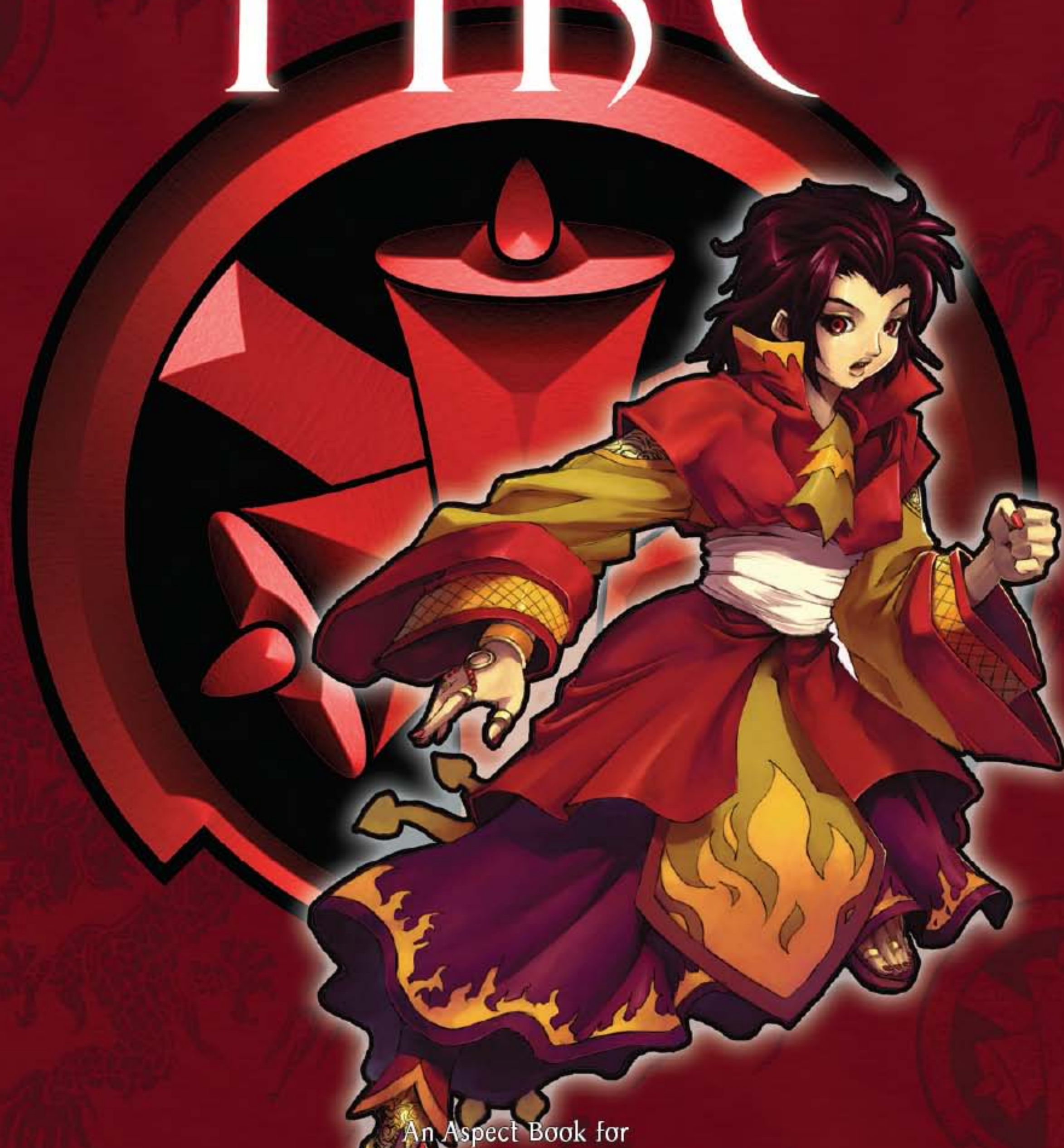


A S P E C T B O O K

FIRE™



An Aspect Book for



THE DRAGON-BLOODED



ASPECT BOOK
FIRETM

By KRAIG BLACKWELDER AND GENEVIEVE COGMAN

THE FIRST BRIGHT BLAZE

Our visit to the Neck was the first official state visit by the Realm in a very long time. Distracted as it was by crises on several fronts, the missing tribute of a tiny island nation wasn't worth the voyage west, certainly not given the dangers presented by pirates. And when the Foreign Office deemed a formal visit necessary, the task fell to me, the least experienced Dragon-Blood of the least respected house.

For my part, I was delighted. Travel benefits Dragon-Bloods in general and sorcerers in particular. I was still giddy with the wealth of knowledge I had acquired at the Heptagram and looked forward to using it to win even more approbation from my house, Nellens, through a successful diplomatic mission.

The proper name of the Neck's capital city is Solid Shell, but since no other town or city in the Neck warrants discussion in Realm circles, the Neck is often synonymous for the capital city as well as the island nation as a whole. The arrival of our ship, the *Dancing Raiton*, in Solid Shell's port was supposed to have been cause for much pomp and circumstance and formal revelry. It was to herald a new warmth in relations between the Neck and the Realm. The bedraggled appearance of our Realm ship as we limped into port, however, did not facilitate a festive air, however, but a troubled one. They were expecting a grand Realm ship containing three of the Dragon-Blooded Host. They were getting a ship with a broken mast and scorch marks over large portions of the deck, a ship so crippled that it barely made it into port. Worse, the ship carried only one member of the Dragon-Blooded Host, the other two having been given a proper burial at sea. And to top it off, the clouds were deep blue-gray and threatening a storm.

Nothing about our arrival was auspicious, but we had at least made it into port before the storm broke.

A band of musicians had been playing some song appropriate to the expected pageantry of the occasion, but the music stopped once we were close enough that those on land could see the damage we had taken.

Once the *Dancing Raiton* was secured to the docks, the rote diplomatic protocols kicked in: The Neck's chieftain petitioned to be allowed on our vessel. We allowed it. Before he came aboard, however, his golden-skinned wives and eight children, laden with flowers and foodstuffs, scuttled onto the ship, keeping their eyes down, and, guided by the crew, presented them to me for my approval. I looked at the array in front of me, including some of the most beautiful flowers I'd seen, and I was honestly impressed. I nodded, and they scuttled off again, and the chieftain himself came aboard. Bua-Shing was an older man with the bronze skin and gray-green hair of an islander. He wore a canvas cloak over his plain gray tunic, although it looked more like an ivory carapace because it was entirely covered with cowry shells. In addition, the old man wore a necklace of bright-blue lacquered lobster claws. Such a necklace, I knew from my research into Western diplomacy, was the badge of office worn by the chieftain, who was put in power by the islands' elders. I would bet a talent of jade that it had been invested with Essence in some way. He took pains to keep his head down, looking up only enough to see to it that he didn't shatter the air of solemnity by bumping into a chair on his way to the parlaying table.

The chieftain tried to hide both his terror and his curiosity at the sorry state of our ship, but the signs of both were unmistakable.

"I thank you for your gifts, loyal Bua-Shing. Please, put yourself at ease."

He relaxed a bit, and I smiled warmly to show him that he was safe. For my part, I simply wanted to know where the tribute had gone and what kind of excuses he was going to invent in order to save face so I could deal with the issue and start fixing my ship. Protocol came first. I have no doubt he had dug

up an advisor or old scroll somewhere that told him how to interact with Dragon-Blooded representatives of the Realm. He may have even rehearsed his lines because he seemed far more polished than I had expected. Eventually, the time came to dispense with formalities and address the issue we had been politely talking around. He felt it too, apparently, because just as I was about to ask, he attempted evasive maneuvers — either that or his curiosity overwhelmed him.

“I see that your ship has sustained damage. My carpenters and shipwrights are at your disposal, Holiness.”

“I appreciate your offer, loyal Bua-Shing. I will let you know soon if I need their assistance.”

“You were... attacked?”

I hadn't yet decided what to say on that matter, and if he hadn't asked, I probably wouldn't have volunteered it. If I told him the truth, it might simply provide him with one more reason not to send his tribute to the Realm. On the other hand, if I told him a believable lie, that mere pirates had been so devastating to an imperial ship, how much further would the Dynasty slip in his eyes?

“No, pirates are unlikely to be so brazen with a Realm ship, Bua-Shing. We were beset by a ghost ship. Their ship overtook and boarded us. My captain, Peleps Ondani, her son, Peleps Baraka, and I met the walking dead in battle. Though we bested them easily, their mistress was a deathknight — and far more lethal. Although the captain and her son inflicted grievous damage on the monster, the deathknight slew both of them before I took advantage of her injuries and destroyed her.” I scrutinized Bua-Shing for any signs that my story did not surprise him — an alliance between Skullstone and the Neck was hardly improbable, after all. Seeing no sign that he had known of our attack, I continued. “While this attack is a tragedy for the Realm, it is a clear sign that the Realm has failed to keep these waters as safe as they need to be. We have failed you, loyal Bua-Shing. The temerity shown by that deathknight hag clearly indicates to me that the Dynasty needs to make its presence more common here in the West if you are to feel comfortable conducting trade in these waters. Don't you agree, loyal Bua-Shing?”

The chieftain nodded his head in silent agreement.

“Outstanding.” I said. “I only wish we'd known your predicament from the beginning. I should tell you that my original mission to the Neck was to discover why 15 months had passed without a single ship from the Neck coming to the Blessed Isle to pay its tribute to the Realm. I understand now that the menacing presence of that deathknight's ship kept you from sending your taxes to the Isle, isn't that right, Bua-Shing?”

The old man, caught more than a little off guard by my rapidly evolving conclusions, only nodded. I did not get the impression that our conversation was going in the direction he had hoped.

“Well, thank Daana'd we found out what was wrong before the situation became a diplomatic embarrassment. We are most fortunate, are we not, Bua-Shing?”

“Yes, Holiness.”

“So, now that the Realm has dealt with the threat that's been menacing your ships, when do you think we can expect to see a Neck tribute ship in Eagle's Launch? Sometime in the next month, I would assume?”

The chieftain's mouth opened, and it hung open as he pondered his next words, but I continued before any word could pass his lips.

“If you'd like, I'd be happy to take your beautiful wives and inquisitive children back to the Realm with me as a favor to you, loyal Bua-Shing. I would be honored to show them the many wonders of the Blessed Isle until your tribute ship arrived to unload its cargo and bring them back to you. In fact,” I said, smiling and slapping my hand hard on the table, “I insist on it.”



I paused for a moment, not just to catch my breath and congratulate myself on resolving things quickly, but also to give the chieftain enough time to collect his thoughts and speak.

After a moment of thought, Bua-Shing took a deep breath and gave me his reply. “But, Holiness, unless I am grievously mistaken, your ship will be so full of our humble tribute to the Realm that I doubt there will be room for my beautiful wives and inquisitive children.”

After thinking on that for a moment, I looked up at the old man across from me and smiled. He was brighter than I’d given him credit for. “What was I thinking? You are so right, loyal Bua-Shing. I was so excited about showing your family the Blessed Isle that I completely forgot about my humble ship’s space limitations. We will have to defer their visit indefinitely, I’m afraid. I hope they won’t be too disappointed.”

“They are young and resilient, Holiness. They will recover from their disappointment.”

“Yes, loyal Bua-Shing, I’m sure they will. I can’t think of anything else that would interfere with the regular delivery of the Neck’s tribute henceforth, can you?”

I was certain that my audience with the chieftain was over and that I could start making arrangements for the *Dancing Raiton*’s repairs, but he made no move to leave. When he took in a deep breath and left his mouth open searching for words in that way he was wont to do, I realized that there was something else on his mind.

“It is not just the dangerous waters that have kept us from sending tribute, Holiness. At the express instruction of an Immaculate monk who visited nearly a year ago, we ceased our practice of making offerings to Shepolpa, the Goddess of Hungry Waters. Since then, not only have many of our shell divers drowned, but every storm is heralded by an attack by the thousand hungry wings.”

“And you hold Shepolpa responsible for both of these developments?”

“Yes, Holiness.”

I heard the strain in his voice, and I felt pity for this old man. Some dogmatic monk tells his people to change their ways and conveniently leaves before addressing the consequences of his advice. Unfortunately, it was an increasingly common story in the chaotic days since the Empress’ disappearance.

“You say the thousand hungry wings arrive before storms?”

“Yes, Holiness.”

“Like the one approaching now?”

“*Exactly* like this one, Holiness.”

“I wish you’d said something sooner.”



The main street of Solid Shell was called Shell Street. It was the only straight street in the city, and like most of the major thoroughfares in the city, it was covered with a tall translucent archway to let light in while keeping the citizens dry during the frequent rains. Shell Street ran the width of the island and opened onto the port on the east side of the island and onto an old temple to Daana’d on the west. According to Bua-Shing, when the Wyld-maddened birds attacked, they came from the west, through the Gate of Daana’d, and flew from there down the various side streets, devouring — to the bone — anyone not behind thick doors and shuttered windows.

Word went through the city that every able-bodied archer was to meet at the western end of Shell street. I stood at the opening of the Daana’d gate. Down a wide stairway hewn from the basalt of the island itself was the enormous domed shrine to the Immaculate Dragon of Water. Those who considered themselves archers began to trickle in from the side streets with quivers of arrows and bows that hadn’t been fired in months, if not years. I had brought



the two best archers from my crew as well. The rest of the crew was on alert back at the ship, just in case this was a ruse to get me as far from my vessel as possible.

Bua-Shing was talking with my archers and telling them what to expect. I faced west, looking out at the darkening sky and the increasingly angry waves. For the first time since leaving the Heptagram, I muttered the words of power that transformed my skin to impenetrable bronze. My anima glowed red around me, lurid in the growing darkness. Behind me, all conversation stopped. For dramatic effect, I also ignited my anima as I turned to address the throng.

“Citizens of Solid Shell, the predations you have suffered are at an end. In acknowledgement of your loyalty, the Realm has sent one of its Dragon-Blooded sons to end the attacks by the thousand hungry wings. Should any birds make it into the city, it is your task to shoot them down. Do you understand?”

There were a few muttered replies, and not at all what I’d wanted.

“I said, DO YOU UNDERSTAND?!” The crowd screamed its assent. I turned before the affirmative roar of the crowd had even stopped ringing through the covered street. Rising above the roar of the crashing surf, I heard the shrill screeching and piping of the approaching flock.

I looked around me, especially up at the metal skeleton of the gate itself and positioned myself so that I would cause as little damage to the city as possible while preventing any bird from getting past me.

I was Nellens Malakai, sorcerer of House Nellens, of the Dynasty of the Realm, and this, in theory, is what the Realm was supposed to be doing throughout Creation. I was hardly about to join the ranks of the “napping dragons” mentioned in the old nursery rhyme.

Out over the water, in the last fading light of the cloudy sky, I saw the flock approaching the city. It was huge and loud and terrible. I calculated how quickly it was coming and how long I could wait before beginning the incantation, and when the flock began wheeling down, aiming for me and the gaping entrance of the Daana’d gate, I spoke my invocation.

I was the most obvious target at the gate, and the first of the screeching birds, intent on their kill, had nearly reached me when the wave of obsidian butterflies shot out from behind me. To my surprise, the Daana’d gate itself, nicked by the edges of a few obsidian wings, rang like a well-tuned bell. The butterflies caught the central mass of birds square on, killing or wounding the majority of the flock instantly. A handful of lagging birds attacked me, doing me no damage, but burning off their own feathers in the attempt. Those I trampled beneath my burning bronze foot.

Behind me, the sound of twanging bows, flying arrows and dying birds echoed in the covered street. The citizens of Solid Shell swarmed from the Daana’d gate and bludgeoned to death any birds that the butterflies or the archers had not killed.

In the city’s center, I found Bua-Shing surrounded by a mass of his joyful citizens. When I beckoned him, he slipped through the crowd to come to me, again keeping his eyes down.

“Tomorrow, loyal Bua-Shing, you will take me to this Shepolpa so that I may speak with her personally. After that, your carpenters will begin repairing my ship.”

“Yes, Holiness. And we will ready our tribute for loading onto your ship as well.”

“Outstanding, loyal Bua-Shing. Outstanding.”

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ASPECT BOOK FIRE™



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INTRODUCTION

*Lift not my head from bloody ground,
Bear not my body home,
For all the earth is Roman earth
And I shall die in Rome.*
—G.K. Chesterton, “The Ballad of the White Horse”

Aspect Book: Fire is a sourcebook designed to help you better understand the world of the Fire-aspected Dragon-Blooded. The Burning Swords form the blazing edge of Dragon-Blooded society. They are the ones who blaze new trails for the Realm and challenge the way matters are conducted there. While the Empress gone and the Great Houses at odds over the succession, the Children of Hesiesh are the ones who drive their people forward, seeking a resolution

to the current crisis of empire. This book exists to give insight into the passionate hearts of these most puissant and charming of the Dragon-Blooded. It also offers new Charms to give your Dragon-Blooded character new might with which to work her will upon the world.

