myself was unclothed and quite frightened, it was not the most erotic of circumstances.

After joining the imperial navy as a young officer, I became quite clear to me that I would not last long as a virgin. I did not intend to, though I had hoped to visit An-Teng and be stripped of my naiveté appropriately. Instead, I settled for a very reputable brothel in Noble where a beautiful mortal woman relieved me of my apprehension, my inexperience and a relatively large amount of my jade. Like all young men who lose their virginity under such circumstances, I fell instantly in love with her and showered her with gifts and promises. We were three days out of port before I came to my senses and sent a message to cancel the order for custom jewelry I had made before leaving.


Since then, I have learned to enjoy such encounters for what they are. Occasionally, even I, with my overly large ears and my inability to look a beautiful woman in the eye unless I am talking to her about the variations in the pronunciation of spells from the First Age versus the Shogunate, am propositioned without the expectation of payment. I have been warned a number of times against this. Love is for mortals, my peers tell me, and one day, I will be married off to one household or another. In the meantime, those women who pretend to adore me, they say, seek a great number of things, but none of them can be freely given by a Prince of the Earth. Whether she is a simple village girl or a patrician's lovely daughter, she is not offering herself freely, even if she believes herself to be. I sadly accept their views on this because I am not experienced enough to know otherwise. Better to rent it now, they say, than to force your house to buy it later.

RANYA PETRIS

While the Dragon-Bloods of the Realm rarely venture into the Far North, I have met a few, and they often talk about duty and service. I was exiled from my homeland simply for being what I was, and I owe nothing and no one for my Exaltation. My only duty is to myself and to those who choose to follow me. Anything else I do, I do either because I want to or because I value the reward that comes from doing it more than the risk or difficulty involved. After I had been with the *Jade Condor* for three years, I was both an excellent air sailor and the chief cargo master. I accompanied the captain on all trading negotiations. One of these eventually resulted in me being given by own air boat.

We were in the Haslanti city of Icehome, selling silks and decorative woods we had picked up from traders in Whitewall. During a pause in the negotiations, the local factor and her assistant walked over to the rack of glowing metal warming tongs to reheat their wine and discuss our offer. I looked around the tavern





and noticed three unusually furtive people in the back corner. I was especially curious since two of them seemed to be icewalkers — these barbarians are rarely anything other than brash and bold. After we concluded our negotiations to everyone's mutual satisfaction, I asked the captain if I could stay behind in the tavern for a while. I watched the trio for the next hour and listened to their conversation with increasing interest. Certain that they had no clue that I was watching, I decided to move closer. It was clear that they were plotting something, but I had no idea what.

They were somewhat clever and only talked in really general terms. To find out more, I had to follow them out of the tavern. My practice in walking along the narrow and delicate spars of the *Jade Condor* paid off — I ghosted after them as quiet as the snow blowing under my feet. Eventually, I came to the house of the local merchant who was talking with the two icewalkers. Listening through the wall gave me the whole story — the pair in heavy furs were not icewalkers, but Wyld barbarians plotting an attack on a Guild caravan that would soon be leaving by iceship. The loss of the caravan would drive up the price of the locally harvested medicines the merchant had been hoarding, while the Wyld barbarians would gain great plunder from the ship. Both sides would benefit, and they were negotiating eagerly. In addition to providing exact details of the route, the merchant had also blackmailed the cook, who would put opium in the guards' food shortly before the attack.

Young as I was, I had seen enough of the Guild to know what their wrath could be like if they discovered a wealthy merchant plotting against them. After I had heard enough, I went to an assistant oligarch that Captain Jellik had once talked with at a party. She agreed to see me, and I explained in the most general terms what I knew and waited for her offer. I told her that I loved the freedom of the skies and wished to have my own air boat. After a long talk, she agreed... after I mentioned that her own interests were directly involved.

I later heard that the now-warned caravan guards remained undrugged and drove off the Wyld barbarians and that aerial scouts managed to track the surviving raiders back to their caves and eventually slew the whole foul nest. None of that mattered to me. I had my own ship and had made a fair deal to obtain it. Within two months, it was ready, and I had a crew to serve under me. None of them seemed to care how young I was. Duty to my crew and to myself is all that I care about. Everything else is about seeking enjoyment, gaining advantage or, hopefully, both.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Growing up, the priests of Gethamane seemed pretty creepy, and the fact that they effectively threw me out of my home after I took the Second Breath didn't help my

opinion of them much. Since then, I've been pretty skeptical of any religion. The Immaculate Philosophy looks to me like nothing more than an elaborate con used by the Dynasts to justify their rule. It's a really sweet con, but I can't see it actually being true. The same holds for all of the various spirit cults I've seen. I'm not questioning that there are spirits out there that could turn me into a grease spot in half a second, but I've also noticed that all of the spirit cults I've heard of conveniently place the particular spirit that runs the cult at the top of the heap. When it comes to religion, it looks to me like everyone is running a con. The whole basis of this con seems to be finding ways to convince people that whoever is in charge of the cult deserves to be in charge and to get a good quantity of wealth and obedience from the worshipers.

I'll admit, it's a pretty sweet racket if you can make it work, but it's not really my sort of thing, especially if I'm not going to be one of the people being worshiped. I also don't have the patience to be a priest or a cult leader. As best as I can figure, every last one of the Fair Folk, gods, Exalts, undead and mortals in Creation are all out for what they can get. Some want jade or silver, while others want prayers, blood or souls. Regardless of what anyone wants, the methods they use are mostly the same. Religion seems to be one of the best ways of making things happen.

As for myself, I'm a bit partial to the Haslanti faith in dreams. I don't waste my time worshiping dream spirits, but dreams often contain important messages, and I'm always eager for any heads-up about something that might happen soon. I've also managed to meet a few dream diviners who seem like honest folk who are just doing their best without any angle. Sure, they want to get paid, but they don't lie or make up stories about how a dream about herding sheep means you're certain to end up being the new Scarlet Empress. My crew occasionally looks at me oddly when I make an important decision based solely upon a dream, but such decisions have been right more often than they have been wrong, and we manage to keep our air boat flying, so the men rarely complain.

ROMANCE

One of many reasons I've no interest in being part of the Realm is that I also don't have any interest in being anyone's brood mare. It makes sense that if the Dynasts want Dragon-Bloods to run everything, they need as many of us as possible. They can count me out of that equation though. I don't have the time or the inclination to have children, and I could care less if the number of Dragon-Bloods in the world goes up or down. I may want to settle down and have a family some day, but I'm going to live a damn long time, and I'm in no hurry to give up the life of the air. These days, I spend the night with whoever catches my fancy and always make certain to keep some maiden tea on hand. I'm also not looking for deathless romance. I've

seen the messes that happen when a captain hooks up with someone in her crew, so that's out, and I'm in the air too much and on too crazy a schedule to keep in touch with anyone on the ground. So long as there are young and pretty men in every city I visit, I'm happy to leave romance to the performers who sing songs about it.

RAGARA TAKAR

It's far too easy to be an idealist when all you have seen is life in Lord's Crossing or Juche. As long as you avoid the snake pit that is politics in the Imperial City, life on the Blessed Isle mostly lives up to its name, at least if you don't look too closely. We keep the troubles at bay, the merchants and other business people are generally prosperous, and even the poor mostly have enough to eat. When you are trained to think of this as the most glorious place in the world and grow up knowing in your bones that protecting it is the greatest task in the world, every day is a new opportunity for duty, excitement and heroism. Even today, when I go back to visit Lord's Crossing, I regularly meet younger Dynasts, and even a few almost as old as I am, who still feel this way. I suppose that such attitudes mean that I'm doing my job correctly.

Shortly after I completed my training at the Spiral Academy, I was offered a position as a junior auditor in the Humble and Honest Assessors of the Imperial Tax and was exceptionally pleased to receive a posting in the Imperial City. With my contacts in Scarlet Orchid and my own moderate skill at noticing small discrepancies in complex records, I was filled with a need to root out all manner of corruption and make certain that everyone gave their due. Naturally, this proved to be impossible. In the course of my investigations into the practice of paying taxes in the form of military artifacts, I uncovered evidence of serious misappropriations of said artifacts. The fact that I learned of these dealings was not to the liking of several very powerful people. I suspect that only the prominence of my own family, combined with my membership in Scarlet Orchid, saved my life. At this point, my superiors indicated to me that my place was outside the Imperial City.

Instead of settling for a lesser position in another city on the Blessed Isle, I left the tax collectors and used my contact in Scarlet Orchid to obtain a minor position in the Foreign Office. I ignored the haunted looks of the older veterans of the Threshold and eagerly volunteered for a posting in the South. If I could not reform the Realm from within, at least I could do my best to keep it safe from external threats. Although I was ostensibly a mid-level bureaucrat who specialized in trade and commerce records, my position in Scarlet Orchid meant that I was part of a small, secret network that underlies the vast numbers of clerks and administrators who form the immense and slow Imperial Bureaucracy. We keep track of unusual events,

we report patterns that we see, and when necessary, we directly investigate and solve problems.

Although I have occasionally worked with agents of the All-Seeing Eye, I am not one of them. I do not go around performing assassinations or stealing valuable artifacts. My own duties are normally far less exciting, but I have ordered a few assassinations and, occasionally, broken into locked rooms and slipped my hand into warded document cases to examine their contents.

My first posting was as a trade negotiator in the Varang City-States. I was stationed in Talt, the Varangian trade city that borders the Southeast. Although the Varangians are allies of the Realm, their land is an especially complex and deadly place for visitors. Because most Varangians expect all outsiders to be thieves and spies, or at least somewhat disreputable individuals, people who actually fit these descriptions flock to the Varang City-States in surprising numbers. As a result, minor troubles are common there, and their border cities are often places where visitors can safely exchange almost any goods with one another. As long as outsiders keep their business inside the Foreign Quarter, Varangian officials have no interest in their dealings.

My first major assignment started with someone dying unexpectedly. The Varangian authorities found a local thief dead in his apartment. Next to him was a pipe that seemed to be filled with high-grade opium. Nothing terribly important, and certainly nothing that would ever reach the ears of foreign clerks, except that, after they examined both his body and the pipe, the locals realized that the opium actually contained a large amount of crack cocaine and that smoking such a large amount of this is what killed the thief. Knowing that the cocaine must have come from elsewhere and that someone was clearly smuggling it, the local guard captain came to the Imperial Trade Embassy to ask for our assistance. Having some moderate familiarity with the drug trade, I offered to help. I looked at the site and discovered something the Varangians had overlooked, the mostly burned remains of a package in the thief's fireplace, a package that had clearly contained the opium and that was made in the East, likely in the lands just to the east of Harborhead. This last finding impressed the guard captain, who then allowed me to examine their records. We kept track of the comings and going of all Guild caravans, and the Guild was at the heart of most of the Threshold's drug trade. After cross checking the Varang records with our own, I was left with only three possibilities for who might have brought this disguised crack cocaine into the city.

Thankfully, the guard captain brought me along to take a look at the three warehouses of the factors in question. Some careful examination easily allowed me to identify which warehouse the foreign trader was using. Then, a discreet look at the records stored there,





combined with a careful search of the area around where the shipment containing the crack cocaine was stored, told me the entire story. The details of handwriting unique to Paragon served to prove what I already suspected. This altered opium was not being sold in the Varang City-States — the Guild was transporting it through Varangia to Chiaroscuro, where it would be secretly sold to the opium-addicted glass workers. The Guild was now taking part in the ongoing trade war between Paragon and Chiaroscuro.

While the Perfect of Paragon was a foul and dangerous ally, he was still more loyal to the Realm than the Tri-Khan of Chiaroscuro. Therefore, the Realm had an interest in allowing these shipments to go through. A word to the guard captain convinced him that these shipments were also in Varangia's best interest — or, more specifically, that keeping the imperial delegation happy was in

Varangia's best interest. The end result was that the warehouse acquired a few exceedingly discreet local guards who prevented similar thefts and that a significant proportion of Chiaroscuro's glass workers later experienced painful and debilitating crack-cocaine withdrawal, noticeably cutting Chiaroscuro's glass production for the next two seasons.

ON DUTY

The most important thing for any Dynast to remember is that we live in the ruins of a broken world. This has been true since the Contagion, but it didn't start becoming clear to the less observant until the Scarlet Empress vanished, the Anathema returned and the Deathlords began to expand their influence. We are taught that we are the noble overlords of Creation — that's a pleasant lie. We exist solely to hold back the forces that would destroy everything. There is no hint of nobility in this and no glory to be had. We can never truly win — the most we can do is hold the line against the monsters. If we win, the Blessed Isle and the rest of Creation survives for another day. If we fail, the tides of chaos or the hordes of the undead consume everything. Every year we hold

them back is a victory, and it no longer matters to me how we gain those victories.

The hardest thing I ever had to do to preserve this safety happened 80 years ago, when I was still relatively new at this job and retained some of the naïve idealism of my youth. A rogue god had begun to collect a following of mercenaries, thaumaturges, outcaste Terrestrial Exalted and even a few of the lesser Fair Folk. It had a hidden port cloaked with potent magics and had begun to attack an increasing number of ships headed to or from Chiaroscuro, Yane and Paragon. This fell thing also had more ambition than sense, and a group of sailors who were occasional pirates told of how it was attempting to make a deal with the Deathlord Eye and Seven Despairs. If that happened, then the god might well send vast armies of elementals, demons and the undead to conquer the Southlands. This god, known as Ibis Walker, could rip memories from the

minds of anyone it captured. I knew this story to be true because it had once returned to me the drooling remains of two of my agents. As Ibis Walker's fleet began to grow, I crafted a desperate and terrible plan.

At the time, I had a young assistant, Peleps Jera, recently graduated from training. She was my cousin Apek's granddaughter and a fine young Fire Aspect. She was exactly the sort of messenger who Ibis Walker would utterly believe. Everyone knows that we do not betray our own and that no one would sacrifice such a promising young Dynast. And yet, because the need was great and I could see no other way, that is exactly what I did.

When I obtained a report of an upcoming attack by a group of the god's deadliest raiders, I gave Jera a supposedly vital message that I fabricated on the spot — it concerned a new alliance between us and Eye and Seven Despairs against Ibis Walker and how we were helping the Deathlord betray and ambush Ibis Walker. Then, I sent Jera, the message and a talon of elite mortal marines equipped with the finest weapons on a fast but lightly armed ship with instructions to carry this reply to Eye and Seven Despairs and to assist him with the plans for the ambush. I sent this near-child and some of our finest marines directly into the path of the raiders and even arranged for one of my contacts to let the fleet know when the ship was sailing.

The plan worked perfectly. The pirates captured the entire crew, and while Jera destroyed the message as ordered, Ibis Walker pulled the contents from her mind. Meanwhile, I informed the Deathlord how easily I had fooled his would-be ally and then bribed him with a First Age cache of soulsteel weapons. In return for this, the Deathlord sent a force of ghosts and zombies to meet the attack the god launched on Cold House. My own forces struck after Ibis Walker's army was almost destroyed by this legion of the undead. I recovered Jera's still-living but mindless husk and gave it a clean death. I will regret what I did to the end of my life, but I would also do it again in a heartbeat. When the alternative is ruined cities filled with ravaged husks or zombies, there is no price too great. We sell our souls and our honor so that the Realm can remain safe for another year. That is the true meaning of duty.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I grew up certain of the truth of the Immaculate Philosophy. Children, peasants and those who have never truly seen the world as it is can all easily cling to such beliefs. These days, I cannot. We live in a fallen era. I have spent time with the old texts, and they are all very clear. Once, gods, Exalts and mortals lived in perfect harmony. Then, the Anathema went mad and almost destroyed the world. The highest gods turned their back on Creation, and it was left to the Dragon-Blooded to slay the beings who had been our just and god-given rulers. In doing so, we shattered an already broken world. The Contagion was only a symptom of this shattering.

We live in a debased era because we destroyed the previous order. In its place, our ancestors attempted to build a new and artificial government and to claim that it is righteous and just. It is clearly neither. Creation is continuously threatened from all directions, we must regularly betray our ideals to preserve the Realm, and the highest gods remain silent and uncaring. I am even told that Heaven itself lies partially in ruins.

While I mime and ape the appropriate ceremonies of the Immaculate Philosophy, I do not worship the Immaculate Dragons because I do not believe that we should honor any gods, spirits or other inhuman beings. In these dark days, they seek only to advance their causes and care nothing for either us or mortals except as pawns and sources of prayer. We must naturally deal with these beings, but we should never follow them or defer to their wishes.


Nevertheless, the Immaculate Philosophy remains exceedingly useful. It is nothing more than a justification for what must be if Creation is to survive. We are the pinnacle of development simply because we are the only Exalts who have avoided madness. This ruin is also not limited solely to the mortal world. With Heaven in disorder, only beings powerful enough to survive the gods' coercion and treachery can safely deal with any spirits. Anyone who observes life in the Threshold can clearly see the horrors that result when cruel and inhuman spirits rule mortals. We use the Immaculate Philosophy to justify our rule and to prevent Creation from falling into the hands of malevolent spirits or mad Anathema. However, as is blatantly obvious to anyone who studies the conveniently forbidden texts, the Immaculate Philosophy is nothing more than a series of useful lies.

One of the harder truths about this Age is that such lies are vitally important. While Creation is fallen and debased, the Realm still stands, and even in the Threshold, most mortals live free from the threats represented by the Wyld, the dead and the Anathema. Anything that we can do to prevent the world from falling further into chaos and ruin is both essential and good, and so, we tell the mortals pretty lies because the truth is very hard to bear. While I have not believed any shred of the Immaculate Philosophy for well over a century, I wholeheartedly support it, and I have learned to sound appropriately reverent when I speak of it. The only truly important goal is the preservation of Creation against its enemies, and any tool that helps us do that is a good one.

ROMANTIC LIFE

I have been told that I have failed in my duty to the Realm because I have never married. All Dynasts are supposed to produce children to allow our glorious race to continue to protect Creation. I respectfully but completely disagree with this position. My duties make me a completely unsuitable husband and an especially poor choice as a father. While a certain amount of distance is only





proper between spouses, and even more is correct between parents and children, my own work is sometimes so remarkably delicate that there are entire seasons where I could literally say nothing about it without compromising the safety of the Realm. Also, while I am merely a senior clerk, I have made a significant number of enemies. Anyone known to be close to me risks being threatened or kidnaped and then used against me and against the Realm.

While I would trust that any Exalt I married could protect herself from most such threats, the fact that I might also be forced to choose the security of the Realm even if it meant my wife's certain death is hardly grounds for a harmonious marriage. I would do the same thing if any child of mine was threatened, and so, I am a completely unacceptable choice as father. In the course of my duties, I have been threatened countless times and kidnaped once — I simply cannot in good conscience place others in such a vulnerable position. I understand that my decisions will limit my advancement, but I am determined to place no one else at risk for my decisions. As a patriot and a member of Scarlet Orchid, I am forced to make decisions that anger both the enemies of the Realm and powerful people on the Blessed Isle, and I will not have anyone I am close to fall prey to either foreign assassins or, more likely, the disgrace of being arrested and facing either death or exile from the Realm.

And yet, I owe a duty to the Realm and to my family to pass upon my bloodline. Thankfully, my skill at analyzing paperwork proved to be just as useful for my own purposes as it has while serving the Realm. During a half year posting back to the Realm after a rather unfortunate incident at Great Forks that meant that I would not be welcome in the River Province for several decades, I had time to meet a great many women from various patrician families associated with my house. From among them, I found four well-born mortal women who were interested in having the children of a Dynast. Although the offspring of these unions are not legally my children, they have full status in my own house. I have never seen them, but I now have five children and am told that two of them drew the Second Breath.

PELEPS DELED

TEMPORAL LIFE

Deham and I arrived at the Palace Sublime on the fourth day following my 20th birthday. "This is as far as I can take you," he said to me. "From here, the journey is yours to take." He left me kneeling in the yard of the Palace, waiting for one of the monks to bring me the gray robes of a postulant. If Deham used his influence in the Order to ease my path to the Paragon of Sextes Jylis, there was no evidence of it, and indeed, Deham must have had much less influence in the Order than I imagined.

I waited in the yard for three days. Monks and other postulants walked past me, never seeming to notice me even when they might have stepped on my hand had I not

snatched it from underfoot. They brought me no food and no water, but I endured, and I waited. Finally, on the dawn of my fourth day of waiting, an elderly monk, obviously a mortal, brought me stewed chicken, rice and wine. After I had eaten, she took my embroidered silk robes and replaced them with the coarse gray woolen ones of a postulant. I had taken my first step on the path to righteousness.

For seven weeks, I endured as a mere postulant, suffering under the watch of the old woman called Falling Blossom, a name I am sure she must have been graced with in her later years. I could tell that she was once very beautiful, and I think I saw in her sharp features and tall brow the blood of House Cynis, though I cannot be certain. In either case, the loss of her beauty had made her bitter, and she ordered us postulants around like dogs, cuffing our ears and caning the backs of our knees with glee. She seemed to take great pleasure in abusing me, interrupting me as I explained the correct reading of the Immaculate Texts to postulants who did not have the benefit of a close relation in the Order or forcing me to eat a bowl of pig fat when I refused meat with my dinner. Despite this abuse, I endured. After seven weeks, her excuses and assignments must have worn thin, for I was finally brought forward to see the Paragon.

I expected a lengthy test of some sort, an examination of my physical and spiritual readiness to become a monk of the Immaculate Order. No such test came. The Paragon only asked me three questions:

"From whence does Essence flow?" he asked.

"From the Immaculate Dragons," I answered.

"To where does Essence flow?" he asked.

"Toward enlightenment," I answered.

"Through what does Essence flow?" he asked.

"Through me," I answered.

With these three answers, I was accepted as a monk in the Immaculate Order, and from that point forward, I had no secular life.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

The next day, I awoke on a bamboo mat in the barracks of the Palace Sublime, where I would spend the next decade honing my already strong sense of truth and righteousness. In meditation and contemplation, through labor and exercise and under the guidance of both monks and secular instructors, I learned the art of controlling my own Essence and becoming one with the Dragon within me. Of all our tasks, it was in the martial arts that I excelled and surpassed even my other Exalted peers. And it was in the martial arts that I found my most contemplative moments: the cutting of my hand through the air, the blocking of strikes before I was consciously aware of them, the feeling of breaking wood, stone and bone beneath my hands and feet. All of these things had secret truths hidden within them, and all I had to do to examine them was to visit often.

Every day brought me closer to perfection, until, finally, I had reached the end. I felt I could learn nothing else in the Palace. Only upon my release, perhaps as an Itinerant or perhaps merely en route, would I be able to surpass my own pinnacle. When I spoke of my concerns, I was cautioned against pride — or worse. As I grew bored with the lessons and meditations I had already mastered, I became acutely aware of those who were considered my peers. There were many who possessed potential. Yet, few had achieved it. There were also many who had somehow managed to misinterpret the Immaculate Texts and voiced these blasphemes as if they were discussing the weather or the best route to Pangu. Of mortals, I could expect little more, though I did my best to educate them when I caught them doing so. But Exalted too, the spoiled scions of Great Houses who had been sent to the Paragon to be put out of the way, misspoke of the Texts and the Dragons. This I could neither believe nor brook. If my instructors would not silence such foolishness, I would do so myself.

But to chastise my “peers” would only invite more lessons in “humility.” I meditated long on this irony, until the answer came to while performing the most difficult of the Water Dragon katas. Our mastery of our own Essence in combat, our martial arts that bring us closer to the Immaculate Dragons, are the surest measure of our righteousness and enlightenment. So it was that I — still a “novice” in the eyes of my teachers — began using martial duels as a tool to teach those who would not hear my words. Should I prevail in any such duel, I could be assured of the righteousness I felt. Not even the masters of the Cloister could argue with this. I was never defeated.

It was only fitting that my ascension from student to true monk came swiftly upon the heels of such a victory. It was apparent to even the most decrepit and comfortable of the masters that the Palace could no longer contain me. Quite surprisingly, I was neither made an Itinerant nor was I sent away to some forsaken monastery on the jagged slopes of some Threshold wasteland. Instead, I was given over to the Wyld Hunt.


There could have been no more fitting fate for me.

I believed, or perhaps imagined, that the end of my time at the Palace Sublime would mean an end to my training. Such was not the case. It would be years before I joined my first foray on a Wyld Hunt and decades before I engaged my first recalcitrant spirit in combat. I was still young and naïve, for all my learning to this point had been from lectures and books. And though I had a deeper understanding of the Immaculate Philosophy than any of my peers and consummate skill with those martial techniques I had learned, there are truths that one can only discover after experiencing them first hand.

As I walked out of the gates of the Palace Sublime, I was greeted by Cathak Titus. I knew him by reputation: a loyal and competent officer of the legions who had been assigned to the Wyld Hunt. Upon seeing him, I immediately knew



Exalted



my destination. Cathak Titus was second to Mnemon Jorun, master of the Pinnacle of the Eye of the Hunt. The Pinnacle was the most well-established Threshold outpost of the Wyld Hunt, and for centuries, it had served as the base of operations for hunts into the North and East. Located in a rural satrapy northeast of Cherak, the Pinnacle was an Earth Manse dating back to the First Age, carved into the side of a towering cliff and accessible only by a winding stair of 10,000 steps or by air. It was an impressive posting, one suitable to my faith and skill.

My first impression of Cathak Titus was mixed. As I was newly assigned to the Pinnacle and he was Mnemon Jorun's second, he was my superior, and I accorded him all the respect due him. It was clear within the first few moments of speaking with him, however, that he was a soldier and nothing more. However skilled a combatant, however valiant a warrior and however sound a commander he was, he was still only interested in the military and political implications of his assignment to the Wyld Hunt. I respectfully expressed my concerns over the idea of a secular field commander for an obviously spiritual mission. He bristled and responded with a curt reminder that he was placed in his position by Mnemon Jorun and that I could take it up with him should it concern me so. I was pleased. From the outset, he knew my mind, and I knew his.

In Chanos, we met others on their way to the Pinnacle, including mortal servants and monks and a woman sorcerer of some sort who was never introduced to me, even over our long journey across sea and land. We arrived at the base of the cliff on which the Pinnacle set at dawn one month later. Cathak Titus and the sorceress mounted a floating basket, while I was left to lead the servants and monks up the stairs. This was pleasing to me, as it would give me time for contemplation prior to going before Mnemon Jorun. We were forced to stop frequently, despite my best efforts to drive the servants and monks at a quick pace. It was deep night by the time we finally reached the top of the stair. I quickly acquainted myself with the staff and had my company fed and sent to bed while I sought out Mnemon Jorun.

The master of the Pinnacle was awake and ready to receive me. After greeting me, he asked me to walk with him so that he could explain what was to happen to me in this place.

"The Pinnacle of the Eye of the Hunt is both an outpost and a monastery, Peleps Deled," he said. "Here, you will oversee the mortal monks, while at the same time undergoing training so that, when the time comes, you will be ready to face whatever enemies of the Realm we are set against. I will instruct you in ways of combating spirits and Anathema alike, while Cathak Titus will instruct you in battlefield tactics and leading men, skills which I doubt you had much time to study while in the Palace Sublime." He stopped suddenly and looked at me fiercely with his diamond eyes. "Here, there is no line between men of faith and men of war. Here, we are all brothers in arms against the horrors that threaten all of Creation. Do you understand?"

I did understand, even if I also disagreed. But it was not my place to question the master of the Pinnacle, and so, I took up my post and began my training under Mnemon Jorun and Cathak Titus.

Six years later, I rode from the Pinnacle on my first hunt. Cathak Titus led a scale of soldiers, and I was present only as an observer. I was to witness firsthand how the Wyld Hunt dealt with, in this case at least, a heretical cult. It occurred to me that the hunt would not normally involve itself in such a small-scale heresy — the cultists worshiped some ancestral warlord in a rural village of the Northeast — but Mnemon Jorun decided to let Cathak Titus deal with the situation, rather than summoning an Itinerant or going himself. I assume this was for my benefit, and if so, then Mnemon Jorun was more successful than he had intended.

The cult had made its "temple" in a shallow cave in the forest, where they dragged local virgins to be sacrificed to their rapist ancestor. Before our arrival, there had been no evidence to presume these were anything more than misguided savages splashing blood on stones in hopes gaining some small amount of luck. Numbering less than two dozen, the cult would have been little more than a brief exercise for Titus' soldiers as the majority would be slaughtered and the ringleaders arrested and publicly executed to discourage such activity. But as the scale swept through the forest and into the cave, cutting down the cults few sentries, I sensed something was amiss. My training as an Immaculate grants me insight into the world of spirits, and I knew almost immediately that there was, indeed, a real spirit here — and a dangerous one. Cathak Titus, despite his misgivings of my presence on this mission, saw my face and knew to expect trouble. It was too late for those legionnaires that had already charged into the cave. Their broken, flesh stripped bodies were flung at the rest of us from the cave opening. Cathak ordered ranks formed behind him, to deal with any assault by the remaining cultists, but stood ahead with me.

The savage spirit, a small god of bile and venom left sleeping since the Contagion that the cultists had so foolishly awoken with their sacrifices, flowed out of the cave opening while the dead cultists within shambled out as animated corpses. Among the first Charms taught in the Palace Sublime is the ability to see and touch dematerialized spirits. Mnemon Jorun made certain all his Exalted followers knew these skills, and so, Cathak Titus and I attacked the mad godling in unison while the legionnaires chopped the wailing corpses to pieces. The spirit was a vicious and canny fighter, but against the two of us, it could not last. In the end, it was Titus who struck the finishing blow and sent it back to tortured slumber. Though we had lost a fang, we had eradicated the cult and dealt with a hungry spirit.

Cathak Titus and I did not like one another any more after that day than before it, but our mutual respect grew. I saw his competence with my own eyes, and he knew that I was no contemplative monk.

The years and decades that followed brought more of the same. I continued to hone my skills under the tutelage of Mnemon Jorun and to expand my knowledge into the realm of war and tactics at the side of Cathak Titus. Other members of the Hunt came and went, often for single missions or for prescribed periods of time. As often as not, strangers to me, perhaps Itinerants or magistrates, would come and go under cover of cloak and darkness. The same sorceress who I had seen upon my initial arrival to the Pinnacle came at least once each year and stayed only a day or two. We were never introduced, and none among the servants or the Immaculates knew her name. All the while, I dug deeper into the Immaculate Texts and researched sources of wisdom forgotten since before the Contagion. I became increasingly aware of the heresy at the Realm's very doorstep and the enemies gathering against it. Each time we rode from the Pinnacle of the Eye of the Hunt, we scrubbed another such enemy from the face of Creation and brought the world intended by the Immaculate Dragons one step closer to realization. Sometimes, months and years would pass between significant forays into the Threshold, and I used this time to meditate and to train the mortal monks of Pinnacle. As time passed, the monks and legionnaires came into subtle conflict, as if emulating the debates and confrontations between myself and Cathak Titus. Though Mnemon Jorun frowned upon this and punished both monk and legion soldier accordingly, I was lenient: I thought it better the monks know the difference between service to the Realm and service to those who had made it.

I was only able to return home a few times in all those decades. Each visit I made was more brief than the last. House Peleps remained as it always had, more interested in politics than righteousness, and even Peleps Deham, who had taken over the Temple of Daana'd in the Imperial City and taught the children who schooled there, seemed to have placed secular matters above those of the Order when it came to House Peleps. Eventually, I discontinued my visits home altogether. Mnemon Jorun was growing older and would one day retire, and I had precious little time to learn what he could teach before I took his place. I never doubted this would occur, though I was always second to Cathak Titus, and he assumed he would take control of the Pinnacle. Had he simply asked, I could have explained it to him: The Pinnacle was a monastery and its mission was a holy one. How would a mere soldier bear such a heavy spiritual burden?

Mnemon Jorun did retire, two years after the disappearance of the Empress. Already we had felt the strain on our resources as fewer members, both Immaculate and secular, came to us, and when they did, they brought fewer artifacts from their houses. The mysterious sorceress ceased her annual visits as well, and Mnemon Jorun explained to me that our orders would come mostly by way of infallible messengers and the like. I was to expect no regular visits from the All-Seeing Eye, though there has been one inspection of my leadership in these last three years. Though I was

sorry to end my relationship with Mnemon Jorun, I was glad to have the opportunity to finally make full use of the Pinnacle to stamp out heresy, Fair Folk and Anathema.

That Cathak Titus could not find the humility to accept my leadership is not surprising, nor was the amount of support from his house that vanished with him. I still await his replacement. In the meantime, I continue the hunt.

ROMANTIC LIFE

I divested myself of the need for romantic love long ago. Such a thing is a temporal distraction, and however blissful it might seem, it merely clouds one's mind from the true desire of the soul: to achieve enlightened existence. This is not to say that I have never felt the pangs of desire or the inner turmoil of infatuation and lust.

In my earliest days as a monk, there was a woman who stirred within me feelings that conflicted with my piety. For a time, I entertained fantasies of midnight trysts and secret rendezvous, and we would trade small glances and hidden smiles while we ate, prayed and exercised. As time went on, we grew bolder, taking the time to speak at length to one another. First, we talked of our youth and the turns in our lives that brought us to the Immaculate Order. We would share our ambitions and dreams. Eventually, just as I felt I could no longer contain my desires, just as I thought that perhaps the touch of this woman's fiery skin against my own would be an equal trade for all the wisdom the Order had to offer, our affair was cut short by betrayal and heresy.

My love was chosen to walk with an Itinerant along the rural paths to visit and minister to the people that lived in the most wayward, poorest villages. She would be gone from the blossoming of the apple trees to the picking of their fruit. She despised her fate and wished to flee the monastery with me that night, to go live together as wanderers and lovers. "We could flee into the night," she said. "We could forget our lives here and make a new life together. We could forget the work and the prayers. We could forget the katas and the duties. We could forget the Texts and the Dragons, and we could be together."


In truth, however saddened I was, it was a kindness I did her. Had I reported her to our superiors, she would have been shamed before all of our peers, and her family would have been deeply marred by her heresy. As it was, I saved her the shame, and from that place in the meadow where we once stole moments from the Immaculate Dragons, her spirit would be free to seek out another life to become closer to them.

PELEPS ARAMIDA

ON DUTY

Something that many sailors forget about their officers is that life in the imperial navy is about service, regardless of whether you are a cabin boy on his first cruise or a fleet admiral who has been commanding ships for more than a century. Just as much as I give orders, I also follow them.





Various Charms and spells allow the admirals to instantly send me messages and to hear my responses — I am never completely out of touch and most certainly never on my own. Any captain who talks too much about being in charge of her own ship and her own destiny is either a traitor or a deserter or in imminent danger of becoming one. That's not to say that I don't have considerable flexibility in my actions, but that's equally true about my own orders to a midshipman or the lowliest marine. A good commander wants both obedience and reliable results, and ultimately, the second matters far more than the first. If the Skullstone fleet is defeated or if the deck is cleaned in time for the inspection, all is well, even if the captain or the deck hand used somewhat unorthodox means to achieve their ends.

I have a reputation for finding unusual solutions to problems, and at first, this raised a few eyebrows, but as long as I continue winning, the admirals will keep sending me out. My reputation started more than a century and a half ago, on my very first assignment. The Admiralty put me in command of the trireme *Resplendent Cloud* and assigned me to protect the outpost on Three Peak Island and to escort vessels to and from the port there. To put it bluntly, I was protecting a tiny piece of rock whose only point of interest were small stands of timber, several fresh water springs and a tiny imperially controlled port with one of the only large dry docks in the region. My first glorious assignment in the wondrous imperial navy was guarding a tiny, isolated repair depot populated by soldiers and shipwrights who had managed to annoy their superiors sufficiently to earn a posting there.

I later found out that the assignment of guarding this island was generally either given to older captains who had fallen from favor or to especially promising young captains. In addition to gaining far too much experience following endlessly repetitive orders, the Admiralty gave these captains a change to prove themselves by going up against the Azure Hook pirates who regularly attempted to raid the weapons depot in order to steal food, weapons and other supplies. Even if I had known all of this at the time, I would still have been far from happy to receive that remote and desolate posting. My first seven months there were a trial by boredom that I never hope to repeat. Then, the seasons changed, and the first of the pirate raids began. Thankfully, the Azure Hook pirates were like most pirates coming out of the Coral Archipelago, small barely organized bands of ill-disciplined freebooters. We were too far north to see much of the Lintha Family and even if we weren't, no one larger or better organized would care about this tiny outpost.

The first two raids were small and easy to drive away, but the third showed a surprising degree of cleverness. The pirates attacked when the *Resplendent Cloud* was out escorting a cargo ship to the dry docks. The ship had been damaged in a recent storm and was only moving at half speed. I first heard about the attack when Atarak, an Earth Aspect from Wavecrest who had joined the imperial navy as a ship-builder, used *Wind-Carried Words Technique* to call for help.

The navy had kept promising to improve the defenses on Three Peak's Harbor, but no one back on the Blessed Isle cared enough to send out any lightning ballistae to supplement the pair of light implosion bows and the catapults. As a result, the marines there could hold off the pirates for a while, but both Atarak and I knew that, unless the marines got in a few lucky shots, the pirates would overrun the island well before my ship returned. The *Cloud* had no chance of getting back in time without Charms, and I could also see another pirate ship on the horizon, waiting to attack the damaged cargo ship if we abandoned it to go defend the port. The pirates were confident that they would get some prey that afternoon, and it was up to me to decide between giving them the cargo ship or the port.

I wasn't any too eager to give up either one and decided to keep them both. We already had the cargo ship in tow, so it didn't take long to actually lash it to the *Cloud*. At that point, I called the winds and then used my Wind-Summoning Whistle and Storm-Outrunning Technique Charms to make both ships go even faster. I took the helm and had my second take command of the cargo vessel. Both ships almost broke apart from sailing at that speed while lashed together, but we arrived back many hours before the pirates expected us and just in time to cause them serious trouble.

All of their ships had mortals skilled in weather magics on board, so they could usually manage to get away. However, this time, I got one of their ships trapped between the *Resplendent Cloud* and shore. The other pirate vessels got away unharmed, but that day, I was the one who took a prize. That incident earned me some favor back home, but it also showed me that the pirates were getting bolder and that they were either in league with Exalts or gods or they had someone working at Three Peak Island's port. Otherwise, they would not have been able to get the timing on that attack so perfectly.

None of my orders suggested anything about actually hunting for the pirate's lair — I was clearly just supposed to be doing guard duty. Fortunately, nothing in my orders specifically forbade pirate hunting so long as the port was appropriately guarded. Now that I had a captured pirate ship armed with several sturdy catapults, I could do both. I had the vessel refitted to do minimal guard duty and then used the intelligence I had acquired from the captured pirates to outfit the crew of the *Cloud* appropriately. A few months before, I would have had to take the pirate vessel and risk being greatly outmatched by the rest of the small fleet. Fortunately, I had could now disguise my ship as another sort of vessel. The *Cloud* was easily a match for any three of their smaller ships and had sufficient powered weapons to destroy their base.

I even knew the location of their base. They didn't expect that. The Azure Hook pirates were clever — only the captain and his second knew the way back to their port, and both of them were well equipped with poison packets to kill themselves if they were captured. Fortunately, the

second in command took the poison a bit too late, and the alchemist I had with me was able to give this pirate something to keep him alive. A few days mixing promises of freedom with torture loosened his tongue sufficiently that we could trust his answers.

After we got the pirate ship fitted out for guard duty, I took the *Resplendent Cloud* to the small island near Coral where the pirates' base was located. It must have been an especially good day for pirates — they only had two ships in port. We got within 100 yards of their walls before they began to get suspicious. Before they could react, we opened fire and managed to cripple both ships in a matter of minutes. Then, we took out the port. Our light implosions bows and lightning ballistae took out their defenses as we headed for shore, and then, I lead the marines in a charge that overwhelmed those pirates who weren't already attempting to flee.

The pirates had no clue what was actually going on until we actually began firing. They must have had some method of sending signals because only one of the ships that was out came back to the captured port, but we dealt a major blow to Azure Hook pirates that day, and they took decades to recover. If the plan hadn't worked or if *Resplendent Cloud* had been badly damaged, I'd likely have been posted to something impressively exciting, such as icebreaking duty in the Far Northwest, but my plan worked, and a season later, the navy reassigned me to more important duties. Obedience is essential, but only success allows you to advance.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I'm not a priest, but the Immaculate Philosophy speaks to me. It also makes good practical sense, and I've certainly seen enough of the troubles that can occur when mortals go against it and worship spirits or the Anathema. I've read the various religious texts, but I've never been much of a scholar — I'll leave the complexities of doctrine to others, I mostly care about the comfort the ceremonies provide and the times I have felt Daana'd's presence in my life.

I meditate and pray regularly, and I've meditated on Daana'd many times. I can't claim that she's ever actually spoken to me, but I have felt comfort, certainty and, occasionally, new insights into problems after such meditations. I know that the Five Dragons are honorable and that the path I follow is just and good, and that's really all any sailor can hope for. My greatest contact with all this comes as part of my duties. It's always hard when good sailors die, especially when they were serving on my ship. I've seen the looks on the faces of the rest of my crews when I perform the funeral services well, and I feel the same way. I suppose that's the most important thing about the Immaculate Philosophy. It provides solace, both to me and to the sailors serving with me. When serving far from home, in the middle of the vast ocean, familiar comforts such as this are precious indeed, and any touch of grace or wisdom is much needed when one is out on the open ocean.



Resplendent Cloud



CHAPTER THREE

THE WORLD WE RULE



While many Water-aspected Dragon Blooded are sailors, this is not universally true. They are equally competent in the ministries, the libraries and the legions of the Realm. The Drowning Hands sometimes fight in the front lines of epic battles, but more often, they assist their allies and serve the Realm in a multitude of subtle and often indirect ways. They often take these roles because of how they see the world. Instead of putting vast amounts of effort into making an obvious or direct solution work, Water Aspects excel at finding alternatives that no one else has previously exploited and hidden weaknesses in their opponents defenses. Their devious cleverness goes hand in hand with equally great stubbornness and determination. Although they freely abandon proposed solutions that do not lead them to their goals, instead of giving up, they immediately seek out alternatives. Violence, money, political influence and lies are all equally acceptable tools for the children of Daana'd.

PELEPS JAPHEN

THE REALM

There is no greater civilization, no land of more just laws, no place where life is more pleasant and stable, even for the most common of mortals, than the Realm. I do not feel merely proud to be of the Realm, but blessed.

I am not as widely traveled as I would like, though I have visited An-Teng and a handful of satrapies on the

shores of the Inland Sea. But I have heard stories of the Threshold, where whole nations are held fast under the iron-shod boots of petty warlords, where barbarians stream into fertile lands unchecked and where the Wyld creeps deeper into otherwise untainted lands every day. I feel for the poor savages who have not had the benefit of the Realm's influence, and I am saddened when I hear that some unruly spirit — or worse, some Anathema — has dominated a whole race of people and made them denounce the truth that is so evident here in the Realm. Thankfully, though the news coming from the Threshold is sometimes disheartening, we still have the legions and the Wyld Hunt to help bring these nations under the protection of the Realm.

Being a Dragon-Blood and a Dynast, I know that it is my place to protect the Realm and to provide whatever service I may offer. Despite the fact it demands time I could otherwise use to study and master my sorcery, I am happy to be in the imperial navy. In the Earth Fleet, I am bound to serve as a watchman for the Realm, to keep our ports and people safe from pirates and upstarts. There is no greater service that I can imagine, no more worthy use of my time and powers. And unlike those that must lead the legions in the Threshold or patrol the far off seas, I am able to see, every time we pull into port, what it is I am protecting. If ever I become despondent over too many days in the sea, I just have to remind myself that it will only be a short time,

a week or two at the most, before I pull into port and see the citizens of the Realm standing on the docks, waving banners and cheering us.

Even so, I am concerned by what I hear sometimes. The gossip that filters down through the ranks of the officers or bubbles up from the enlisted crew can be worrisome. There is talk of too much infighting between the Great Houses. There are rumors of heresy in the remote villages and towns and rumors of treachery within the cities. Since the Empress disappeared, the Immaculate Dragons preserve her, there has been a sense of uncertainty, even fear, which is palpable. I can only hope that those who seek to fill the void that she left are as wise and compassionate as she was. If the Realm were to succumb to the kind of base squabbles that cause the downfall of other nations, all of Creation would be lost. I wonder, if the whispered fears of the people are true and all the political infighting and subterfuge is to explode into civil war, where will the Earth Fleet stand? Who will we fight? Who will we protect?

But these are the fears of a child, and I know that I am no longer a child. The Realm will endure, as it always has, and the Empress will return, and in time, all the misled nations of the Threshold and beyond will remember who it was that drove back the Fair Folk and who it was that brought civilization to their lands.

HOUSE PELEPS

While I love the Realm and know that it is truly righteous, I cannot help but feel less connected to my Great House. I cannot pretend to understand the environment of competition and even animosity engendered by our leaders. Nor can I pretend to feel accepted by my house, as both the child of two rivals forced together by edict or as a sorcerer in a house that has no love for sorcerers.

I am told by my peers that every young Dynast struggles with his feelings about his house. I am told that the sometimes harsh treatment we receive from our own family is intended to bolster us against our enemies. I am told that the Realm is strong because the Great Houses are strong and that strength comes from adversity. Yet, despite all these things I am told, I must wonder: Would House Peleps be any less powerful if we could speak civilly to one another at celebrations, if we did not have to craft our words when speaking to our own cousins, if we did not have to trip each other in order to advance a few steps in this never-ending race? I honestly do not know, and the not knowing pains me.

None of this matters much, though. I was born to House Peleps, and I will always be a member of this house. And despite how I feel sometimes and the things I said above, I do feel a connection to my house. I am Peleps Japhen, and I enjoy the many comforts that come with that name. Despite how I am treated when I walk into a room full of Peleps, I never want for my allowance, and I never need fear that I will be without a ship or Manse to call home for at least a short while. House Peleps does not allow its

members to wither and die, and I know that, as I make my career in the imperial navy, more and more members of my house will seek me out or invite me in. And while I know that, when this happens, it will all be a part of someone's grand scheme, the scheme will always have the same final goal: to increase the standing and power of House Peleps. And when I look outside myself and my own limited wants and desires, I realize this to be the most noble goal possible.

If I have one hope, however, one I could never utter with my breath but keep close to my heart, it is this: Let Peleps Eralin, my admiral, be the one who decides my place in House Peleps, rather than my parents. The Sea Witch, at least, understands the call of sorcery and the limitless potential sorcerers have to support both the Realm and House Peleps. If I have a second secret hope, it is even simpler: Let House Peleps and House Nellens never go to war.

MORTALS

The people of the Realm— not merely the Dragon-Blooded, but all the Dynasts and patricians — are our responsibility. In the same way that they are bound to accept our rule, we are bound to protect them, nurture them and, sometimes, even honor them. In my short time on the *Wave-Cutting Wind-Running Saber*, I have come to know mortals as companions and compatriots. I have seen them act with compassion, conviction, temperance and valor in their service to the Realm. At the same time, I have seen some of my Dynastic peers treat them like little more than beasts of burden, which is not merely an act of moral failure, but one that flies in the face of our duty. If I have embraced one teaching of the Immaculate Philosophy, it is that mortals are as necessary to the Realm's continued well being as we are. At the very least, how we treat them is a reflection of ourselves.

My nurses, my servants and my tutors were all mortals. They cared for me, taught me and protected me while my Exalted parents attended to their own interests. While what I am today is forged of Daana'd and those Exalted, such as Nellens Baeden, who have helped make me what I am, the foundation of who I am is built upon the good work done by loyal mortals in service to my House and to me as a Dynast. How could I not love them for that, if I love myself?

Of course, not all mortals are virtuous. Some forget their place in the Perfected Hierarchy. They prey on their own, they flaunt the laws designed to protect them, and they betray us, the Dragon-Blooded, with heresy and rebellion. It is sad, like watching a child scream and thrash in the midst of a tantrum. And like recalcitrant children, some mortals need only a stern word to remind them of their place, while others need harsher punishment, which is sad but necessary. As an officer in training about my ship, I have been commanded to dole out punishments to those sailors who have transgressed. I do not like to do it, but it is my duty — not only to my superiors, but to those being punished as well. It will be no different, albeit on a larger scale, should I ever command my own ship and be forced

to sink a ship of pirates or rebels or to confiscate the vessel of a unscrupulous merchant.

ANATHEMA

Nothing frightens me more than the Anathema. As a child, I felt secure because the Scarlet Empress watched over us and, through the Wyld Hunt, kept us safe from these demons that were constantly testing the cracks in the walls of the Realm. Now, even though I am touched by the power of Daana'd and can summon mighty storms to defend my land, I am afraid. The Empress, the protector of my childhood, is gone, and stories of the Anathema are spoken with more and more frequency. And they are not confined to the Threshold. There are stories of Anathema rising on the Blessed Isle itself. Are we so weak without her that even our own land is not safe from these monsters?

Sometimes, I have a nightmare. It is a moonless night, and the mist is heavy over the sea. I stand watch alone, looking through my spyglass toward the southwest. There is a chill in the air that bores through my clothes, crawls over my skin and creeps into my bones. In the dream, I try to shake off the feeling of dread and tell myself that summer is over and it is just the first hints of autumn cool. The feeling remains, however. I call out for a cup of tea, but the cabin girl does not come. Is she asleep? I will have to reprimand her, but I can't leave my place, or there will be no one on watch. So, I stand, the chill deepening and my pulse quickening. Then, I see it, first as a few points of light in the mist. The points of light multiply and grow, and I realize they are lanterns on the prow of a ship. I call out, alerting the crew. No one comes. Did I actually speak, or is my throat closed with fear? I cannot turn from my place, cannot let the spyglass down. I watch the ship — a massive vessel seemingly made of blackness, sharp and deadly and full of hate — as it crawls ever closer to the *Wave-Cutting Wind-Racing Saber*. I see the first sign of movement on the deck: huge, hulking, apelike forms appearing and disappearing in the mist. And then, I see *him*, the captain of the ship: tall and powerful and lit with a green light that is not of this world. He parts his lips and speaks a single word, carried over the sea in a hiss to reach my ears and freeze my soul: "Kimbery." And I wake, as always, in a cold sweat and must remind myself, force myself, to believe that it was just a nightmare.

As an officer of the imperial navy, a Dynast of House Peleps and a Dragon-Blooded Exalt, however, I must be prepared to face these fears. They, the Anathema, will come for us one day, to take back what was rightfully given to us and to destroy us all. I must be ready to stand against them and to throw them back just as our Empress threw back the Fair Folk. For as long as I must, I will stand watch on the bow of my ship and be prepared. I only ask for some time before it happens, time to grow in my skills as a sailor, time to master my power as a sorcerer and time to simply live my life before I have to give it in defense of my house, my Realm and Creation itself.



Kimbery

RANYA PETRIS

MORTALS

Hearing other Exalted talk about mortals bother me. What exactly are mortals? Even Exalts grow old eventually, and we still die if you stab us enough. I may be a bit tougher and better at magic, but I'm not all that different from my crew and the people I regularly trade with. I drink with them and treat them fairly. If I did otherwise, even my fancy Charms wouldn't keep me safe from knives in the night. I see things differently — there are two kinds of people, people I like, respect or care about and marks who exist solely for me to take their money or their goods. Some of them don't have the sense to make profitable deals, and others are unlucky enough to be undefended when I see an opportunity for some piracy. Except that Exalts are more dangerous than so-called mortals, I care a whole lot more if someone is a friend or a mark than if they are going to live to be 70 or 270.

I've no idea why people make such a fuss about the difference between mortals and Dragon-Bloods. Sure, we're tougher and far more deadly, but so is a huge man like my chief steersman, Assim, when compared to a starving peasant or someone elderly and arthritic. These days, I'm fast and deadly, but I wouldn't want to face more than three people like Assim at once.

DYNASTS

I've been down to Cherak and the rest of the coastal cities enough to have seen how the other half lives. I've got to admit that the Dragon-Blooded of the Realm look like they have a pretty sweet deal going on. They get worshiped almost like gods and pretty much get to do whatever they want to with the rest of the folk in the Realm. However, I still prefer my life. They have lots of power, but they aren't free. My time and my life are my own, and that's an awful lot more than any of them can say.

In addition to getting ordered around by some aging tyrant, I also have no interest in assassins poisoning my food or setting complex and lethal traps in my bed because my second cousin offended someone else's third cousin. The Realm and the lives of the Dynasts are far too strict and regimented for me to have any interest in them.

I guess the worst part about their lives is that, when you first hear about how they live, the whole thing really does sound like a great deal. I remember when I first met a Dynast — I'd just gotten my own ship and had been contracted to carry a load of feathersteel and ivory from Icehome to Cherak. Exalted air-boat captains are clearly pretty rare — I got the whole VIP treatment down in Cherak. It turned out that they put on the whole show of special lodgings and meals of the finest food and wine that I have ever had because they were trying to recruit me by showing me the good life they all lived in the Coastal States.

After I was happily full, the price of this evening arrived in the form of a distinguished, middle-aged Air Aspect who walked over to my table, sat down and started telling me all about the wonders of the Realm and how all of these things could be mine if I went to work for the Dynasty. Sure, I was interested — who wouldn't like a life of luxury and the constant support of a powerful empire? After hearing him talk, I agreed to work for the Realm for a season and to talk again after that. My only condition was that I not have to give up the *Diamond Shadow*. She was my boat, and I was good at piloting her. He agreed — and rapidly too. I'm pretty certain that the Realm can't make its own air boats and is more than happy to have a few in service. Also, it very much seemed that the Dynasty was so eager to get me to work for it that it would agree to any reasonable request.

The next season was easy on the crew and on the *Diamond Shadow*. We were under contract to the Realm, so we didn't have to constantly worry about where our next job was coming from or whether risking pulling a raid or two might be the only way to live decently. Its Dragon-Blooded have spells and Charms to carry messages, but even the Realm needs ships to carry large cargoes. We carried drugs, medicines, weapons and various luxury items such as fine silks all over the Northern coast. It was an easy life for the first month, and I began to get to know the other Dragon-Blooded in the region. I even made a few friends, including Sarana — she grew up a commoner in the Realm and was adopted into House Nellens after she Exalted. She and I had a good bit in common. Then, one visit, I found out she was dead, part of a coordinated attack on all the members of House Nellens living in the Northlands. I was all ready to help find the killers and send their souls to the Yozis or the Deathlords. Instead, I was told that the satrap needed the shipment of ivory I was carrying because she was having it made into a statue of her husband to commemorate their 50th wedding anniversary. Carrying luxury items for the rich when a friend lay dead and unavenged sat poorly with me. I was even less pleased when I found out that, while the assassins had all be caught and executed, no one was saying who paid them, and the people in charge of the investigation seemed little interested in finding out this information. They all assumed it was another feud against that house and didn't want to get involved. I kept asking around for the next month. I didn't find out anything, but a week before the season ended, I discovered that someone had sabotaged the *Shadow*, so that it began to fall apart in midair. Fortunately, the cables they cut partly through did not all give way at once, and so, we had time to land and make repairs before the gas bag shredded. If they had gone after me, I would have been angry enough, but as is typical here, the assassin cared nothing for the "mere mortals" in my crew. We couldn't afford to break our contract with the Realm, but I did not renew it, and we avoided visiting the Coastal States for the next year. For the next week, we doubled the watch on the

Shadow and made certain to have at least two of us constantly watching any outsider who came onboard. There haven't been any further attempts on the lives of either myself or the crew of the *Shadow* when we visit the Coastal States, but we never stay there long.

ANATHEMA

Because they're pretty rare, I've only ever seen one of the Anathema, and I hope to never see one again, though I'm told the Anathema I saw is one of the worst of the lot. He's a huge icewalker known in all the Northlands as the Bull of the North. I've heard tell of prophecies stating how he'll unite the entirety of the icewalkers into one vast army that will smite all of their enemies, conquer the North and then rule the entire world. I've never been much for most prophecies and believe they are usually nothing more than a mixture of wishful thinking and propaganda. However, that doesn't mean that I'd ever want to stand between the Bull of the North and his goal. When I first heard about him, I told myself I would avoid anyone associated with him, but his army was large, and it continues to grow. Times had been lean for trade in the Northeast, likely because everyone was too afraid of what he would do next to do much in the way of long-term trade. If I didn't want to have a really lean season, I only had two choices. I could either sign on as one of the raiders that worked with the Bull of the North and harassed his enemies, or I could avoid poverty by occasionally raiding the increasingly wealthy army of icewalkers that he leads.

I'd heard stories about signing up with the Bull of the North. Once you started working for him, it seemed pretty difficult to stop. I'm guessing some of it has to do with the freakish powers he commands, and the rest was simply the fact that he tends to think people who left him as traitors and dealt with them accordingly. I couldn't see doing that, so when times got rough, I raided around the edges of his forces. I still do so on occasion, but I make certain not to do it too often. The last thing I want to do is attract his attention.

I've heard a few people talk about working with the Bull of the North or the other Anathema who are around and some talk of people who can control and manipulate these beings to their own ends. I'm having none of that. I once watched the Bull of the North lead a raid on a small city. The *Diamond Shadow* was just under some low clouds, so we were nearly impossible to see and had an excellent view of the raid. I've led dozens of raids and watched a goodly number of others, and none of them were like this. He destroyed entire buildings with a single blow, but more than that, I saw the way his troops followed him.

He owns their hearts and their souls, and I'm not about to give my soul to anyone, much less some ancient god-thing that crawled back from the dead and into the head of some huge smelly barbarian. The Anathema are forces of nature, like hurricanes or frozen fog. I can't get rid of them, but I can do my best to guess where they are going and to be somewhere else.