The Aspects of Fire are the principals of passion and change within Dragon-Blooded society. They are fighters and speakers and lovers of living, although

not always of life. At their most undisciplined, they are a wildfire of interests and passions without particular direction. However, the Dynasty frowns on such behavior, and Fire Aspects are generally true to the restrained ideals of Hesiesh, seeking to focus their inner fire into a jade core of discipline and careful consideration. It well that they do, for if they were to press the case for anarchy forcefully, it is likely their impassioned demeanor and terrible martial prowess would carry the day.

This book not only expounds on the lives of the Crimson Dragons, but also paints a picture of the Scarlet Dynasty and the society it rules and supports. The Children of Hesiesh serve the Realm as officers, duelists, monks, politicians and professional charm-ers, and as much else as well. As the Time of Tumult looms, they are the foremost defenders of the Realm, and their strength of character, and of Essence, is constantly put to the test.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Aspect Book: Fire explores the personalities of the often misunderstood Aspects of Fire. Driven by the most volatile and active of the elements, few understand that they possess as much depth of character as any other individuals. This text sheds light on how they live their lives and why. This book also gives players some ideas on how to flesh out their Fire Aspects, as well as new Charms and artifacts to use. For Storytellers, **Aspect Book: Fire** gives some insight into how Storyteller characters may react to the Crimson Dragons in their games.

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

Chapter Two: A Life of Obligations shows the duties and expectations laid upon the shoulders of the Aspects of Fire. These stories show how these Exalted view 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 Hesiesh.

Chapter Three: The World We Rule illustrates the opinions of these Fire 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 of the Crimson Dragons. It gives a variety of opinions from friends, teachers, betrayers and servants, to name a few. Storytellers can use

characters in this chapter to beef up the backgrounds of the Storyteller characters in their games.

Chapter Five: Records of the Before gives examples of life in the First Age from the historical records of the Dragon-Blooded. 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 Hesiesh contains new Charms for Fire Aspects to use. These Charms expand the abilities of the Crimson Dragons to put their mark upon Creation, to gain victory in battle, to excel at feats of athletic prowess and to kindle passion within all those who behold them. New Hearthstones and other wonders are also listed here.

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

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

SOURCE MATERIAL

There are many characters in mythology and media who match the idle of the Fire-pected Dragon-Blooded. At their heart, the Aspects of Fire are hot-headed, hot-blooded and quick with their swords. Many characters in heroic fiction come from this model of heroism.

Achilles of *Iliad* fame, recently played by Brad Pitt in Wolfgang Peterson's *Troy*, is an excellent example. Whether a rock star like the movie Achilles or a driven demigod like the character in the epic, Achilles is there for the glory and the battle, not the war. In his hot passion, his athleticism and his embrace of the warrior's emotions and life, he is an excellent example of a Fire-pected Dragon-Blood. He's fighting at Ilium because conflict is where he belongs. This is the heart of the Fire-pected Dragon-Blood. The quick-tempered, red-headed Norse god of thunder, Thor, is another good example of a Fire Aspect. Thor is loyal, passionate, quick-tempered and ever ready for a scrap. Like an ideal Dragon-Blood, he's always a loyal defender to his people, even if he drinks too much or has a short temper.

Likewise, Miyamoto Musashi (the author of *The Book of Five Rings*) as a hot-blooded youth, almost a bully, is another excellent Fire Aspect, crashing his way across Japan in search of competition. The big-hearted brutality of Zhang Fei from the *Romance of the*





Three Kingdoms is also worthy of a Fire-pected Dragon-Blood. Both men were governed by their bullish hearts and prone to swaggering and outbursts of temper that diminished them as upright individuals but couldn't diminish their heroism.

In anime and related media like CRPGs, this character is a very common archetype, and almost every story is likely to have someone who is "fiery," someone who is a good fighter, acts inappropriately and is often overwhelmed by emotion. Shayla Shayla from *el-Hazard* is a good example, as is Lina Inverse from *Slayers*.

In more conventional cinema, Arnold Schwarzenegger's quip-tossing, good-humored action-movie persona from mid-career movies such as *Commando* and *Predator* is another good example of a Fire Aspect. Fast thinking, naturally charismatic, good-humored and deadly in battle, the jovial Arnold-hero makes a great Aspect of Fire.

All these characters are energetic, sociable and formidable fighters. In this, they are suitable for any game. However, it's notable that one of the central traits of almost all of these characters is that that, in **Exalted** terms, their Valor scores are often very high while their Temperance scores are low, and this often causes them a lot of trouble.

Even the most "realistic" of the characters — Musashi and Zhang Fei — caused lots of trouble with their drinking and their quick tempers. This is something that Storytellers and players should discuss at length before play begins. If the player is going to emulate the aspect's extreme behavior, that's something that needs to be talked out in advance, so that it's not detrimental to the game.

If a player intends to roleplay the fiery stereotype to the hilt, the Storyteller should clearly define what is acceptable. How far can the aggressive personality veer into abusiveness before the tone becomes too harsh for the game? Conversely, how far can the player portray her character as a red-faced buffoon? The least-realistic characters of the fiery archetype, such as Shayla Shayla, are often rather comical. You should decide how far the character can sink into the humorous before it's inappropriate. It's always good to discuss with players how they'll be portraying their characters, but with characters such as Aspects of Fire, who are typified by extreme behavior, it's doubly important. This not only protects the feelings of sensitive players, it also helps the Storyteller get a good idea of exactly what sort of game she's going to be running. Someone who wants to be an epic betrayer may have no place in a light-hearted Dynastic sex comedy, while someone who can't help but drink and duel merrily will be just as out of place in a game of imperial special-forces operations around the ruins of Thorns.

Finally, don't forget that the Dragon-Blooded teach restraint to their firebrand heroes. Obviously, not everyone is a good follower of Hesiesh, but keep this in mind as an answer to players who insist that they absolutely must act foolhardily to play an Aspect of Fire properly. The Dragon-Blooded know very well the tendencies of their kind and work to combat them. This isn't to say that every Aspect of Fire is a good follower of Hesiesh, just that there's no reason a player *must* behave foolishly in order to remain "in character."

ON CONTROLLING FIRE AND THE WORSHIP OF HESIESH

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

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

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

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

Worship of the Fire Dragon Hesiesh is mostly confined to the ranks of the Dragon-Blooded. The Realm is a state founded on tranquility, and the Dragon of Fire's role in the destruction of the Anathema is mostly a matter for the battle narrative segments of the Immaculate Texts. On the Blessed Isle, peasants are not taught the importance of fire discipline and the psychological importance of the unanticipated line of attack, and so, these lessons have been let to lapse out of the Philosophy's popular form.

However, among the Dragon-Blooded, and particularly among the Aspects of Fire, the teachings of Hesiesh are still alive and well. Dragon-Blooded are ardent practitioners of the military virtues, and the self-discipline of Hesiesh is stressed to each and every young Exalt. The miracles of the Exalted are finite, and they come easily to the Dragon-Blooded. Without iron control, an Exalt will quickly exhaust her store of magic.

Among Aspects of Fire, the lesson is even more important. All Exalted must be concerned with the dangers of Essence possession, of becoming a vessel ridden by the raw needs of the Essence they control rather than harnessing it to the Chosen's will. For all Exalted, Hesiesh's tale is a positive exhortation to husband resources until they are needed. For Fire Aspects, it is specifically instructive. When using Fire Essence, it is often important to wait for the critical moment because one mote follows another very easily for Aspects of Fire. They are masters of battle miracles, and it is natural for them to reflexively wield their power when fighting or even just generally exerting themselves. Not only does this exhaust this power, it can often endanger the environment around them. An Aspect of Fire whose anima banner becomes powerful enough to do damage will not scour the walls or leave the floor sprouting and rotten, she will burn down an entire Manse or palace or forest because, unlike the other aspects' anima banners, theirs can lead to self-perpetuating destruction. It is crucially important that these Exalts maintain control of their power at all times, and the tales of Hesiesh feature some fairly blatant instruction on how Aspects of Fire should best do this.

The result is that Fire Aspects, especially those who are devout Immaculates, are often very much different than one might expect. The elemental character of fire is to burn everything it touches. The personal character of Aspects of fire is to burn only what they want to, when they want to and in a fashion that pleases them best. Much of their passion is directed inward, to cultivate a self-control that can harness the mad energy that wells up endlessly within them. Even among those who are not devout Immaculates, this attitude is common because this is the behavior expected from individuals of this aspect by civilized society in the Scarlet Dynasty and in all the other major groups of Dragon-Blooded.





CHAPTER ONE CHILDHOOD AND SELF

Exalt!

The lives of young Dynasts are burdened by incredible expectations. They are expected to Exalt, and if they Exalt, they are expected to get into one of the great academies, and if they get into such a school, they are expected to excel, and if they excel, they are expected to enter a vocation that brings the family prestige... and so on. Add to that the distant role of parents and the intense atmosphere of competition at even the primary school level, and it's no wonder so many young Dynasts leave childhood with wounds and resentments that are likely never to heal — and equally likely to drive them to prove themselves in all manner of extreme ways.

Aspects of Fire, in particular, are known for their tempers and their passion, and much of this reputation stems from their Exaltations, which are typically the most destructive ones of all the Dragon-Blooded. Self-control, the tenet embodied by Hesiesh is and must be the core of the Fire Aspects outlook. Otherwise, each is a walking fire hazard, easily as much a threat to the Realm as a protector. If the Exalt can master his own surfeit of passion and raw energy, however, he can fashion himself into a truly formidable foe, both on the field of battle and in the softer but no less dangerous arenas of social conflict.

PELEPS DANIC DAMANCHINA

There is an art to aesthetics, just as aesthetics themselves are part of art, and the proof is that they must be

delivered at the precise time if they are to be worth anything at all. My cousin, who is Water-aspected, speaks of the peak of a wave or the point of a whirlpool. I am Fire-aspected, and I prefer to seize the moment to light the fire of appreciation in the breasts of onlookers. This stroke of the pen cripples an account; that denunciation lays low a minister; this presentation of finances brings down a business; that exposure of tax evasion results in five suicides, 10 imprisonments, an arranged marriage, a raised levy in a distant satrapy and a formal duel. But had I done any of them a day earlier or a day later, then they would have been worthless.

It's all in the timing. So said Hesiesh, and so say I.

I don't believe in wasteful action. That's something just as apparent in poetry or art as it is in war or economics. This probably makes me a stereotype of my aspect, or so a daughter of House Cynis once said. Trying to annoy me, of course. I reminded her of the Immaculate saying: "It is better to walk a thousand paces in the footsteps of a Dragon, than to turn away from his path to seek your own." Then, I set fire to her private collection of carved ivory toys at a moment when she was too preoccupied with her bodyservant to interfere. She didn't try to insult me again. She did try to assassinate me, but that was an entirely different matter. But I'm wandering from the point, which was — choose the moment, use the moment, and if necessary, destroy the evidence afterward.

EXALTATION

My parents made it clear to me from an early age that I was destined for the Spiral Academy. Exaltation or not, I was good with numbers but no more than average with blades or military tactics. More importantly, the family needed members in the bureaucracy, and therefore, unless some truly astonishing talent presented itself, that was where I was bound.

I liked the idea. Not only did I enjoy working with arithmetic and poetry, but my older brothers and sisters were already in the legions or at the Heptagram or, in one case, at the Cloister of Wisdom. My family believes in competition, and even at five years old, I was already being held up against my cousins by way of a challenge. When I was that age, it was a case of one sweet bun and five competing children. Now, the prize is higher than a sweet bun, but the principle remains the same, and the taste of triumph over others is *exactly* the same. It's not just the getting of the sweet bun. It's the fact that the other children don't get it. That's the Peleps ethos: Harness your pride and your pettiness to serve the house, so that your vices may exalt it just as your virtues do.

I remember that, when I was at boarding school, some of the other children feared that they would fail their examinations or that they would not Exalt. Perhaps I am unimaginative, but I never conceived that either of those two things would happen to me. I worked at my classes, I paid attention in the lectures, I brought pride to my

parents, I was the good child, I was the perfect child, I was everything that they could have desired, and it all worked out. The fire came, and I was transfigured. I watched the hatred and the envy and the bitterness in the eyes of the other children, the unExalted, those who by now knew that they would never be Exalted, and...

I made their vices serve me. Some of them thought that the mere company of someone newly Exalted would increase their own chances of Exaltation, and who knows? Perhaps they were right. Some of them did Exalt, so... Others believed in elixirs: "Drink a mixture of the blood, the hair and the saliva of an Exalt at midnight for three days, my child, and surely, on the morning of the fourth day, you will see a change. You will hear the Dragons themselves responding to your plea." It would have been irresponsible not to take advantage of such blatant idiocy. Besides, if I hadn't, someone else would have. So, why shouldn't I take some of the profit? Make other people's vices serve you as well as your own. Take advantage of the moment, and destroy the evidence afterward.

I remember the jealousy of others. "It's not fair," they said, as though saying it would change anything. There are two basic situations in life: situations that can be altered by your own efforts and situations that are purely matters of luck — in the talons of the Dragons, if you will. In the first situation, if they didn't bother to take advantage of tradition, to make an effort and to work, then I have no pity for those who fail. I saw no reason to slow my own steps just because other pupils were not doing as well



as I was. I had no motivation to share my work or to collaborate on tests. I'd been taught that competition was part of life. If my classmates wrote themselves out of the running before we even finished the first heat, what was I supposed to do? Pity them?

Hesiesh, like all the Immaculate Dragons, teaches that we must be strong. His hymns and prayers are efficacious because they are the *right* ones, handed down by tradition and proven through the Ages.

All that they needed to do was to follow tradition, to work at their lessons and to get them right. Was that really so hard a thing? I managed it.

Exaltation may be different. That is in the talons of the Dragons, and they choose whom they wish. But I think — I think that if I had failed, that if I had been forced to return home as a mere human, then I would not have chosen to live further. I would have failed my parents and my family and my house, and I could not have born the disgrace.

I know at least one boy who failed to Exalt and left the school and did not return. He was of House Mnemon — Mnemon Caras' line, if I remember correctly. He had been so proud of his family, so utterly certain that he would Exalt and follow his ancestor in the steps of the Dragon of Earth. He did the bare minimum of work, skimmed on his work, only practiced his weapon drills because he enjoyed the sport and spent more time on pornography than poetry. If he did pass his exams, it was more because of admitted natural gifts than any real work. And then, he failed to Exalt. Was it because of his lack of effort, his lack of spiritual merit or some stroke of chance? We don't know, though I've certainly heard enough argument on the point. But if it *had* been the first, then it would have been entirely his fault. Small loss to the empire, in any case.

But the actual moment of Exaltation itself? That was — I run short of words when I try to describe it. The best descriptions of it that I've ever seen or heard have been in semi-mystical poetry, usually written by Immaculates while “off with the Dragons,” as I've heard it put. Everything suddenly makes sense. The entire universe is a poem that you can deconstruct, a piece of artwork that you suddenly appreciate every brushstroke of, a lover at the moment of orgasm, a fire at the precise moment when the flame catches and leaps into the air. For that single second, I was the descending lightning, the consuming fire, no longer merely flesh, but something greater than myself. When that moment was over, I was changed forever.

We had been practicing with staves on the field. Of course, we were supposed to be practicing dodge-and-block-and-strike without doing more than tapping our staves against each other's. And of course, we were all taking the opportunity to get in a few bruises. I was tired, so tired that my body ached from it. I closed my eyes for a moment as we held the parry, I opened my eyes, and then,

the fire came down upon me, and I cried out as it blazed through me. I finished the pattern of dodge and strike that we had begun, as smooth as oiled metal, and ended with the end of the staff at my opponent's throat and him on the ground, shaking with fear and envy.

Exaltation. The power of the Dragons descends upon us and makes us the Princes of the Earth. There are people who try to recreate the experience with drugs or sex or wine or by burning through their Essence with Charm after Charm in the hopes of regaining that moment of absolute precision. I haven't tried. Not because I know it would be futile, which it would be, but because I'm not sure that I could stop once I started.