SPIRITS

I'm not much for things that aren't humans, as most of them are creepy, predatory or simply too weird and freaky to deal with. The only exception I know of is some of the gods. One of the reasons I have no patience with the Immaculate Faith is its distrust of the gods. I'd far rather trust my life to a god than to a Dynast. At least the gods are more straightforward about what they want from you. I guess the most important thing about them is that they mostly like the way things are going — they aren't interested in ending the world, killing millions or otherwise ruining the party. Instead, you make a deal with them, and unless you're an idiot or make them angry, if you keep your end of the bargain, they do the same. Given the sorts of nice toys the gods have to play with and occasionally give away, making deals with them is well worth it. I've only been cheated by a god once, in large part because I've learned to be really careful when dealing with them. They may want to work with you as much as you want to work with them, but the fact of the matter is that many of them can eat me or any other mortal or Dragon-Blood as a snack. I'd likely make a pretty tough and prickly snack, but I'm none too eager to test that. I didn't follow my own advice once, and I learned a hard lesson.

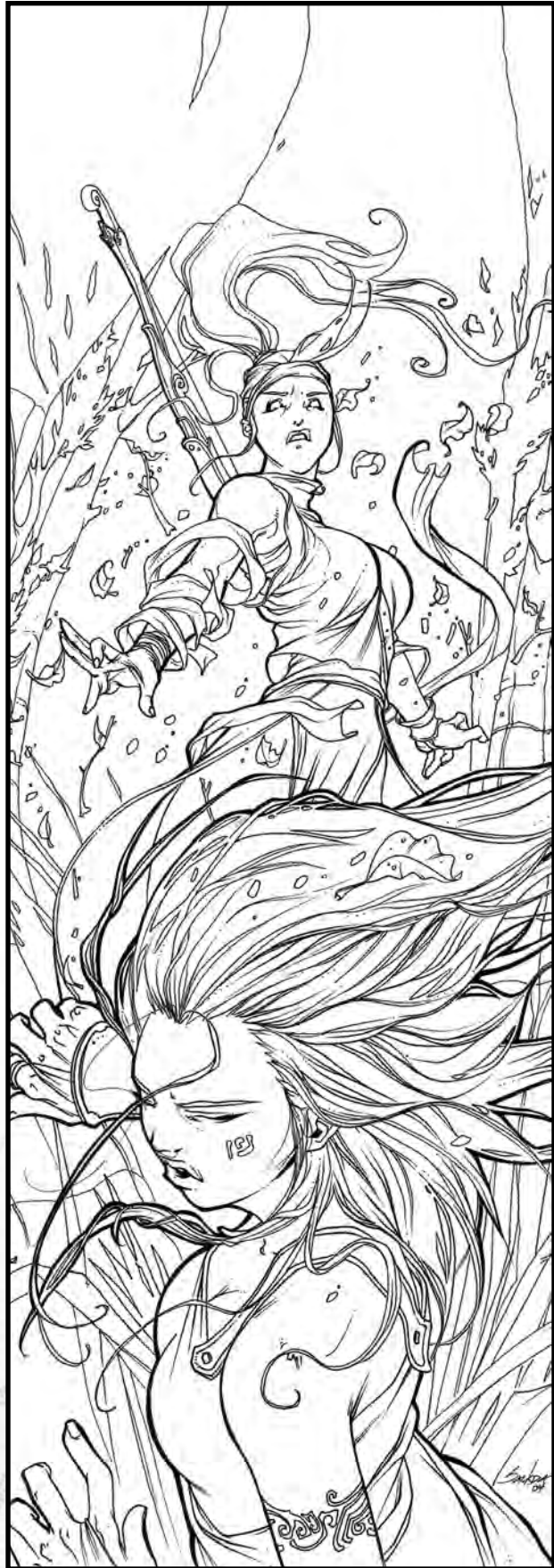
My touchiest time with a god was meeting Caltia the Eternal when we visited the Northeast. We landed to do some minor repairs, and she came up in her sleigh and watched us work. I'd heard many tales of her and was pretty scared. Caltia is one of the gods that sensible people avoid, but it would have taken us half an hour to get airborne, and I'd heard about how deadly her bow was. Thankfully, she wanted to talk. She told us flat out that we had two choices: We could do a job for her, or she would chase us down individually and eat our livers. That got everyone listening closely to her offer.

She told us about some ruins just southwest of Crystal that had recently been uncovered by an avalanche. She said that the ruins contained a First Age temple. She wanted the large jade-and-starmetal cauldron that sat on its altar. She needed us because it was outside of the area she controlled and going there might provoke the local god of the ice. People like us are beneath the notice of such beings, but if she tried to go there, the ice god would object.

At this point, I knew that we weren't helpless — if she let that temple wait too long, someone else would grab that bowl. Also, I generally make a practice of never accepting my own life as payment for a job. In return for doing this job, I asked for enough jade to pay us for our time — I knew it was an excellent deal, as the gods could get as much jade as they wanted, but it was really valuable to us. She looked like she would gut us all on the spot, but I knew that was a bluff. She agreed, and in an hour, we were off to the ruins.

Naturally, the task was far from easy. Several ancient automata guarded the ruins, and Geysal lost a leg to one





that had blades instead of hands. Then, we had to spend the better part of a week digging through ruins to get to the heart of the temple. Finally, we reached it and found that a lion dog guarded the temple. Thankfully, it was an exceptionally lonely and despondent lion dog, and we got the bowl from it in return for letting it become a member of our crew. The new trimisman said she would leave if we took on a beast like that as part of the crew, but I'd far rather have a loyal minor god guarding the *Diamond Shadow* than a coward adjusting its gas bag, so I agreed and hired a new trimisman.

The problem came when we returned. Caltia was impatient, and the way she talked made me think she might be going to double-cross us. I had already thought that Caltia might cause some sort of problem, and so, I'd talked to the lion dog. It was guarding the bowl with instructions to devour it if Caltia tried to steal from us. I made the mistake of demanding the jade and telling her that the lion dog was ready to destroy the bowl at the first sign of trouble. Caltia was so angry that the trees behind her began to sway and break like in a hurricane, and she accused me of not trusting her sworn word. Then, she slew the lion dog with a gesture, took the bowl and told me that I could challenge her to a duel if I wanted the jade. We now avoid the portion of the Northeast that she controls, and I learned more about how not to insult the gods — it's easy to be too clever, and when dealing with the most powerful ones, respect and deference are our only protection.

FAIR FOLK

Not much to say there. They're nasty things that any sane person avoids. Sure, I've heard how much they pay for live captives. Slavery only makes sense, but selling people to be eaten by monsters is going way too far. No one would ever claim that I'm an idealist, but I don't think that even my overly strict father would think that raiding the Fair Folk was any sort of crime. I don't do it often — I don't want to end up hunted by their dogs and their Ravagers, but if the opportunity presents itself, I'm not going to pass up a chance to steal some gossamer blades and armor or to free some captives. I don't much care what happens to Creation, but I know that I don't want the Fair Folk controlling any more of it than they already do.

I guess that I don't much care about good or evil, but the Wyld scares me, and so does anything that comes from it. Drifting into the Wyld is one of the biggest risks of being on an air boat. On the ground, you can generally tell when things are starting to get weird and turn around before the snow drifts start talking to you. During a storm, however, air boats can move really fast, and if the storm blows you into the Wyld, you could be many miles into it before you notice that the bulkhead you're leaning on is now covered with several dozen living eyes.

I've gotten to know the crews of several other air boats extremely well — those of us who sail the sky look out for each other. I once gave up a good commission for discreetly hauling a load of ivory and feathersteel from Icehome to White Wall to help join the search for the *Falcon Sliver* after it was a week late putting into Crystal. The *Jade Condor*, my *Diamond Shadow* and two other air boats in the area all took some time out to search for that boat — we'd all shared drinks with Captain Orolik and his crew. However, I was the one unlucky enough to find the *Sliver*.

The watch saw it on the ground, a few miles in from the Flicker Peak Wyld zone, northwest of Crystal. I don't know if the ship was lost or if a storm blew it there, and none of the survivors were in any shape to tell me. We knew it would be bad when we saw the boat itself. The gas bag was now covered in gasping lipless mouths that opened and closed like the maws of fish slowly dying in market baskets. Whatever it had become could not survive long out of the Wyld, for which I'm really thankful. Some of the crew were not doing any better. I found Red, the first mate, halfway embedded in the aft bulkhead, so that the left side of her body was now completely part of it. I slit her throat when she moaned after I touched the bulkhead and felt the blood-warm feathersteel pulse under my fingers.

At first, I thought they'd only had a nasty trip into the Wyld, but then, I saw the damage in the front of the ship and found the captain. Orolik was half mad, but he did manage to tell me that, after the *Falcon Sliver* entered the Wyld, it was set upon by a pack of Fair Folk riding on flying manta rays. They took the youngest and prettiest of the crew and all the passengers. Because she fought too much, they made Red part of the wall. Then, for some reason, they ripped a few pieces from Orolik's mind and from the minds of two of the older crew members and set the ship adrift. Orolik got them back into Creation. Orolik has family to take care of him, and the other survivors recovered, but neither of them ever went into the air again. I can't make any complaints about thieves, brigands or pirates, but most are not so randomly cruel. The Fair Folk are a different matter.

I've got to admit that I've dealt with Fair Folk on occasion. Sometimes, they pay quite well for information on one of their number living in Creation. However, I've never run slaves to them or done anything to help them grab onto any part of Creation. If they want to pay me to tell them the location of another of their kind that they want to kill, though I'm all for more dead Fair Folk. I'd not be sad to see them all dead, but I'm guessing that won't be happening anytime soon.

RAGARA TAKAR

THE FAIR FOLK

They are our oldest enemies. Since the lost days of the First Age, we have been fighting them, and I can see no


way that this war will end until one side destroys the other. I rather accept that they will eventually overwhelm us. My job is to make certain that this doesn't happen on my watch. I don't like to visit Juche anymore because I don't trust how helpful the Mountain Folk are. Everyone who works closely with them says that they are not like the others of their kind, but I cannot help suspecting that they simply conceal their true intents more carefully than their fellows. The fact remains that their kind has only one goal, the destruction of all Creation.

Of course, that is not to say that we don't sometimes work together. The sort of moral absolutism that would rather accept failure than to work with a sworn enemy has no place in the real world. However, it's also true that far too many people actually believe that your enemy's enemy is in some way truly your friend. This sort of thinking leads to a knife in the back or a draught of poison in your wine. Nevertheless, your enemy's enemy can often be a necessary, but temporary, ally. Even a temporary alliance with the Fair Folk who dwell in the Wyld is madness, and the laws demanding the execution of anyone who works with them are right and just. However, the world is considerably less black and white than many on the Blessed Isle know, and the few Fair Folk who are exiles from the Wyld and now live among mortals can, very occasionally, make useful, if exceedingly dangerous, allies.

The one advantage we have when dealing with the Fair Folk is that they are a known enemy — we understand what they want and have at least some idea about how they work. That knowledge can make them exceedingly useful. For the last five decades, I've alternately worked with and against a trio of Fair Folk who fled from their fellows in the Wyld more than a century ago. Iftlin, Selchin and Satreyla are their names. They are deadly monsters, and I would love to purge them and all their kind from Chiaroscuro, but they also occasionally provide useful aid against mutual and more dangerous foes. The only reason I work with them at all is that they have no contact with their fellows back in the Wyld, and according to my best intelligence, they would be tortured and then slain if they ever entered the Wyld again.

Four years ago, there were rumors of a powerful Demon-Blooded sorcerer intent on releasing his foul kin from Malfeas. Before she vanished, one of my fellows in Scarlet Orchid sent me a message that, though this being was in Yane, the sorcerer had agents in Chiaroscuro seeking the ingredients he needed for his magics. A combination of fear and greed meant that no one who knew what was actually going on would talk to me, and the last thing the Southlands needed was someone calling up a horde of demons, especially since there were hints that this half-breed might be able to call upon more than just lesser demons. If the stories were true and he could summon up Second Circle demons, then destroying him would be worth almost any price.





As always, I knew where to go for help. There is little that Selchin and Satreyla don't know, and they will reveal it all for the correct price. After a week, they came to me saying that they had information about one of the sorcerer's agents who was going to be traveling to meet with her foul master in a few days. Their price for the information was higher than ever before, as they knew exactly how important this information was. They wanted full protection from any of the local authorities in Chiaroscuro. Between me and someone I knew in Scarlet Orchid, I could arrange sufficient influence to force the Tri-Kahn and his officials to leave them strictly alone. I knew that if they became too problematic, some local official would complain to the Realm, and I also would answer for their crimes, but I still agreed, both because I needed them now and because they were exactly as useful as they thought.

They gave me the name of the woman, who was seemingly a jewel merchant from Gem. Because I was the oldest Dragon-Blood in the area, I ended up tracking her myself, along with a dozen of the finest soldiers from the Imperial Garrison and an exceedingly young Wood Aspect. We followed the jewel merchant to a caravan stop a day out from Gem. We almost missed her rendezvous, as she got up in the middle of the night and walked to some ancient ruins almost a mile away. The Half-Damned was waiting there, along with five of his bound erymanthoi. Thinking himself safe, he had not bothered with more protections. I snuck up on them all, holding my men back because I knew that the blood-apes would rend them into shreds, while the Demon-Blood dematerialized. I ignored the blood-apes, snuck up on the Demon-Blood and cut him in half. Then, I charged one of the blood-apes and called for everyone else to take on the other four. Although the jewel merchant fled and the erymanthoi had killed most of my soldiers, both the Half-Damned and his demons were dead. Without the aid of Selchin and Satreyla, I might never have located this Hellspawn until he marched into Chiaroscuro with a dozen Second Circle demons at his back.

THE DEAD

While they are a slightly more recent enemy, their threat is no less great than that of the Fair Folk. Even before their conquest of Thorns, it was clear that they meant to conquer us and transform the world into a mass grave. Thorns merely proved that their timetable is speeding up. Even more than the Fair Folk, the dead honor their deals and can make tempting allies against the mysterious dangers of the Anathema. However, dealing fairly with them is a fool's game. They mean to destroy us, and our only hope for survival is to keep them as weak and divided as possible. We cannot work with them, and we have no hope of defeating them. All we can do is fight them at every turn and, occasionally, make treaties to give us time to regroup before one side or the other breaks them.

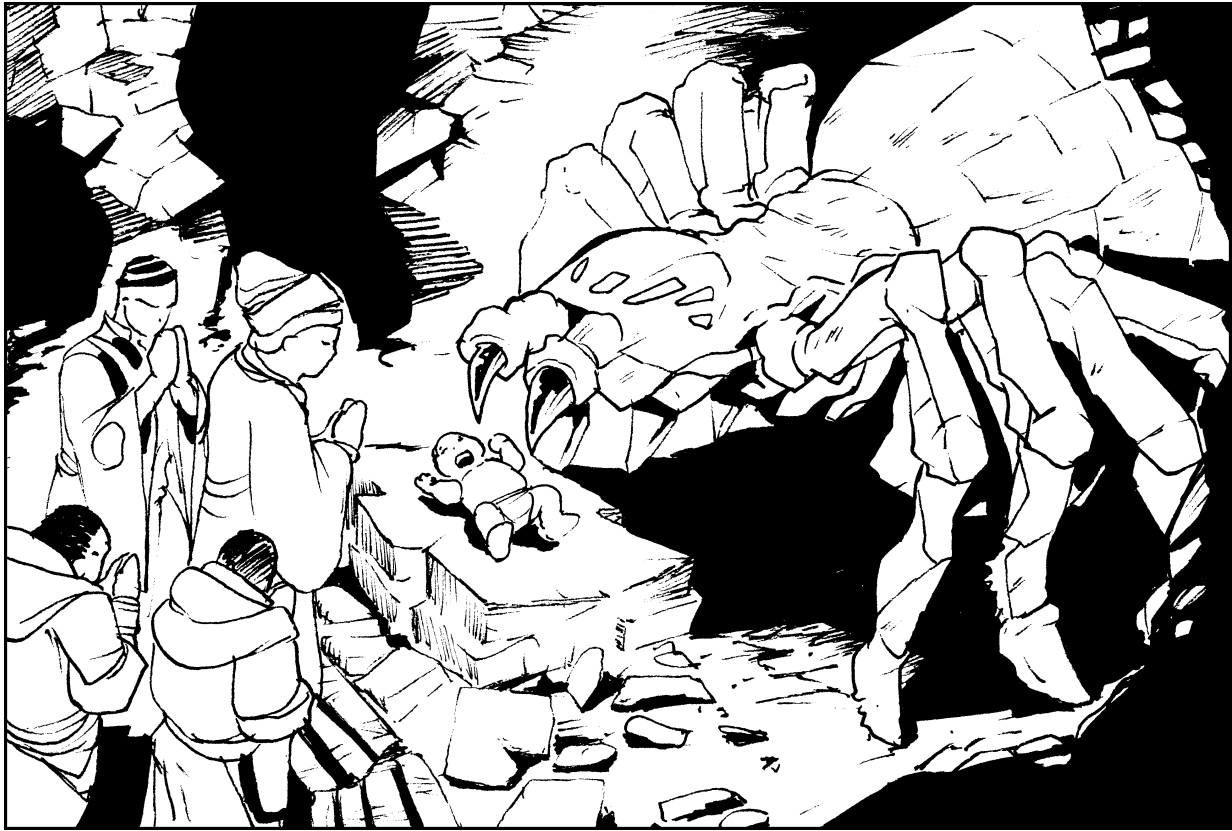
SPIRITS

Although I don't believe in the Immaculate Faith, it does contain some truly excellent ideas, and one of the most important is the place of gods. Out in the Threshold, many residents simply have no idea of the danger that gods represent. Mortals wisely avoid seeing gods or even being near them, but many think nothing of worshipping them.

Here in Chiaroscuro, when the mortals think of gods, most of them think of Grandmother Bright. I don't trust her, and frankly, I don't like her, but she does seem to keep to the Plaza. She's a rarity though. Without the Immaculate monks to keep them in line, far too many gods are worse than the greediest of mortals — they aim to take whatever they can get and will use any means to obtain what they want. If left alone, gods can be bad enough, but worse things happen when people are foolish enough to worship them. The worst local case I know of was that of Painted Digger. Digger looked like some sort of huge glass spider and lived in the underways of Chiaroscuro. Most of the smaller gods like to have a territory and Digger claimed a section of the underways that was exposed when one of the towers in the Broken Finger District fell down six years ago. The New City scavengers were down there as soon as the dust had settled. They all wanted to find some untouched artifacts and become rich.

Unlike most places, there were actually a few such artifacts down there, but so was Painted Digger. Painted Digger had been hungry for a long time, and after eating the first few scavengers, it got the same bright idea that many other minor gods have had — it offered free passage and help finding valuable artifacts in return for a fee. I hear people occasions talk about gods who like green flowers or expensive incense, but like far too many of the gods, Painted Digger had baser and far deadlier tastes — it liked the hearts of prepubescent children. One child could provide passage for a season for three people, four if it was an infant. Also, like all spirits, it wanted prayers, and it wanted its offerings presented with the appropriate rituals. With a steady diet of hearts and prayers, Digger thrived and grew strong.

While the missing children were only a problem for Chiaroscuro, a few of the artifacts that the scavengers turned up were profoundly dangerous, especially since at least some of them were both extremely powerful and badly damaged. When one of the scavengers sold an artifact to a licensed artifact trader from the Realm, the artifact exploded, killing several cargo handlers and partially destroyed a warehouse. Any trade in powerful and unsafe artifacts is of interest to the Realm, and as senior trade legate, uncovering the source of this artifact was partly my responsibility. The Blessed Isle wishes to control such artifacts, especially because there are stories of ancient wonders that can destroy entire cities — regardless of whether the artifact does this by accident or because the



person using it truly wanted to destroy cities, the Realm always looks into new caches of powerful artifacts.

In this case, all I did was the research. I have no desire to go up against a god of unknown power that has been growing fat on prayers. After I tracked back the artifacts to the people who sold them, I convinced the sellers to give me the full story about Painted Digger. At that point, we called in a team of Immaculate monks. They did the job, but Painted Digger managed to kill one of them. If I had my way, spirits would keep to their heavenly duties and completely avoid all mortals.

PELEPS DELED

THE REALM

To have come so close to perfection, to have reached the cusp of ultimate development and to have lost it all is proof of the failure of the Realm to embrace the truth of the Immaculate Dragons and properly emulate their examples. The Immaculate Dragons gifted to us the Realm and its rulership as they swept away the Anathema, and in the centuries since, we have failed them by allowing secular, temporal desires — for wealth and flesh and pleasure — to blind us of our duty to the Immaculate Dragons and their Order.

But we have been gifted again with a new opportunity. The Empress has disappeared, and with her, her devotion to those secular, temporal aspects. The powers of

the All-Seeing Eye and the Wyld Hunt and the wisdom of the Palace Sublime may be directed properly under the guidance of our most wise Immaculate monks. By the will and devotion of the Immaculate Order, the Realm and its Great Houses may be cleansed of improprieties, of influence by the Guild and its allies and of heresy. Chaos is the result of failure to take appropriate action. The chaos that eats at the heart of the Realm must be stopped, and only by acting now, in accordance with the Immaculate Texts and under the direction of the Immaculate Order, can the Realm be restored to its rightful stability.

The Realm is not merely the seat of the Immaculate Dragons, but the point on which all Creation turns and balances. If the Realm is not pure, then how can we expect our satrapies to be so? If we do not maintain order in our own lands and between our own Great Houses, how can we expect order in the Threshold? If we do not embrace piety and righteousness here, how can we expect to give it to the lands still under the thumbs of small gods? If we cannot keep the Anathema from rising on the Blessed Isle itself, how can we hold them at bay elsewhere?

For now, my duties lie in the Pinnacle of the Eye of the Hunt, and the purity of the Realm must fall on the shoulders of others. In time, however, when I have secured the Threshold against heresy and villains, I will return to the Realm and give its children the wisdom they need to make it once again the model of perfection in Creation.

HOUSE PELEPS

House Peleps is guilty of the same sins that mar the perfection of all the Great Houses: impiety, secular ambition and greed. The house to which I was born is a veritable academy of treachery, deceit and politics, all dedicated toward the goal of increasing House Peleps' power, influence and wealth. Forgotten in House Peleps is Daana'd and the road to enlightenment that she taught us: Adversity and exercise teach us adaptability and growth, which is the only path by which we may emulate the Immaculate Dragons. Instead, House Peleps uses the gifts of Daana'd—malleability, adaptability and intuition—as maneuvers in its constant struggles, both internal and external, for dominance and reward. It is ironic that this house for so long ruled the seas for the Realm without embracing the Water Dragon. It is justice that Daana'd has taken that mastery away.

When I was young, I wished to emulate Peleps Deham, to live in both the world of House Peleps and the world of the Immaculate Order. I realize now that such a thing is impossible. While I still hold great respect for my uncle and am forever indebted to him for bringing me to my place in life, I cannot barter my spiritual obligations for temporal rewards the way he has. Since his assignment to the Temple of Daana'd in the Imperial City, he walks too often among the politicians of House Peleps, and though his goal of tempering our house's secular ambitions with the Immaculate Philosophy is a noble one, he must compromise too much. Compromise is for the Deliberative and for the Thousand Scales. For an Immaculate, there is only the truth and those who refuse to see it and act according to it.

When I have the opportunity, I return home and visit with my parents and other relatives. I attend those functions that are convenient for me or those I feel obliged to attend, which are few given the time and distance that often separate me from my childhood home. Yet, when I do make such visits and attend such functions, I do so as an Immaculate monk, not as a scion of House Peleps. I do not hesitate to remind my family of my foremost obligations, nor do I fail to remind them of theirs. This has not made me popular within my house, but my popularity is not a concern. I possess no holdings that will benefit my house in its maneuvers, and I cannot be bartered as a husband for the benefit of alliances between my house and other, equally misguided, Great Houses. I am certain there are those within House Peleps that envy me this, but I feel no sympathy for them: The Immaculate Order takes all who can set aside temporal desires and ambitions and dedicate themselves to the true needs of the Realm.

In one manner, I remain like Deham. When these opportunities arise, I make certain to spend time among the children of House Peleps, who are so often ignored by their parents and elders. I test them on their knowledge of the Immaculate Dragons and teach them where they fail. I engage their bodies and spirits with the same difficult lessons that I was taught. I remind them of their connection to the sea and

the element of water. It is unfortunate that I cannot dedicate more time to this, as the Realm has many enemies both within and without and my first duty is as a member of the Wyld Hunt and not as a teacher. I imagine that, upon my retirement, I will return to my house and ensure that, in House Peleps at least, the Realm has a whole generation of defenders and servants. In the meantime, I am obliged to ensure that there is a Realm for that later generation to serve.

MORTALS

Mortals come in two varieties: those who have some understanding of the grand tapestry of existence and their place in it and those who have not yet been shown the truth and power of the Immaculate Order. Of these, the first variety is of no concern to me: They know their place and must, by extension, perform their appropriate function, whether that is to bring wheat to the table of their prefect or to dig jade from the depths of the earth. The second variety deserves my attention and the attention of all Immaculate monks, for to allow such people to live without providing them with the truth by which to live is cruel. Just as one would not expect the cattle to pull the bucket from the well themselves so that they might drink, we should not expect our mortal charges to pull the truth from the Immaculate Texts themselves.

And while there are few in the Realm who can claim to have been denied the opportunity to embrace the truth of the Immaculate Texts, such is not the case in the Threshold and beyond. Mortals there, under siege by heretical spirits, soul drinking Fair Folk and the infernal Anathema, deserve to be shown the truth. I will show it to them with the Wyld Hunt. I will dash the skulls of the Anathema who threaten them, and I will return the wayward small gods to their rightful places. I will destroy the Fair Folk and their twisted servants, and I will push the Wyld back beyond the borders of Creation. When these things are done, the mortals who live in the Threshold will know, without question, what is righteous and what is ruin.

To love mortals is to protect them, to teach them and, when they are wrong, to punish them. These things we do because it is our charge, the task given all Dragon-Blooded by the Immaculate Dragons. They are the younger sibling who learns our ways whether we mean to teach them or not. Better that we show them the right way through the actions we take ourselves, than to say what is right and do another thing. Anything else we might do is a crime against them and against our own Exalted station.

ANATHEMA

When the Five Elemental Dragons took human form and led the Terrestrial Exalted to throw down the wickedness of the Old Realm, all of Creation sang out in joy. That song has become but a distant echo now, for the Anathema are finding their way back from the hell into which they were cast. Who can say for certain why this is?

I can.

The rule of the Scarlet Empress, though marred by political and secular maneuvers, did embrace one of the core aspects of righteousness: the Wyld Hunt. To many, it might have appeared as just another weapon in her arsenal of rulership, through which she extended her own power. But those of us who served in the Wyld Hunt knew the truth: Despite her games, she believed in the truth that is the Immaculate Philosophy and denounced the heresy that is the Solar Anathema. In her time, the hunt had all it needed to seek out and destroy the reborn Anathema and even the Wyld-twisted children of Luna if they dared raise their heads in Creation. Then, there were scores of soldiers and the most powerful artifacts, borrowed from the vaults of the Great Houses and recovered from the tombs of the heroes and monster of the past, available to the hunt. Then, the Realm was faithful.

Now, the Great Houses have taken back their artifacts, and the legions dissolve, one after another, leaving us bereft of soldiers. So, the Anathema are free to be reborn and undergo their parody of Exaltation. Only a few of us stand stalwart now, searching for any sign of their kind and placing our very souls in jeopardy to ride them down and slay them. Once, the Wyld Hunt acted. Now, it reacts. Once, the Anathema had barely time to take their first breath before they were destroyed. Now, they have the time to build armies and raise nations against the rightful rule of the Realm. All this because greed and pride have worn away our righteousness.

Yet, I do not despair. Daana'd has gifted me with the power to find the Anathema and kill them, to send their soul-shards back to the hell where they belong. I have faced Anathema in battle and have seen their power and felt their wicked touch. On the banks of the River of Tears, I fought with Bosk of Sijan and barred him entry into his long-forgotten tomb. Though still formidable without his ancient armor and weapons, I did not relent and gave him no ground. While Cathak Titus stood by with an arsenal and an army, I duelled with the demon to show them all that it is not strength of arms or numbers, but the power of the Immaculate Dragons that will defeat the likes of Bosk. As he fell and his soul was dragged back to its hell, I gave him a message to deliver to his masters: "The Dragons yet rule." If I must hunt them all to the end of this Age, I shall. And should they grow to be too many and overwhelm Creation, I still do not despair. Should that happen, the Immaculate Dragons will come as they did before and lead the righteous to smite them finally, irrevocably.

I should very much like to kneel at the feet of Daana'd, hands raised and bearing the head of the Bull of the North or any of his ilk for her pleasure.

HERESY

The Anathema are not the only danger to Creation. Were that so, even the diminished resources of the Wyld

Hunt would be more than enough to find and destroy them all. No, we must split our energies and time between Fair Folk who grow ever bolder in their gnawing at the edges of Creation, spirits who have forgotten their place and heretics.

Heresy is the cancer that eats at the heart of Creation. Even in the Realm, where the power of the Immaculate Dragons is plain for all to see, gods step outside their bounds, and mortals give them undue praise. These small gods have chosen to ignore their obligations and have turned their backs on the divine order of things, and to what end? Are the prayers of duped mortals so sweet a nectar that they would risk all? Or do they believe that there is no power in Creation that can turn them right? If it is the first, then they have indeed fallen and must be set right. If it is the latter, then they are wrong: the Wyld Hunt yet rides. And for the mortals that would give them their prayers, there can be no response but harsh punishment, like the whipping a child receives for stepping outside the bounds set by his elders.

Beyond even this affront, the Immaculate Order itself suffers the burden of heretics, though they would not call themselves such. Within the Order, there are monks whose "interpretations" are little more than excuses to play at politics or mercantilism. As surely as a mortal who hides in a cellar to give blood offerings to some dark spirit of the wilderness, these are heretics. I have exposed many in my time and will do so whenever I see them. The fists of the righteous cannot be parried by the hands of the wicked.

To find the worst affront against the Immaculate Dragons, one need look no farther than Lookshy and its Immaculate faith. Twisted beyond recognition by the needs of traitors, this blasphemy exceeds all others. The chaplains and sorcerer-priests of the Seventh Legion left the truth behind long ago and have since married themselves to secular, military powers. Nothing could be farther from the intent of the Immaculate Texts. That they yet defy the Realm and ally themselves with the rebellious nations of the River Province is only incidental when compared to their crimes against the Immaculate Dragons. When the rest of the Threshold has been cleansed of heresy and when the Realm has remembered its faith, no tears will be shed as Lookshy and its blasphemers are crushed, for none shall be left to cry.

With so much heresy in the world, both within and without the Realm, it is no wonder that the Anathema have returned in force and that the Wyld Hunt is stretched to its limits. I am not surprised by the weakness and greed and ambition in the hearts of our Dynasts, nor do I question how it is that the Guild, with its ever-shifting alliances and dalliances with the Fair Folk, has grown so powerful. Yet, none of these things shall matter, and none of them shall last, when heresy is finally scoured from the face of Creation.



PELEPS ARAMIDA

THE ANATHEMA

I have only faced one of the Anathema, and I hope never to do so again. A year ago, I faced the Forsaken named Lyta. Spawned on our very island, she became a deadly and hateful serpent after her foul transformation. I lead my fleet to Redspar when the orders came down to destroy both her and her cult. I was in charge of blockading the harbor and making certain that neither she nor any of her lieutenants escaped. I remember watching the unholy glow coming from her from my ship. It lit up the sky, and though my spyglass, I could see the twisted way that all of her allies looked at her. They worshiped her like a god, in part because of her sheer power, but also because her twisted and defiled gifts forced them to do so.

The Anathema are not merely dangerous because they wield powers greater than anything except the Five Dragons. That is only a small part of their true danger. They can also enslave the wills of mortals and sometimes even bend the minds and souls of the Terrestrial Exalted.

Near the end of the invasion, she summoned some foul beast from the depths and made her escape, but none of her fleet got away. However, the cost of the battle was frighteningly high. Her mortal soldiers died in seemingly endless masses, like ants trying to cross a stream. The reports from the marines all said that these warriors were

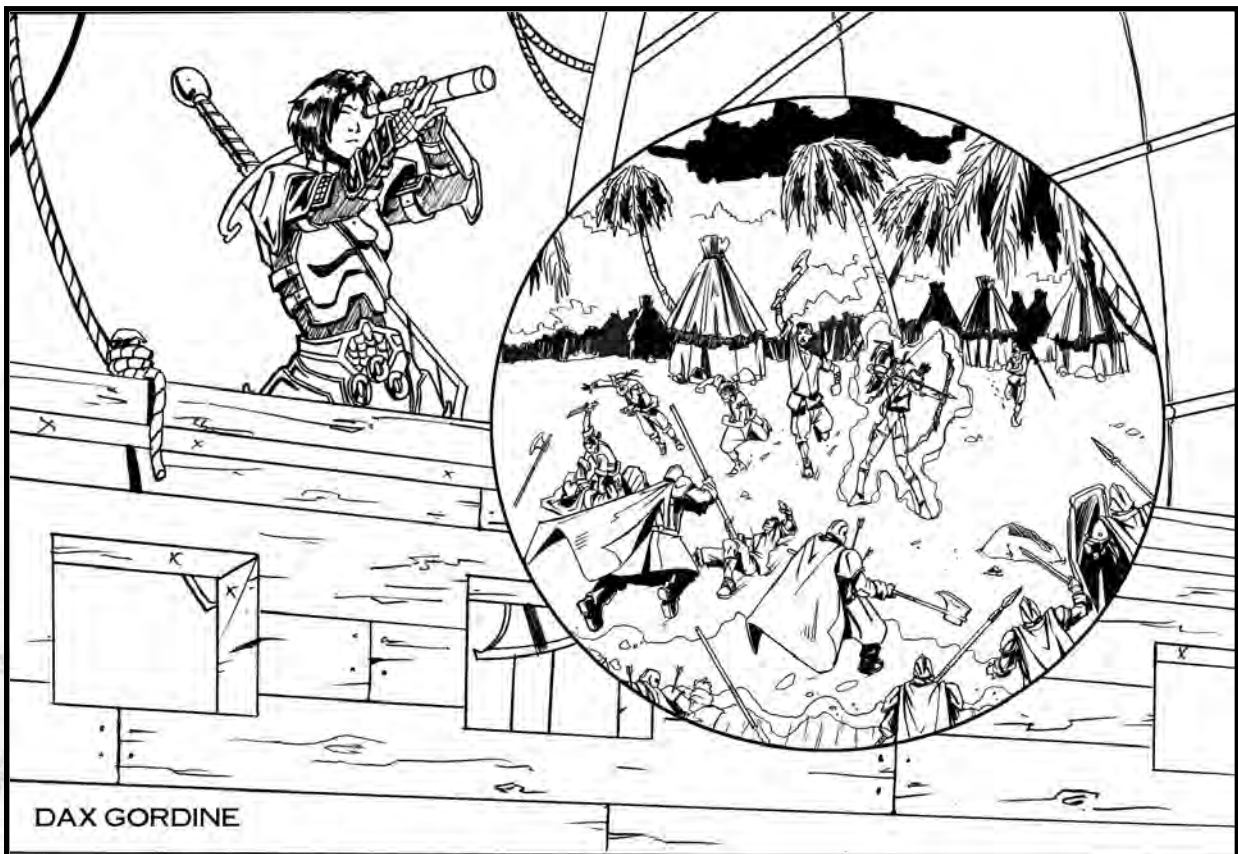
incapable of fear or retreat. When she knew she was going to lose Redspar, she stripped the inhabitants of their will and used them as unwilling pawns to protect her escape.

The battle was hard, but walking among the survivors of her cult was worse. This Forsaken had driven them all mad. Not long ago, these people had been ordinary fisher folk. Now, they were chanting about cauldrons of boiling blood and transforming the entire Realm into an abattoir. None of them had ever even seen the Realm. Lyta had imposed her ideas upon their minds.

The Anathema can twist the minds of mortals as easily as I can braid a rope. All of our prisoners continued to chant hymns to Lyta and her foul and twisted god even after she abandoned them to their fate. We had no choice but to execute them — I was sorry it came to that, but their minds were clearly not their own. Lyta and all of the others like her are monsters intent on destroying the world. I know that mortals worship others of their kind elsewhere in the Threshold, but I cannot imagine that anyone who saw the massacre in Redspar and the horrifically awe-struck faces of the people she forced to fight for her would ever willingly worship such beings.

THE DEAD

The Anathema twist minds and souls, but they are still young and can perhaps be stopped. The dead are a far greater threat because they have so much power. Zombies and ghosts are minor troubles in small number, but when



facing an entire fleet crewed by such, even experienced sailors shake with terror. Worse yet are the horrors who lead them. Last year, the Silver Prince of Skullstone ordered some of his number to turn pirate and begin raiding ships from the Wavecrest Archipelago. He denied that his people were to blame and insisted on proof if he was to take action. At least, that's what we were told. I'm certain that monster knew exactly what was going on and that he simply wanted to watch good sailors die before putting an end to the latest of his sick games.

Regardless, we had a duty to defend our allies, so I was dispatched with a fleet of 11 triremes and my own *Swift Midday Brilliance*-class warship, *Dragon's Fury*, to go pirate hunting among the dead. Knowing the dangers of facing these horrors, we stayed in groups of four ships. The pirates mostly seemed to attack out of the fog banks. My own group escorted trading convoys through the fog for more than a month. That sort of duty is exactly what real naval warfare is all about, endless tedium, broken by heart-pounding moments when the watch calls out that he sees something. We had three false alarms, including one caused by barrels that must have been out there from some previous raid, another caused by a mat of sargasso weed and the third by the sighting of a whale.

It always starts the same. The watch up in the bow sees a hint of something in his spyglass, looks again and then makes a decision as to whether it's something real or just some pattern in the fog. He calls out the sighting, and the deck grows quiet as everyone looks where he indicates and those of us who can use the right Charms attempt to get a better look. If anyone else sees something, we begin to get ready. Oars are unshipped on the galleys, and I power up the engine on the *Dragon's Fury*. As quietly as we can, with padded oars and the engine on low, we move between the sighting and the convoy, and two ships slowly advance, knowing that we could hear the whistle of ballista bolts or the flash and crack of ancient weapons at any time.

After three false alarms, we caught a glimpse of a soot-black hull and leprous yellow sails. Then, the wind shifted, and we caught the stench. Even several hundred yards away, nothing else smells like a ship of the dead. Then, the watch called back the reason why the smell was so strong. There were three ships, not one. Two were going around us to the convoy, while the third and largest headed straight at us. This one was armed with those hellish animated weapons of undead bone. Then, I noticed that this wasn't just under the command of some undead thing or one of the twisted mortals that lives on Skullstone. Instead, standing in near the bow, in unmistakably ornate black armor was one of the deathknights. I'd heard tales of them, but had never seen one. No one has ever called me a coward, but I thought that I'd be sleeping in the depths with my mother before the sun set.

Our lightning ballista and their vile weapons fired. Then, the deathknight fired a ray of hellish blackness at us.

It only hit the railing, but the wood on part of it rotted before our eyes. I knew we could not face them, but I also saw that our sails were bigger than theirs and that the fog was thicker in the direction that they came from. I put the engines on full power and set a course directly around them — we did our best to look like we were fleeing for our lives, like any sensible sailors would. I knew that the ship beside us had little chance, but better to lose one than both. We fled away from them, directly into the wind. Then, when we were fully out of sight and heard the terrible sounds of battle and the keening of the undead behind us, we cut our engine and set the sails. Using my Charms, I doubled our speed, and we headed right back at them. Everyone was at their weapons, and we all maintained complete silence.

We got within 50 yards before I ordered everyone to fire. The lightning ballista and the heavy fire cannons all hit, as did my own elemental bolts and the flaming arrows from the marines. Then, before they had a chance to return fire, our ship struck theirs. The ram fitted on the front did terrible damage and destroyed the rear weapons just as they were moving to fire. The ship of the dead splintered like rotten kindling under the massive impact of the *Dragon's Fury's* First Age hull. Before the deathknight could recover from the shock of seeing its own vessel destroyed, we turned our fire upon our own ship. The other trireme was already badly damaged and one well-aimed volley was enough to break it in two.

Not waiting to see what the monster would do, we returned to the convoy and the two remaining ships. One of my triremes was slowly sinking, and the other was badly damaged, but one of the ships of the dead was nothing more than sinking fragments, and the other had a broken mast and only two functional weapons. I dispatched boats to rescue the survivors from the sinking trireme and then joined the marines who boarded the remaining ship of the dead. We swiftly dispatched all of the remaining undead and then took off at top speed for Abalone after we retrieved all of the surviving sailors. We had our prize, and I wanted to give the monster no time to recover and come after us. I am certain that I did not kill it, but for once, it lost a battle.

From all that I have seen, the dead and the monsters are that lead them care for nothing except spreading death and destruction. They have no ideology and no goals beyond massacre and gore. I am no mystic or priest, but when sailing the open ocean, I have occasionally felt Daana'd's touch in the way the warm wind carries the smells of land far to me and in the way that the dolphins ride our wake and in the wonders that I have seen when I have ventured into the depths. Creation is alive from the deepest undersea ravine to the highest peak that I have ever seen. The dead and their shadowlands are the antithesis of this life — like the foul denizens of the Wyld, they contain nothing but decay and corruption. We can likely never fully defeat the dead, but every battle we win helps hold them back.





CHAPTER FOUR

VOICES NOT OUR OWN



Dragon-Blooded engender both fear and respect in Creation's other inhabitants. However, the Children of Daana'd inspire particularly complex feelings. Their compassion and dedication earns them respect from their allies and followers, but this same determination, coupled with their ruthless adaptability, is the reason that many distrust the Aspects of Water and fear what they are truly capable of. Their versatility is one of the primary reasons for these mixed feelings. While Water Aspects who are clever and determined sea captains or diplomats are typically respected, even by their enemies, people often fear and loathe Water Aspects who are equally clever and determined thieves, pirates or bureaucrats.

MORTALS

JAHAMAR, SLAVE-TUTOR OF HOUSE PELEPS

For three generations of young Peleps, Jahamar taught them math and philosophy, and never before has one of their children so impressed Jahamar with his or her mind than did little Japhen. Quiet, yes, and a little ugly, perhaps, but quick of wit and sharp of mind. Kind, too, he was, never scolding Jahamar for doing his work well, and never demanding. Not like his father, not at all. Young Kijin was a beastly child I say, if an old man can speak his mind once before he is gone. Always hitting Jahamar and making jokes about his clubbed foot, never trusting that

Jahamar knew of what he was speaking. But enough of long ago. Jahamar would rather remember his good students, his kind children. Jahamar would rather remember little Japhen.

Once, little Japhen, only five, came running to Jahamar with tears running down his cheeks. He had beaten his cousin at Gateway, he told, and then his cousin had tossed the board and broke all little Japhen's favorite pieces. So Jahamar asks little Japhen, "Why do you cry, little Japhen? Did your foul little cousin strike you?"

"No, Jahamar, he broke my playing pieces."

"And are your parents so poor that they cannot buy you more little pieces to play with?"

"No, Jahamar," he says in his little voice, "my parents are very rich. But he broke them because I beat him."

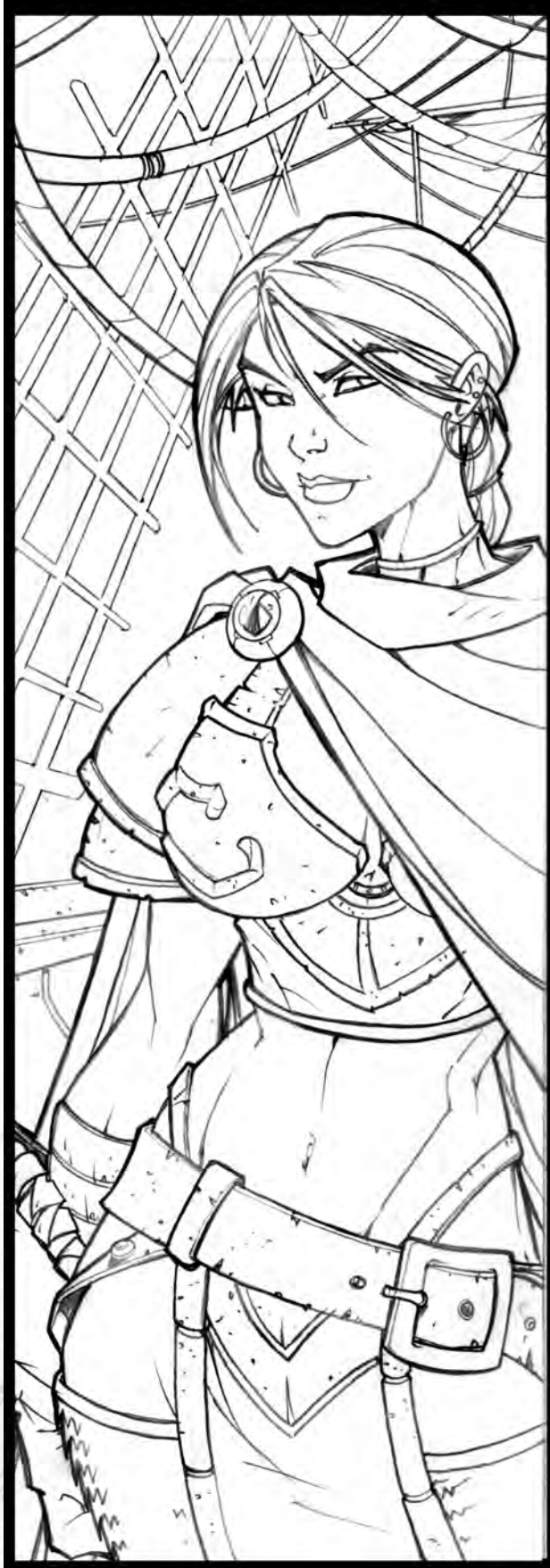
"Jahamar understands," I said stroking his hair. "Did you cheat?"

And little Japhen looked at me with such intensity, such anger, I thought he might hit Jahamar. "No," he growled. "I did not cheat. I never cheat. I can win every time without cheating."

And Jahamar looked at him and said, "Even if all your pieces were broken?"

"No. You have to have all the pieces to play."

"I see. And you could not use, perhaps, pebbles from the garden to play your game, the way the servant children play their games?"



“I guess you could.”

“Then, what did your monstrous little cousin do to you, other than ask you to beat him with pebbles?”

Little Japhen smiled, and Jahamar sent him back to play again with his cousin, but stayed to watch this time – even that little beast would not hit Japhen with Jahamar so near. Of course, little Japhen won with his pebbles, and Jahamar was happy for him and hoped he would remember that it is not beautiful jade playing pieces that make a victor.

UA, COURTESAN OF THE HOUSE OF BLOSSOMS IN NOBLE

With so many walking through my door and laying on my silks, I do not often recall them from one day to the next. But Peleps Japhen I remember. He was unattractive and uncomfortable and ever so sweet. It is so rare to have the opportunity to teach a Dynast, especially an Exalted one, anything: So often, they believe, quite wrongly in my experience, that they know everything. He trembled with apprehension as I laid him on the bed and gasped when I touched him, though I had warmed my hands with a hot towel. He was a blank slate, completely without experience. It was beautiful to witness him blossom by the end. Even in his untrained moment of passion, he was gentle, more gentle than most of his kind at least.

Of course, he loved me afterward. For a while, gifts came daily to the House of Blossoms. The others and I marveled over how utterly he was devoted to me and giggled at the kinds of things he had sent to me: flowers and sweets and all manner of things fit for a untouched schoolgirl. Each time, I wrote him a little note thanking him and wishing he would return. I shouldn't have, for it only prolonged the poor boy's infatuation, but I could not help myself. Had I been the girl he imagined in his mind's eye while looking wistfully from the prow of his ship, I would have loved him, too.

But we are all what we are, and we all have our place. It did not take long for his fellow sailors to set him straight, and he sent me a last gift, with a note of apology and of thanks. In a way, I will miss those gifts and love letters. Only the fantasies of the young can be so strong as to begin to feel real to even a well-ridden mare like myself. I hope he one day finds his virgin schoolgirl.

ASSISTANT COMMERCIAL LEGATE BALIS

TANDA OF CHERAK

Although Captain Ranya Petris of the air boat *Diamond Shadow* has traded fairly with this office for more a year, I wish to request that the magistrates pay special attention to any activities by this captain or her vessel while it is in the Coastal States. I have received

three separate reports of attacks on caravans by the *Diamond Shadow*. It is worth mentioning that all of these caravans were private ventures that were not associated with either the Guild or the Realm.

The most recent attack is typical. On a relatively foggy night, when the caravan guards could not see the air boat's approach, the *Diamond Shadow* positioned itself directly over its camp and sent at least a dozen soldiers down on ropes. Captain Petris was among this number and used her Charms to great effect. Arriving silently, she and her troops rapidly killed or disarmed and tied up the caravan guards. They avoided unnecessary bloodshed and did not take hostages for ransom. Instead, they rapidly gathered up all the easily portable valuables while the air boat landed nearby. Immediately after the *Diamond Shadow* landed, the entire compliment retreated to it, and it took off. They carried out the entire operation in less than 30 minutes, with the sort of precision that spoke of much practice and careful drilling.

In light of this revelation, I have two recommendations. First, we should obviously keep track of the *Diamond Shadow*'s movements when it is in or near regions controlled by the Realm, lest the captain decide to increase her purse at our expense.

However, there is another far more lucrative reason to watch her actions. She could make a fine paid agent. Her vessel has already precisely executed daring raids on several caravans. Her crew is loyal and well practiced, and she is extremely powerful. Should the need arise, she could perhaps be persuaded to raid targets that we would find convenient for her to attack.

BALO HAN, MORTAL IMMACULATE AT THE PINNACLE OF THE EYE OF THE HUNT

I am ashamed, for I was fearful when I was assigned to the Pinnacle of the Eye of the Hunt. It was not fear of facing the monsters of our time, for I knew I was yet young and would not be a member of the Wyld Hunt itself. I was fearful because I knew who was the master of the Pinnacle. The name Peleps Deled is still whispered at the Cloister of Wisdom and the Palace Sublime, both of which I attended due to the esteem of my prince-father in the eyes of the satrap of my homeland. A century after his leaving the Palace Sublime for the hunt, the stories of his ruthless zeal still pass from one generation of students to another. I believe the instructors allow such gossip because it makes a good cautionary tale about self-righteousness. For me, however, the tale was to become truth.

The Pinnacle sits against the face of a cliff, with 10,000 steps winding up the mountain to the gates. With each step, I meditated and prayed that the stories had grown over the years or that perhaps Peleps Deled had grown more wise than self-righteous in the intervening years. Upon arriving at the top of the stair and being

greeted by Deled himself, I knew instantly that my prayers were in vain.

Peleps Deled is imposing not only in his form, but in his air. I bowed and scratched the earth immediately, not merely because I was required to but also because I wished to hide the terror that must have been written over my face. He asked me my name and my purpose, and I gave it. He delayed whatever mission that had brought him to the gate, so that he might see, as he said, "What the Palace Sublime has sent me to work with."

I do not know what was more difficult to endure, the questions or the blows. He tested — no, the correct term is "interrogated" — me on my knowledge of the Immaculate Texts, and I feared my answers would be insufficient. He did not seem pleased with all of them, but he said, "There is no falseness in you that cannot be swept away by the truth," and I felt relieved. Then, however, he ordered me to spar with him, in order to "see if the instructors of the Palace Sublime have grown as lax in their teachings of the katas as they have their teaching of the Texts."

I took me weeks to recover from the beating I received that day. My left hand still does not close completely. Yet, after I could no longer stand to face his onslaught, he lifted me by the shoulder and even smiled a little, like a master looking at a dog who had performed a trick correctly. "You will do" was all he said before he sent me to the infirmary.

Since then, I have done my best to avoid meeting Peleps Deled as I perform my duties within the Pinnacle. I can only hope that when our paths finally cross, and they shall, he hasn't the time to investigate how my stay at the Pinnacle has improved me.

ARTERIS CLAND, SAILOR ON BOARD THE DRAGON'S FURY

I'd follow Captain Peleps Aramida into Hell and fight demon galleons under the green sun, and I'm not the only sailor on board who would do the same. The captain isn't just fearless and tough, she's the cleverest and most devious bitch, 'scuse my language, that's ever lived. I've never seen her not find a way to turn the tables on a bigger fleet or a better ship. She don't ever give up, and she always finds some new trick to save us when things go bad.

Of course, every sailor talks about how his captain is clever and always wins — what you got to remember is that this sort of talk is a lie. Unless she's only been at sea for a few months, every captain loses sometimes. One of the best things about Captain Aramida is how well she loses. She don't blame the crew unless we screwed up. I know some captains that give out lashings and half rations every time things don't go perfectly, even if it was their fault. Not her. First, she gets the dead buried and gives a damn good service if I might say so — lets me know that, when it's my turn to meet the deep, I'll be in good hands. Then, she talks to the rest of us. Her speeches at these times are all pretty



similar, but that's a comfort. She talks about determination, about not giving up and about doing right by both the Immaculate Dragons and our families back home. Not that she's soft on us, mind you — if you screw up, you get lashed and end up scrubbing the deck for a few weeks. Once the talking is over, then she gets up back to work and tries to find out how to win the next time. Captain Aramida loses occasionally, but I've yet to see her lose against a single foe twice. Once she sits down and thinks about what went wrong, she fixes it, comes up with some clever trick or other and whoever beat us before doesn't stand a chance during the rematch.

OTHER DRAGON-BLOODED

NELLENS BAEDEN

I have been a captain for a very long time, first in the Earth fleet under the husband of Peleps Eralin and then of my own vessels, *Naresh's Blessing* and, now, the *Grace of Daana'd*. In the years that I have worked for myself, I have outrun, outfought and outwitted the Lintha and the Guild and any number of others who see a small First Age vessel as a target worth the risk. As a Nellens, I have danced with members of every other house, playing games and switching sides all in the hopes of making my house strong and my coffers full. My business — its public face anyway — is that of a charter, and as such, I have ferried literally thousands of the scions of the Great Houses to and from An-Teng and other destinations where they would stretch their wings and spend their jade. It keeps me known to those of many houses, and when I pull through a rough storm or outpace a vicious pirate, I am both remembered and rewarded well. When I manage to do those things while at the same time delivering a whole crop of the Dynasty's finest safely to harbor, I am nothing short of a hero of the Realm, for a while at least.

I remember Peleps Japhen's Exaltation on my vessel, certainly. It was the only one I was ever witness to under such circumstances. Looking at the boy, I would never have guessed that he was well bred or that Daana'd would touch him. He was gangly and ugly and looked like a dog that'd been beaten one too many times. As I said, I was an imperial naval officer, and quite a few of my peers were of House Peleps. I can't imagine what these captains and admirals must have thought when they saw the boy sulking in a corner at a family celebration. Or rather, I can imagine, and it would not be pleasant, but perhaps amusing. Every house has its mice, as the saying goes. In any case, this low opinion of Peleps Japhen disappeared the moment his anima flared on the deck of *Naresh's Blessing*.

Dynastic children nearing puberty are told a great deal of what to expect should Exaltation come to them. Most of them forget it entirely once that moment arrives and they are, ever so briefly, consumed by their elemental

natures and brought forth as true Dragon-Blooded. I remember losing myself as I Exalted, feeling as if I had become liquid, formless and without limit. When I watched Peleps Japhen Exalt, his rail-thin frame quaking with pure Essence and his anima of crashing waves pushing back the real waves coming over the bow, I did not see him lose himself. He was afraid, I am certain of it, but his jaw was set. He was thinking, working through the experience with all the logic and knowledge he had at his disposal. Even as he faltered and a wave pushed through his anima and swept him from the deck, I knew he would be fine, that he would manage to attune himself to the sea. Peleps Japhen would survive.

That kind of raw talent with Essence and that kind of almost religious acceptance of lore and theory is wasted on any but a sorcerer. I am myself a sorcerer. I know. I also know how Peleps' feel about most sorcerers. So, I chose to act immediately, pulling in favors I had been owed since my days as a captain. I lobbied for the boy to be accepted at the Heptagram, and he was. I made sure to get reports of his progress, and when I realized he would make it, despite that painful incident with the summoning, I began writing Peleps Eralin. Her husband had taken a liking to me as a midshipman, and while I cannot go so far as to say she owed me any favors, the fleet admiral found it in her heart, and her interest, to have this young Peleps sorcerer made a member of the Earth Fleet.

"Why?" you might ask. Part of it is self interest, of course. A friend in any Great House is of value, especially if they owe you a sizable favor or two. But I truly like the boy. He is too quiet and perhaps too soft when it comes to mortals, but he has a keen mind and, by all accounts, is taking to mastering the First Age technologies of the *Wave-Cutting Wind-Racing Saber* with ease. We trade letters often, which not only keeps me acquainted with him, but with what is happening on his ship and, more generally, with the Earth Fleet. When I can spare the time and energy, I send him an infallible messenger to remind him he has a friend in Nellens Baeden. In his responses, I find something heartening, an authenticity that is not common among Dynasts, particularly those of House Peleps.