THE SPIRAL ACADEMY

The Spiral Academy is a place of tradition. It trains its pupils in the finest glories of the Realm: backstabbing, throatcutting, accounting, bookkeeping, poetry and perjury. The Realm needs her soldiers and her sorcerers and her monks, but when push comes to shove, the Realm really needs to know how to feed her people, where the rice is coming from, when the rice can be moved and how much it's all going to cost. One of my cousins, trying to impress me, quoted a saying about how battles are won by quartermasters. I already *knew* that.

I expected to get in without too much trouble. Of course, there would be difficulties, but I was confident in my own abilities and in my parents. I pity those children who are born outcaste and those whose parents don't bother to push them enough. The secondary schools require both merit and payment, or at least very definite merit. Fortunately, I had the ability, and I knew that my parents wouldn't stint in getting me into the place. I attended all the required interviews, took the tests and competed in the field with the other prospective candidates, but truthfully, I was never really afraid. I was good. I was among the best. And my parents paid good jade. I entered the Spiral Academy and never looked back.

There was one way in which the place was a complete and absolute joy. I was working with people who agreed with me that numbers and statistics and records were important. We'd sit next to each other at our high desks, going through piles of records, and as the candles burned down and were replaced by the servants, we'd make note after note for our presentations the next day. It wasn't necessarily a feeling of friendship — by the Dragons, no indeed — but more the knowledge that you were among others who felt as you did about what was important and what wasn't.

I suppose that the other academies must have that too and that it must foster similar working relationships and even friendships. Do sorcerers bond as they compare demonic titles, and do little Immaculates-in-training huddle together on their pallets against the cold, and do the





soldiers-to-be compare battle scars and complain that nobody else understands them? I know that we did. “Oh, Damanchina, have you seen this set of accounts? Look at how he’s tried to hide his revenues for the last quarter in his clerical expenses!” “Damanchina, my dear, I understand how dreadful you must feel after the way that Sesus Atoris tore your essay to pieces. Dry your tears on my affectionate shoulder.” “Cousin Damanchina, tell me, do you ever get annoyed about the way that our brothers keep on laughing at our work and calling us paper-blooded snails with no more gumption than a peasant and no future beyond a petty career among the minor officials?”

Those of us with particular Charms that eased the burden of record-keeping and record-analysis were, oddly enough, at a disadvantage in the early days of study. It would have been simplicity itself — particularly for those who were Water-aspected — to invoke certain Charms and speed through the work. But it would fail to teach us the work properly, or so our masters reasoned.

It would mean that, at times when we had no Essence to power these Charms or when we had too much work to use them or if we needed to apparently be innocent of them, we wouldn’t know how to do the work properly, page by painstaking page. Those of us who knew the Charms had to put them aside and work through the piles of scrolls as slowly as if we had been mere patricians. Of course, later in our studies, we were permitted to use the Charms and even trained in how best to apply them, but that wasn’t for years.

Why should we apparently not know how to use them? Well, a visiting lecturer explained, the time might come when we would need to seem to be ineffectual but actually to be taking note of everything that was going on around us. We might need to look like society frivolors but actually be capable of going through a thousand records in a single night. The word *spy* was never used once, nor were the words “other ministries” or “army budgets” or “satrapies” or “house taxes.” I was very impressed by the whole concept, though not inclined to do it myself.

At the Spiral Academy, those who could not cope simply sank to the level of their own incompetence. I have been told that, in other secondary schools, they have whipping posts and training fields with salutary bruises and agonizing tortures administered by specially trained demons. Quite right. How else are we to learn better?

NELLENS MALAKAI

CHILDHOOD

Truthfully, the first nine years of my life were unremarkable. I was my parents’ only child at the time, although my father recently told me that my mother is pregnant again.

Both of my parents were Exalted, but neither of them was anything to brag about. My mother, one of only three

Nellens in her generation to Exalt, graduated next to last in her class from the Spiral Academy. It was an embarrassment that has haunted her more with each passing year. Luckily, her future was not staked on her performance in the academic arena. She was, and remains, strikingly beautiful and quite adept socially. Guileless, she wins friends every time she is introduced to someone new. It is a talent I envy. My father, on the other hand, is extraordinarily brilliant and a member of the All-Seeing Eye in good standing, although *his* parents had been in serious disrepute with the Empress for reasons never explained to me. Marrying the underachieving Exalted daughter of a largely mortal house was — nigh inconceivably — a step up for him on the social ladder, which might explain a number of things....

Mine was a dull childhood, peopled with all the usual nannies and tutors and trainers and help and a house full of distant relatives. As a child, I was only as outgoing as I was forced to be. Only a few interesting memories punctuate my recollections of childhood. I was reared closer to my parents than many of my fellows. I think they thought of me as a fascinating experiment. They were not cruel, but neither did they coddle me. I always got the impression that they found me *interesting*, but I’m not sure why. In retrospect, the only thing that I remember my parents for, the only thing that makes them interesting to me now, was their tendency to produce spectacles and to entertain guests. All of life to them was one big party into which a little work, by necessity, had to fall. It was the life my mother was born for. They still see the world through that lens, and when I think about the nature of their parties, I can’t help but wonder whose child my mother is swelling with.

You may have guessed by now that my parents were libertines. I grew up in what I’ll call a very freewheeling atmosphere. My parents share the moral code of House Cynis, for better or worse. I think I saw more of my parents — in all the senses of that phrase — than many of my peers saw of theirs. I suspect the rest of the house thought of my parents as diplomats or something, trying to improve our standing by hosting parties, the decadence of which equaled at least some of the Cynis’. It’s my personal theory that my parents and their interminable parties were, ultimately, an attempt to improve the status of our house through social, as opposed to political, means. I think the experiment failed, although my parents kept up their decadent lifestyle long after the house had come to the conclusion that it didn’t pay well.

I remember one party in particular that my parents hosted — when I was around eight — with a particular keenness. It was late and my cousin Sarata had put me to bed and stayed in the room until I feigned sleep. It was irresponsible of him to leave me alone, but I think he wanted to experience some of the party himself. I could not

sleep. The guests and the strange music were much too noisy, and I was too curious, so I slipped out of my room to have a look around. As I walked down the hall to the ballroom, I had to pass several spare bed chambers on my way to the stairway that led to the ballroom. All of them were occupied and emanated moans and sighs. I knew what these sounds meant, but I still had no understanding of what made adults do such things. My parents' house was no longer the place I knew, and I felt like a stranger stealing through someone else's home. It was very exciting.

Down in the ballroom, a troupe of primitive musicians played their native music. I think they were from Rubylak, although I could be misremembering. Their music wasn't like anything I'd heard. It was fast, discordant and very rhythmic. I thought that perhaps it was the music that was causing the adults to behave as they were, careening about in assorted states of undress and arousal. The open sexuality was only of moderate interest to me. It was only the music that really differentiated that party from the one the week before or the week before that.

I wandered around the party, pausing only briefly to look at the couples, trios and clusters of rutting partiers. I was quite focused on finding my parents, although I don't remember what I wanted them for. I did eventually find them in my father's bedchamber. My mother was lying in a sling, head back, legs spread wide. A cluster of male guests were taking their turns with her.

Until he saw me, my father, who was naked, had been watching the proceedings through heavy lidded eyes, seemingly quite fascinated. He didn't notice me until I walked over to him and placed my hand on his bare leg to get his attention. He wasn't particularly angry with me, although I think he resented having to leave the room to put me back in bed. He took me to Sarata's room and, somewhat irritably, told my cousin to watch me more closely because if I were mistaken for a spare catamite, the consequences would be his to bear. Before he went back to the party, he told me that I would have plenty of time to have my own parties when I was an adult and that, for now, I had to leave the adults to their fun.

It wasn't like that all that time, of course, but I remember a number of parties in that same vein. For years, I thought everyone's parents had parties like that, but as I got to know more of my peers, I found out that my parents were just more sexually active than most.

It feels dishonest to even use the word peers with regard to the other children in my childhood. I did not feel that I *had* any peers my own age. When I could avoid it (which was not often), I was not social with other children, largely because they seemed, if you will, childish. The hours of team-building exercises we performed in primary school always angered me because my "peers" always seemed about three steps behind me in understanding what we were supposed to be doing. Those

exercises often pitted one class against another in performing some childish task. Eventually, my class figured out that I was much faster at figuring out what it was we should be doing. After that, we won almost every exercise. My class loved me. I did not return the sentiment. On the contrary, I kept to myself as much as I could. I applied myself to whatever my tutors were teaching on any given day, and when we were granted social time, I occupied as much of it as possible reading whatever I could find. I was extraordinarily precocious, and I treated my adult tutors and caretakers as peers and comrades. Some of them frowned on the excessive familiarity, while others treated me just as they would an adult.

Adults liked me, but eventually, the children took offense at my standoffishness and began to openly resent me. It did not help matters that, while my mental aptitudes developed far in advance of my age, my physical ones seemed slow to develop in equal measure. I think both of my parents despaired of my ever Exalting based on the incredible awkwardness I exhibited as a child and into my middle adolescence.

The most embarrassing moment of my childhood took place at the end of my first year of primary school. It was caused by my own clumsiness and took place during sailing class. Given how important trade is to the Realm in general and to my house in particular, there was no getting out of learning the basics of sailing and ship handling. It was close to the end of our time on the ship — a leaky old sloop on the verge of being decommissioned — and I was up on the mast tending to the mainsail. It had just rained, and I was more focused on watching a fight down on the deck than on where I was placing my feet. I fell, but instead of plunging to the deck, and probably dying, I got tangled in the rigging. The fight below broke up immediately. My fellow students, who thought me aloof and who had never liked me, laughed as I hung upside down from my ankle and my elbow. Worse, the instructor, an old naval officer himself on the edge of retirement, did nothing. He came out to see what the others were laughing at, glanced up at me and, without a reaction of any kind, returned to his quarters.

I often wish I had Exalted then. It would have saved me years of torment.

Instead, over the course of 15 minutes, I got myself straightened out, climbed over to the mast and got myself back down on deck. I walked with a slight limp for the rest of the evening, but my ego was so bruised that I don't know that I even truthfully felt my ankle. My "peers" laughed at me for weeks afterward. In retrospect, I'm surprised I wasn't deemed a dangerous liability to the Dragon-Blooded Host and killed in a tragic "accident." If I had had the same accident a year later, I suspect I would have been. The Realm likes to cull its weak earlier rather than later.



EXALTATION

It went like that for years. I generally got along well with adults and spent my social hours interacting with them. I likewise endeavored to avoid, as much as possible, interaction with others my own age. I would retreat into my studies or into my personal interest in the First Age. I had a knack for memorization, so I memorized things as my way of showing them respect. I memorized certain First Age rhymes, the Empress' family tree (all the way down to myself), bits of the Immaculate Texts, Anathema lore and a good deal of geomantic terminology. Any discipline that had a great deal of theory behind it and not a lot of physical aptitude involved in its actual practice appealed to me. My peers grew to realize that I was of more use to them in class versus class exercises if I kept studying the way I was inclined to, so they let me study as I wanted and covered for me occasionally if I screwed up at bridge-building or some similar exercise. It wasn't an ideal situation, but it was workable. The instructors were very critical of my ability to work as part of a team, but my social and intellectual precociousness impressed them enough that they were willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. Looking back on it, I was lucky to have finished primary school at all.

When I was 12, I had my first crush, a Dragon-Blood named Cathak Korvek. I think he was a recent House of Bells graduate performing some kind of extra duty as a combat instructor at the Dragon Path Academy where I attended primary school. I thought he was the most handsome man I'd ever seen, and I often tried getting close enough to him to hear his voice. I learned his schedule by heart, and to whatever degree I was able, I changed my routines so I could watch him arrive at the school in the morning and catch glimpses of him at various points during the day. It was a lot like hero worship, not uncommon at that age, except that I wanted to see him naked.

While I thought I was being so brilliant and subtle, I was, in fact, deluded and blind to the blatancy of my actions. In my romantic fixation, I was being ridiculously obvious. Worse, in abandoning the safety of my quiet studies, I had opened myself up to attack. My peers had been watching me and making their own plans to humiliate me. My few friends had discretely tried to warn me that I was setting myself up, but certain that I had everything under control, I paid no attention.

One morning, I had just watched Korvek walk in the doors of the academy. I casually followed him as I was wont to do, and as I entered the building, I found him stopped by a crowd of my peers, all grinning maliciously. I was suddenly mindful of the warnings I had received and immediately turned around to go, but there were others behind me. I tried to run, but they caught me easily, and three of them dragged me back to face Korvek.

The speaker for my mob of persecutors was a girl I didn't even know. She was pretty and very well spoken, and I think they chose her to deliver their message for that reason. She walked up between where my captors held me and where Korvek looked down at us with a mixture of amusement, curiosity and impatience, and she said, "Nellens Malakai has been following you around like a puppy for some time now, sir, and he dotes on your every movement. As it appears that Malakai is too timid to ask you himself, we thought we would assist him by presenting him to you for a kiss."

The others laughed at this as though it were the most masterful act of social assassination ever committed. To this day, I wish I'd had the nerve to look up at Korvek's face to gather some kind of knowledge from his expression. But I didn't. I was so overcome with humiliation that I felt sick. I did nothing but look down at the ground. I still wonder if the others thought me a safe target to abuse because I was from House Nellens and, therefore, in theory, less likely to Exalt.

When one of my captors then shoved me toward Korvek, my anger finally bested my humiliation. I rounded on him, and my rage ignited. Literally. I had every intention of throttling the one who pushed me, a boy several inches taller than I was at the time. I certainly felt strong enough to do it at that moment, and I was delighted to have burst into flame, although, in all honesty, I thought I was just imagining the flames.

Before I had the chance to land a single flaming blow on my persecutor, however, Korvek, his own anima blazing, lifted me up and carried me in his big arms to the section of the school reserved for Exalted students.

Once he sensed I was in control of myself again, he put me down. Smiling, he said, "Congratulations, Exalt. Welcome to the ranks of the Dragon-Blooded."

My life improved immensely after that. Not only had I made my family exceptionally proud (a sentiment they expressed through a barrage of costly presents), but I was a Dragon-Blood in a house notorious for having a shortage of Dragon-Blooded.

Personally, my physical ineptitude became a thing of the past. While the other Fire-aspects could match my physical skills, I was now far better at most physical feats than any of the mortal students and some of the other Dragon-Blooded. My energy was boundless.

Korvek became my mentor and my tutor in martial arts. I offered, quite eagerly, to repay him with sexual favors, but he said no payment was necessary, and in so doing, he broke my young heart, although I never let him know it. I was so furious with him for — as I saw it then — rejecting me that I didn't talk to him for two weeks. When I *did* speak with him, he made it clear that he knew what was going on with me. He told me it was nothing personal,

and then, he kissed me. I forgave him instantly. We were friends until I left the Academy.

Ironically, it was through talking with Korvek that I finally figured out that I wanted to be a sorcerer. He knew little of sorcery himself except the theoretical workings and strategic advantages of combat sorcery that he'd learned at the House of Bells, but he had only the vaguest understanding of what it entailed. When we talked, he told me what he knew about the Heptagram and sorcerers he had known, and I decided then that sorcery was exactly the kind of discipline I could devote myself to completely. Such a career coincided perfectly with my own interests — and with my self-interest as well. Not only was I Dragon-Blooded, but once I graduated from the Heptagram, I'd be a sorcerer as well, making myself into a doubly rare treasure for my house, and the house, for its part, would be delighted to do what it could to keep me happy. I could live with that kind of reciprocity.

It's my suspicion that there were many, both within my house and without, who did not want me to attend the Heptagram. Simple procedures became needlessly complicated and drawn out. My mother had to pay bribes for simple services that should have been automatic. I had a vague understanding of what I had to do to get accepted into that school, and I found myself having to jump through twice as many hoops as I should have — and thrice as many as applicants from House Mnemon.

But I did jump. And jump. And jump still more. *Nothing* was going to stand between me and a life of sorcery. My own dedication was absolute, to the point of obsession at times. My performance in classes was superlative. I even mastered the team-building exercises that had been my downfall when I was younger. I also believe my family threw all of its meager weight into getting me into that school as well. I left the Dragon Path Academy at the age of 14 to board a ship to the Heptagram.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

I had heard that navigating the channel to the Heptagram was a difficult feat and one that had bested many kubernetes who've made the attempt — unauthorized ones at any rate. That reputation comes almost entirely from the air and water elementals serving the school. They see that only ships that *ought* to make it to and from the Heptagram do so. All others are nudged toward rocks or otherwise made to founder. While it's initially the cause of much concern and amazement, Heptagram students quickly adjust to seeing demons and elementals arriving and leaving the island. Becoming accustomed to such things is just one of the privileges of attendance.