Whatever pretense on my part may have inspired our friendship, it is a real brotherhood now, and I would be crushed to have to end it. Not that I wouldn't should it come to that, but I would be heartbroken about doing so.

CATHAK MELADUS

I knew Peleps Japhen while I was studying at the Heptagram. Like so many of the other students, he was always thinking of theory rather than practice and digging through the oldest, dustiest tomes for the most esoteric of lore. In some ways, though, he was like me. He did not seem to fit in with the other sorcerers to be, never going to their parties or sneaking off for midnight trysts. Because

the only places to find solace were the libraries and laboratories, our paths crossed regularly.

He was quiet and withdrawn. We did not speak often, and when we did, it was always about lessons. I only ever saw him smile when he had decoded some ancient riddle or discovered some long forgotten scroll from the depths of the library. Nonetheless, I felt some kinship with him at times, particularly when the sounds of revelry drove each of us from our dormitories and into the library late at night.

The other students called him the Well-Bred Bastard. As near as I can tell from the way they talked about him, he was something of a pariah in his own household. Knowing what little I did of House Peleps, it made sense: Only the most unloved of that house are shipped off to the Heptagram to become sorcerers. I gathered though that this was perfectly fine with him; he did not seem to have any desire to be a part of his house, especially given the way Peleps Joro Kendal constantly badgered him. If he were my cousin, I would not like to meet him at the house harvest festival either.

When the accident happened, I think we all wondered whether it was merely random that Kendal was one those killed by the demon. For all his feigning loss of control, Peleps Japhen mastered every other task with ease — or at least with as much ease as any of our peers. Did he manage to hold onto the demon long enough to give it a single command? Even if he did, I cannot say that I would blame him.

I have not seen Japhen since our commencement ceremony. I heard that he was in the Earth Fleet. It might

be that he was destined for the imperial navy from the start, given that the Sea Witch holds more than a little sway, but I don't think so. When he left the Isle of Voices, he seemed as lost and as unhappy at the thought of returning home as he had throughout our schooling. I can only guess that Peleps Eralin or one of her subordinates heard of his unusual talent with sorcery, whether from an instructor or from someone else. In any case, I am happy he found a place, and should we ever meet again, I would be glad to call him friend.

SESUS KARATHAN TO SESUS CHENOW

There is absolutely no question that Ragara Takar is a highly effective and skilled bureaucrat, but he is also a danger to our house. His loyalty to the Realm as a whole is exceptionally strong and quite commendable, but he lacks the appropriate appreciation of the nuances of power and of the realities of the lives of the more elevated members of this and other houses. His posting in the Honest Assessors has been a complete and utter disaster. In his seemingly never-ending quest to uncover potential problems, he's managed to bring to light several special projects that would have better served the interests of both House Sesus and the Realm if they had remained forever hidden. While I cannot but admire his skill and thoroughness at finding and tracking down all manner of anomalies in the imperial financial records, I am certain that you also can understand that, occasionally, the needs of our house must come before some of the more trivial of the Realm's laws. Naturally, none of these



special projects directly threatened the safety or the security of the Realm.

The most troublesome of the projects that Ragara Takar's diligence brought to light were the sales of First Age weapons to both Great Forks and the Haltan Republic. While I am well aware that neither of these nations are allies of the Realm and that, in fact, the second state is the sworn enemy of one of our allies, neither of these states could provide any manner of credible threat to the Realm, and in both cases, the sales served the needs of our house. In the first case, we received large amounts of wealth and similarly large quantities of valuable intoxicants that we can sell to greatly enrich our house, and in the second case, I traded these weapons for a long-term supply of exceptionally rare poisons that our assassins need to conduct their business. Some of these poisons are completely untraceable, which allows these assassins to perform their work far more effectively than before.

The use of imperial weapons in these sales was also perfectly reasonable, as we needed to keep both projects from being discovered by our rivals in other houses. Selling off our own stocks of weapons would both weaken our house and alert our enemies that we were engaged in some important enterprise. By contrast, the imperial weapons stockpiles were extremely large, and the weapons we appropriated had not been used for more than two centuries. We covered our trail by altering the supply manifests that list these weapons.

Unfortunately, neither I nor anyone else involved in this endeavor counted on someone comparing these manifests to the maintenance checklists that are created every decade when armorers go down and check on the status of these weapons. I must accept full responsibility for overlooking the existence of these maintenance records. The care and dedication with which Ragara Takar performed his duties is quite exceptional, especially in someone so young. However, he does lack a certain flexibility that is vitally necessary for working with such sensitive records. One of my agents heard of the irregularities Ragara Takar uncovered shortly before Takar officially reported them. I met with him to try to argue the wisdom of leaving certain problematic secrets alone. He would not hear of it and went on at length about the danger to the Realm that such deals posed, both because they weakened us and strengthened the Realm's enemies. He completely refused to see the true subtleties of the situation.

As you know, Takar's family and his professional connections make him too prominent to simply dispose of. Also, my sources tell me that he is either a member of or has powerful allies in Scarlet Orchid and is therefore far too well protected to risk assassination. Since I cannot simply eliminate him, I am sending this message to you. The one factor that he neglected is the power our house wields in the Imperial City. I implore you to save our house from

disgrace and to make certain that Ragara Takar's report vanishes and joins the many other problematic documents that regularly disappear. In addition, I ask you to consider having him transferred out of the Imperial City and, if possible, out of the Realm entirely. His dedication is quite commendable, but he is perhaps not well suited for the complexities of internal politics. However, I can definitely see his talents being perfect for the rougher environment of the Threshold. Someone less concerned for his well-being might also suggest that House Sesus would benefit from his being posted to one of the more troubled locations of the Threshold, but I would not consider attempting to recommend such a course of action.

PELEPS DEHAM

In a life as long as mine, there are many successes and many failures. But far more than these are those things that can be counted as neither wholly successful or wholly unsuccessful. For me, Peleps Deled falls into this last category.

It was a time of spiritual trial for me. I realized, as my sister and her husband brought Deled into the world, that I would never do the same, having taken the robes of the Immaculate Order. It was not the physical love that produces a child I lamented, nor the desire to see my own blood a grown man. Rather, I felt robbed of the opportunity to give my wisdom to an individual who would follow it without question, who would hear in my words truth despite all the other voices vying for influence. So it was that I approached my sister and asked her of her plans for young Deled. As was common with her then, she had never thought much of it other than he would be tutored, then schooled, then hopefully Exalt and become a valuable member of our house. Seeing my opportunity, I asked her permission to groom him for the Immaculate Order, and she acquiesced. In later years, she would regret that decision, I think, and try to draw Deled away from the path I had chosen for him, but never so much that she was able to open a rift between us.

Deled took to the teachings of the Order with a wonder and respect I had never seen in a child so young. He embraced the Immaculate Philosophy as much as he was able to, and as he learned and grew, his love for it grew as well. At first, I was pleased by his contemplative nature, for it bode well for his life as a monk. In my pleasure, and because I was so often away because of obligations as an Itinerant, I failed to see his faith growing into zeal and his confidence growing into arrogance. Yet, I did not turn his course, for I believed that the Immaculate Order would be able to temper his less desirable traits. Perhaps I failed him in my absence — or by my presence, as I was often too kind because I wished to see him advance.

That day in the garden when I showed him the simplest kata of the Water Dragon Style, I hoped his failure

in performing it would illustrate that he was unready for the righteousness he felt. That the kata inspired his Exaltation is a wonder even I cannot explain, and it did nothing to make him more sublime. Again I was called away, however, and he would have to attend the Cloister of Wisdom alone. I hoped that he would find his balance within its walls. As I received missives from my sister, I knew my hopes were dashed. He had grown more zealous and self-righteous and had taken to dueling as a method of debate. Had I been there, I might have exerted influence on the instructors that were blinded by his knowledge and prowess, but again, my duties kept me away.

I made a final attempt at tempering Deled by ensuring his entry into the Order, using favors owed to me. I cannot say that I truly regret this, for the decision was made out of kindness and what I believed at the time to be wisdom. Yet, as he trained and his number of “accidents” increased, I felt responsible for what he had become. In the end, I drew one last favor and had Deled assigned to Mnemon Jorun’s Pinnacle of the Eye of the Hunt. If nothing else, he would be safely sequestered from those he could abuse and his righteous anger could be directed at those more deserving.

Now, Deled is the master of the Pinnacle and directs all of his resources and energy to ridding the Threshold of heresy and Anathema. While I am concerned for him, I know that his works, whatever his motivations, are good. The Realm is weakening, and as much as I would prefer that power follows wisdom, sometimes, the opposite is preferable.

Now that I have returned to the Temple of Daana’d in the Imperial City, I can try again with those children sent to me for schooling. This time, I shall be ever mindful of what unwatched students can become.

CATHAK TITUS

I saw Peleps Deled for the first time as he left the Palace Sublime to join us on our journey back to the Pinnacle of the Eye of the Hunt. I did not like him from that moment. He swaggered as he walked, and on his face, he wore a mask of arrogance and righteousness. He believed himself hand chosen to ride with the Wyld Hunt, which, in a way, was true, but not in the way he believed it to be. Part of me wanted to put him in his place then and there, to erase any notions he might entertain as to his own significance. But my duties would not allow it, so I endured his disdainful glances, as if officers of the legions were somehow unfit to do the work of the Immaculate Dragons, and brought him by land and sea and land again to the Pinnacle.

It was apparent from the outset that, though I was Mnemon Jorun’s second in the Wyld Hunt, Peleps Deled would surpass me in that old monk’s eyes. Fair enough. They shared their precious Order and Texts, and their lives were paralleled in ways mine could never be. I was not

there for the love of any monk. I was there to serve the Realm and to ensure its safety from gods and monsters.

Deled, I think, expected me to bow to his superior wisdom and accept the righteousness of our mission. I merely expected him to keep his mouth shut when around me. Certainly, he was an extremely skilled combatant and very powerful in the ways of his own Essence, but he allowed his beliefs to blind him to the sometimes hard compromises that must be made. This is the difference, I think, between a soldier and crusader. Only a soldier can see the larger goal and accept temporary defeats to achieve ultimate victory. A crusader such as Peleps Deled sees only the moment of victory and views any failure of his sword as a failure of his faith.

It amused me, Deled’s reaction the years of additional training he would have to undergo at the Pinnacle before he rode with his first hunt. But inevitably, he would be part of the Wyld Hunt, and he would have to bow to my orders. And he did so, though not without bristling and always delivering his own report to Mnemon Jorun after. I cannot argue with his skill, however, and he brought many enemies of the Realm to their knees. He was quite the effective tool in this fight.

Unfortunately, Mnemon Jorun could not see him as merely a tool. The Empress disappeared, and many of the resources we enjoyed from the Great Houses were withdrawn. Our mission was suddenly far more difficult than it had been, and our enemies far more numerous. Jorun realized this and realized his own looming age. He finally retired, returning to the Realm to have a few years of peace at the end of his life. I do not fault him for this. Even a career soldier such as myself would like to see a field of wheat that was not plowed by hooves and watered by blood. But I was not prepared for Jorun’s last act. He named Peleps Deled his successor as the master of the Pinnacle, not I.


Do not misunderstand. I am not jealous. Under the circumstances, the Pinnacle is a burden that would be unpleasant to bear. But I would have done so, for the Realm. Instead, I was asked to bow to a zealot who saw me as an affront to his blessed mission. So, I allowed him to think such, and I myself retired from the Wyld Hunt.

As I return to the legions to try and put them in order, I fear that Deled in his crusade will, in the end, cause more harm to the Realm than good. I hope I am wrong.

LEDAAL YANIK ON PELEPS ARAMIDA

I am a scholar of First Age artifacts, so I am well used to traveling to uncivilized and dangerous locations far outside the borders of the Realm to perform many of my studies. In the past, I have confined most of my expeditions to the relative safety of the inner portions of the East and the Southlands. The discovery of fragmentary ruins on the tiny island of Talas-Fal in the Far West was





the reason for my first journey to the West. I was apprehensive, but I also knew the vast amounts of knowledge that could be gained if the ruins there actually turned out to be the remains of a First Age defense station designed to hold off the Wyld. Only one such defensive border post has been previously found, and it had been covered in dense jungle for more than 500 years, so that what little survived the end of the Shogunate was almost completely destroyed by the harsh environment. Out in the furthest reaches of the West, the only forces that such sites have to contend with are water and the Wyld, and our few records indicate that such sites were specifically hardened against the destructive affects of both.

Because of the urgency of the mission, the imperial navy dispatched the *Dragon's Fury* captained by Peleps Aramida to carry myself and my assistants to Talas-Fal. We all realized that both speed and armaments were necessary for this investigation, since the Realm was far from the only group interested in such an installation. In addition to the Guild and various local powers all desiring the secrets of such a place, if the local fae heard about it and managed to find it first, they would most certainly attempt to destroy both it and anyone who had learned anything about the artifacts there. In short, we were in a race against time. The one thing we had on our side was a powerful artifact that protected the ship and everyone on it from the affects of the Wyld and would also supposedly help shield us from any attacks by the fae, though I was far from eager to test this last property.

My first impression of Captain Peleps Aramida was not terribly positive. She seemed to be a typical member of the military who was far more concerned with orders and discipline than with the necessities of scientific investigation. She also reiterated several times that she was ultimately in charge of the safety and security of this expedition and that, if she deemed it necessary, she would evacuate everyone at a moment's notice. When I protested, she informed me that the large Earth Aspect who acted as her second in command would, if necessary, pick me up and carry me back to the ship. Needless to say, we did not begin the voyage on the best of terms.

However, I am definitely prepared to say that my first impression was largely incorrect. She soon proved herself to be the most fiercely determined naval officer I have ever encountered. We faced weeks of swift sailing through the drenching summer rains of the Western monsoons followed by almost indescribably terrible conditions once we entered the Wyld. Although the Wyld's energies could not directly harm us or the *Dragon's Fury*, the rains of glass slivers and the living water were truly terrible. Captain Aramida never flinched at the danger, and her bravery and her constant presence and stern heroism kept even the youngest and most inexperienced members of her crew from panic. I have also never met anyone quite so devout

in her beliefs. She rarely spoke of the Immaculate Dragons and similar religious matters except during the prayers and other ceremonies that she led, but when she did, her deep faith was evident to all who heard her. Her unwavering belief in the Realm and in the Dragons caused the daily prayers that she insisted upon touching me like they haven't since I was a young child.

Although the mission itself was mostly a failure because the fae laid waste to the installation a few days before we arrived, due to the heroic efforts of Captain Aramida, only two members of my team died during the voyage, and the survivors managed to recover some potentially useful artifacts. I am planning on recommending her for a commendation, and I have learned new respect for naval officers from knowing her.

THE FAIR FOLK

SELCHIN OF CHIAROSCURO

Most Terrestrial Exalted are little more than children playing games of power and status. They can be impressively dangerous, but they have little sense, and our kind can easily manipulate them. However, a very few are worthy of respect. Ragara Takar is such a one. He is as subtle and as clever as the nobles I fled from centuries ago. I would have asked Iftlin to slay him decades ago, if only he was not so wretchedly useful. I deal with Ragara Takar as an equal, but I fear that he will someday become my master.

The mortals who live in Chiaroscuro do not trust us, but they love the services that we provide, and the Guild feels similarly. We trade information and pleasure for safety, sustenance and wealth. There is always the risk that someone with more anger than sense will set upon us in revenge for a service we supplied to his enemy, but we also have many who protect us because they know we could ruin them with a word.

Ragara Takar is not such a one. He keeps his secrets with a skill almost equal to our own and has yet to be tricked by a deal where we seemingly promise considerably more than we actually agree to. One regret I have when dealing with him is that, though there can be much joy to be had in playing games of advantage and power with those who are truly skilled at them —and he certainly has the skill — he lacks all joy in the endeavor. Nothing matters to him but the ultimate goal — he sees no fun in the getting there. He is frighteningly effective though. In the three decades he has been in Chiaroscuro, he has offered increasingly larger payments, both in goods and in promises of aid. However, he has also asked increasingly large favors. In some cases, the information he wanted seemed trivial or minor, but we later found out that we had made enemies powerful enough that only he and his connections with the Realm could protect us from retribution.

The worst was done before we truly understood the true extent of his guile. We gave him information about the new Guild negotiator's more exotic tastes, and Ragara Takar then used this information to blackmail this negotiator into giving significant trade concessions to the Realm. In return, we gained both wealth and further protection, but until the Guild's enmity dies down, we require this protection if we do not wish to always be on our guard. Also, for at least two decades, we will not be able to safely work with the Guild. In all ways, this deal worked to Ragara Takar's advantage. This is the first time a mere Dragon-Blood has bested us in this fashion. I would relish seeing him fall from power but would lose far too much to ever attempt to make this happen.

GLIMMERSWIFT, A FAE LADY FROM THE NORTHERN MIDDLEMARCHES

Both mortals and Dragon-Bloods puzzle me at times. I can see how naïve fools and those who especially value a particular individual would attempt to steal back captives

and slaves destined for our pleasure. I also know far too well about those who wish to steal valuables from us. However, very few do both. The only exception I know of is a Dragon-Blood who captains an air boat that I believe is named the *Diamond Shadow*. Her raids have touched both myself and my friend Restala once each. After hearing about the first raid from Restala, I was naturally curious about this atypical being and actually took time during my battle with her to ask her reasons and motives. She and her crew move swiftly and with great skill — they were thieves who knew exactly what they were doing and were far more skilled than the amusing ones who occasionally attempt to free captives and end up becoming our prey instead. When I asked why someone was both freeing captives and stealing the gossamer trinkets and similar baubles that mortals value so much, she yelled back something about how even thieves sometimes can't stomach certain things and flew off at great speed. I fear we may see more of this thief. Even if she does not sell the captives, I am told that the goods she collected would bring her considerable wealth, so I expect that she will make more raids in the future.





CHAPTER FIVE

RECORDS OF THE BEFORE



The Dragon-Blooded look back longingly to the lost golden age of the Shogunate and the heroic era immediately before that, when they overthrew the overwhelming might of the Anathema and ruled in their stead. Records from these eras provide both valuable instruction about the past and inspirational tales of an era when the Terrestrial Exalted transformed Creation and ruled its entirety with unquestioned authority. The Children of Daana'd are often particularly drawn to these texts, both because they have a natural interest in research and because some of the more obscure records and histories contain accounts of particularly unusual strategies. Not only do such ancient accounts provide Water Aspects new inspirations for their plans, they also serve as a reminder that sufficient flexibility combined with un-failing determination can reshape the world.

NOT LONG BEFORE THE END


From the collection of the private letters of Aritas Zhann, stored in the Imperial Archives

I have been in deep cover with Fire Jade for three months. Just as we suspected, its members are more than simply bandits. They are a coalition of mortals, a few God-Blooded and even a small number of our own kind who are actually attempting to overthrow the Solar Deliberative. They commit piracy and similar acts as both a way to obtain funds and to directly strike at those

noble houses and companies that the leaders of Fire Jade see as being most crucial to the maintenance of the power of the Solar Exalted.

Even though they had no reason to doubt the stories and the official thought-records of my trial and subsequent disgrace, getting into Fire Jade was quite difficult. Its members are exceedingly careful, as we expected from a group that has every member implanted with talismans that allow them to instantly die if they are captured. Shortly after it was made public, I went to a tavern frequented by Rajak Telanis, the captain of one of Fire Jade's small, swift coastal raiders. Your intelligence was completely correct — one of his greatest pleasures is playing Kadac. He's an exceedingly good Spring-class player, only a Summer-class player such as myself could regularly beat him. Naturally, I did not do that. I deliberately won slightly more than him but made certain to lose periodically and, therefore, kept his interest.

Since his ship was being completely refitted, he had five weeks in port. We played every day, and I gradually began to talk about the supposed injustices that had been done to me. He was intrigued, of course. It's not often that one of the Terrestrial Exalted is formally dismissed. I hated having to undergo that trial and the official disgrace, but otherwise, it would be too easy for the rebels to check the databases for the truth about me. A few quiet comments directed against the Solars produced



knowing looks and careful nods. After that, he invited me back to his place for drinks and more games of Kadac. We were well in our cups before he began to tell me about his feelings about the Solar Deliberative, and I am quite certain that he was far less drunk than he seemed. By the third week, he invited several “friends” over for multi-Kadac. Naturally, they were all in Fire Jade. The only one I recognized from our reports was Leja Aradi, the commander of Telanis’ attack group. Another of their number was clearly a Fire Aspect, but she was masked and made certain never to reveal her name.

Aradi was mostly silent — she listened carefully to our conversation and spoke just enough to encourage me to say more about my supposed true feelings about the Solar Exalted. I believe that I played angry and confused extremely well. When I finished talking and had lost the latest game because I was seemingly too upset, she began to talk. She explained about the many atrocities committed by the Solars and added personal accounts from herself and one of the other people there to back these up. I am certain that they would have tried to kill me if I had seemed at all hesitant or upset by what she was saying. Instead, I nodded appropriately and looked interested but skeptical.

You and I have both heard most of these stories before, but it was different hearing about the destruction of Tamar-Lak from someone whose parents died in the disaster. We live in a chaotic world, and it was difficult to blame these people for their feelings of disloyalty. They were merely responding to life in a deeply troubled era. At the time, I assumed that the real problems came from their leaders. My goal was simple: I would infiltrate their ranks until I could identify the people in charge, and then, I would report back, and the mighty Solar Exalted would either slay the wrongdoers or bring them to justice.

Within a few days, I was invited to Leja Aradi’s home, and we talked until late into the night about both my past and my future. She had a copy of the official thought-record of my trial and knew a great deal about me — these people are well more than they seem. While I am not now prepared to say more, even this small band of rebels and pirates has attracted the attention of some exceedingly powerful protectors, which is the only reason that this group continues to survive.

After warning me about the clearly profound dangers of joining them, Aradi continued to talk to me about the increasing excesses of the Solar Exalted and the dangers they posed to the entirety of Creation. I made certain to seem quite skeptical at first, then she told me of problems of which I had never heard. I began to do a bit of independent checking through various sources. The story of how Kal Bax literally cut down a group of young children who disturbed his tea by making too

much noise outside of his window is perfectly true, but I had previously only encountered it as a foolish rumor that every sensible person dismissed as an obvious lie. I have seen the daily records from Bax’s palace. Don’t ask how I managed that. He killed four children in cold blood and then calmly went back to his tea. That was only one of the reports I checked up on.

Information is being buried and hidden because the situation is considerably worse than it seems. According to the records I have seen, almost half of the Solar Exalted have become increasingly erratic. While mass murder and large-scale destruction are both thankfully rare, casual killing, treaty breaking, fits of blind rage and random brutality are all becoming increasingly common. These are not just our rulers, but the representatives of the holy Unconquered Sun, and large numbers of them are going increasingly mad. Worse yet, the ones who remain sane are clearly unwilling or unable to see the full magnitude of the problem, and at least some of them are concealing it from everyone else.

Regardless of what I was learning, duty naturally came first. My own talents, my knowledge and my Exalted state meant that they were quite eager to recruit me. After more talking, they gave me command of another of the small raiders. Several people I met hinted that this would be an interim position if I proved myself — Fire Jade desperately needed members who were Dragon-Blooded to power various artifacts. If I obtained its leaders’ trust, it looked likely that I could rise rapidly into the organization’s highest ranks. At this point, I still thought that I would give you the names of their leaders and justice would prevail.

After two months of living in deep cover, I commanded my own ship and had been on several raids. Four of our ships were sailing to attack a small cargo fleet coming out of Tzalti, but we abandoned this plan when we sighted a far larger fleet of ragged ships sailing away from Tzalti. One of the local Solar Exalted, a Dawn Caste called Contentious Sword was occasionally struck by violent madness, and his latest fit had been far worse than those in the past. After defeating a powerful demon that had attacked the city, he had continued to fight, attacking everyone nearby — he had even destroyed a pair of the enormous sky-glass towers. At this point, the populace had begun to flee in ships and skyships.

Most people simply hid and waited the trouble out, but once Contentious Sword calmed down, many of the residents decided that this city was no longer safe. We abandoned our planned raid and, instead, helped the refugees. I wish I had been able to tell them someplace safe to go, but now that I am willing to look beyond the carefully edited official thought-records, I worry that no place may be truly secure.

At this point, I began to question my loyalties. I well know that this is common in deep undercover work, but I also know that our world is sick and that the source of the sickness lies in its increasingly mad rulers. I have begun to hear rumors that others have begun to work against the Solars. I am writing you because I am asking you to join us. Joining us is far from a safe choice — more than one in ten of the people I have worked with for the past season are now dead. However, from everything that I have learned, it is the only moral choice. I do not know if we can succeed. Even with the military-grade vehicles and stealth systems we have, we still lose one ship, skyship or submarine for every three we send out. However, the horrors I write about are real. I am asking you to help us save the world.

DAANA'D AND THE QUEEN OF THE DEEP WYLD

What follows is an excerpt from the apocryphal text known as The Well Scrolls, named after the location in which they were found: a First Age well dug a thousand feet deep, about a league outside of Arjuf. Though it is confirmed that the scrolls date back to the early Shogunate, the author is unknown.

Daana'd locked forever the seal, and the Evil Ones would never again be free to corrupt beautiful Creation. Blessed are we for her kindness.

Daana'd began her long swim from the bottom of the bottomless sea, when upon her came the Queen of the Deep Wyld. Monstrous was the Queen of the Deep Wyld, and beautiful in all her terror. Daana'd stopped, unafraid, yet curious why this being would attack her, and she asked, "Why, creature of the Wyld, would you attack me? Is your life so long or terrible that you wish it ended now?"

The Queen of the Deep Wyld hissed and spat and writhed her serpentine form. She then sang, "You have come into my realm uninvited, Immaculate Dragon of Water, and I would have satisfaction of you."

Daana'd did not stir, nor raise her weapons. She said, "This is my realm, for I am the mistress of all the waters of Creation. Perhaps I should seek satisfaction of you for making so bold a claim over my holdings."

The Queen of the Deep Wyld hissed and spat and laughed with her many toothed mouth. She then sang, "Creation is that way, Immaculate Dragon of Water," and she flicked one hundred of her tails skyward. "Here is the Deep Wyld, and I am Queen," she sang.

Daana'd pondered for a moment. She had indeed felt the presence of the all-corrupting Wyld nearby, but her mission had been of such great importance for all of Creation that she had ignored it. Now, she sensed the chaos and thought that perhaps this monster was right. "Even so," said Daana'd, "there is water of Creation in your Deep Wyld, so this place is mine as well."

The Queen of the Deep Wyld hissed and spat and thrashed her mane of serpents. She then sang, "I am the Queen of the Deep Wyld. Here I birth my brood, who will one day sweep up and fill the waters of Creation." And as she said this, out of the darkness of those deep waters and into the light cast by Daana'd came a thousand thousand small, malevolent creatures with glass teeth and glowing tendrils.

Daana'd shook her head and looked at the small monsters with disdain. "Your brood is great, but they cannot give you satisfaction. Keep to your Deep Wyld, O Queen, and you shall suckle them to the end of time. Let them swim in my waters, and all shall die." And then she swept her sword through the waters of the Deep Wyld and a hundred hundred of the monsters died.

The Queen of the Deep Wyld hissed and spat and wrapped her coils around the remainder of her brood. She then sang, "Go now, away from here Immaculate Dragon of Water, I give you leave."

Daana'd sheathed her weapon and returned to her journey back to the surface, to tell all she had locked the seal. Blessed are we for her kindness.

This story is significant not only because it diverges from the depiction of Daana'd in the Immaculate Texts, but because it also hints at the tension with the Fair Folk culminating in the invasion by the Fair Folk Host following the Contagion at least 500 years after the writing of this text.

THE DEATH OF SAMAL ZOS

The following was published throughout the islands of the western Threshold, where the recently usurped Anathema still had many followers. No evidence that the events recounted are true has ever surfaced and it is unknown whether the Anathema Samal Zos even existed.

Let it be known that on the ninth day of Ascending Wood in the year of the Bull, the demon Anathema called Samal Zos is dead. For two centuries did this monster rape and pillage and bring more of the same terror that inspired the Great Usurpation to our Shogunate. Now, he lies dead at the bottom of the ocean, and Creation is safe from his depredations.

Let it be known that it was the servants of Immaculate Dragon of Water, of the Seaborn Monastery, who brought the Anathema to justice. Though many of their number fell under the vile sword of Samal Zos and those who served him, the monks of the open ocean would not allow Samal Zos to escape.

Let it be known that, under cover of darkness, the fleet of Samal Zos came upon the Seaborn Monastery and, with weapons of the Old Realm, attempted to kill and devour its pious inhabitants and sink its wisdom to the ocean floor. In such despicable subterfuge, Samal Zos



proved why it was that the Old Realm fell and his kind were dethroned and exterminated.