The Heptagram must be among the most fascinating places in all of Creation. While I was there, I took it for granted, as one cannot help but take for granted those things with which one becomes familiar through



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daily contact. My first thought upon disembarking from the ship was how remarkable the architecture was. Contrasted to the flawless Manses of the Heptagram, Realm architecture in all but the largest cities exemplifies sloppy, second-rate geomancy. In sharp contrast, every building on that island is built to the most exacting geomantic principles known. My initial impression was something along the lines of “Wow. This is the real thing.” In some ways, it was like looking through a window into the First Age, when every building was created by a truly skilled architect using the best materials possible, not just what happens to be convenient.

The school itself comprises seven enormous buildings, each of which illustrates a specific model of Manse construction. The buildings are placed in very specific geomantic relation to each other to ensure that the flow of Essence is both plentiful and orderly.

My own pride at becoming a sorcerer, at being rewarded for studying the things that had fascinated me for so long, was unbounded. I had always felt that power was to be found in those mysterious places that the common man was too afraid to go. Power is found in the farthest frontiers of knowledge, not in the center. It is risk’s more beautiful twin. Safety and freedom are at opposite ends of a continuum. Those who make it to the Heptagram, almost uniformly, hold in subtle contempt those who choose the former over the latter.

And that is why those who are not sorcerers fear and avoid us. Those sorts of social penalties don’t hold much terror for a true, versatile sorcerer. I think any graduate of the Heptagram will tell you that it’s a small price to pay for what you learn.

Days at the Heptagram are grueling, beginning with exercise and relatively simple martial-arts training. Breakfast comes after training. After breakfast comes the first block of academic courses until weapons training. Weapons training lasts an hour, after which, lunch is served. The second academic period starts after lunch and goes until the late afternoon. From late afternoon until dinner time, we practiced crafts: smithing, geomancy and architecture, savant-engineering and the like. After dinner, we had our third academic block, after which, we were allowed to study independently. I don’t think I ever got more than six hours of sleep in a night while I was there.

The first year was, by far, the most tedious. It’s remarkable how much basic history, cosmology, mathematics and spirit lore Heptagram students have to learn in a single year. We did nothing “magical” that first year whatsoever, and I thought I had made a terrible mistake. Shogunate history was the only thing that engaged me, but I found it fascinating enough to make my other classes tolerable.

The second year was more interesting, with our instructors discussing and modeling basic banishing formulae. Banishing is taught first, and only students who *master*

banishing are allowed to learn restraining theory, and only students who master restraining theory are allowed to study summoning theory. While everyone who graduates from the Heptagram knows *some* sorcery, more than a few of every year’s graduates are little more than glorified historians who know Emerald Countermagic. Those poor bastards get all the stigma of being a sorcerer with hardly any of the advantages.

By the end of the second year, though, we had all learned our first actual spell, that being Emerald Countermagic. At the time, it seemed a *lot* of work for not a lot of payoff, but in retrospect, I think the Heptagram curriculum is very cleverly set up to protect the students.

For the most part, I was a model student. I did have my occasional academic lapse. I grew to hate banishing drills. It is not that I do not understand their importance or acknowledge their necessity, but anything that one is forced to do for hours, days, months on end, one is likely to develop a distaste for. And I have a very low boredom threshold. Given how lax I grew about those drills, I’m sure I would have paid a steep penalty — to a demon if not to one of our instructors — had Mnemon Tirhon not insisted that I practice with him.

CYNIS DENOVAH AVAKU

I remember cotton rather than silk, raw wool rather than furs and satins and the smell of salt from the open sea rather than the perfumes and incense that would have scented the bedrooms of the Princes of the Earth in the Imperial City. I remember poverty from my birth. I remember a desire to change things. Tradition should be kept, where it is good, and broken, when it needs remaking. To keep a tradition without thought and without awareness is the Way of the Illiberal Churl, who destroys himself through lack of insight, following a path which leads to his own destruction.

It is the custom in House Cynis for all members of the house to take the name of the daughter of Cynis herself from whom they are descended to mark their family line. It says something about how utterly lacking in importance, how *worthless* my family was considered to be, that we were allowed to keep the name Denovah and weren’t required to name ourselves after Wisel, Belar or Falen. My parents were expected to retreat to the crumbling cliffside castle and the small estates that were all that was left to them and to stay out of the public eye so as not to shame the family further. House Cynis does not admire victims — not even its own victims. My parents lived on their stipend and on their pathetically small resources and served the house by keeping out of sight.

I was not expected to Exalt. If I had been, then I would have been given a proper name, maybe even adopted into another bloodline. As matters stood, my parents still had enough contacts in the capital and among the schools to

get me into one of the better places, but it took every last piece of jade they had. I went to school in clothing that tried to look classical because it was decades old and studied from books that had been battered and torn when my grandparents had owned them. I lived in the scorn of my classmates. I was Cynis Denovah Avaku, a child from a line that none of Cynis' own daughters could be bothered to acknowledge. At best, I was told, I might become a minor functionary or a low-ranked Immaculate. The second would be preferable — one does not breed from worthless stock.

My parents could have paid less and got me into one of the petty boarding schools, where low-ranking patri- cians send their children and where nobody seriously expects an Exaltation. It would have left them the jade to buy me proper silks to wear, proper weapons for the practice field, proper scrolls and inks for my lessons and proper gifts for me to share with my classmates. It might have meant days when I wasn't sneered at as a jumped-up brat who must have peasant blood in his line, because otherwise, surely, one of the daughters of Cynis would have claimed us as her own. The teachers never stinted my lessons, I'll give them that — but when I was found beating another pupil's head into the dirt because he'd insulted my mother, which of us got caned and which of us was reprimanded? My buttocks bled while he ate sugar-cakes and laughed with his friends.

Don't think that I'd have had it any other way. I made friends there, friends whom I still have, and the quality of the teaching was worth a thousand times the jade that my parents bribed the dominies with. Better to be a peasant at a school for kings, than a king at a school for peasants. But my children — my son is already at one of the Realm's best schools, just outside the capital itself, and my daughter will follow him there. The dominies take my jade with smiles on their faces. There will be others with the name Cynis Denovah in future years, and their children will go to the best schools, and to the House of Bells or the Academy or the Cloister or the Heptagram afterward. Some day, Denovah will be a Cynis line, as admired and respected as Wisel or Belar or Falen. And the old castle where my parents brought me up will be renewed in obsidian and gold and granite, surrounded by estates finer than any in the capital, and silk-sailed ships will bring my line tributes from the satrapies that lie beneath Cynis dominion.

EXALTATION

Exaltation comes with mastery of self. That is how I remember it.

I had done poorly on my geography studies, and the dominie chose to make an example of me. I was called up to the front of the class and had to stand there while he wrote examples of my work on the board and asked the rest of the class to point out my errors. My tunic was still stained

under the arms from a fight earlier behind the training field, and my left sandal had a hole coming in the sole. I stood there, gangly and too tall, and looked ahead of me. Not to the right, not to the left, just ahead. I bit my tongue and didn't say a single word.

The blackboard shattered. That is the part that I remember most clearly — the fragmenting wood, the flaming splinters flying in a hundred directions. My classmates were screaming. So much for the unflappable calm of true aristocracy and the virtues of pure noble blood.

It was at that moment that I knew my full destiny. The Dragons do not choose without a reason. In spite of my family's disgrace, in spite of the house grinding us into the mud, they had chosen me. Why? Because they had a task for me, one that only I could fulfill. Just as Hesiesh before me saved his strength for the moment when it was most needed and, thereby, completed the blow that only he could deliver, by burning the bodies of the Anathema, so I, in my time, had a task laid on me. Why else would the Dragons choose *me* for Exaltation?

I remember laughing. The sound was strange, even to me. I felt as though I no longer needed to breathe. It was a divine laughter, one far above the things of earth, that ran through my veins like hot iron and that shook the room around me, setting the chairs and desks jump- ing and trembling and making students throw themselves to the floor in fear. The teachers came forward and laid their hands on me, speaking soothingly, reminding me that I was Cynis Denovah Avaku (and oh, the sudden fear in their eyes as they looked upon a proven Cynis, a Prince of the Earth who would remember all their pettiness and tyranny) and a pupil at this school. They told me to be calm and to remember myself, and they led me into the better accommodations, where the sheets were silk and the walls were hung with tapestries, where there were plates of sweetmeats and fruits on the tables and where the servants bowed to the newly Exalted with true respect.

Perhaps a dozen other pupils who had previously Exalted were there at the time. They were from higher years, as all those of my own year had been in lessons. None of the older pupils had bothered to pay much attention to me. It had been those of my own year who'd troubled themselves to mock me or to call me worthless and peasant-blood. But these older pupils knew some- thing of the power that Exaltation brings with it. They had felt the touch of the Dragons themselves. More to the point, they knew that I was marked now as being among the Princes of the Earth. I was no longer worthless and could no longer be dismissed. I was a potential ally, a worthy comrade in arms. A Peleps girl invited me to join them, to discuss the dominies and their faults. A Mnemon boy proposed a game of Gateway.



That evening, I rejoined my yearmates at the evening meal. Their eyes were full of envy and fear. I smiled at them. It was as simple as that. I was Exalted now. If the Dragons chose them, too, then I would make my peace with them and together we would forge our future. And if not, well — why should I waste my time calling them petty little names, such as dirt or lackblood or peasant? I would need allies. I had a great deal to do. The future was lying before me like an unsheathed sword. The touch of the Dragons changed my life.

THE HOUSE OF BELLS

A career in the legions was my best choice if I wanted to rise swiftly and restore my family's fortunes. I was no sorcerer, and I had no interest in the refinements of philosophy, so the Heptagram and the Cloister of Wisdom were out of the question from the beginning. The Spiral Academy and the Thousand Scales might have been more secure in the long term, but I didn't have the gifts for bureaucracy that I did for swordplay and tactics and strategy. And this was a matter for strategy. I had to plan for the long term, for finance and allies and power. The tactics came in getting entry to the House of Bells, which required more jade to change hands than even the most expensive primary school and a commensurate level of favors and influence. In other words, even the Exalted with good families and with jade oozing from every pore had problems being admitted.

I had to excel. I had to convince the masters of the House of Bells that I was worth their time, that I was not merely a run-of-the-mill fighter who could be enrolled in a legion somewhere and left to rise to minor rank. I had to be better than all the other Dragon-Blooded in my year — I could not afford to be merely as good as them, in case that single ounce of discrimination should be enough to tip the balance in their favor. My parents were delighted beyond expectation at my Exaltation and had stripped our house bare for anything that could be converted into jade to bribe my way into the House of Bells and had gone to humbly ask our Cynis relatives if they might deign to exert any influence in my direction. House Cynis did actually make a few minor gestures. After all, a unExalted Dynast was hardly worth the trouble, but an actual Aspect of Fire was worth some effort in order to cultivate a useful ally.

I was desperate. One morning, I rose at dawn and went down to the Temple of the Dragons to pray before the altar. We were to compete before the masters that afternoon, and I feared it might be the critical test that decided whether or not I would win admission. I left my bodyservant (House Cynis was being generous in small matters) outside and knelt before the high altar. But what should I say? If Hesiesh had chosen to Exalt me, was it also his choice as to whether or not I should be schooled at the House of Bells? He was the Reciter of Loud Hymns and Efficacious

Prayers, but those were matters of tradition, not heartfelt pleas for the future. I bowed my head on my hands and wept in frustration.

"It is said," a female voice behind me pronounced calmly, "that Hesiesh himself was not certain of the future. But he took counsel with the other Immaculate Dragons, and he knew the evil of the Anathema, and with that knowledge to guide him, he saw no other course than to go forward. What troubles you, child of Cynis?"

For a moment, I was shaken, but then, I realized that she must have recognized my clothing as of the colors of House Cynis or spoken with my bodyservant outside.

"I am uncertain of the future, Sister," I said, rising to my feet and giving her a polite bow. She was bald, of course, but the bones of her face were elegant, and her brows were like inkstrokes against the pallor of her skin.

"It is not given to any of us to know our future," she answered. "Hesiesh teaches us to heed the past, so that we may take proper action in the present, but no man may know his own fate."

"But..." I hesitated, then spoke to her as I might have to my own father. "I have been chosen by the Dragons. I am a Burning Sword. But if I cannot enter the House of Bells, how can I hope to have proper training for the legions? And if I cannot serve properly in the legions, then how can I ever restore my family line? Sister, I have done all that I can, my parents have given all that I can, and I am afraid that it will not be enough. I beg you, advise me."

She tilted her head, looking down the beak of her nose at me. "Do you seek the word of the Dragons to soothe your troubled mind, Chosen of Hesiesh?"

I nodded, relieved that she understood. "I do, Sister."

She raised one hand and struck me across the side of the head, hard enough that I staggered and that my head rang with the blow. "That is for your fears!" Turning, she hit me across the other side of my face, and I nearly went to my knees. "That is for your desire for consolation! If you come to the Chosen of Hesiesh for counsel, do not seek to be comforted!"

I tried to ignore the way that the entire temple was swaying around me, and I managed to speak, despite the sensation that my jaw was broken. "Sister, I thank you for your counsel and ask for an explanation."

She folded her arms. "Hesiesh did not waste his energies in worrying about the future. He let tradition guide him, but he also used his own intelligence to assess the situation. You have assessed the situation. Now, let tradition guide you. If the House of Bells will not take you, then consider again, but do not waste your strength in pondering what will happen if you fail. That was the point of my first blow."

I nodded. Her words were just. By fearing the future, I wasted my strength, rather than husbanding it for when I needed it. "And your second blow, Sister?"



She snorted. “Hesiesh did not need to seek for consolation. He stood with trusted allies who gave it to him when he deserved it. Find oath-brothers, young Burning Sword, who will stand with you even against the Anathema. They will console you in your hour of need, and you will console them. The Dragons act in concert. Heed their example.”

I bowed my head and thanked her for her wisdom. Then, I went outside to find my servant and return to our lodgings. That afternoon, I stood on the field with the other pupils. I was not troubled by fear, I did not seek for consolation, but I husbanded my Essence for when it was needed, and I spent it in Charms that left the other pupils scattered around me on the grass.

I was accepted into the House of Bells.

SESUS RAFARA

CHILDHOOD

My very earliest memories of childhood are very happy. I did not grow up in particular luxury. My family lived in Eagle’s Launch. My mother managed a fleet of ships that hunted siaka, and my father worked for the Thousand Scales as the director of security for the Imperial Post. We weren’t rich by Dynastic standards, but I thought we lived well, and I had two nannies who doted on me, and that made everything delightful from my perspective.

What I didn’t realize then that I see very clearly now is that, while I was happy, my parents were not. Both my parents were Exalts, but neither of them had risen to the place of prominence they had expected. Instead of being commanders of ships or legions and members of the Wyld Hunt in good standing, they were both in what they saw as very common positions that their houses had pawned off on them. They fought about this sometimes, with my father accusing my mother of being insufficiently motivated to push for something better, while my mother accused my father of being too weak to challenge his family to give him something more befitting their perceived status.

For my part, I tried to ignore them because their unhappiness did not fit in with my rosy outlook. As long as I my nannies were cosseting me and my tutors were happy with my performance, the antics of my parents, whom I saw only rarely, didn’t mean much to me.

I did not attend primary school for very long. My father, for reasons I still don’t understand, withdrew me shortly after my second year. After that, a steady stream of tutors come to me instead. I do not know why. While money wasn’t plentiful in our house, we were hardly poor. And even if my parents had previous financial obligations, they easily could have borrowed the resources necessary. For any child not to attend primary school in order to learn teamwork and leadership with other children is unusual,

Exalts!



and for the offspring of two Dynasts, it's nothing short of bizarre. It's possible that I may have been singled out for my later calling even before my Exaltation, although I don't know why. Alternatively, it's possible that my unusual isolation from my peers during that time was responsible for my being chosen as "fresh eyes" by the Sesus spymasters.

In any case, I seldom had to deal with others my age after leaving primary school, and for that, I was glad. What little I had seen of other children, both my fellow students and distant cousins I was forced to deal with during Calibration festivals and the like, I had not cared for. They were too nosy and asked too many questions about my parents — Are your parents Exalts? What to they do? Are any of your siblings Exalted? How big is your house? Do you live in a Manse? How many people live with you? — and once I'd heard their answers to those questions, I realized that the answers that I had were not the answers they were looking for. I tried lying once, but they mocked me mercilessly when they found out. After that, I took pains to answer those hated questions with utmost honesty. The truth may have been underwhelming, but it beat the humiliation of being caught in a lie. All in all, it left me happy not to be subjected to that while trying to learn.

I excelled at numbers, dance and all things analytical. My tutors liked me and described me as "bright." I was learning my subjects well in advance of others my age, and it was, overall, a happy time for me. My best moments took place in the evenings, after my studies had been completed, when I was tended to by my nannies.

EXALTATION

My nannies were immigrants. S'Zil was a widow, a patrician from a provincial noble family that had been broken up in some forgettable frontier war. Blossom Diri was an incredibly kind and nurturing young woman, although she was clearly more than a little addled. In retrospect, I often wondered if she had been a victim of the Fair Folk. My understanding is that she was the bastard child of a great-uncle of mine, and he pawned her off on my father as a way to make sure she didn't wind up in a gutter or as a whore for the legions.

Whatever their failings, I loved them both dearly, and they doted on me in return. They would comb my hair, make my bed, rub my feet, cook for me and, in general, spoil me rotten any time they could do so unobserved. S'Zil was like a mother to me, while Diri was like an older sister. I never realized that it *wasn't* supposed to be like that. It wasn't until years later that I realized what an odd childhood I had.

My mother did not approve of my relationship with my nannies. She discouraged it when she could, but she was often at sea, and even when she wasn't, she was too busy and distracted to cause much of a disruption in my relationship with them.

One evening very close to the end of would have been my primary school years — I must have been about 12 or so — my mother came home from work unexpectedly to find me lying on the ottoman in the front room while S'Zil brushed my hair and Diri told me a funny story. It did not help that I was eating an expensive piece of fruit that had been shipped all the way from the Wavecrest Archipelago.

The look on her face was unmistakable grimace of rage, and the three of us all scrambled to try to look a little less... pampered. My mother simply walked out of the room without saying a thing.

Later that evening, my mother was uncharacteristically chatty. We had the longest conversation we'd had up to that point, and she invited me to come see what it was that she did at work during the day. I didn't want to, of course, but it seemed the least I could do in return for her not getting angry about what she had seen that afternoon.

I was nervous the next morning until I found out that S'Zil and Diri would be coming with me. Knowing they'd be there made me feel much better about going.

I still remember how excited I was to be going on a big ship like the ones my mother commanded. We had learned the rudiments of sailing in school, but on smaller and older ships. Hunting siaka calls for larger vessels.

As we went out to sea, my mother explained to us that the strait between the Blessed Isle and Kyon, the bigger of the two great islands to its northwest, is a popular feeding ground for siaka who come in from the deeper waters to mate and feed.

For the first time, my mother seemed truly interested in interacting with me as a person. Now, of course, I would not fall into so obvious a trap. When we were nearly an hour out of port, we found an area where the siaka were thick. I believe my mother may have used a summoning Charm of some sort because siaka are not normally that numerous. I was very excited to see the two-foot-tall dorsal fins breaching the water's surface — so enthralled I was, in fact, that I didn't even notice that my mother had brought S'Zil and Diri up on deck, naked. S'Zil looked resolute, but Diri was blubbing. It was the sound of her crying that made me look up from the water.

As I watched, my mother took out a dagger and gave each a shallow cut across the cheek. Only then did I realize what she intended to do.

I tried to interpose myself between her and Diri, but my mother deftly tripped me and sent me sprawling flat on the deck. From my prone position, I saw Diri's terrified face fall past the deck and heard the splash as she hit the water. She screamed and blubbed for another few seconds, then came a wet noise that wasn't quite a splash, followed by silence.

S'Zil was more stoic. She smiled at me reassuringly, even as my mother pushed her toward, and then over, the ship's railing. I heard the splash of S'Zil hitting the



Exalted.

water, but though I tried, I was unable to hear anything beyond that.

I was trying, not very effectively, not to cry. My mother forced me to my feet and looked at me with visible contempt, and when she unsheathed her dagger and cut my cheek, I felt the wound more acutely than any pain I'd ever known. It was as if her blade were on fire. But then I realized that it was not she who was on fire, but me. My rage had Exalted me, and I lunged at her with a fury I'd never before felt. I landed one solid punch on my mother — and that, I'm sure, only because she was so stunned. To my delight, it burned her quite badly, but then she ignited her own anima. I remember her lunging at me, feeling a sharp impact on my head and nothing more.

My mother was there glaring at me when I regained consciousness, her burned face only inches from mine. "Congratulations on your Exaltation. I am, of course, very proud, but you should know that there's a siaka out there who went hungry that day because of your bad timing." In my most generous moments, I like to give her the benefit of the doubt and assume she was kidding, that the whole day was simply one ugly object lesson. The rest of the time I think she seriously meant to kill me. She was clearly not in her right mind. She was at least sharp enough to realize that my burning anima was a threat to the ship and knock me unconscious before I ignited the deck beneath my feet.

For the brief remainder of my time at my parents' house, I did not speak to my mother at all. My father was more sympathetic and extremely proud of me. I think he also realized that my Exaltation would bolster his social standing immeasurably. When I was not being tutored, I was with my father, learning anything I could about his work. I'm sure he realized that my sudden fascination with weapons came from my desire to kill my mother, but he had the grace not to say anything.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

My home life was dismal from then on. Pride at my Exaltation was nothing compared to my sadness over the loss of the only two people I loved. The horrors of primary school were replaced by the utter loneliness of life without any friends at all. I thought I would be one of the popular and elite few, yet I had no one to be popular with and not the slightest idea what life held in store for me.

As it turned out, I did not attend one of the four great schools where the Dynasty's pampered darlings go to rise to their proper social level. I didn't even go to a school attended by patricians. On the contrary, I was carefully kept from these things.

My training took place as far from others as my family could arrange. While other Dragon-Blooded students were practicing dating behavior and making contacts for use



later in life, I was being trained in a disused hunting lodge my family owns in the mountains south of Bright Obelisk. The Manse was huge, a ruin from the First Age that had been, more or less, restored to its original state.

My teachers were Dragon-Blooded men and women. The youngest of them was still over a century older than I was at the time. These were the master spies of House Sesus. They taught me how to study other people, to masquerade as other people, to seduce other people, to obtain other people's secrets and then, if necessary, to kill other people. It gets repetitive. There are two instant poisons that have no smell, no taste and no antidote, there are three ways to get a garrote around a man's neck, four unconscious postures that indicate when a man is aroused, five undetectable ways of reading letters meant for others... and so on.

Our days started early and ran late. Physical training and academic instruction were alternated to keep either from growing too tedious. My instructors were not kind, nor were they cruel. They were formal, they were stern, and for the most part, they were fair. They were there, a collection of adults, for the sole purpose of training me to be a spy, in general, and a spy with an outsider's perspective, in particular. For that reason, they deliberately kept me from learning the standard imperial histories, the advanced catechism of the Dragons or any of the standard curricula that the other schools force-feed their students. When, in the last year of my training, they *did* teach me that stuff, they were careful to present it as "what is believed in the Realm."

The basic premise behind this kind of study, obviously, is that being immersed in the culture of the Realm renders much of its culture transparent — it's not something you can analyze, it's something you *are*. By deliberately raising me as much as possible in an environment that was free of cultural assumptions and biases, I was, in theory, supposed to be able to discern the foibles, quirks and weaknesses in Dynastic culture more readily, like when we look at the Linowan or some other strange group from the Threshold.

To shield me from cultural bias as much as possible, I was taught by instructors from all over Creation. When only an elder Sesus spymaster was capable of teaching a particular subject, she would take great pains to ensure that any information she presented me was as objective as she could possibly make it. If there was no way to do that, she would state, clearly, any cultural biases she was aware of. Of course, with things that transparent, it's impossible to know if you're biased or not. Like the old Haltan saying goes, "Not even the sharpest eye can see itself."

They tried to make it out like I was being honored by undergoing their training. Their sweet words made it easy to buy, but I understand the situation better now that I see what I gave up. In essence, I was sacrificed, deliberately

molded into a Dynastic outcast in order to be a better spy. In so doing, the house made sure that I will never marry well, will never have children and will never personally experience the benefits enjoyed by every other Dynast. My parents, on the other hand, benefited enormously from selling me out. My mother smiles more now than she ever did when I was a child.

The one thought that drives me to keep going is that one day, if I arrange things well, I will get to watch that smile fade from her dying face.

CATHAK CAINAN

CHILDHOOD

While it's hard to remember the details that happened nearly 400 years ago, I still remember the underlying themes that colored the eras of my life. Discipline was the very essence of my childhood, and as I get closer to the end of my life, I suspect that discipline, more than any other single element, will prove to be the defining concept in it. When I say discipline, I don't mean in the sense of being disciplined, but in having discipline. Only those with the weakest character need discipline imposed from without. Children of House Cathak learn self-discipline early on and pride themselves on their strength of character for the rest of their lives. In childhood, those few that don't learn self-discipline are disciplined by others, usually in the form of extra assigned duties. Any large household has more than enough chores for those with the time to do them. Floors need to be scrubbed, clothes need to be cleaned, meals need to be cooked, animals need to be slaughtered and butchered, and so on.

The other 10 houses have servants and slaves to perform these tasks. House Cathak has children. The theory here is that childhood is about teaching children how to be good adults. If a child gets out of line, it is assumed that his lack of self-discipline comes from an excess of energy that needs to be bled off until the child has developed more self-control. It's amazing how much self-control a child can learn after a few months of getting only five hours of sleep a night because he's so burdened by household duties. I saw others learning that lesson the whole time I was growing up but got a taste of it myself only once. Those of us who mastered ourselves enough to be punctual, efficient and conscientious in our tasks were rewarded by having our tasks taken from us and given to those who had not shown the same level of self-discipline. Only once was I ever assigned extra duties as a punishment.

My older sister Kenevra, who was kind but lacked self-control, was so burdened by her duties that I once did a number of her extra household duties *for* her so she could get some sleep. When one of our tutors saw what I was doing, he informed my mother. We were both caned for

that. I got 10 strokes for undermining my sister's moral instruction. She got 20 strokes for *letting* me undermine her moral instruction. And since I had demonstrated that I had far too much time on my hands, I was given *all* of her duties on top of my own for a month.

Our chores, mind you, were duties in addition to those demanded by our education. Just because we were running the household didn't exempt us from the standard tutorials in Dynastic history, mathematics, archery, riding, gymnastics, dance, the Immaculate Texts and etiquette. House Cathak has *always* been very competitive with the other Great Houses, and under no circumstances were we allowed to show anything other than mastery of our basic subjects.

EXALTATION

I had three older siblings — Kenevra, Naijan and Umera — and four younger — Atessis, Garel, Varans and Karena. All but my youngest sister Karena Exalted.

I still remember my own Exaltation, in part because it played a part in the biggest trauma of my young life. My oldest brother, Naijan, was a bastard, literally and figuratively. He was also a sadist. On the day in question, we were home from our respective schools for Calibration — I from the Rising Phoenix Academy and he from the Spiral Academy — but that did not absolve us of chores. He and I were mucking out the stables one day as part of our damned duties when he got the urge to show me some of the holds his trainers at school had taught him. What that meant, when translated from Naijanese, was that he was going to get me in a series of painful arm bars and joint locks and tighten each one up to see how much torque he had to apply before I'd cry out in pain. Since he had Exalted a few years before, becoming an Aspect of Water, it wasn't that much of a challenge for him to catch me or to wrench my bones and joints to the point of cracking. The last time he'd gotten such an urge, it had ended with me crying out, not because the pain was so great, but because the humiliation was preferable to being crippled. And there was no doubt in my mind that if I *didn't* cry out he would not hesitate to break my arm — and then force me to take the blame.

Naijan decided he wanted to work over my legs, so he tripped me, making sure my face was in a patch of straw drenched in horse piss, and



Exaltation



began twisting my legs in a number of unnatural and extremely painful positions. I tried getting away, but there was no escaping Naijan when he was in one of his malicious moods. In a moment of rage and intense pain, I Exalted. My anima flared up and burned him. He tried to push me away then, but I wasn't about to let him escape that easily. My Exaltation was a much more physical phenomenon than his had been. I felt faster and stronger immediately, and while he was older, stronger and had learned some Charms by that point, I was faster and far more agile.

The advantage in that fight was all mine. Naijan was, first and foremost, a wrestler, not a pugilist, but he couldn't get me in a clinch without getting badly burned — but I could hit him freely. And did. His pride and malice prevented him from fleeing the fight, even though he had no chance of winning. He rarely landed a blow, but when he did, my anima made sure that he felt it more than I did. I paid back every slight he had ever made me suffer, every sadistic torment, every sign of disrespect he'd shown, with generous interest. Our fight lasted for nearly half an hour. By the time it was done, he was horribly burned. His arms and torso were red and black, but his face was the worst. He was unrecognizable. He had been somewhat handsome before, but he looked more like a sloppily seared steak by the time my young temper had run its course. I had taken some hard blows, but I was willing to fight to the death. Ultimately, the fight ended only because my anima had kindled some of the barn straw, and if we continued the fight, we would risk burning down the barn.

I was terrified that my father was going to view my loss of temper as a critical moment of weakness and punish me severely. I imagined myself getting 30 lashes with the cane or being disowned and forced to go live in the Scavenger Lands. At the very least, I assumed I would be laboring under 100 extra duties for the next several months.

I was wrong. Not only was my father delighted that I had Exalted, he was particularly proud that I had become an Aspect of Fire. In a way, I suspect he saw it as proof of paternity. Both my parents were Fire-aspected. When Naijan had Exalted as a Water-aspect, my father was quietly disappointed with Naijan but *furios* with my mother. That was the one time I ever saw them in physical combat, and it was terrifying. Only the intervention of my father's father prevented my mother's death that day.

With my father's loving forgiveness, I assumed that everything would be fine and life would return to the way it had been. Once I came to my senses, I remembered that my father kept a dose of sweet cordial in a warded vault in the basement, and I assumed he would give it to Naijan to repair the damage I had done.

When I asked him about it the next morning, he only laughed. "Sweet cordial is very, very expensive, Cainan, and as such, it is reserved for favored sons and heroes, not

bastards or bullies. Naijan is an Exalt. He'll heal. Maybe next time he's moved by a spirit of malice, he'll exercise some self-control." Then, he tousled my hair and left to train his troops.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

Naijan's wounds healed in time, but none too quickly. He looked horrible, and I could not look at him when we ate or I would lose my appetite. My father would not let anyone tend to his burns, and he swore to kill Naijan if anyone brought a healer to him. He even sent a letter to the Spiral Academy by Imperial Post informing the school that no healer was to touch Naijan. His rationale was that Naijan's pain would serve as a reminder that cruelty and violence against the family would not be tolerated.

When it came time for school, Naijan returned to the Spiral Academy and my two older sisters went back to the House of Bells.

I was going to be finishing secondary school soon, and my father and I had been talking about what I wanted to do. I could have gone to one of the expensive schools as well. My father would have called on any connections he needed to in order to assure my education. I didn't want him to go out on a limb for me, though. In part, that was because I knew I had four younger siblings who would need to go to good schools if and when they Exalted, but I was also wracked with guilt for what I had done to Naijan.

My guilt only worsened three weeks later when I received a letter telling me that the woman Naijan had been betrothed to had been so horrified by his charred appearance that she had broken off the engagement and was now affianced to a young man from House Ragara. Given that Naijan was only going to look that way for a few weeks before he healed, I think it was a flimsy excuse to break things off, but I still felt like I was to blame.

Mine, therefore, would be a strict and religious education, and I would strive to emulate Hesiesh, who was more frugal with his Essence than I had been when I fought my brother. My father had his reservations, but he was pious enough that he didn't feel he could, in good conscience, talk me out of attending the Cloister of Wisdom, although he did make me swear not to become a monk.

By the time my guilt faded away — and, to be honest, it didn't take that long — I was a student at the Cloister of Wisdom, learning meditation, self-control and the Immaculate Texts. I also made excellent use of my elemental aspect in the Immaculate martial arts.

While it's not a war school like the House of Bells, the only way to come out of the Cloister of Wisdom without being good in a fight is to die in one. Coming as I did from a military family, the structure and discipline of the Cloister was comfortable to me. I have always appreciated structure. Rules clarify roles. In a place like the Cloister, there's no question about what counts as appropriate

behavior and what does not. You know where you stand, and that's a good thing. Unfortunately, there are also those for whom structure is a crutch. They cease to think for themselves and their critical abilities wither away like roses in a drought. I saw a number of those people there, and I swore to myself that I would not become one of them, nor would I allow it of any troops I ever commanded.

On the surface of things, the Cloister of Wisdom teaches young Exalts strong religious values. It also teaches self-mastery and innovative thinking. It doesn't harden one, the way some institutions do. Instead, it builds you, mentally, physically and spiritually. In addition to honing our martial skills, we also developed the character necessary to master those skills. We committed large portions of the Immaculate Texts to memory. We learned to emulate the Five Elemental Dragons and to disdain their antitheses. We honed our blood-connection to the Dragons by practicing Essence control. In addition to self-control, we learned the values of perseverance, integrity, self-esteem and courtesy.