Let it be known that it was spirits of the water, loyal to the Celestial Bureaucracy and allied with the Seaborn Monastery that alerted the monks of the attack, and by their loyalty, the monks were able to man the weapons of the Old Realm upon their own vessel and mount a counterattack. Even as Samal Zos and his hordes boarded the Seaborn Monastery, his fleet was obliterated and will never again terrorize the sea.

Let it be known that the Immaculate monks of the Seaborn Monastery, mortal and Exalted alike, met their attackers upon the deck and fought them to a man. Their faith in the Immaculate of Water and the martial skills of the Immaculate Order gave them wisdom and might enough to turn the horde back and send it screaming into the sea to drown.

Let it be known that Samal Zos himself was defeated in single combat by Lovos Sar, Monk of the Fifth Coil and Master of the Seaborn Monastery. Lovos Sar and Samal Zos fought until the coming of dawn, when the rising of the sun blinded the dark pirate and Lovos Sar crushed his skull and tore his heart from his chest.

Let it be known that the body of Samal Zos was thrown from the deck of the Seaborn Monastery to be devoured by the scavengers of the sea as it sank to its final resting place.

TURN ABOUT

From military diaries stored in the House of Bells
I was one of the talon of warstrider troops who led the army in its battle against the demons. Although it has been a long three months, this will be the final battle of this wretched war. I am please that I will soon be home with my husband and children in the underwater district of Chiaroscuro. Before I do that, though, I must recommend Chuzei Lekan Nuranis for the posthumous Jade Sunburst. His family deserves this medal in recognition for his heroic sacrifice.

We had to march literally to the borders of hell itself to defeat the demon-army raised by the Unclean, Jalia Khrast. As always, the battle began suddenly. One moment, my shield-friend Malisp Vekis stood before me. The next, a writhing mass of hair-fine tentacles reached into the heart of his warstrider and ripped off pieces of his flesh. It all happened so fast that I didn't know until he began to scream. I slew the horror that had killed or maimed him, but more were always coming.

Eventually, we had fought our way through the hordes of erymanthoi and luminita and faced the Anathema who led this army. As expected, she destroyed the first attack wave. Just as she dispatched the last of them, the two Sidereals with us took the lead, and along with a dozen warstrider troops, they attacked a woman dressed



in robes of shining gold. She clearly led this twisted army. Even while holding off two Sidereal Exalted, every few seconds a thin thread of darkness would leap from her hand and destroy one of the warstriders. During this push, I joined the other troops who formed a perimeter around the Unclean and the portion of our force that was attempting to slay her. The intensity of the fighting against the hordes of demons who attempted to come to her aid meant that I caught only glances of the battle going on behind me. However, I will never forget what I saw. Chuzei Lekan's warstrider suffered one broken leg and fell, but he seemed largely unhurt. Shortly after this, I heard a cry of triumph from the Unclean as one of the two Sidereals fell. I don't know if he was dead or simply badly hurt, but I could see the tide of this portion of the battle poised to turn against us. In that instant, before the Unclean could press her attack, Chuzei Lekan acted. I watched as he dragged his warstrider's light implosion bow within three yards of the Anathema. She was still wrestling the other Sidereal, but I could tell that the creature was mostly just playing with the Sidereal, confident that she could win at any time.

Instead of firing the light implosion bow, I watched in horror as Lekan struck the weapon's Essence reservoir, causing it to instantly overload. Lekan was positioned so that the Unclean's body shielded the remaining Sidereal from the blast. The explosion knocked down almost everyone except the Anathema and the Sidereal and caused the nearby demons to pause in their attack. The Anathema was naturally still alive, but she was badly hurt, and before I was forced to turn back to fighting demons, I saw the Sidereal begin to shred the Unclean with a blur of precisely directed blows. I think that all Water Aspects would do well to remember Lekan Nuranis' heroic sacrifice. We may lack the martial prowess of the most powerful gods and demons, or even the Sidereal Exalted, but opportunity is like a lever. Wait for the precisely correct moment, and our efforts can be greatly multiplied in effect, and we can change the world with a single blow. The price he paid was high, but I am convinced that his effort helped to save Creation from being overrun by the hordes of Malfeas.

FROM A REPORT BY UDAN ODAN,
EYE OF THE WESTERN SHORE AND CAPTAIN OF
THE WAVE-CUTTING WIND-RACING-SABER

The following report is recorded on a sound-stone in the vaults of the Imperial Naval Library and was recently transcribed by Cadet Peleps Japhen while completing the Histories and Linguistics portions of his midshipman's training

It is with great concern that I stand here before you today. That the Fair Folk grow bolder every day cannot be argued any longer. For two centuries, I have patrolled

the Blessed Isle and never before has a pirate ship of any stripe, even a thrice-damned fae vessel such as the *Dreaded Dawn*, dared to run aground and its crew walk our shores. Yet, it has happened, and while I can say with all certainty that the transgressors have paid for it dearly, I know that it is not the last act of boldness on the part of the Fair Folk we shall see in our time.

In the months since the last Calibration, I had overheard more and more stories of the *Dreaded Dawn* in the waters close to our shores, closer than I would like. At first, I dismissed it as nothing more than scurvy visions or port gossip, since in all the time I have served as Eye of the Western Shore, I had never encountered this *Dreaded Dawn*. Nonetheless, I knew better than to ignore these rumors, and I kept an ear in every port. Rumors have a way of coming true, especially where the Fair Folk are concerned: They like the sounds of their own names, I think, and if the *Dreaded Dawn*'s presence did not inspire the whispering of his name, I knew the opposite would soon hold true. As such, I enacted my privilege and engaged a number of local sailors as informants. The jade spent on these eyes and ears was well worth the expense.

I was informed of the first confirmed victim of the *Dreaded Dawn* two weeks past, just following the Rite of Spring Blossoms. A mortal sailor on a fat-bellied merchanter called the *Prospect* came to me with news that his captain, while passing through the Western Teeth en route to Eagle's Launch, spied another merchant vessel drifting without sail or anchor among the rocks. The captain of the *Prospect* attempted to approach the vessel, in order to loot it I am sure, but was driven away by what my informant called "ghostly moans." After ordering the captain of the *Prospect* arrested for violation of maritime law — as, by his own admission, he failed to seek out survivors or even report the wreck to the Port Authority — I immediately piloted the *Wave-Cutting Wind-Racing Saber* into the Teeth to investigate.

At this point in my report, I believe it necessary to inform the board as to the nature of the fae pirate vessel called the *Dreaded Dawn*, as some of you are only recently returned to the Blessed Isle from the River Province. The *Dreaded Dawn*, which may in fact be the name of both the vessel and its captain, appeared in the waters off the western shore of the Blessed Isle two years ago. Up until recently, it has been little more than a night-rhyme among the sailors and docksmen. In the past six months, however, more and more vessels have reported sightings, and a number of ships — no less than nine merchanters and two of the Shogunate's own cutters — have disappeared in the regions where those same reports took place. By nearly all accounts, the *Dreaded Dawn* is a massive warship of a size equal to our most advanced First Age vessels that's the color of the mist that sits on the sea in the morning. Its sails are gossamer and seem to be



driven by a wind that does not fill the sails of mortal vessels, and it has, by some counts, a thousand oars. I can tell you now that these eye-witness accounts are not merely false, but fall far from the mark in attempting to describe this monstrosity of the Wyld.

Allow me to continue.

Upon the dawn of the following day, we located the drifting merchant ship in the Teeth. It had run aground on one of the larger reefs but had not quite managed to sink itself. I immediately employed the Tiger Shark Armor Squadron to investigate the wreck. Just as the team began to emerge from the water and search the vessel, a strange mist began to coalesce around the Teeth. Within moments, visibility was reduced to a mere hundred meters, and we lost sight of the Tiger Shark Armor Squadron. A few moments later, we heard them however. Never before in all my years of humble, loyal service commanding men to rush headlong into death to defend our Isle have I heard such screams: terror, anguish and, if I am not mistaken, bliss were all wrapped up in a single blood-chilling cry. I attempted to signal the team with both flare arrows and screamers, to no avail. Once the screams ended, there was silence. We were blind and deaf for an uncertain length of time. Then, the mist began to thin, and the *Dreaded Dawn* appeared before us.

It was... monstrous. There is no other word to describe the *thing* — it was no ship, my lord — that emerged from the whiteness and crawled its way over the surf toward us. The stories were wrong. It was twice the height and breadth of our grandest warship, with masts reaching so far above I lost the crow's nest in the mists. And the oars. They were no oars, but arms. A thousand would be a conservative count, and each one dipped into the water with webbed hands and drove the terrible vessel forward. On the prow, where any other ship would have had a ram fashioned unto a siren or water dragon, there was a spiral of tentacles that writhed and moved. When they opened, like a blossom grown in Malfeas itself, there was a maw at their base. All the while, we could hear the constant yapping of wicked thing — hobgoblins, no doubt — upon the deck.

Despite the terror this monstrosity inspired in my men, I was able to command them to the task of arming the implosion bows. We fired on the *Dreaded Dawn* three times. Each strike merely fell off its hull. As it closed, the mists began to thicken again, and by the time it was aside us, we could not see it, though it must have been nearly close enough to touch. The yapping of its crew faded swiftly, far too swiftly for even the vessel to be retreating, and soon, the mists had lifted, and the *Dreaded Dawn* was nowhere to be seen.

We were unable to recover either the men or their tiger shark armor, nor did we find any bodies, let alone survivors, from the merchanter.

No, my lord. We left the area immediately following our search of the area.

Yes, my lord. I am certain this is only the beginning. The *Dreaded Dawn* will return to the Blessed Isle.

Translator's note: Later accounts indicate the Dreaded Dawn did indeed return to the Blessed Isle during the Fair Folk's invasion during the Contagion. No evidence was discovered that it was destroyed when the Empress took command of the Isle's defenses and defeated the invading fae. A report submitted by merchants of the Guild, and therefore suspect, suggests a sighting of the Dreaded Dawn as recently as RY 694.

STORM WARNING

From a thought-record recovered in the ruins of Meru

The situation in Crystal continues to worsen. I implore you to further aid. The affects of the Contagion were surprisingly mild here. Slightly more than a quarter of the population is still alive, and most of the survivors are adults in good health. Unfortunately, my previous reports of Fair Folk incursions greatly underestimated the severity of the problem. I have just returned from what may well be my final journey to meet with the local fae.

I am loathe to admit having broken several laws by having such direct contact with our enemies, but in these desperate times, I stand willing to receive whatever sanction you see fit to levy. The situation is far too grave to deny knowledge merely to protect my reputation. In my own defense, I must remind you that, out here near the borders of Creation, it is best to gain whatever knowledge we can of the many threats facing us. Despite the illegal nature of our embassy, we kept standard contact protocols — the embassy is a full 100 miles north of Crystal in the uninhabited wilderness near the border of Creation. Located in a minor Demesne, their embassy is a horrifying creation of multicolored glass inhabited by a pair of nobles and innumerable deformed and twisted servants. I have regularly visited the embassy every other month for the last two decades.

The nobles have always been haughty and far from helpful, but these negotiations have perhaps averted several incursions. Accomplishing this goal generally proved to be relatively simple — regular demonstrations of our weaponry convinced them of the danger our military artifacts posed to them without the necessity of risking any of our troops in battle. In addition, I decided to dispose of the worst of our convicts, mostly Anathema cultists and demon worshipers, by offering them to the fae. The offerings clearly made the local nonaggression pacts far more tempting, and performing them only rid us of individuals who we would have executed anyway and who now serve as useful deterrent against others contemplating these heinous crimes. In return for the lives of

these vile wretches, we have gained an unusual degree of peace and safety. I alone negotiated this deal, so if I should survive to bear the consequences of my actions, no one but I should receive punishment.

These past deals have kept relations strained but open between my district and the local fae. Even as the Contagion killed three out of four people, relations with the Fair Folk remained strangely peaceful. Recently, even the minor raiding that this combination of threats and payment had been unable to stop greatly decreased. In the previous four months, there has only been one incursion by the fae, and that was quite small, and the raiders were all rogue hobgoblins who were relatively easy to dispatch.

The reason for this lack of trouble became clear during my most recent visit. As soon as we came in sight their citadel, my aides and I turned and fled. The reality monitoring and control stations had gone down during the Contagion—I assumed that the personnel there had

all died and planned to train replacements as soon as order was fully restored. I was wrong. The embassy was in the midst of force-90 Wyld incursion that stretched as far as I could see. In front of this seething chaos was the largest force of hobgoblins I have ever seen. There were at least 250,000 and possibly far more. Abandoning the captives to their fate, my aides and I fled, hoping that one of us would get back to Crystal to send a warning. Both of my aides died when they were overwhelmed by flying hobgoblins. I was able to use Stormwind Rider to escape.

An invasion is coming. They think us weak and unprepared. I suspect that it will happen within the next day or two, which is why I am sending this message to you via my swiftest courier spirit. I am certain that the invasion will encompass far more than this local district and the city of Crystal and suspect that the plan is to attack the entire North — or perhaps even all of Creation. I urge you to prepare for the worst.

May the Five Dragons protect us all.





CHAPTER SIX

MIRACLES OF DAANA'D



Water-ascpected Essence is both powerful and subtle. It combines brutal strength with the ability to enhance both the cleverness and the charisma of its wielders. Bringing together the raw physicality of punching and wrestling with the ability to carefully gain advantage in a complex political situation makes Aspects of Water exceedingly formidable opponents. Water Aspects can be mighty boxers, skilled bureaucrats, insightful detectives, daring thieves and inhumanly skilled sailors.

This chapter details the Charms and artifacts used by Aspects of Water. Some of the Charms herein are passed from teacher to student at the House of Bells and the Spiral Academy, while others are in general use or were developed and refined by the many Water Aspects who are sailors. However, while they are best known for their prowess at sea, their abilities allow even Water Aspects who never set foot on a ship to be formidable opponents and invaluable allies.

BRAWL

BONDS OF UNBREAKABLE ICE TECHNIQUE

Cost: 3 motes, 1 Willpower
Duration: Essence in turns
Type: Supplemental
Minimum Brawl: 3
Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Riptide Method

Just as ice on a frozen sea can hold a ship fast in place, the character can use bonds of Essence to maintain a hold on an opponent. The character makes a hold attack on her opponent normally and uses this Charm. If the hold attack is successful, then, at the beginning of the next turn, the character can let go and act normally. The opponent will remain held as if by the character for an additional number of turns equal to the character's Essence score. The opponent can attempt to break free normally, and all such attempts are made as if against the character. Even if the opponent cannot break free, once the duration of this Charm is up, he is automatically freed. The character can use this Charm to immobilize multiple opponents one after the other and can enhance the hold by placing this Charm in a Combo.

CRUSHING GLACIER PRANA

Cost: 10 motes, 1 Willpower
Duration: Essence in turns
Type: Supplemental
Minimum Brawl: 5
Minimum Essence: 4
Prerequisite Charms: Bonds of Unbreakable Ice Technique
 The character can now also maintain a clinch after she ceases to touch her opponent. The character makes a

normal clinch attack and uses this Charm. If the clinch attack is successful, then, the next turn, the character can let go and act normally. The opponent will continue to be crushed by waves of Essence for an additional number of turns equal to the character's Essence score. The opponent can attempt to break free normally, and all such attempts are made as if against the character. Even if the opponent cannot break free, once the duration of this Charm is up, the opponent is automatically freed. The character can use this Charm to attack multiple opponents one after the other and can enhance the clinch by placing this Charm in a Combo.

SMASHING TIDAL WAVE TECHNIQUE

Cost: 3 motes + 3 motes per additional target, 1 Willpower

Duration: Brawl in turns

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Brawl: 5

Minimum Essence: 4

Prerequisite Charms: Crushing Glacier Prana

Just as a tidal wave can crush many people at once, the character can attempt to hold a number of targets equal to his permanent Essence. In addition, this attack can be made at a range of (Essence x 5) yards. The opponents can be all together in a single group or standing separately — so long as all opponents are in range, the player rolls normally for his character to attempt to place each of them in a hold. The player rolls each hold attempt separately. Unless they break free, all opponents are held for a number of turns equal to the character's Brawl score. All such attempts are made as if against the character who activated this Charm. Once the duration of this Charm is up, all opponents are automatically freed. The character must maintain these holds as if he were maintaining normal holds. Taking any other non-reflexive action automatically frees everyone effected by this Charm.

SLIPPERY ESCAPE METHOD

Cost: 1 mote per two dice

Duration: Instant

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Brawl: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Drowning Embrace

As water flows past all obstacles, the character can escape from clinches and holds by literally flowing through the arms of her opponent. For each mote of Essence spent on Slippery Escape Method, the player adds two dice to the roll for her character to escape from clinches and holds. In addition, the player can also add this same bonus to any Larceny roll made to escape from bonds or for any Athletics roll made to squeeze through tight spaces. The character cannot spend more motes on this Charm than her permanent Essence.

SWIFT STREAM PRANA

Cost: 2 motes

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Brawl: 4

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Slippery Escape Method

Like a stream of water runs rapidly past stationary obstacles, the character can use this Charm to allow his player to make a reflexive roll for the Dragon-Blood to escape from a clinch or hold or to slip out of bonds. Regardless of whether this roll succeeds or not, the character can then act normally in the turn with no penalty to his dice pools. This Charm can be placed in a Combo with others that can be used to increase his chances of successfully escaping.



DISARMING STRIKE PRANA**Cost:** 3 motes, 1 Willpower**Duration:** Instant**Type:** Simple**Minimum Brawl:** 4**Minimum Essence:** 3**Prerequisite Charms:** Become the Hammer

Even the most skilled brawlers know the difficulties they have when facing well-armed opponents. This Charm allows a character to reduce the difficulty of an attempt to disarm her opponent by 1. This Charm does not allow the character to take or break the weapon. It only allows her to make a barehanded strike that will cause the weapon to fly out of the opponent's hand and land (5 + 1 per additional success) yards away. The character can choose in which direction the weapon will land.

BUREAUCRACY**FINDING THE WATERS' DEPTHS****Cost:** 2 motes**Duration:** Instant**Type:** Simple**Minimum Bureaucracy:** 3**Minimum Essence:** 2**Prerequisite Charms:** None

The Dragon-Blooded of the Realm frequently buy and sell goods and negotiate agreements much like ordinary mortals. Since most deals are accomplished through elaborate haggling, this Charm is invaluable. It instantly allows the character to know if the person she is bargaining with has reached the limit of the price she is willing to pay or the general degree of concessions she is willing to make. In addition, the Charm allows the character's player to make a roll to determine if the target is approaching the limit she is willing to spend or agree to or if this limit is far beyond what the character is currently asking. A single success on a Wits + Bureaucracy roll allows the character to know if the current offer is half or more of her target's maximum or minimum offer, two successes allows the character to determine her target's limit within 10 percent, and three or more successes allows the character to exactly determine the target's limit.

SPARKLING FOUNTAINS OF ELOQUENCE**Cost:** 1 mote per two dice**Duration:** Instant**Type:** Simple**Minimum Bureaucracy:** 3**Minimum Essence:** 2**Prerequisite Charms:** Finding the Waters' Depths

This Charm lends special timbre and eloquence the character's voice for the purpose of convincing someone to buy an item or to agree to a deal. So long as the roll is being made for one of these two purposes, the character can

improve her Bureaucracy dice pool by two dice for every mote of Essence spent. The character cannot more than double her Bureaucracy Trait with this Charm, and she must pay the full motes of Essence even if she can only raise the Trait by a single die.

DISTRACTION OF THE BABBLING BROOK**Cost:** 4 motes, 1 Willpower**Duration:** Instant**Type:** Simple**Minimum Bureaucracy:** 4**Minimum Essence:** 2**Prerequisite Charms:** Sparkling Fountains of Eloquence

The Dynasts of the Realm must regularly engage in trickery to preserve their ancient empire. One of the keys to such trickery is convincing someone to agree to a deal without looking too closely at the fine print. This Charm increases the difficulty for a character to discover hidden traps in a contact or to be able to locate hidden defects in merchandize the character is offering for sale. In all cases, the tricks or traps must be reasonably subtle. This Charm will not cause someone to sign a contract to sell themselves instantly into slavery when they think they are signing a contract to purchase a villa, nor will it cause a character to overlook the fact that the horse she is buying only has three legs.

However, if noticing a problem would require a roll, this Charm adds 1 to the difficulty of the Wits + Bureaucracy roll needed to discover the problem. This Charm has no effect on the Intelligence + Bureaucracy the character's player can use to attempt to further conceal such problems. As a result, the most subtle of the hidden problems become almost impossible to find, while problems that are more obvious are simply slightly less easy to spot. This Charm only works on a single target. If several people are examining the item or contract, then the character must use it on each of them separately. Also, the target must be examining the item or contract while the character is present for the character to use this Charm.

DASHING BROOK METHOD**Cost:** 4 motes, 1 Willpower**Duration:** One task**Type:** Simple**Minimum Bureaucracy:** 5**Minimum Essence:** 3**Prerequisite Charms:** Geese-Flying-South Administration

Regardless of whether they are working for or against a character, large bureaucracies almost always move quite slowly. This Charm does nothing to sway the outcome of a petition or to dictate the success of an edict, but it will cause any single request to be processed at the maximum possible speed. Reduce the time needed by 10 percent for every success, to a minimum of 10 percent of the unmodified time. In the most extreme cases, a petition that would normally take several days to be resolved requires only a few hours.



INVESTIGATION

TAMPERING DETECTION TECHNIQUE

Cost: 2 motes

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Investigation: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Indisputable Physical Analysis Technique

A character using this Charm can instantly tell if an object has been tampered with and how the tampering was done. If a lock has been picked, forced or opened with any form of magic or if a document has been altered in any way or if a signature or seal has been forged, this Charm will reveal both the changes and the method by which they were accomplished. Each use of this Charm reveals all changes to a single object that have been made in the last year. This Charm does not reveal who made the changes and only gives general information about when the tampering was performed, but it will identify everything from a crude lock-picking to a use of the Solar Charm Lock-Opening Touch.

CLEAR WATER PRANA

Cost: 5 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Investigation: 5

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Tampering Detection Technique

When a character examines a room or a similar-sized location to determine what occurred there, one of the greatest risks is overlooking details that have been deliberately concealed or clues that have been hidden. This Charm enables the character to find everything that was deliberately hidden or concealed in a space no larger than five yards on a side. When the character uses this Charm, a tide of Essence sweeps through the area and glows briefly when it encounters anything that has been deliberately hidden. If the character is searching several small rooms or one large room, she must use this Charm multiple times to cover the entire area. Also, there is no guarantee that something that has been hidden in the room has anything to do with the events in which the character is interested. If the character uses this Charm in a room where a murder was committed, she might just as easily turn up the small cache of opium the victim had stashed under the floorboards. Also, while the Charm automatically detects items hidden by mundane means, to detect items hidden using Charms or sorcery, the character's player must make a successful resisted Perception + permanent Essence roll against the Essence of the individual who used the Charms or sorcery. It cannot discover matters concealed by Celestial Circle Sorcery or some equivalent or greater power.

EYE OF THE ENLIGHTENED READER

Cost: 3 motes

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Investigation: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Indisputable Physical Analysis Technique

This Charm does not help the character find the sources he is looking for, but it does provide equally important information about those sources that are useless to the character. The character need only touch a book, scroll or other manuscript, concentrate on the information he seeks and then use this Charm. In an instant, the character will know if the document he is holding actually contains the desired information. Of course, specifying a particularly broad category of information, such as "The Realm," can provide general information that more specific requests can miss. However, such generalities may be useless. In contrast, asking if a book contains a biography of some particular person will instantly reveal if the book contains such information, but it does nothing to let the character know that this same book also contains useful anecdotes about the same person buried in the biographies of several other famous figures.

INFORMATION CARRYING TIDE

Cost: 4 motes

Duration: Instant

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Investigation: 5

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Eye of the Enlightened Reader

When confronted with a great library or some other large collection of books and/or other records, the primary challenge is winnowing through the information to find the few grains of wheat amidst the vast amounts of chaff. When a character uses this Charm, an invisible tide of Essence flows outward and causes the most relevant and useful materials within the collection to glow softly. This Charm reduces any difficulty penalties to Investigation rolls made because the Exalt is looking through large numbers of books or other written records that are poorly organized. This Charm reduces these penalties by the character's permanent Essence but cannot lower the difficulty of a roll below 1. It merely makes looking for information among a pile of random tomes no more difficult than seeking it among the best organized and cataloged library in the Realm. However, if the desired information cannot be found in the library the character is looking in, this Charm will not suddenly cause it to be present. Instead, the character will merely be certain that this information cannot be found in the collection of manuscripts.

LARCENY

NAKED THIEF STYLE

Cost: 2 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: One scene

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Larceny: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Resetting Tumblers Technique

Sometimes, the most useful time to be able to pick a lock or open a barred door is when no one is expecting the character to be able to do so. This Charm allows characters to pick locks, untie bonds, unbar doors and lock or unlock all manner of non-magical locks without any sort of tools or equipment. Regardless of whether the character would need a set of fine steel lock picks to finagle a sturdy lock, a paper thin saw to cut through the bar on a door or simply a pry bar to jimmy open a window, this Charm allows the character to attempt the feat without any tools by creating temporary tools made from solidified Essence. While this Charm does not otherwise aid the character when opening a lock, it can be successfully used in Combos with Charms that do. The character must use this Charm once per lock or other obstacle — for example, if a door has both a bar and a lock, the character would need to use this Charm twice.

INSTANT DISGUISE PRANA

Cost: 4 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Larceny: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Naked Thief Style

In emergencies, even the most skilled thieves and spies lack the time to adequately prepare a disguise. While this Charm does not allow the character to disguise herself more thoroughly than normal, it does allow her to disguise herself as well as if she had a full set of disguise makeup and to do so inhumanly rapidly. In a single minute and without any equipment, a character can use this Charm to disguise herself as well as if she had no shortage of time or equipment. The character can change her hair color and the shape of her nose and make other similar changes, but she cannot exceed the limits of ordinary disguises — she cannot make herself noticeably shorter or thinner or perform other normally impossible changes. Also, the disguise produced by this Charm is no better than any other created by the character. It can simply be accomplished faster and without penalties for lack of equipment. Although the Charm requires only a minute to perform, the effects last for one full scene. This Charm in no way alters a character's clothing or accoutrements.

NEW VOICE TECHNIQUE

Cost: 2 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Larceny: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: None

This Charm allows the character to perfectly imitate someone else's voice for an entire scene. In addition, also allows the character to imitate the sound of any animal, spirit or other creature, as well as any other noise that the character can perceive. The character must have heard the voice or sound she is attempting to duplicate at least once, and she must correctly remember the sound she is attempting to duplicate. To do so, the player must make a successful Perception + Larceny roll for her character. The difficulty of the roll varies depending upon how familiar the character is with a sound and how complex the sound is. Remembering the sound of a friend's voice is difficulty 1, while remembering the voice of a three-mouthed god that speaks in music and that the character only heard once is difficulty 5. Also, regardless of what the original sound did, the character cannot use this Charm to do damage or to duplicate any magics associated with the target's voice. Each different sound that the character duplicates requires a new casting of this Charm. This Charm will fool both a character's closest associates and animals trained to respond only to the target's voice.

PRECISE INK TECHNIQUE

Cost: 3 motes

Duration: One task

Type: Simple

Minimum Larceny: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: None

Forgers and spies everywhere favor this Charm. A character using this Charm can duplicate anyone's writing and even her writing style. The only limit on this Charm is that either the character must have a sample of what he wants to duplicate in front of him or he must examine the document carefully and his player make a successful Perception + Larceny roll for the Dragon-Blood to correctly recall the details that he needs to duplicate. The character can forge anything from a brief signature to a multi-page letter. In addition, this Charm allows the character to use ordinary forging tools to perfectly duplicate any mundane stamp or seal used to prove a document's authenticity. This Charm does not translate languages, and the character must have seen an actual sample of the person's writing that he is attempting to duplicate. However, it allows the character to create a perfect duplicate of someone's writing that is impossible to differentiate from the original by mundane means. If someone examines the forgery using



Charms, the difficulty of any roll to determine the authenticity of the item is increased by the character's permanent Essence.

WATERS OF HONESTY METHOD

Cost: 4 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: One Scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Larceny: 2

Minimum Essence: 1

Prerequisite Charms: None

This Charm allows the character to determine if anyone is cheating at a game that she is observing. The character can only observe one game at a time, but the Charm allows her to learn both who is cheating and how the cheating is being accomplished. This Charm works on any game or contest, from footraces or duels to games involving dice or cards.

PERFECT GAMBLING PRANA

Cost: 4 motes

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Larceny: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Waters of Honesty Method

This Charm allows the character to control a single event during any game of chance. The character can control the outcome of a single throw of dice or the draw of a card. To use this Charm, the character must be the one throwing the dice or the recipient of the drawn card — the character cannot influence someone else's dice rolls or the cards that someone else is dealt. Each new roll or draw demands a different use of this Charm. Frequent use of this Charm will exhaust the character's Essence pool quite rapidly. This Charm is illegal in the Realm, and offenders will be imprisoned or executed, depending upon their status.

FLOOD OF VICTORY PRANA

Cost: 5 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Larceny: 5

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Perfect Gambling Prana

A gambler using this Charm automatically wins whatever game she is playing. Regardless of whether the character is playing craps, cards, roulette or any other game of chance, she will win. The only exception is if another character uses the same Charm on the game. In such a case, the character with the highest permanent Essence wins. The only limit on this Charm is that it cannot be safely



used in casinos run by gods or Exalts, since they almost always have ways to determine if someone is using this or some similar Charm to cheat. In general, using Charms to cheat at a casino run by a powerful god is a quick way to attain a messy death, and it is illegal in the Realm, as well as very poor social form.

SAIL

WATER DROP PROTECTION TECHNIQUE

Cost: 5 motes, 1 Willpower

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Sail: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Storm-Outrunning Technique

This Charm is specifically designed to work with Northern air boats. The character can completely protect her air boat from the effects of storms. This Charm does nothing to affect the storm. Instead, it sheathes the air boat in a large bubble of protective Essence. The winds of the storm continues to push the air boat forward, but the Charm completely protects both the vessel and everyone on board from all environmental damage. The entire air boat and all of its rigging are completely calm, even if gale-force winds are blowing a few feet away. This Charm can be recast as necessary, but most air-boat pilots use it as a chance to outrun a small storm or to land and stake down the air boat to protect it from the effects of a prolonged storm.

DECK-WALKING PRANA

Cost: 3 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Sail: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: None

Whether the character is on a trireme off the coast of the Blessed Isle or on an air boat high above Diamond Hearth, the deck and rigging of any ship can become exceedingly treacherous during a storm, a battle or any other emergency, and a single misstep can cause a character to fall to her death. This Charm effectively removes such risks. A character using Deck-Walking Prana can move across the deck or up and down the rigging of a storm-tossed ship as safely as if she were doing so while the ship was in dry dock. The Charm also negates all movement penalties associated with environmental factors such as ice, snow, water or motion. If an action such as sliding rapidly down the rigging would normally require a roll to be safely performed, then the character's player must still roll, but this Charm removes all penalties associated with adverse environmental conditions. This Charm only works on board a ship, and it does not allow the character to perform actions that would normally be impossible, such as walking along the side of the

hull or striding across the canvas of a billowing sail. In addition to being able to use this Charm herself, the character can also cast it on anyone she can touch.

SHIP-STRIDING TECHNIQUE

Cost: 5 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Sail: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Deck-Walking Prana

This Charm allows the character employing it to move about a ship in any possible fashion and under any conditions. She can walk along the underside of a flying air boat or stand on the bottom of the keel of a ship sailing through a storm, with no risk of slipping or falling off. The character can completely defy gravity with this Charm, but the object she is standing upon must be able to physically bear her weight. The character can also use this Charm on anyone she can touch. Although this Charm allows the character to stand firmly upon the hull in calm conditions, if she is buffeted by waves or high winds, her player must make a successful Dexterity + Athletics roll for the Exalt to avoid falling — the difficulty of this roll would be 1 for the normal motion of a ship through water or on an air boat during a gale. The difficulty only rises to 5 during a storm so severe that it is almost certain to destroy the vessel.

ARTIFACTS

ESSENCE-SCRYING VISOR (ARTIFACT •)

These arcs of translucent solid crystal fit snugly across the eyes like goggles. Anyone wearing an Essence-scriving visor can spend 1 mote per scene to ignore all penalties for low-light conditions less severe than absolute darkness. More importantly, wearers can spend 3 motes per scene to activate Essence sight. This magical vision displays the world in dark surreal hues, with unmanifested spirits, living beings and enchanted objects (including walking dead and automatons) glowing against the murk. Essence sight negates all visual penalties, piercing the thickest smoke and deepest darkness, as well as adding three dice to any Awareness roll to notice illuminated beings and objects that are not magically concealed. This power is useless inside Demesnes and Manses, since the ambient Essence leaves the user effectively blind.

ASHIGARU BATTLE ARMOR (ARTIFACT ••)

Repair: 2

This lightweight armor, equal in protection to a reinforced breastplate, is enchanted to aid the wearer in various ways. The armor sharpens the wearer's senses, negating penalties for darkness less than "utter blackness" and adding two dice to all Awareness dice pools. Enchantments and filters protect the wearer against poison and



disease, adding two dice to Resistance dice pools and completely shielding the wearer from breathed toxins for up to an hour. Finally, the armor can camouflage its wearer, blurring her presence and adding two dice to the wearer's Stealth dice pool when moving or three dice when stationary. Exalts must commit 4 motes to use this armor but, otherwise, suffer no effect. Ashigaru armor is built using a mixture of Magical Materials and First Age alloys, and Exalted wearers gain no Magical Material bonuses. Ashigaru battle armor requires maintenance every 150 hours of operation. Every 10 hours of missed maintenance disables one power at random.

STAMP OF ULTIMATE AUTHORITY (ARTIFACT ••)

This stamp seal is made from all five colors of jade and is a favorite of both devious bureaucrats and con artists. This item can duplicate both the signature and any associated stamps, seals or similar marking that the user has ever seen. Although this artifact cannot reproduce the power inherent in magical seals or stamps such as the mark the Perfect of Paragon uses to control and monitor his subjects, it can exactly reproduce any purely mundane seal and can also create non-magical duplicates of magical seals or stamps. To reproduce a signature, seal or stamp, all the characters needs to do is commit 5 motes of Essence to the stamp, touch it to the document to be signed or stamped and spend 1 mote of Essence. The stamp then produces the desired mark in an instant.

ELEMENTAL LENS (ARTIFACT •••)

Repair: 2

An elemental lens can take many shapes — some were made as part of a glove or gauntlet, with the lens mounted on the back of the hand, while others were built into talismans, weapons or suits of armor. An elemental lens built into an artifact adds • to the device's Artifact rating, if the Artifact's rating is less than ••• to start. Elemental lenses require 5 motes to attune — if added to another artifact with an attunement cost, it adds 2 motes to that cost. The elemental lens amplifies the effects of a Dragon-Blood's elemental attacks as follows:

Elemental Bolt Attack — each mote invested in an attack does 4L damage.

Elemental Burst Technique — each mote invested does 3L damage or increases damage radius by one yard (so, permanent Essence + motes spent in yards). Total motes spent for damage or blast radius cannot exceed Stamina.

Dragon Vortex Attack — each mote spent above 10 either increases the radius of the effect by two feet or increases the damage suffered per turn by 1L. Maximum number of motes equals permanent Essence + Stamina.

GAUNTLETS OF DISTANT TOUCH (ARTIFACT •••)

These gauntlets allow the wearer to affect people and objects at a distance. They can be made from any of the Five Magical Materials, and these gauntlets all consist of solid bracers and a heavy plate that covers the back of the wearer's hand. The palm and fingers are covered by a fine flexible mesh of the woven Magical Material that allows the character to manipulate objects without penalty. The character can spend 3 motes to allow her to manipulate objects at a range of (permanent Essence x 3) yards for one full scene. Also, by spending 1 mote, the character can make a single attack or parry using her Brawl Ability at the same range. These gauntlets also provide sufficient protection such that the character can parry all weapons without harm or penalty. By making a parry at +2 difficulty, the character can even parry an attack aimed at one of her comrades, so long as the attacker is within range of the gauntlets. To activate this artifact, the character must commit 4 motes of Essence. Committing this Essence also causes the gauntlets to size to fit the wearer. When used to make an attack, this artifact gains the normal bonuses for weapons made out of one of the Five Magical Materials.

THE ULTIMATE DOCUMENT (ARTIFACT •••)

This rare and difficult to create artifact is treasured by spies and bureaucrats who own one. In its unmodified form, this item is a single piece of shimmering pearlescent parchment. It is difficult to destroy, possessing a lethal and bashing soak of 2 each and two health levels to destroy. This parchment cannot be marked or written on in any fashion. However, if the user spends 5 motes of Essence, he can instantly transform it into any document that he can imagine, even if the user has never seen an actual copy of this document. All the user needs to do is to verbally state what the document contains and then spend the Essence. For the next scene, the artifact is an exact duplicate of the desired document, complete with all of the appropriate signatures, wording and calligraphy. If the character states that the document is a set of written orders from the Despot of Gem to release a prisoner from slavery or a letter of introduction from a high official in the Realm to the Syndics of White-wall, anyone who looks at the document will see that it is.

Name	Speed	Accuracy	Damage	Defense	Minimums	
Gauntlets of Distant Touch	+3	+2	+5L	+3	S••, D•••	
Exalted Power Combat Data						
Name	Speed	Accuracy	Damage	Defense	Rate	Minimums
Gauntlets of Distant Touch	+1	+2	+7L	+5	5	S••, D•••

Since it is almost irreplaceable and instantly reverts to its true form as soon as the scene is up, a sensible character will not allow officials take the document to show it to others. Also, this artifact cannot be used to make copies of official documents from Yu-Shan. Documents written in Heaven are more refined and are made from solidified prayers, so they cannot be duplicated as easily as mortal documents.

RESPLENDENT DOLPHIN UNDERSEA COURIER (ARTIFACT ●●●●)

Built during the First Age, such vessels were designed for speed and discretion. However, they were unarmed and only lightly armored. When inactive, this item appears to be a large jade egg that is just small enough to fit within an ordinary barrel. To transform this artifact into a vehicle, the user must commit 7 motes of Essence to it. She can then command the egg to instantly transform into a small, fast ship that can sail both on the surface of the seas and deep in the ocean depths. All versions of this vessel are shaped like somewhat stylized fish made of jade, steel and silver. When fully unfolded, this vessel is 25 feet long and eight feet in diameter. This ship uses Essence rotors to propel it across the surface at speeds of up to 40 miles per hour or underwater at speeds of up to 25 miles per hour.

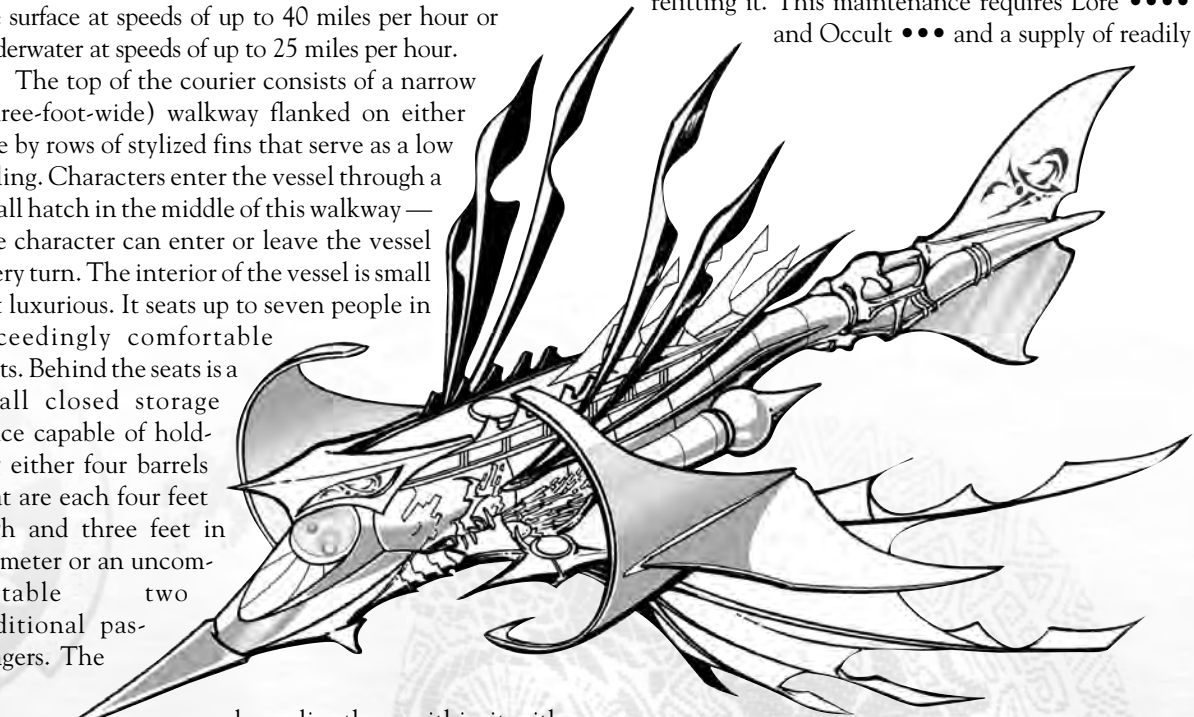
The top of the courier consists of a narrow (three-foot-wide) walkway flanked on either side by rows of stylized fins that serve as a low railing. Characters enter the vessel through a small hatch in the middle of this walkway — one character can enter or leave the vessel every turn. The interior of the vessel is small but luxurious. It seats up to seven people in exceedingly comfortable seats. Behind the seats is a small closed storage space capable of holding either four barrels that are each four feet high and three feet in diameter or an uncomfortable two additional passengers. The

vessel supplies those within it with pure air and fresh water and has facilities for long-term occupancy — the seats even recline to form cramped but useable beds. The front of the ship consists of two large transparent windows that look much like the huge eyes of deep sea fish. The front-most seat is larger than the others and has a pair of easy to use control panel on the arms. Piloting the courier requires both Sailing ●●● and Lore ●●.

Although it has a lethal and bashing soak of 15 and has the same resistance to damage found in other First Age hulls, undersea couriers are not armed and cannot be effectively armed. A few of them have added mounts for a light implosion bow on the top walkway. However, diving while this weapon is in place both halves the courier's speed and destroys the weapon, so it must be removed and taken inside before diving. Doing so requires 15 minutes of careful work. To safely disassemble and move this weapon, the character handling it must also possess Lore ●●●. The implosion bow must also be removed to allow the vessel to fold back into its compact barrel-shaped form.

To activate this vessel, the owner must commit 5 motes of Essence and place a Hearthstone of level 2 or higher in a mounting on the right control panel. This Hearthstone provides no benefit except for powering the vessel. Without the Hearthstone, the user's committed Essence only allows her to transform it from an egg to an unpowered ship that has neither propulsion nor the ability to produce fresh air or water.

This ship requires periodic maintenance. After every 250 hours of use, one hour must be spent repairing and refitting it. This maintenance requires Lore ●●●● and Occult ●●● and a supply of readily



available materials with a cost of Resources ●●●. If the vessel is actually damaged, the cost of the repairs increases to Resources ●●●. Failure to do routine maintenance lowers the vessel's speed by five miles per hour, with additional decreases every 50 hours. Once the vehicle's underwater speed is reduced to 0, it can no longer dive and can only be used upon the surface.





APPENDIX I

SIGNATURE CHARACTERS

Aspects of Water are the traders, negotiators and facilitators of their society. Their malleability, flexibility and inherently gifted understanding of transactions allows them to claim a prime role as the arbiters of markets and bureaus throughout the Imperial Bureaucracy. In addition, their own natural affinity with the element of water makes them masters of the open sea, and there is no wave or storm they cannot conquer.

This chapter contains game statistics for the five narrators featured in this book. Two of the characters, Peleps Japhen and Ranya Petris, are statted as starting characters. Two more, Peleps Deled and Ragara Takar, are middle-aged, while Peleps Aramida is an ancient Dragon-Blooded in the twilight of her existence and at the height of her power. In terms of power level, Deled is probably the most directly dangerous, but Aramida and, to a lesser extent, Takar are both significantly more versatile.

These characters can be put to a number of uses. They can serve as antagonists in a non-Dragon-Blooded game, as pre-generated characters in a Dragon-Blooded game or as Storyteller characters in a Dragon-Blooded game with regular characters.

PELEPS JAPHEN

Quote: *If I must, I will sail beyond the limits of Creation to find my place. Do not block my path.*

Prelude: From the moment of your inception, you have been a burden on your household. Your parents, both Peleps cousins, were forced to marry by the heads of House Peleps when their political sparring brought shame to the house. Duty required them to have a son, you, but it did not require them to love you. Raised almost exclusively by nurses, servants and tutors, you grew up lonely and withdrawn. This, coupled with your unattractive appearance, made you the target of many barbs by your peers and even your family. Your saving grace was your keen mind, however, and you excelled in all of your lessons and quickly mastered Gateway and many of its variants. Despite the lack of attention your parents bestowed upon you, you were of strong Dragon-Blooded stock, and it was no surprise when you Exalted on the deck of a ship as it returned from a “field trip” to the satrapy of An-Teng bearing your primary-school class. The captain of that vessel was a former imperial naval officer named Nellens Baeden, who took a keen interest in you from that day forward. Calling in favors owed to himself for a boy and a house he did not know, Nellens Baeden had you accepted to the Heptagram in short order. At the Heptagram, you realized there was a place for you, and you devoured your lessons with fervor. Even there, you could not escape your tormentors, however, and an accident in the Summoning Room resulted in the death of Peleps Joro Kendal, a cousin who sabotaged your reagents out of jealousy. Though injured, you survived the encounter and went on the graduate from the Heptagram with quite high honors. Suddenly, your parents were taking a much keener interest in your life, and you feared you would end up a pawn in their games against one another for the rest of their lives. Once again, Nellens Baeden intervened on your behalf and convinced Peleps Eralin, Admiral of the Earth Fleet, to contract you into service as a cadet. Now serving aboard the First Age light warship *Wave-Cutting Wind-Racing Saber*, you believe you have finally found your calling as a sailor-sorcerer in the Realm’s imperial navy.

Roleplaying Hints: For most of your life, even after your Exaltation, you were the target of bullies. Your parents never showed you love, or

even pride in your achievements, though after your Exaltation, their interest in your doings and whereabouts was much higher on their list of priorities. You love the Realm, even if your own house breaks your heart sometimes, and honestly believe in your duty to protect it and its people. In Nellens Baeden, you have found a friend and an ally, someone who, unlike your parents, saw your potential the moment he laid eyes on you and has managed to help you at every major turning point in your life. Though you would never betray your house for him, you would do anything short of it were he to ask.

Image: For a Prince of the Earth, you are decidedly unattractive: Your ears are too large, your limbs are too gangly, and your gait is too loping. You are, however, ever professional in your appearance. You wear the uniform of a cadet of the imperial navy perfectly pressed and with every adornment in the proper place. In addition, you wear the belt of a ship’s sorcerer-technician: Strange looking tools, vials and flasks of caustic liquids and other oddities adorn your waistline.

Equipment: Slashing sword, jade breastplate, jade short powerbow, cord of winds, gem of injury sense



PELEPS JAPHEN

Element: Water
Concept: Young Sorcerer
Nature: Savant

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 2, Temperance 3, Valor 2

ABILITIES

Archery 2, Awareness 2, *Brawl 1, *Bureaucracy 3, *Craft 4, Endurance 1, *Investigation 2, Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Guild Cant, Low Realm, Riverspeak) 3, *Lore 5, Medicine 1, Melee 2, *Occult 4, Performance 1, Presence 1, Ride 1, *Sail 3, Socialize 2
 *Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Allies 1, Artifact 2, Breeding 2, Manse 1, Resources 1

CHARMS

Linguistics: Wind-Carried Words Technique
Lore: Elemental Concentration Trance
Occult: Terrestrial Circle Sorcery (Spells: Calling the Wind's Kiss, Infallible Messenger, Stormwind Rider)
Sail: Hurricane Predicting Glance

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 6

Attack:

Punch: Speed 6 Accuracy 4 Damage 3B Defense 4
 Kick: Speed 3 Accuracy 3 Damage 5B Defense 3
 Slashing Sword: Speed 9 Accuracy 6 Damage 5L Defense 6
 Jade Short Powerbow (Unwelcome Tidings): Speed 6 Accuracy 7 Damage 7L (Rate 3, Range 300)

Dodge Pool: 3 **Soak:** 7L/7B (Jade breastplate, 6L/4B)

Willpower: 6 **Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-4/Incap
Essence: 3

Personal Essence: 11 **Peripheral Essence:** 26

Committed Essence: 6

EXALTED POWER COMBAT:

Attack:

Punch: Speed 6 Accuracy 5 Damage 3B Defense 6 Rate 5
 Kick: Speed 3 Accuracy 5 Damage 6B Defense 1 Rate 3
 Slashing Sword: Speed 12 Accuracy 6 Damage 7L Defense 5 Rate 2



RANYA PETRIS

Quote: *I don't care about Creation. I just want a good life for myself and my crew.*

Prelude: You were born in the Northern city of Gethamane to mortal parents. No one had any idea that you would draw the Second Breath. You dreamed of adventure and heroism while you worked in your parent's jewelry store, but you never expected those dreams to come true. Your Exaltation ended your old life, as few in Gethamane are comfortable with the Dragon-Blooded. At the age of 14, you bid your parents farewell and signed onto a Haslanti air boat. You used to watch these air boats dock and dream of the exiting lands they visited, and now, this idle fantasy had suddenly become your life.

You adjusted rapidly to life on a trading vessel that occasionally dabbled in smuggling and raiding. After proving your worth many times over the course of two years, you overheard the plottings of a Haslanti merchant who would have risked the anger of the Guild for his own advantage. You asked the Haslanti Oligarchs for an air boat of your own in return for sharing this information.

They granted this request, and so, at age 17, you became the captain of your own air boat, the *Diamond Shadow*. It is a small vessel and far from new, but it is yours, and you love both it and your crew.

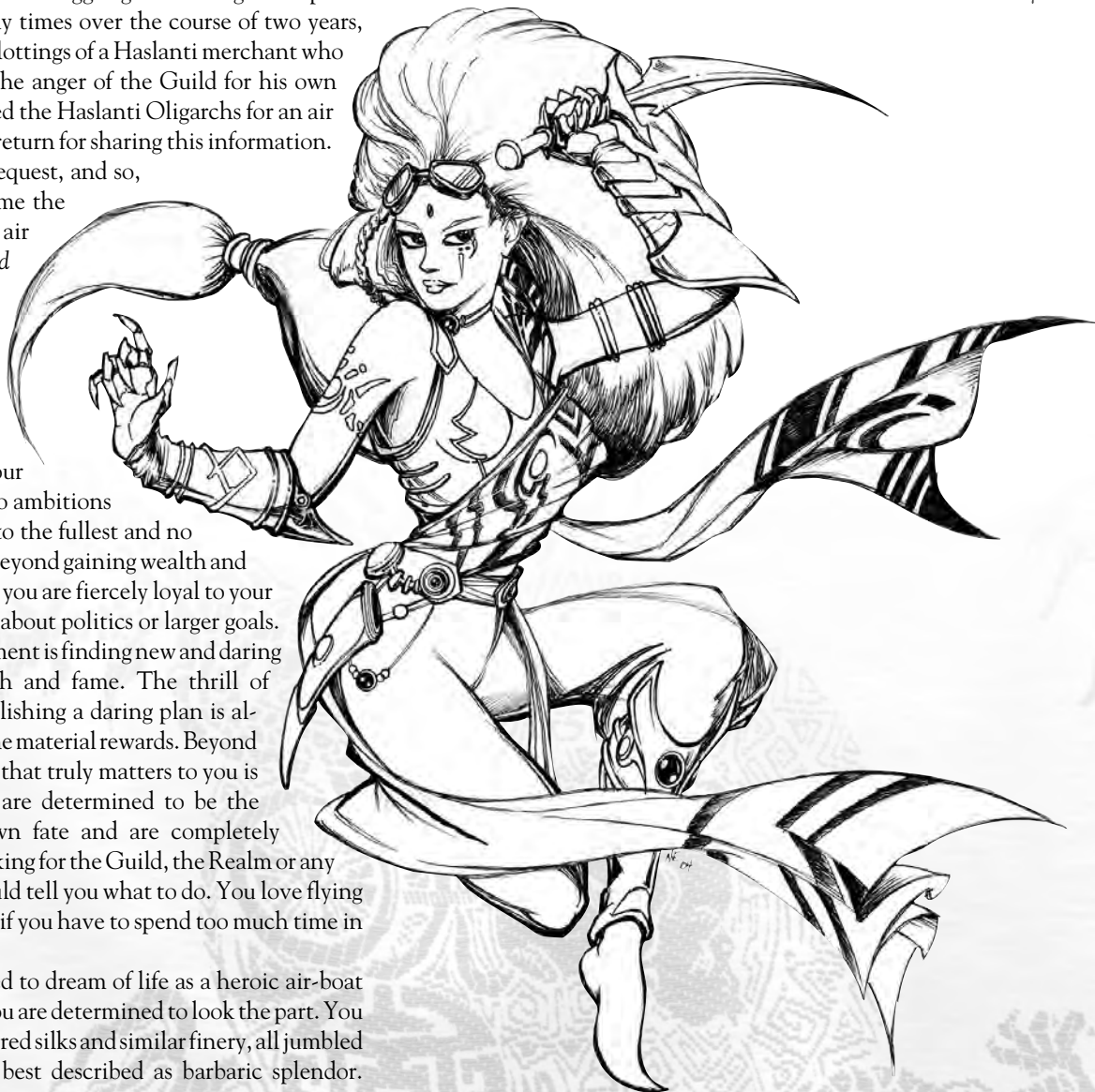
Roleplaying

Hints: You love your new life and have no ambitions beyond enjoying it to the fullest and no plans for the future beyond gaining wealth and enjoying life. While you are fiercely loyal to your crew, you care little about politics or larger goals. Your greatest enjoyment is finding new and daring ways to gain wealth and fame. The thrill of successfully accomplishing a daring plan is almost as exciting as the material rewards. Beyond that, the only thing that truly matters to you is your freedom. You are determined to be the mistress of your own fate and are completely uninterested in working for the Guild, the Realm or any other group that could tell you what to do. You love flying and become restless if you have to spend too much time in one place.

Image: You used to dream of life as a heroic air-boat captain, and now, you are determined to look the part. You dress in brightly colored silks and similar finery, all jumbled together in a style best described as barbaric splendor.

When you go into dangerous situations, exquisitely made lamellar armor and a few pieces of somewhat gaudy jewelry made from the finest materials complete your ensemble. You are an attractive young woman with snow-white skin, and you normally wear your long blonde hair in a simple braid — while you enjoy looking good, you have little time to spend on elaborate coiffures. You are always clean and well kept, but you often look a bit rumpled after either a hard night of drinking or a particularly difficult raid.

Equipment: Gauntlets of distant touch, feathersteel lamellar armor, exceptional Haslanti crossbow, brightly colored silk clothing, Haslanti air boat



RANYA PETRIS

Element: Water

Concept: Brash Air-Boat Captain

Nature: Hedonist

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 3, Conviction 2, Temperance 1, Valor 3

ABILITIES

*Archery 2, *Athletics 2, *Awareness 2, *Brawl 4, *Bureaucracy 3, *Larceny 4, Linguistics 1 (Native: Skytongue; High Realm), Performance 2, Presence 2, *Sail 4, Socialize 2, Stealth 2

* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 3, Contacts 1, Followers 3, Influence 1, Resources 4

CHARMS

Brawl: Drowning Embrace, Pounding Surf Style

Larceny: Instant Disguise Prana, Naked Thief Style, Precise Ink Technique

Sail: Hurricane-Predicting Glance, Storm-Outrunning Method, Water Drop Protection Technique

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 7

Attack:

Gauntlets of Distant Touch: Speed 13 Accuracy 10 Damage 8L Defense 11

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 7 Damage 5B Defense 7

Exceptional Crossbow: Speed 7 Accuracy 8 Damage 6L (Rate 1, Range 175)

Dodge Pool: 4/3 **Soak:** 7L/11B (Feathersteel lamellar, 6L/8B, -1 mobility penalty)

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

Essence: 2

Personal Essence: 8 **Peripheral Essence:** 20

Committed Essence: 4

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Gauntlets of Distant Touch: Speed 11 Accuracy 10 Damage 10L Defense 13 Rate 5

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



RAGARA TAKAR

Quote: *Every day that we hold back destruction is a victory.*

Prelude: You Exalted at the age of 17, several years after your Exalted parents had given up any hope of you taking the Second Breath. After having spent the last several years as a dissolute drunk, you found the Spiral Academy to be both challenging and exciting. You learned to apply yourself and to truly excel as a bureaucrat. The members of the powerful Scarlet Orchid secret society noticed your performance and recruited you. Being a member of a covert organization dedicated to preserving the Realm's power and safety, regardless of the cost to either its members or to anyone else, appealed to you.

Your connections provided you with a prestigious position when you graduated. You were made a junior auditor in the Humble and Honest Assessors of the Imperial Tax and were assigned to work in the Imperial City. Unfortunately, your dedication to your job proved to be your undoing, when you refused to keep silent about various irregularities you discovered. You were dismissed from your position in this ministry, and only your connections within Scarlet Orchid allowed you to transfer to the Foreign Office and leave the Blessed Isle. Since that time, you have taken various positions in the Threshold. You are now the Senior Trade Legate in Chiaroscuro. In addition to keeping track of mundane details of commerce and finance, you also investigate any irregularities you find. While you sometimes spy on suspected pirates or hunt down demonic cultists during these investigations, you generally turn over the information you gather to the Wyld Hunt, the All-Seeing Eye or the military.