Many primary schools coddle their Exalted students. Mine did not, and I was glad of it. The first few weeks at the

Cloister of Wisdom made it very clear which students came from weak schools and which did not. All of us were surprised at how rigorous the Cloister's regimen was, but those who'd come from soft schools were in shock for most of that first week. Religious life was clearly more demanding than they expected.

The Cloister's purpose is twofold: to turn out Immaculate monks and to turn out rigorously ethical and highly trained Dragon-Blooded soldiers to defend the Realm — and by extension, Creation — from its enemies. Every Exalted student at the Cloister is pushed to his or her absolute limits, and the monks feel that it's impossible to know a student's limits until you exceed them.

Whining was rewarded with "character-rectification drills" for the plaintiff and his talon that could go well into the night. I think there would have been more of that had the monks themselves not joined us in our training. A young Dragon-Blood thinks twice about complaining when monks 200 years his senior are participating in his training exercises right alongside him — and being more effective to boot.





CHAPTER TWO

A LIFE OF OBLIGATIONS



The power of fire, properly harnessed and channeled, drives each Burning Sword to excel in her chosen field, whatever it may be. If that drive is *not* properly (or entirely) harnessed, however, it can be just as devastating as any uncontrolled conflagration blazing across Creation's face. The essence of elemental fire is that it is incomparably destructive unless carefully channeled. Passion, overt or banked, is the hallmark of the Aspects of Fire, and whatever direction they give to their lives, they are possessed of ample talent and energy to attain their goals. Those who succeed generally do so in fine style and with great flare, but even those Fire Aspects who self-destruct in the pursuit of their goals typically do so in a spectacular blaze of destruction that gives the populace of the Realm something to talk about for years afterward.

PELEPS DANIC DAMANCHINA

The songs we learn as children tell us that the Scarlet Empire is borne upon the backs of the Dragon-Blooded. Military thinking holds that it is supported upon the shields of its faithful soldiers. Cynicism suggests that the slave trade may have something to do with it. Practicality, most accurate of the group, points out that everything comes down to jade and grain. Grain, or other foodstuffs, to feed us, and jade to make sure that the rice keeps flowing, that the legions don't decide to turn around and march toward the Imperial City instead of away from it,

that the satrapies don't rebel, that the Guild keeps within its limits and a thousand other things.

I do not claim to be some sort of idealist. By supporting the empire, we support the Empress herself (may she return soon!) and the Great Houses and everything else that goes with our society and our way of life. Equally, by supporting our houses and making them strong, and by elevating the fitter among them to higher positions of authority, we, in turn, support the Realm and strengthen it to last down the ages. Enlightened self-interest is a much more practical motivation than heroic idealism or religious fervor. Of course, I don't deny the Dragons — how can I, when we all know that they exist and have proof of them in our Exaltation? — but I leave great declarations about the “immanent will” and the “necessity of virtue” to the monks of the Immaculate Order, who are far better fitted to do that sort of thing than I am. They've studied it, and I believe in doing what you're good at and in leaving other people to do what *they're* good at. Life would be so much simpler if everyone tried that once in a while.

After leaving the Spiral Academy, I went straight into the Imperial Treasury. I'd impressed Ragara Dendas, one of the ministers, enough that he requisitioned me for his staff. I had to start at the bottom, of course — running errands, copying notes, preparing drafts and summaries and always being the last called on at parties to finish a couplet or quote a poem. I had been warned about this, but it was still



unpleasant. Even with the evenings spent at parties with others of my own age, or even at the Gateway tournaments or on hunts, if Ragara Dendas or any of his junior assistants called, I had to come running. If they commented on a tax, I had to be there to note it down. If they wanted a reference found, it was my task to go and find it — and to bribe the clerks myself where necessary. If they sneezed, I had to be waiting with a silken kerchief and a cup of wine.

I didn't expect to find myself enjoying the position as much as I did. While the menial service aspects were an unfortunate necessity, the ability to see some of the financial mechanics that underpin the Realm was incredible. There were whole layers of machinations and laws and tariffs and back-handers that we never even suspected when we were at the Spiral Academy. Of course, we knew, as students, that there was some degree of speculation going on, but the sheer *scope* of what I discovered left me gasping. And as for the scope of what I can do with it, well...

Do you know how many of the Terrestrial Exalted are collecting their payments from the empire? No? I do. I can find out how much each of them is getting paid. I can tell where the money's going. I can track the taxes from the satrapies to the Great Houses and follow the jade through the Treasury and out the other side. At the moment, I may be low-ranking and even have to obey the commands of high-ranking patricians, but I can endure that. It's little enough to pay, to have the tax records at my fingertips.

MARRIAGE

Marriage. Well — it's a necessity. I'm aware that my parents are considering several possible candidates, so, for the moment, I am doing my best to offend no one and to show myself agreeable and useful to the Great Houses of those gentlemen. Even if they're the ones who are coming into our house, I don't want to make any enemies or lose a potential future ally. Having to bear children is one of those things that every female Dragon-Blooded has to come to terms with. I appreciate that I have no choice in that matter. I hope that my husband will come to the situation with a similarly practical outlook. A household needs to be a functioning team, not a squabbling couple creating the sort of farce you see in low-class theatricals.

A partner in the military might be useful. A sorcerer, on the other hand, is quite out of the question. I'm aware that they do marry into our house from time to time and that some members of my house attend the Heptagram, but the people involved are generally, well, you know — not quite the thing. Certainly, my parents aren't going to waste someone like me, with a promising career ahead of myself in the Treasury, on an alliance with a sorcerer. That's the sort of thing a unExalted Dynast can handle.

I'm lucky that I have a task and a position that are basically sedentary and won't require me to run around the satrapies with the legions or go hunting around with the

Magistracy or anything like that while I'm pregnant. No, I'll be able to handle my documents and keep on auditing and negotiating up to the birth itself, and hopefully, I'll get back to work shortly after that. The child — children — will be well cared for by nurses. I can do more for them by working in the Imperial Treasury than by fussing over their cradles. Later in their life, they'll appreciate this.

It's one of the differences between being a child and being an adult: Children don't understand. Children spend their time wanting their parents to show them some sort of affection. Adults realize that the affection was shown through all the work their parents did in making sure that the child went to the right primary and secondary schools, that the child got the necessary training and that the child was eventually placed in the best possible position for her talents and aspect and house. What loving parent lets a child run wild, when the parent should quite obviously know better? And if the parent doesn't know better, then what in the name of all Five Dragons has she been doing with her life, in managing to go through it with her eyes shut?

You don't send a potential sorcerer to the House of Bells, and you don't send an accountant to the Cloister. And even before that, you direct a child according to her talents, and you drive her to excel. Without proper guidance, even a dragon may go astray, the myths tell us, and without proper stimulus even the rivers and the winds grow lazy. The parallels are obvious.

I'm not sure how I would react to being asked to wear the pillow, if my husband should end up siring a child that was indisputably his on someone inappropriate. One hears stories of wives who've had families of half a dozen children and only a single one of them their own. I can't help but feel that shows a fundamental weakness in their marriage. Not so much in the sense that they're sleeping in separate beds — the Dragons know that that sort of thing can be handled intelligently — but that he had to sire so *many* on another woman, or other women. It's like a tax where half the jade is lost between peasant and prince or a trade route that costs more to administer than it brings in.

STRUCTURE

It's a mistake to think of anything in the Realm, right up to the Realm itself, being on its own. The Realm is a structure whose arteries pump the jade of taxes and allowances, whose sinews are the military, whose bones are the Great Houses — and whose brain *was* the Empress. These days, the Realm seems to be running off a set of rather lower impulses.

The Great Houses themselves are great lumbering animals, directed by ancestral wisdom, but with occasional losses of coordination between head and paws. Each house is a confluence of interests: monetary, military and political. The money comes from the satrapies, from house-owned businesses and from the pension that the Realm pays each and every Dragon-Blooded. I have to admire the nicety that they shave that pension with. For adults of my age, it's the

bare minimum that can support reasonable accommodations, an acceptable wardrobe, proper investment in pens and paper for poetry and literature, a bodyservant's lodging and feeding, the necessary bribery in the daily job and the occasional Gateway party or gala. I'd like to be able to invest more of mine, but I don't have it to spare yet. And no, I haven't even considered embezzling from the Treasury — they've had smart young assistants there before, and every plausible way I could think of was not only thoroughly blocked, it was humiliatingly blocked. I'd rather wait till I've reached the ranks of the ministry and then do it in style.

The Magistracy — or should I say the Magistracy of Hares? — is another example of structure, though one that's falling apart. Or rather, it's part of the structure of the whole Realm, a check built in to keep it from falling apart, just as we have our own checks and balances in the Treasury. I'm torn. I realize that it's necessary, but I also realize how much easier some things would be if the magistrates weren't there to make life more awkward. What would be best would be the Scarlet Empress firmly on the throne or a new empress or emperor to take her place. This current state of controlled chaos offers useful business opportunities, but ultimately, it's going to fall apart. Just like the Magistracy of Hares is doing now. And if the empire falls, we fall with it.

Enlightened self-interest, again. Nobody ever asks whether the Immaculate Dragons themselves might have had personal motives when they led the Dragon-Blooded to put down the Anathema. Perhaps they acted out of high idealism and noble passion, or perhaps they simply looked around at their own estates being ruined, their people enslaved, their brothers and sisters killed and said, "We will have an end to this," and raised rebellion. Self-interest is protecting what is your own. Idiocy is destroying it or letting it be destroyed. Heroes go out and fight for the Scarlet Empire because they identify with the empire, not because they serve it. The empire is our strength, our power, our grip upon the world. The Dragon-Blooded aren't fighting for the Realm or taxing for it or doing any of the other things that we do for it — we're doing them for ourselves because we *are* the Realm, and we stand or fall with the empire.

However... I am worried by the state of the empire's structure. We need the taxes and imports from the satrapies — not just from Gem, but from An-Teng and other lands as well — and the current policies can't be kept going for much longer. At the best, some of the Great Houses are maintaining their tributes through previous goodwill and a bit of judicious trimming at the edges. At the worst, satrapies and protectorates are outright refusing to pay, and the houses are busy using their own troops — or the Realm's troops — to get the money out of them.

Everyone knows that House Peleps is busy using our navy connections to "persuade" our tributaries to pay up on time. I see nothing wrong with this: our navy, our money, our

tributaries, our solution. However, looking at it from a strictly objective point of view, it is possible that we may have problems later on if we carry on this way. What happens when the threats stop working and we actually need to use force? And what happens prior to that if we somehow lose the navy? House V'neef's founding has already proven that what we have *can* be taken away from us. In that single stroke, our house lost a significant portion of its annual revenue. And we can't fight the entire Scarlet Dynasty. If the other houses league themselves against us, we simply don't have the strength to risk civil war, far less the inclination.

What with the fabled Anathema massing in the distant wastes, the Wyld, the fae, and the Guild throwing its weight around, things are getting very hairy. Yes, I count the Guild as a significant problem in the Empress' absence. When she was here, the Realm kept the Guild firmly within limits. With her gone, it's trying to push the boundaries, and I'm afraid that it's succeeding. Of course, the Deliberative and the Great Houses feel that it's not a significant problem — you'd need to be a graduate of the Spiral Academy checking through the records of imports and tariffs around the Threshold to notice anything odd going on. Of course the Guild's taking advantage of unstable political and military conditions. That's what the Guild does. It's in it for the money.

However, in order to counter the Guild's moves, we need firm direction from the Scarlet Throne, proper funding of the ministries, prompt payment of taxes by the tributaries — oh, and to get rid of those Anathema who are apparently giving the legions so much cause to run around waving their weapons and demanding more subsidies. Don't misunderstand me, I know my catechisms, and I acknowledge that the Anathema exist and are evil given human form, but come now. How much trouble can a couple of hundred people be, scattered across the whole of Creation?

In the absence of the Empress, someone needs to take control of the Realm. I'd prefer Her Scarlet Majesty back, but if she's going to remain in seclusion or in the divine realms or wherever it is she's vanished to, then someone else needs to warm the Scarlet Throne with their Exalted backside. Whether it's a Peleps or not, someone needs to rule the Realm, if the Realm is to be saved. And we have to save the Realm, if we are to save ourselves.

NELLENS MALAKAI

It's amazing the places sorcery can take you. Not physically, but academically and vocationally. I had assumed that a Fire-aspected sorcerer would be most useful in either the Imperial City or in the Threshold, but many of the places I'm called to are in the hinterlands of the Blessed Isle. Sorcerers are called in from time to time to deal with those things that are just beyond monks' ability to manage. Sometimes, we act as diplomats with spirits too big to be slapped around or intimidated, while, at other times, we investigate allegations





of inappropriate sorcery on the part of other sorcerers. Still other times, we're dispatched to a place to investigate reports of newly discovered First Age artifacts. Often, these reports are false, and a peasant has simply found something unrecognizable while plowing his field or, occasionally, some small wonder, such as a fire pearl, has turned up. If there really is a newly discovered artifact — and that's rare, especially here on the Blessed Isle — we compare the item with our records and try to identify it. If it's not in *The Catalogue of Transcendent Antiquities*, we try to ascertain what its use is. Some artifacts are easy to figure out. Others are either impossible to make sense out of, or they require more Essence than is easily generated to activate them. In theory, a sorcerer finding an item of unknown function is supposed to take it back to the Heptagram for further study. That's how it was done when the Empress was around. Now, though, with the Great Houses all looking for that one great artifact that will give them the lead in the race for the throne, a few items have been "lost" en route. Were it not for fear of the magistrates, I'm sure things would get lost even more often.

Since the events on the *Dancing Raiton*, I seem to have become the sorcerer to call to discuss Anathema with, deathknights in particular. Members of the Wyld Hunt generously relieved me of the old hag's armor after I told their investigators my story. I didn't tell them about the other items I obtained from her charred corpse, or I'm sure they would have taken those too. For the first time, possibly ever, I find myself feeling ignorant, and it's frustrating. Tirhon and I have gone back to the Heptagram to research everything we can about deathknights and the undead, but there's not much there to learn. I did read a little about shadowlands, and I'm sorely tempted to ask the house for money to venture near one and see if there's more I could learn. I just have to convince the family that possessing the Realm's greatest scholar of deathknights would be advantageous to House Nellens in general. Tirhon has already mentioned that if my family won't bankroll the expedition his might, and his family has (or had) an away-house north of Thorns that we might be able to use if the caretaker responds to the letter sent by his father. Since his father is the youngest son of Mnemon herself, I expect a fairly quick reply.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Why, yes, I am a heretic. Thank you for asking.

This Immaculate Dragon nonsense is fine for patri- cians and even the majority of Dragon-Bloods. It gives them a center, something noble to rally around, and it certainly helps keep the caravans running on time, and from that perspective, it's great, and I'm behind it all the way. As far as spiritual truth goes, however, I've started having doubts. Something doesn't add up.

Mnemon Tirhon hates it when I say that. Not because he disagrees, mind you, but because he thinks it's a danger-

ous viewpoint to let get out. Maybe it is, but though I may let the law tell me how to behave, I will not let it tell me what to believe.

It's hard to say how I wound up with such a heretical outlook. I experienced the usual indoctrination as a child, the assorted Dragon catechisms and the like, and while I was never exactly a paragon of piety, I guess I accepted most of it — more or less. Religion was always background noise to my real interests.

But the training you receive as a sorcerer lets you peek around all that stuff you're filled with as a kid. The standard narrative of the Realm is that the First Age was basically just an inversion of the virtuous natural order that holds sway — held sway, rather — under the Empress. Once you really start looking at First Age accounts of the world and see what Creation was like, especially compared to the way things are now, you can't help but wonder how much sense that makes. The sorcery was far and away more powerful than anything you'd see these days, even when the Empress was around. And the people didn't seem *that* unhappy. The trouble with history is that it sometimes reveals a present that isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Facilitating my concerns was the fact that few of the testimonies of the demons, spirits and elementals we interrogated ever quite matched the versions in the Immaculate Texts. The more powerful the spirit, the more pronounced the discrepancy, and when I synthesized their respective cosmological accounts, I came to the conclusion — inevitably, I think — that even those of us who study at the Heptagram aren't getting the whole story. I hate feeling like I'm not being told everything. It just makes me want to investigate until I find an answer.