Roleplaying Hints: Spending several years being considered a failure to your family instilled a profound cynicism in you. However, your Exaltation and your acceptance into both the Spiral Academy and the Scarlet Orchid secret society also inspired both a fierce loyalty to the Realm and an overwhelming desire to excel. You are firmly convinced that both the Realm and all of Creation are ultimately doomed, but you are also determined to do everything you can to avert this doom for as long as possible. You are deeply loyal to the Realm and care passionately about protecting it, and you are profoundly ruthless.

You will do anything that you think is necessary to protect it. You are not proud of some of your deeds and hate the fact that the state of the world requires such actions, but you will continue to do what you think is necessary because you are certain that the alternative is far worse.

Image: You are an attractive man in young middle age, but you intentionally do little to draw attention to yourself. You dress well, but in a conservative and somewhat drab fashion, and you avoid clothing or behaviors that would tip anyone off that you are anything other than a dedicated and slightly hidebound bureaucrat. Your blue-green skin and green-black hair is striking, but you have done an excellent job of making yourself somewhat forgettable.

Equipment: Jade Hearthstone bracers, excellent chain shirt enchanted with Ritual of Elemental Empowerment (Earth), short daiklave, excellent flame piece, gemstone of surface thoughts, somewhat drab dress clothing



RAGARA TAKAR

Element: Water

Concept: Cynical Bureaucrat

Nature: Critic

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 1, Conviction 3, Temperance 2, Valor 3

ABILITIES

Archery 2, Athletics 2, *Awareness 3, *Brawl 2, *Bureaucracy 5, Dodge 3, Endurance 1, *Investigation 4, *Larceny 5, *Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Low Realm, Old Realm, Seatongue, Skytongue) 4, Lore 4, Melee 5, Occult 2, Performance 1, Presence 2, Resistance 2, Ride 2, *Sail 2, Socialize 3, *Stealth 4

* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 2, Backing (Scarlet Orchid) 3, Breeding 3, Connections (The All-Seeing Eye) 1, Connections (Finance) 2, Connections (The Thousand Scales) 2, Manse 1, Resources 4, Reputation 1

CHARMS

Awareness: Precision Observation Method

Bureaucracy: Benevolent Master's Blessing, Confluence of Savant Thought, Distraction of the Babbling Brook, Finding the Waters' Depths, Geese-Flying-South Administration, Sparkling Fountains of Eloquence

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique

Investigation: Clear Water Prana, Indisputable Physical Analysis Technique, Tampering Detection Prana

Larceny: Ears of the Snowy Owl, Instant Disguise Prana, Naked Thief Style, Observer Awareness Method, Precise Ink Technique, Trackless Walk Style, Window-in-the-Door Technique

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

Lore: Elemental Bolt Attack

Melee: Dragon-Graced Weapon, Portentous Comet Deflecting Mode, Stoking Bonfire Style

Resistance: Strength of Stone Technique

Stealth: Distracting Breeze Meditation, Feeling-the-Air Technique, Soundless Action Prana

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 9

Attack:

Punch: Speed 9 Accuracy 6 Damage 3B Defense 6

Kick: Speed 6 Accuracy 5 Damage 5B Defense 5

Jade Short Daiklave (Rule 19): Speed 15 Accuracy 13 Damage 7L Defense 10

Excellent Flame Piece: Speed 9 Accuracy 6 Damage 8L (Rate 1/2*, Range 8**)

* The weapon takes one turn to reload after every shot.

** Flame weapons have no range increments and suffer no range penalties. This is its maximum range.

Dodge Pool: 7 **Soak:** 8L/7B (Excellent chain shirt enchanted with Ritual of Elemental Empowerment (Earth), 6L/3B)

Willpower: 6

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

Essence: 3

Personal Essence: 12

Peripheral Essence: 29

Committed Essence: 9

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 9 Accuracy 7 Damage 3B Defense 8 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 6 Accuracy 7 Damage 6B Defense 3 Rate 3

Jade Short Daiklave (Rule 19): Speed 15 Accuracy 13 Damage 7L Defense 10 Rate 6

PELEPS DELED

Quote: *Stand down, Anathema, and accept the fate ordained to you by the Immaculate Dragons. You refuse? Excellent. A quick death is too good for your kind.*

Prelude: As a youth, you were guided into the Immaculate Order by your uncle, Peleps Deham. Within its teachings, you found a divine justification for your hatred of heresy in all its forms and the skills necessary to combat it. As you grew in knowledge and power after your Exaltation, you became increasingly violent toward those you thought of as heretics, even other students who disagreed with your particularly rigid interpretation of the Immaculate Philosophy. The Order gave you over to the Wyld Hunt in hopes that your ferocity and power could be directed against more appropriate targets.

You have spent the better part of a century hunting marauding Fair Folk, rebellious spirits, mortal heretics and the Anathema. You began during the time when the Wyld Hunt was still strongly supported by the Empress and grew in experience and rank under the leadership of Mnemon Jorun, a veteran member of the Wyld Hunt and the Master of the Pinnacle of the Eye of the Hunt. Throughout these years, you came into constant conflict with Cathak Titus, a former legionnaire

and your direct superior. The conflict arose due to differences in philosophy, you seeing the Wyld Hunt as a spiritual crusade and Titus seeing it as a military and political one.

When the Empress disappeared, you were astounded by the suddenness of the loss of support for the Wyld Hunt as the Realm turned inward. Mnemon Jorun, growing old, decided to retire a mere two years after the Empress' disappearance. He chose to name you his successor as leader of the Pinnacle, much to the displeasure of Cathak Titus, in hopes that a strong spiritual leader would make up for a lack of secular resources. Cathak Titus refused to submit to your leadership and returned to the legions.

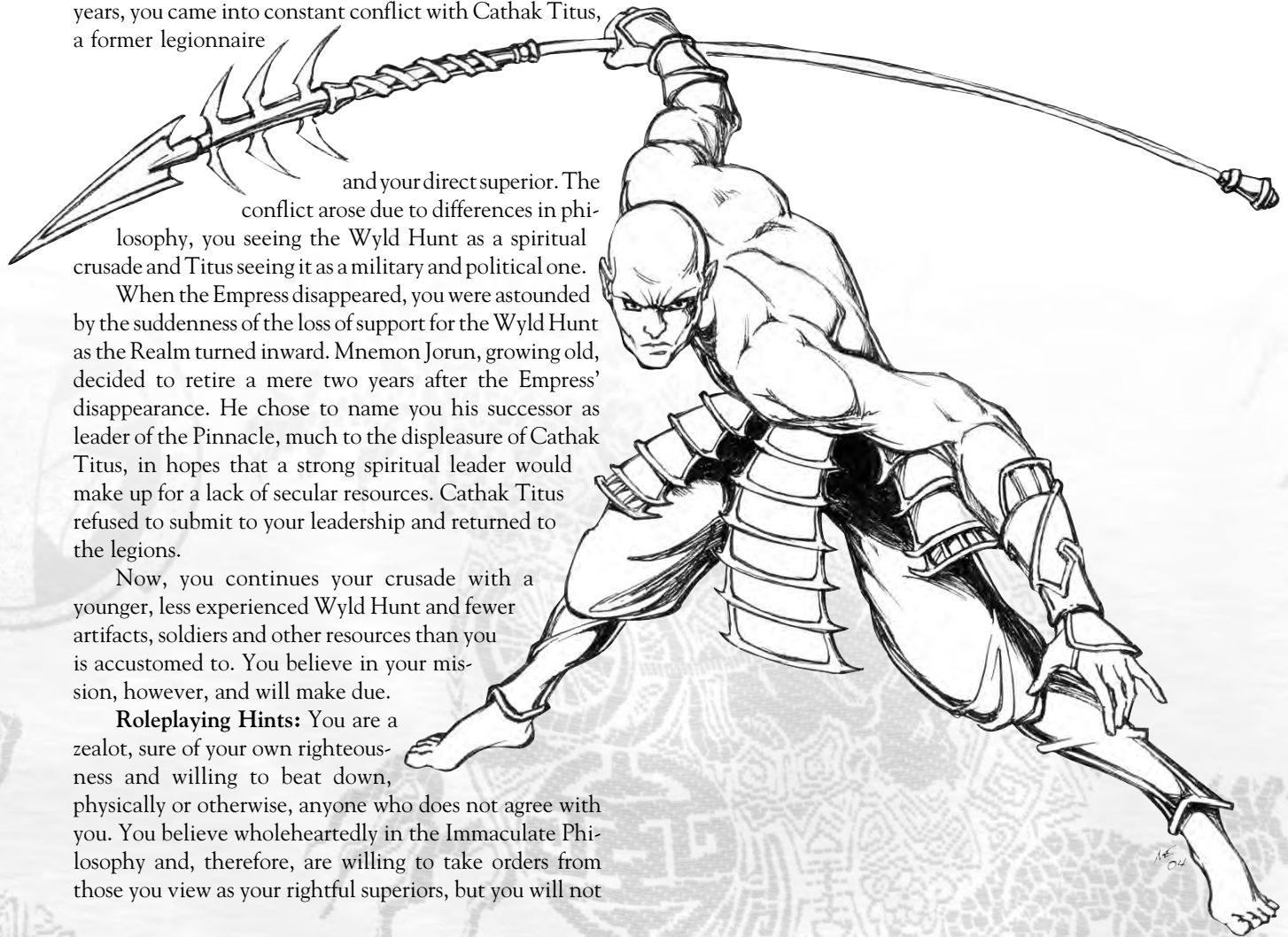
Now, you continue your crusade with a younger, less experienced Wyld Hunt and fewer artifacts, soldiers and other resources than you are accustomed to. You believe in your mission, however, and will make due.

Roleplaying Hints: You are a zealot, sure of your own righteousness and willing to beat down, physically or otherwise, anyone who does not agree with you. You believe wholeheartedly in the Immaculate Philosophy and, therefore, are willing to take orders from those you view as your rightful superiors, but you will not

compromise your spiritual beliefs. You are a vicious combatant and a relentless hunter, and you will stop at nothing to see that your prey, however powerful and regardless of mitigating circumstances, is destroyed. If you have compassion in your heart, it is for the children of the Realm, who you desire to educate in the truth of the Immaculate Philosophy as you were.

Image: Lithe and muscular, you are the very image of an Immaculate martial artist. You prefer to wear dark colors, your favorite being the color of the sea at dusk. Like all Immaculate monks, you shave your head and are otherwise well groomed and clean shaven.

Equipment: Jade razor claws, jade reinforced breastplate, jade dire lance, the freedom stone, sphere of balance, the labyrinthine eye



PELEPS DELED

Element: Water

Concept: Zealous Crusader

Nature: Paragon

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 1, Conviction 5, Temperance 2, Valor 4

ABILITIES

Archery 2, *Athletics 4, Awareness 3 (+2 Spot Ambush), *Bureaucracy 3, Dodge 5 (+2 Versus Ranged Attacks), *Endurance 4, *Investigation 4, Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Low Realm) 1, Lore 2, *Martial Arts 5 (+3 Versus Other Martial Artists), Melee 4, Occult 2 (+2 Spirits), Performance 2, Presence 1, Resistance 1, Ride 3, *Sail 2, Socialize 2 (+2 Discern Truth), Stealth 3 (+2 Ambush), Survival 3, Thrown 3
* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 3, Backing 2, Breeding 2, Manse 3, Reputation 2

CHARMS

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

Dodge: Flickering Candle Meditation, Safety Among Enemies

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique (x3)

Martial Arts: Crashing Wave Style, Drowning-in-Blood Technique, Flow Reversal Strike, Flowing Water Defense, Ghost Resisting Whirlpool Stance, Rippling Water Strike, Shrugging Water Dragon Escape, Spirit Sight, Spirit Walking, Theft-of-Essence Method, Water Dragon Form

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 8

Attack:

Punch: Speed 8 Accuracy 10 Damage 4B Defense 10

Kick: Speed 5 Accuracy 9 Damage 6B Defense 9

Jade Razor Claws (Claws of Daana'd): Speed 12 Accuracy 11 Damage 8L Defense 12

Jade Dire Lance (Sting of Daana'd): Speed 17 Accuracy 11 Damage 9L Defense 9

Dodge Pool: 10/9 **Soak:** 12L/13B (Jade reinforced breastplate, 10L/9B, -1 mobility penalty)

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

Essence: 4

Personal Essence: 14 **Peripheral Essence:** 38

Committed Essence: 11

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 8 Accuracy 11 Damage 4B Defense 12 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 5 Accuracy 11 Damage 7B Defense 7 Rate 3

Jade Razor Claws (Claws of Daana'd): Speed 11 Accuracy 11 Damage 9L Defense 11 Rate 6

Jade Dire Lance (Sting of Daana'd): Speed 23 Accuracy 11 Damage 13L Defense 12 Rate 3

PELEPS ARAMIDA

Quote: *Those of us who serve in the navy are the Realm's first line of defense. It is a hard life, but I would have no other.*

Prelude: You grew up the child of two Dynasts, and you idolized your mother, who was a high-ranking officer in the imperial navy. Although she seldom visited, her tales of honor, duty and adventure on the high seas thrilled you. You were determined to follow in her footsteps. When you were only 12, you were shocked into Exaltation by the news that she had died fighting pirates. You became even more certain of the course of your life. A few years later, you attended the rigorous House of Bells, where you excelled and proved both your determination and your cleverness.



After graduation, you were made captain of a trireme assigned to the West. You have remained in the West for most of your career, guarding merchant convoys, hunting pirates and escorting groups of savants intent of studying First Age artifacts. Your many successes, sometimes against overwhelming odds, and the fierce loyalty you inspire in your crew lead to your rapid advancement. After many years of honorable and diligent service, you command a portion of the Realm's Water Fleet and are at the pinnacle of your career. You still captain a ship and are not eager for your impending old age to force you to either retire or to take an administrative job back in the Blessed Isle.

Roleplaying Hints: You are a blunt, somewhat gruff, but deeply honorable woman who has lived on board ships for more than 150 years. Although you are one of the most powerful commanders in the imperial navy, you still mostly talk and act like an ordinary ship captain and are quite proud of your own vessel and crew. Although you could direct operations from shore, you are not willing to put

people under your command into risks that you do not share. You feel a deep affection for the sailors under your command, from the most decorated captain to the lowliest untried sailor. You are very concerned with duty and responsibility, but you also know that merely following orders is insufficient. You are also brilliant and daring and are never afraid to try risky plans if you honestly believe that they can work. The fact that you talk far more like a sailor than a scholar often causes others to forget the fact that you are one of the Realm's best strategists and tacticians.

Image: You are a somewhat weathered woman in late middle age with greenish-black skin and extremely short black hair with green highlights. Except when formal occasions require you to don your dress uniform, you wear a worn and somewhat drab-looking duty uniform that is decorated with a few of the highest medals the Realm gives out.

Equipment: Jade reaper daiklave, ashigaru battle armor with built-in elemental lens, Essence-scriving visor, exceptional compound bow



PELEPS ARAMIDA

Element: Water

Concept: Gruff But Brilliant Admiral

Nature: Paragon

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 3, Temperance 2, Valor 4

ABILITIES

*Archery 4, Athletics 2, Awareness 3, *Brawl 2, *Bureaucracy 1, Craft 3, Endurance 4, *Investigation 2, Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Guild Cant, Low Realm, Seatongue, Western Tribal Tongues) 4, Lore 3, Medicine 2, *Melee 5, Performance 1, *Presence 4, Resistance 2, Ride 1, *Sail 5, Socialize 3, Stealth 1, Survival 2, Thrown 2

* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 3, Backing (Imperial Navy) 4, Breeding 2, Command 3, Connections (Legions) 1, Reputation 3, Resources 4

CHARMS

Archery: Dragonfly Finds Mate, Seven-Year Swarm Volley, Spring Follows Winter, Swallows Defend the Nest

Awareness: Precision Observation Method, Sight-Riding Technique

Craft: Flaw-Finding Examination, Shaping Hand Style

Endurance: Ox-Body Technique (x3)

Linguistics: Voices on the Wind, Wind-Carried Words Technique

Lore: Elemental Bolt Attack, Elemental Burst Technique

Melee: Dragon-Graced Weapon, Ghost-Fire Blade, Portentous Comet Deflecting Mode, Refining the Inner Blade, Stoking Bonfire Style

Presence: Glowing Coal Radiance, Aura of Invulnerability

Sail: Deck-Walking Prana, False Color Flying Demonstration, Fine Passage Negotiating Style, Hurricane-Predicting Glance, Pirate Masquerading Method, Ship-Striding Technique, Storm-Outrunning Technique, Sturdy Bulkhead Concentration, Wind-Summoning Whistle

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 7

Attack:

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 6 Damage 4B Defense 6

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 5 Damage 6B Defense 5

Jade Reaper Daiklave (Blood-Red Wave-Road): Speed 15 Accuracy 12 Damage 8L Defense 12

Exceptional Composite Bow: Speed 7 Accuracy 9 Damage 6L (Rate 4, Range 250)

Dodge Pool: 4/3 **Soak:** 12L/13B (Ashigaru battle armor, 10L/9B, -1 mobility penalty, fatigue value 1)

Willpower: 7 **Health Levels:** 0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap

Essence: 5

Personal Essence: 14 **Peripheral Essence:** 39

Committed Essence: 11

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 7 Damage 4B Defense 8 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 7 Damage 7B Defense 3 Rate 3

Jade Reaper Daiklave (Blood-Red Wave-Road): Speed 19 Accuracy 13 Damage 8L Defense 10 Rate 4

APPENDIX II

OTHER NOTABLE WATER ASPECTS



NELLENS BAEDEN

Nellens Baeden is the captain of the *Grace of Daana'd*, a light First Age merchant ship that he uses as a passenger craft to take Dynasts back and forth to An-Teng. He operates primarily out of Arjuf. He is an exceptionally skilled captain, having spent years as an officer in the imperial navy under the Admiral of the Earth Fleet, Peleps Carcharo, prior to his death and his wife's acquisition of the title. He built many strong relationships while in the imperial navy, and many of them were with members of House Peleps. He keeps in friendly contact with a number of the officers with whom he served and keeps tabs on all the rest.

Of course, chartering for the spoiled children of other Great Houses is only the public face of Nellens Baeden's career. He is an accomplished smuggler, as well, and makes a comfortable living moving drugs, slaves and other illicit cargo between An-Teng and the Blessed Isle. He never moves much at any given time, preferring small quantity and high value on whatever it may be. He has never been caught smuggling, partly due to his innate shrewdness and partly due to the fact that he knows a good deal of the customs inspectors in the ports where he calls. A few well thought out gifts to old friends go a long way toward softening their otherwise stoic stances on cargo assessment.

When it comes to sailing, Nellens Baeden is among the best in the Realm. He long ago mastered his First Age vessel, and with his skill at sorcery, he has even managed to improve upon the vessel — at least from the quality it had when he first acquired it from Guild merchants a decade ago. The vessel is fast and well armed as far as

merchant vessels go, and with a Water-aspected Dragon-Blood at the helm, it is more than a match for any mortal vessel on the seas. He has never been caught by even the Lintha, and in the few cases where he has chosen to fight, his expertise at naval tactics has brought him victory in quite dire circumstances. He is careful, however, and does not allow himself the luxury of overconfidence: He has seen too many of his fellow captains, and smugglers, taken down because they thought they were unbeatable.

Nellens Baeden makes it a habit to cultivate alliances among those who might be of use to himself or his house. He is charming and genuine and rarely uses



subterfuge when a few drinks and an honest opinion will serve him better. He takes the issue of favors seriously, however, and will do his best to ensure that those with whom he deals regularly owe him in one form or another. By the same token, should Nellens Baeden find himself indebted to another, he will do whatever he can — short of placing himself, his ship or House Nellens in peril — to repay that debt.

Nellens Baeden is middle-aged man with sea-green hair and eyes the stark blue of clear tropical skies. He never wears armor, though he is adorned in jade bracers and greaves, and when on the deck of his vessel, he always wears a daiklave called Bane of Black Flags on his back.

V'NEEF ODESSA

Odessa was not born to the young House V'neef, but rather, was the child of an line of outcaste Dragon-Blooded rulers of a coastal Threshold nation called Gulland. That nation's history contends that its founders were Water-aspected Dragon-Blooded who wrecked on the shore during the chaotic times of the Contagion. Though many of customs of the Shogunate were lost or replaced due to necessity over the intervening centuries, the connection to the Terrestrial Exalted was never forgotten, and the line continued strong down the generations.

Odessa was born half a century ago and bore all the signs of a strong bloodline. There was no question that she would Exalt and become the new queen of Gulland. This destiny was interrupted by the savage raids of beastman pirates. It was pure chance that brought a sworn brotherhood of young V'neef adventurers to the sea near Gulland not long after and more providence yet that kept the infant Odessa alive when the V'neef destroyed the pirates' ship as it fled Gulland with her and many more treasures besides. The V'neef found

Odessa and brought her home to the head of their household, who adopted her into the house and granted her to a V'neef couple that had failed to conceive after many years of trying.

Odessa feels that she owes her Great House a debt that can never be repaid. Upon her Exaltation, she gave her service to V'neef and was groomed as a sailor. Now, with V'neef controlling the merchant navy of the Realm, Odessa serves as a captain's second on one of the largest merchant naval vessels in the fleet, the *Queen of Pearls*. She is a capable officer and both a skilled merchant and diplomat. She lacks the self-interest that often drives Dragon-Blooded to greatness, however, and has no ambition beyond serving her Great House.

Recently, in a bid to upset V'neef's perfect control over the merchant navy, House Peleps has done some research into the founding of Gulland and discovered that the history told to Odessa is a lie. Gulland was, in fact, founded by exiles from House Iselsi, who took control of the local populace and educated them with the much more palatable story described above. What House Peleps will do with this information remains to be seen.

MNEMON TYNALIT BERA

The daughter of a minor branch of House Mnemon, Tynalit Bera has risen to become the chief librarian of the vast and ancient Imperial Library. Located in the Imperial City and sponsored by the Scarlet Empress, this library holds all of the Realm's most treasured books and records. Tynalit Bera was a bookish child well before her Exaltation, and drawing the Second Breath only served to enhance this facet of her personality. Her family both expected and pushed for her to become a scholar who studied the fragmentary records of the First Age and the Shogunate. Although she loved reading about these long-ago eras, her primary interest was in cataloging, preserving and keeping track of the masses of books, scrolls, thought-records and similar ancient documents. Instead of apprenticing to a scholar, she attended the Spiral Academy, where her meticulous mind and her perfect memory allowed her to excel. Although her instructors encouraged her to seek a more ambitious position, she was overjoyed to accept an apprenticeship with an assistant librarian in the Imperial Library.

Since that time, Tynalit Bera's dedication to her task, combined with her considerable political savvy, has allowed her to rapidly rise in power. In under a century, she became the youngest chief librarian at the Imperial Library. In social situations, she is relatively shy and listens far more than she talks. However, in the more structured environment of her library, she has no trouble being an effective leader. Although she shares the same love of the past and of ancient documents found in the various scholars and students who visit the Imperial Library, her primary interest is in preserving and adding to her collection. She also enjoys gardening and the occa-





sional quiet conversation, but she is happiest in the vast halls of her library.

In a manner that belies her otherwise quiet demeanor, Tynalit Bera is exceedingly ruthless in her search for additional materials for the library. Although her letters and other communications are always both understated and scrupulously polite, she occasionally uses threats, bribery and even blackmail to encourage scholars and scavenger lords from all over Creation to donate their materials to the Imperial Library.

Tynalit Bera is exceedingly protective of all the books and other documents under her care and will often take time to personally track down anyone who damages or steals one of them. The people who work at the library and the scholars who visit it often enough to get to know her all have great respect for Tynalit Bera, but some of them are also somewhat afraid of her. She almost never raises her voice, but when something threaten the order or safety of her collection, her cold and calculating anger can be quite terrible, and she has the power to ban anyone who sufficiently offends her from ever entering the Imperial Library again.

TEPET YASAL

As soon as Yasal Exalted, everyone around him was certain that he would become one of the preeminent warriors of the Realm. He attended the brutally hard House of Bells and, in his first year, defeated many older and more experienced students in both boxing and wrestling matches. However, he proved to be only mediocre at combat that involved weapons, and he had little interest or ability in leadership or strategy. By his third year at the House of Bells, he had defeated everyone there noted for their ability at any form of brawling, including all of the instructors who taught these arts. During that same year,

he began tutoring less adept students, and this choice determined the course of his life. After he graduated, the headmasters of the House of Bells asked him to stay on as a tutor in unarmed combat. Yasal gladly accepted, having far more interest in the precise details of the practice of brawling than of actually using it in warfare.

Word of his prowess soon spread well beyond the House of Bells, and several nobles — and eventually the Scarlet Empress herself — asked him to put on exhibitions of his martial prowess. At first, he merely used his skill to rend large and heavy objects and engage in harmless practice bouts with other skilled boxers and wrestlers. However, both his own need for acclaim and glory and frequent requests from some of the most powerful people in the Realm eventually convinced him to occasionally use his abilities in lethally dangerous fights against a variety of opponents. Once or twice a year, Yasal takes time off from training students at the House of Bells and fights some exotic and deadly opponent. In the past, he has fought enormous apes, gigantic and heavily armored Wyld barbarians and, on one occasion, a particularly deadly hobgoblin.

Tepet Yasal is the preeminent brawler in the Realm and certainly one of the greatest in Creation, but he is also exceedingly proud, occasionally boastful and completely intolerant of slights against his honor. Although he is an excellent teacher of dedicated students, he has absolutely no patience for students who are not willing to apply themselves and, on more than one occasion, has physically thrown such students from his classroom. Although some ignorant people refer to Tepet Yasal as a gladiator, his own lot is far superior to the slaves and impoverished warriors who normally perform such entertainments. Being already both famous and fabulously wealthy, the only reasons that he agrees to such fights are his own prideful



love of fame and the joy he takes in figuring out how to defeat an unusual and deadly opponent. He only agrees to fight beasts or beings that he has never fought before and that he believes will be an interesting challenge.

TERESU GIDO

Teresu Gido is a sohei, or sorcerer-priest, of Lookshy. Though rail thin, he is exceptionally tall and, when bedecked in his ceremonially robes, cuts a very imposing figure. His breeding is relatively light, however, and only a hint of blue-green in his skin and hair give him away as a Water-aspected Terrestrial Exalt.

At 211 years of age, Teresu Gido is one of the most respected and powerful sohei in Lookshy. He began his career as a sorcerer-exorcist in the Seventh Legion, as most sohei do, and, after a century of service in that capacity, chose to direct his energies toward more personal matters. Such long service has left him with many allies among the Seventh Legion's officers, many of whom have moved on into important posts of their own. Should the need arise, Gido can have call in favors and have whole units of Seventh Legion special forces put at his disposal.

Since he left the Seventh Legion, Gido has kept exceptionally busy treating with spirits, up to and including Tien Yu, the spirit of Lookshy itself. Gido is a Purist — a member of a political faction that desires to crush the heresy of the Scavenger Lands and spread Lookshy's particular brand of the Immaculate faith — but few individuals are aware of this, as the Purists are thought of largely as crackpots and zealots. His time in the Seventh Legion showed Gido that spirits that have turned their backs on the Celestial Bureaucracy can be even more dangerous than the Anathema. By enforcing the Immaculate faith throughout the Scavenger Lands, he feels he can control such spirits and put them back in their respective places. As he has grown older, however, he has begun to lose his grip. Instead of finding and speaking with such spirits and dealing with them in whatever way is necessary, he has begun to hatch more and more dangerous and elaborate plots to bring about his goal of an orderly River Province.

Gido has a particular hatred for the God-Blooded, whom he sees as an affront to the natural order of things. He believes that the Immaculate Dragons alone have the power and right to create Essence-wielding bloodlines. Among his few Purist associates, he has begun to speak of God-Blooded conspiracies and impending attacks against the Immaculate Faith by rogue gods. Few, if any, of his compatriots take him seriously, but due to his power, both personal and political, they make a show of agreeing with him.

Old and experienced, Teresu Gido has vast powers at his disposal. He is both an accomplished martial artist and one of the most powerful Terrestrial sorcerers in Lookshy. He knows dozens of spells, many of which he designed himself, all primarily dedicated to dealing with, binding, exorcising or even destroying spirits. His arsenal of artifacts is equally vast, and as stated, he can call upon favors in the Seventh Legion to produce First Age weaponry with which to enact his crusade, should he finally lose his grasp on reality altogether.



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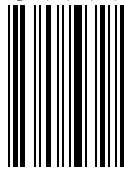
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