Most of our instructors at the Heptagram at least paid lip service to the Immaculate Philosophy, although there were a couple of them who, I suspect, had their doubts. It's surprisingly hard to get to the root of some issues. Immaculate monks and Heptagram instructors alike seem to avoid certain questions. The Immaculates are not generous with their knowledge, and I'm left wondering if even I, a sorcerer of the Realm, have the full picture. I do not believe that my concern is groundless. They teach peasants a much-simplified version of the Immaculate Texts. That's not problematic to me, really. Peasants are probably happier *not* knowing all the esoteric details, frankly. Meanwhile, they teach the majority of the Dragon-Blooded a somewhat more complicated version of the philosophy. And, of course, those of us who attend the Heptagram learn a still more complicated version. But I'm still left with a gnawing concern: Just because they're giving me a fuller picture doesn't mean they're giving me the *complete* picture. Nuance is a need-to-know matter. If the most knowledgeable instructors don't feel they need to tell us *everything* for us to perform our duties to the Realm, they're not going to give us the whole picture, and that bothers me.

More scandalous yet, many of our instructors at the Heptagram are... well, they aren't what they seem to be. And what they are makes me question everything.

ROMANTIC LIFE

When I wake up alone in an empty bed, I am prone to waxing melancholic. I do not like sleeping alone. I don't sleep soundly or restfully, and I shift all throughout the night trying to find the warmth that I feel should be next to me. When I don't find it in my sleep, I wake up and search for a bedmate for a moment or two before I remember that I had gone to bed alone. And then, I go back to sleep, and it starts all over again. There is no reason to sleep alone, ever. I will have eternity to sleep alone in my tomb in peaceful Sijan. Since I am still alive and warm, however, I prefer company when I am horizontal.

When I wake up next to Mnemon Tirhon, it is as though a burden is lifted from me the moment I sense the warm press of his stony skin and take in the earthy scent that is unique to him. He is my boon companion, my closest friend, the only one who knows my heart and the only Dragon-Blood I feel I can honestly talk to in the entire Realm. He is also a fantastically talented fighter and sorcerer, and it makes me proud to be his intimate companion. It was Tirhon who first showed me the appeal of sex, and if he turns out to be the only one I ever share real intimacy with, so much the better.

Tirhon caught my eye the first week we were at the Heptagram. He is unusually well put together, quite solid, and I feared he would be the first in a long string of schoolboy crushes. It was only in our second week at the Heptagram that *he* approached *me* about studying together. He had heard that I was a relentless student with a remarkable history of academic achievement, and he felt that we would do well to combine our minds if we wanted to do well. I was hesitant at first. The eagerness of others makes me nervous, and it did then, but I was so attracted to Tirhon that I would rather have renounced my Exaltation than say no to him. Within a week, we were close friends, and within a month, we were taking turns sneaking to each other's chamber at night. Though he is the most stubborn, inflexible person I have ever met, there is no one else I feel I can truly trust and no one else with whom I would share my life.

Every now and again, I wonder what would happen if he were to go away or if he were to take up with someone else, and the thoughts haunt me. With the passage of time, loss is inevitable. What does history teach us *but* that? All the same, I do not believe I could stand to lose Tirhon, and while I'm perfectly aware that such an attitude is a weakness on my part, it's a weakness I accept in myself.

And when I wake up next to my wife, I feel trapped and disappointed, forced to perform duties I do not care to perform and obligated to a woman I am not attracted to. Women, while necessary for producing heirs and consoli-

dating political liaisons, repulse me sexually. Men are far more sensible objects of love and attraction. Not only do they eliminate the danger of producing bastards, but they are far more insightful and adept at pleasing another man sexually. How could they not be?

And while the situation is not entirely to my liking, it works. I made quite certain that Elenji knew of my preference long before the marriage — I had no intention of misrepresenting myself, after all — and for whatever reasons, she was amenable to this arrangement. She bears my inattention with admirable grace. I believe it speaks well of both of us that things have worked out so amicably. We are friends, as spouses should be, and she and Tirhon have grown quite close as well. I am the first Dragon-Blood of House Nellens in a generation to wed another Dragon-Blood, and she has borne me a fine set of twins, thereby freeing me of my obligation to make her swell again for several years.

CYNIS DENOVAH AVAKU

Everyone plays Gateway. That was one of the keys to society, so I had to master it. Small matter that I preferred other games of strategy or that I would rather have been discussing *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier* than making witty quips as I pushed Gateway pieces around. Gateway won me friends, or at least acquaintances, and helped me establish myself as a proper young Exalt out looking for work that he could do for the Realm. I would recommend it to anyone in my place. You need to be expert enough to beat some of your opponents and, more difficult, to be beaten by other opponents but in a way that highlights their prowess while not overly shaming your own. If they straight out beat you, then there is probably little disgrace in losing. Some players are acknowledged champions, and the best you can hope for is a dignified and hard-fought loss.

I learned many things at the House of Bells, but the most important thing that I learned was that we are whom we choose to make ourselves. Even after the Dragons choose to Exalt us, we are left to finish the process. We can still give up; we can waste our potential; we can fail. If I wanted to be a warrior, then I had to make myself a warrior. If I wanted to be a leader of men, then I had to make myself a leader of men. It's little use to talk about talents and abilities — if one of the Exalted truly, in his heart of hearts, *wants* a thing to be so, then he can make it so, but he must be prepared to give himself totally to the fire of his inspiration, and to burn in it ceaselessly, without respite and without regret.

In my third year at the House of Bells, there was a cadet in our scale who was a liability to the group. He was a Cathak who had fallen in love with the traditions of his house and who mistook some personal ability in battle for actual skill or experience. He shirked where he could, and he kept to himself in the evenings, choosing not to share himself with the others of our scale. Most of all, he was not





prepared to risk himself for us as we would have risked ourselves for him.

On one of the obstacle courses that we were made to run, there was a pile of logs to climb. This youth was at the rear of our group and was left struggling up it while the rest of us waited at the top. The logs fell on him as he climbed and shattered his right lower leg and wrenched both his wrists. We picked the logs off of him and carried him to our masters, who agreed that it was a sad mistake on his part to have been so careless and to have incurred so much injury. We had a new cadet transferred into our scale by evening that same day to take his place. Any cadet of the House of Bells would understand this story — the parts that are spoken and the parts that are left unsaid.

The boy? Oh, he had to repeat the year — his injuries were severe enough that they took a while to heal. He eventually graduated and serves in the Red-Piss Legion. Word gets around. Nowhere better would have him. Graduates of the House of Bells understand what that sort of injury means and what it says about the victim. Unsurprisingly, the boy himself took no responsibility for events and held us to blame. He attempted to have my younger daughter killed last year. Unfortunately, he is currently serving on the frontier, or Cathak would be the less by an heir. When he returns to the capital next year, I will tidy matters up once and for all.

However, the same principle of mutual trust and mutual surgery applies to the Realm. We Exalted should not disagree in public, as it sets a bad example to the patricians and to the peasants. How can they trust us as their leaders and their spiritual guides if they see us squabbling as they do themselves? But equally, we cannot tolerate those who are not prepared to defend the empire and support each other. I must be able to depend upon my cousins in battle, and I am. But how can I trust the sly-eyed bureaucrat who rations out money from the ministries or the sorcerer who summons demons and is oathbound to unknown masters or the Immaculate whose vows must be dearer to him than any brother of blood or service?

The answer is both simple and complex. Simply speaking, we must be able to trust one another. We must all be servants of the Realm, binding ourselves together as we do in battles on the field of war, matching step to support each other, holding ranks to face the enemies together. And there are so many enemies: we have the Fair Folk and the Anathema and the beastmen on our borders, the rebels of our own kind in Lookshy, the satrapies and protectorates stirred to foolish treachery and breaking their oaths to the Empress in her absence. We were created by the Dragons to work in concert. We are a thousand times more powerful together than apart. How is the empire to stand if we betray each other?

And then, there is the complex answer. There are degrees of trust. I can trust other warriors while we are in battle. I can trust my house when it is a matter of the house's safety or prestige or power. I can trust the Immaculates to support the proper spiritual order of things, to put down the various heresies and to take a stand against particularly flagrant examples of corruption. Now, in a properly organized empire, all of these things would work together. Each would have its function, each its place, each its tradition-granted role, and each could be relied upon in that role. This is how the Realm has always existed and prospered. We worked in concert, a thousand dragons united to weave the fabric of Creation and stamp our imprint upon it.

The Empress held us together. She weakened us when she felt it necessary, but she also made us stronger. She cut the Iselsi to pieces as a gardener rips out a weed or as an officer kills a deserter — or as a squad of cadets throws their defaulter from the height of a pile of logs and throws others down on him to ensure that his injuries are sufficient. We must trust, but we must also be sure that the others around us are worthy of trust in their separate capacities. If not, then they are weaknesses in the Realm, and they must be excised as swiftly as we would cut out our own flaws.

What must I do to cut out this growing rot? How far must I go to serve the empire?

THE LEGIONS

Some legends say that Hesiesh himself wrote *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier*. It seems perfectly plausible to me. Who would be a more appropriate writer of such a text than the Reciter, who maintains the strengths of tradition? It nourishes the soldier's spirit as well as keeping his hide in one piece. He is encouraged by it, knowing that a thousand thousand officers have trod these paths before and have found answers and have used them to uphold the Realm. He finds it in himself to be a leader of men, when he sees that, through its wisdom, he has brought his soldiers to victory. He deals wisely with the captured enemy, bridling his own anger and the joy of victory, so that they will lie quietly under the Realm's yoke. He cultivates common sense, and if he must criticize other officers, he does so where the men cannot hear him.

The army is the Realm's support and its backbone, its arms and hands and spirit all combined. The Empress herself was an officer in the army before she ascended to power, and she still remembers its needs and duties. Those ministers who attempt to squeeze the legions' budget, sheltered behind the marble walls of their palaces, apparently do not recognize how they are draining away the Realm's lifeblood. We must remind them of this.

I do not argue that the legions actions have always been right, or that its soldiers have never made mistakes. We can err. We can cling to tradition and be wrong in doing so. Yes, I admit this — I, a fervent Burning Sword, a supporter of tradition, admit that tradition *can* be the

wrong course. One has to accept that once in a thousand times, innovation is acceptable, that tradition is wrong and that the junior officer holding the Palace and controlling the Realm's defenses has proven herself worthy to be Empress and administer the Realm.

MARRIAGE AND HOUSEHOLDS

My wife dwells with my parents (both of whom still live, praise the Dragons), and I have two strong children: one son, one daughter. Both are currently at good boarding schools, and both — I hope — will, in time, be chosen by the Dragons and Exalted in their service.

I was wed to Mnemon Caras Minata shortly after I left the Spiral Academy. The marriage was arranged by House Cynis. I was surprised, though not displeased. It is unusual for Mnemon, who are so notably and publicly religious, to marry into Cynis, even if Mnemon is always willing to marry around for alliances. Of course, when I found out more about Minata, it made more sense.

The Caras bloodline is notable for virtuous entry into the Immaculate Order. While I have nothing to say against this, I can understand how life could be difficult for a young Dynast of that bloodline without Exaltation and without notable talents elsewhere, who at the same time didn't feel that her place was in the Order. Apparently, she had expressed an earnest desire to marry someone for the good of the family. She told me later that her precise words had been, "I'll marry anyone — I'll even marry a damn Iselsi — but I am not shaving my head and spending the rest of my life in a temple." I believe that if she had Exalted, she would have been a Burning Sword like me, for she knows to save her strength for when it matters.

With this sort of background, Minata's parents took her at her word and looked for any sort of alliance that would be useful to the family. Someone in House Mnemon (possibly even Mnemon herself) decided that a marriage into Cynis would be useful. House Cynis, meanwhile, was looking for some sort of alliance where the other party would be prepared to take a youthful Exalt of lowly bloodline but potential military talents. By the time Minata and I were allowed to meet each other for the first time, it was all arranged.

Minata was not incompetent, but she had not Exalted, and she did not have any great talents which might have made up for this deficiency. She explained all this to me, with her eyes downcast. She also added that she had grown up as we all had, amid the turmoil of daily life in the Great Houses and that, while she could never give me all that an Exalted wife might have done, she would be unhesitatingly loyal to me and would defend my interests in every way that she could. She also pointed out that many in her bloodline were Chosen by the Dragons, so there was a good chance that our children would be similarly favored.





I was touched by her honesty, and well, while I admittedly would have preferred a wife who was also Exalted, I told her that there were few things more steadfast and admirable in the Realm than a household based on mutual respect and mutual trust, and I swore to her that we would have such a household. I have not taken back those words. She has been faithful to me in both spirit and body. She bows to my parents as though they were her own. She writes me long letters, giving me the news of the capital — both that which is publicly known and the gossip and secret talk. While she frequents many parties, she knows the proper behavior of a married Dynast and does nothing to bring shame on our family. Though, given that the family is House Cynis — no, I will not go into that for the moment.

Of course, Minata will die before I do. We have both accepted the inevitable. Her memorial will be in the lives of her children and in the household that we have created together. Before she dies, I hope that she will live to see Denovah become one of the Cynis family lines. I have confided this ambition to her, and she took me in her arms and reassured me that she had faith in me, and through me, in the Dragons. “Avaku,” she said, “the Dragons chose you, and you have kept faith with them by serving the Realm, by serving House Cynis and by strengthening yourself and your family. You are strong, and the empire needs that strength. Even the Empress herself started off as a lowly officer. I believe that you can do as much — or more.”

Sometimes, I think that loyalty can be an even stronger thing than the will of the Dragons.

SESUS RAFARA

There are those individuals who perform their work when they choose to and those who *are* their work and cannot so much as bend a wrist or take a deep breath without it pertaining to that work. I am in that latter category, as I was engineered to be.

I am a spy and an assassin for my house. I specialize in thinking innovatively. I was carefully raised apart from other Exalted children and rigorously trained to examine a wide range of approaches to any dilemma. I am, therefore, a kind of resident alien among my own people. I’m not a secret, but I’m not a known quantity, either. My records these days tend to say what I need them to say. Spies aren’t stupid, after all. We do understand the value of information.

I have been at this line of work for just about 100 years. I have been more or less responsible for the deaths of several Dragon-Blooded, three of them members of the Deliberative. I can’t even remember how many patricians I’ve done away with. They’re not challenging enough to remember. I am currently leveraging potentially damaging information to get special considerations from three members of the Deliberative, one instructor from the Heptagram and 12 Immaculate monks, none of whom want their

secret excesses known to the general public. The only Dynasts who can’t be blackmailed are those from House Cynis. Everybody already expects them to be perverts and freaks. The Cynis don’t need to be blackmailed, however, because they can so easily be bought with wealth or drugs, so it’s no great loss.

Of late, I have found one thing that I can do that is not my work, and that is my fascination. There is a woman, a powerful woman, whom my family would like to destroy for tedious political reasons. I have challenged myself to do whatever is necessary to keep her alive and well. I took a liking to this woman quickly when reading reports on her. She’s a spirited leader and an accomplished soldier, and she’s proud. Her pride is very invigorating.

She and I have never met. She would not know me were I to speak to her on the street (though I often imagine how a conversation might go were that ever to happen).

I originally learned about her when I was assigned to follow her movements while she was on the Isle. I was to find out what her vices were and write a report on how best to compromise her abilities as a general. That I did, but I challenged myself to leave some important detail out of the report — nothing of any significance, just something that I could have innocently forgotten. It was strangely exhilarating. I reread the altered paragraphs several times and found it more gratifying each time. There, in those few lines, was my little rebellion, my executable offense, my sense of power. Before I actually gave my report to Chenow Mareq, I rewrote the report entirely, changing certain facts and omitting enough others to render the document largely useless. I admit, I went somewhat overboard in that particular instance, and since then, I’ve been lighter handed in altering my updates on the Roseblack, but not enough to truly compromise her.

There’s only so much I can do before my elders discern a pattern where she’s concerned, but since I do not have the luxury of controlling much of my own life, I can make the most of this small, precious rebellion, and so long as I don’t get sloppy, there’s nothing they can do to stop me. It’s not like spymasters are common enough that they can be sent to check each other’s work.

Is my odd little hobby petty? Of course it is. Is it self-destructive? Unquestionably. Will I get caught? Eventually. Will it be worth it? I can only say that it has been so far, and I don’t expect that to change. If House Sesus is so willing to kill one of the Dynasty’s extraordinary commanders so frivolously, especially now, then it deserves my contempt. If anything, the house should be grateful that my betrayal is something so small.

Provided the Roseblack’s death continues to be a goal of House Sesus, its agents will soon begin scrutinizing my reports for further weaknesses they can exploit against her. They will find themselves increasingly frustrated by their inability to make effective use of the information they have on her, and then, in stages, find themselves curious,

confused and concerned. And at some point, they will turn to me. Or *on* me, as the case may be.

I've already compiled a list of the possible assassins they might realistically send after me. It contains two names, and if I get so much as a whiff that the house is onto me — and I'm expecting it — my would-be assassins will be dead before they even see their orders to kill me.

Things will go downhill from there.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

I have had to impersonate Immaculate monks a time or two, and I have therefore been trained in their religious doctrine. I have also had to impersonate heretics a time or two, so I have been trained in their religious doctrines as well. This training, mind you, was all very dry, and it was not done in such a way as to actually burden me with these beliefs, but to teach me enough that I won't embarrass myself if I enter a casual conversation while impersonating a graduate of the Cloister of Wisdom.

I do not subscribe to any religious viewpoint. Religion is a tool, a means of providing the masses with easy and appealing icons for their culture's virtues. Some spirits fill a niche in our hearts, and to them, we give our belief like a gift. Others are like judges whom we try to bribe with prayers. I have yet to see piety in the Realm that's not tainted with self-interest. For my part, I have seen least gods and little gods and a couple of gods that I think could best be described as either big or *very* big. They all have their purpose and serve their role under Heaven. All of them have purpose in my life, but none more than any other.

ROMANTIC LIFE

For a time during my schooling, when I was most lonely and most missing being in the company of my peers, my instructors said they would introduce me to some locals for socializing and possibly for dating. I was delighted — surprised, of course, but delighted. One after the other, handsome men and beautiful women came in and swept me off my feet. They said exactly the right things, whatever that right thing happened to be at the time, to make me fall in love with them. And every single one of them betrayed me in some small but crucial way. If I told one a secret about one of my teachers, that teacher would repeat the secret to me and use it against me for the rest of the year. Sometimes, the betrayal would just take the form of a cavalier dismissive comment, but it could be anything — just enough so that my trust in the person I supposedly loved was undermined, and each time, I performed a careful inventory of my feelings and took note of whatever weakness in myself caused me to fall for whichever perfidious bastard or bitch had hurt me. That happened six times in the space of two years. The seventh time, the suitor was a very attractive Dragon-Blood, and he did everything in his power to make me fall in love with him. I was so braced for his betrayal

that I never did open up. Nor did I do so for the eighth, the ninth or any of the subsequent “lovers.” Those two years of angst and tears were part of my training and a part of the training of everyone who learns to be a spy for House Sesus or, I suspect, any other house for that matter. I have since watched the spymasters of House Sesus use the same technique to chill the hearts of others they need to train to be “strong.” I've administered the same kind of training myself and referred to it as “emotional hygiene,” and I felt like a heartless bitch for doing so. But I did it anyway because love is a sloppy thing, and no one engaging in frequent espionage and assassination can afford to be sloppy. We are taught to use love like a tool for gathering information or bypassing a target's defenses. We are also taught how to avoid falling prey to those same tactics.

I have very carefully learned to eschew such sloppiness. I've learned other ways of attending to needs, ways that are cleaner. You have to take your pleasure where you can get it. I've heard others jestingly make the claim that they were lovers and not fighters. I cannot imagine what that must be like. I am a fighter by nature. I was trained as a fighter, and I will die as a fighter. From the standpoint of one who has been so-honed from early on, love is just an aberrant emotion.

I've watched love affairs blossom and fade from just outside the bed chamber window. The passion and romance last six months, maybe eight if they've got a bad case, and then, the light goes out and all those sweet gestures become work.

Marriage plays an important role in politics, provided love is carefully kept out of it. Anyone who thinks she is developing romantic feelings for her spouse probably isn't paying very close attention to his actions. Romantic love is only possible when the lovers don't know each other very well. The moment each sees the other for who he or she really is, love becomes impossible.

Then, there's also that sappy love-from-afar nonsense where the lover pines for the beloved. His hope sustains him through hardship, or so he thinks. Later on, he'll discover that hope is the lock that traps pain in the heart, and the more he hopes his beloved will return his affection, the more pain he'll be in. It's pathetic and embarrassing.

I've had bed partners when I've wanted them, patrician and Dragon-Blooded alike. I've been told that I'm a very aggressive lover. That shouldn't surprise them in the least. A sword oiled up and wrapped in silk is still a sword.

CATHAK CAINAN

The greater an Exalt's deeds in life, the more he has to reflect on in his few quiet moments, and so it is with me. I have been a soldier, a general, an instructor of strategy at the House of Bells and a distinguished member of the Wyld Hunt. During my days in the Hunt, I destroyed or helped to destroy 12 Anathema, including one deathknight





on my last mission. I have also had the pleasure of killing three nobles of the Fair Folk, and I still think I have it in me to kill a few more before I die. I do not believe that it is arrogant to say that I am one of the most powerful Dynasts in Creation. I am one of a handful of Dragon-Blooded who can get an audience with the Mouth of Peace within an hour of requesting one. There is not a warrior on the Isle I cannot best in fair combat. While the Empress and I didn't see eye to eye on everything, she knew that, if she really needed a successful resolution to a military matter, she could depend on me and the legions I commanded in her service. I have had 58 children, all of them legitimate, 49 of whom have Exalted. I think only Mnemon has a better track record as far as that goes. I've actually lost count of how many grandchildren and great-grandchildren I have, but I believe the number exceeded 400 not too long ago. Many of them are in the legions now and following in my footsteps, and I'm proud of every soldier in the bunch. I wish I could put together an entire legion of my offspring because then you can bet our tributaries would stop trying to squirm their way out of the tribute they owe us. It might resolve the succession conflict to boot.

Action is the principle behind House Cathak, and action has been the hallmark of my service to the Realm. Think fast, strike fast, and the enemy will be reeling in shock even as you administer the coup de grâce. And if he's not, you'd best react fast, otherwise you're going to get your ass kicked. That principle has served me well for several centuries, and I've inculcated the value of celeritous action into every Dragon-Blooded soldier I've instructed. I know the Fire and Air Aspects understand what I'm saying. I sometimes wonder about the rest.

What, I sometimes wonder, has been the high point of my military career? It's tempting to say my days with the Wyld Hunt, but one battle in particular stands out among all the others, and it wasn't against the Anathema, but against the Fair Folk in the Far North.

I was commanding the 28th legion at the time — this was years before it was decommissioned — and we were making one last attempt to defend the region from a major incursion of Fair Folk before the Empress fired up the Realm's defenses.

We met the fae on the battlefield, and the fighting was incredibly vicious, but we were well positioned and holding our own. Every time I looked down over the field of battle, though, my eye kept being drawn to something bright floating over the Fair Folk army: its queen.

She was horrible and beautiful and cold. While my men were wearing as much clothing as they could fight in, she floated above and behind her troops on the battlefield wearing the sheerest possible silver gossamer gown. I don't know how she was controlling her troops, but they were

fighting extraordinarily well. Still, the 28th legion had better discipline, and we were making headway.

And then, I heard her calling me or singing to me or the like. Her voice was haunting, in the fullest meaning of that word. The other men couldn't hear it, thanks be to the Dragons, but I found it much more than distracting. I couldn't make out the exact words, but she was calling me — across nearly a mile of battlefield and through the driving snow, mind you — to come lie down with her in a bed of soft snow, where we could, uh, look for a more peaceful resolution to our conflict.

I held out as long as I could, but it was eventually too much for me, and I set out to see her. My staff, fortunately, disobeyed direct orders and restrained me. We knew that this kind of thing could happen — it's in the manuals on Fair Folk tactics, after all — but it was the first time I'd really felt that... pull. It was terrible.

My dragonlords and duelists tied me up, gagged me and left me on the bed in my tent. This was all out of the sight of the men, of course, so the only one to see what had happened was my slave, Katonei.

By the time the sun rose the next morning, we — or, I should say, the dragonlords — had the Fair Folk on the run, and the song in my head finally ended.

I don't know what happened to her. I hope she was one of the Fair Folk casualties that day because I don't like the idea that she might still be out there.

The dragonlords I commanded always looked at me a little oddly after that, like I had been compromised.

And maybe I was. It wasn't quite a year after that that I gave up command of the 28th and began teaching at the House of Bells on a permanent basis. And I tell that story to every class I can because the more they know about the Fair Folk, the better. Forewarned is forearmed.

These days, unfortunately, what I do is more politics than strategy (not that the two are mutually exclusive, by any means). Since the disappearance of the Empress, the houses have been turning their legions on each other. If the houses can't get themselves under control, they'll be fighting each other more than the enemies of the Realm. It's pathetic and shameful. While I'm the patriarch of this family, no Cathak legion will be called to war on any but the enemies of the Realm as a whole.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

While my home life as a child was moderately religious, I didn't really begin to understand the ways of the Dragons until I attended the Cloister of Wisdom. There's a good deal more to the Immaculate Order than most people realize.

Only two out of every ten of those who graduate from the Cloister of Wisdom go on to become monks of the Immaculate Order. Most of the time I was studying at the Cloister, I thought there was a pretty strong chance that I

might wind up as a monk, but my father let it be known that I was to become a general like him and not a monk. It was a blow to my young notions of how a spiritual man should lead his life, but I eventually came to believe — as my father did — that a man's spiritual nature needed to *inform* his life, not be the whole sum of it.

As I get older, I find that I'm becoming more pious. The more I see of the world, the more evidence I see of the truth of the Immaculate Philosophy. My appreciation of the wisdom of Hesiesh grows deeper as I truly realize just what kind of self-discipline that Immaculate Dragon must have had to keep his Essence in reserve as he did. More Dynasts need to understand that.

I recently donated a very large sum of money to the Order to build a new shrine to Hesiesh in the Imperial City. Given the financial situation of the house at the moment, it was probably more than I should have given, but as my death becomes an increasingly less abstract notion, I find that I want to do what I can to contribute to the spreading of Hesiesh's word.

Am I afraid of death? Not really. I do want to be found worthy of Exalting again in my next incarnation, however, and so I've been brushing up on the Immaculate Texts and changing the way I do a few things.

ROMANTIC LIFE

More than once, I've heard men claim that they were lovers, not fighters. I must admit to being a fighter and not a lover. There are only so many fronts a general can fight on, and my heart is not one of them. I have liked women, I have bedded women, I have even deeply appreciated the company of a few women, but I cannot say that I have ever fallen in love with anyone. I can't imagine that I'm more than a few decades away from my death at this point, so I can't see this being the time to suddenly open my heart to some new possibility.

The woman I am closest to is my wife, but our marriage is based on a profound respect for one another and little else. She has given me many, many children, a vast majority of whom have Exalted so far. The youngest one hasn't Exalted yet, but she has a few years yet. I feel very fortunate to be married to my wife. She is as fine a general as I am and possibly better since she's less likely to march her troops into danger than I am.

Whole years have passed when my wife and I have not touched each other. Given my position in the Realm, I could have taken to my bed any winsome thing that came along, but I didn't, primarily because promiscuity shows a lack of self-discipline and partly because I felt that to do so would be disrespectful to my wife. For her part, Urima has never shown any interest in sex with anyone. I suspect that she is as pleased as I to have birthed such a brood, but it has never come up. If I wanted to lay with her, she would oblige me. Otherwise, she's perfectly content to train troops and wage war on the enemies of the Realm.



Exalted



CHAPTER THREE

THE WORLD WE RULE



Fire-aspected Dragon-Bloods are talented warriors and diplomats. They are energetic and have a natural affinity for melee unmatched among the Dragon-Blooded. They can strike at an enemy with lethal accuracy and then evade a counterstrike as easily as a flickering flame. Every one of them is a phenomenal athlete who can also use raw charm and animal magnetism to flatter and manipulate her way through even the most politicized and partisan social environment. Those goals they cannot attain through open combat, the Burning Swords strive for through more subtle means — and Crimson Dragons are perfectly comfortable thinking of seduction, veiled threats and even outright assassination as subtle means.

PELEPS DANIC DAMANCHINA

THE REALM

The Realm is the heart of the world that we cleansed of the Anathema and took for our own to rule. Like most things, it can be seen as a business operation: Jade goes in, jade goes out, and the people at the top attempt to keep the first amount greater than the second, and the people at the bottom suffer if it does not happen. Now, it is the principle of any good business that one cannot be content merely to stay static. One's business must expand, whether it's in terms of quality of product, scope of provision, size of clientele or simply higher prices.

Is the Realm expanding in any way worthy of the name? No.

We do not increase our boundaries. In fact, we are, according to my friends in the legions, hard put to maintain those that we have, whatever the official word on the matter may be. Stories of heroic last stands and noble holding of ground and valiant victories of one against a hundred are all very well, but to my admittedly clerical mind, they point to one big fact. We are losing ground. We are having to fight battles where one stands against a hundred. We are having to undertake last stands. We are having to hold old ground rather than seize new ground. Even I, plebeian jade-counter that I am, can see the military errors in this.

We do not improve the quality of our product. Rather, it diminishes. House Peleps itself is using the navy to persuade our tributaries to hand over their jade, but we give them less and less for it. Roads begin to fall into ruin. Rice goes unharvested, and the Fair Folk snatch up prey to eat their souls. A satrap's first question is not, "How may I improve this land so that it may give more jade to the empire?" but rather "How may I squeeze more jade from the land for my house's coffers?"

The time has come. I see it in the world around me, from the papers of the Treasury to the accounts of friends, from the gossip in the street to the official announcements. We need to change things. It's depressing to hear the

children of the Great Houses talk about restoring the glories of tradition and the duties of bygone years, while our elders are apparently too busy feuding with each other, squabbling for privilege and jade or resorting to knives and politics and poison. The time has come to act, to take our Essence, our power and our strength and to make things better.

We have to do *something*.

THE TREASURY

The marble floors are marked by the tread of sandaled feet, however often the slaves scrub them with buckets of rose-scented water. The thresholds of the great chambers that contain the records — or the stores of jade — have dents from thousands of footfalls, from all the times that someone has paused in the open doorways to gasp at the shining wealth or at the scope of the records we keep here. The whole place is alive. By day, in the sunlight, visitors come in and out, carrying jade and paper and presents in either direction, moving through the long corridors like leaves born on the water.

By night, the torches burn, and the candles glow, and the clerks scratch away at their documents, and more private visitors come to attend secret meetings where intangibles are offered and promises are made. Guards stand at the main doors, weapons and shields gleaming in the sunlight or torchlight, but there are other doors that nobody watches obviously, where it is understood that those who enter do so privately. It is unhealthy to discuss those people. It invites fatal afflictions.

The Treasury wishes to control the flow of jade absolutely (and why not?), which means that it must control jade's movement on both sides of the law: the legal and the illegal. While any negotiations with the Guild are made by those far beyond my rank — for the moment, at least — there are other ways of taxing the illegal. There are people such as Nagezzer the Slug, who are willing to make their generosity manifest in return for clerks handling his business and auditors investigating the occasional problem that they have in their cash flows and other little things such as this. And in return, we know who they are, we know what they do, and we can trace the jade as it flows into their coffers — and trace where it goes after that. Nagezzer and the others like him probably think that the Treasury knows far less than it does. People think stupid things like that.

Stories passed between junior clerks and assistants hold that there are hidden cellars to the Treasury that date back to the time of the Anathema, or even before then. There are supposed to be rooms in the complex of buildings with windows that look out onto different worlds, from the dwellings of the gods to the mansions of ghosts. Some even claim that the building is haunted by the Anathema who were killed in it during the Great Uprising. I do not know the truth, but I know this much: Once, I was in the

Treasury during Calibration. Normally, I would have been at home or at a party with some friends, but one of the ministers decided that she wanted a particular set of documents in order to prove a point, and I was the most junior of her clerks. It was early evening, and when I looked out of the windows, I could see the fireworks from parties elsewhere in the city and hear the distant sounds of music and cheer.

There has always been a story that a phantom Deliberative sits by night, debating its ghostly issues as though the delegates were still alive — and perhaps even thinking that they are still alive. I do not pretend to know about the dead. But that evening, I was consumed by curiosity, and it seemed that both time and place had combined to give me the key to this mystery. I took the keys from where they hung, and I went silently down the marble corridors, and I slipped past guards — who were hurrying back in their quarters, in any case, this night of Calibration — and I made my way to the Chambers.

There was a whispering beyond the door. Ghosts, things of the past, clinging to what they had been rather than going on in triumph under the guidance of the Dragons. The sound rose and fell like the roaring of a banked furnace. I thought of the ghosts behind the door, chained by themselves, consuming their future in order to live forever in the past. The waste — the utter, complete pity of it. I did not look. I fled.

I don't believe in ghosts. I believe in politics, in finance, in treachery and in the empire. That's all I need.

HOUSE PELEPS

When I look at the Deliberative or when I consider daily life in the Treasury, I am more and more convinced that the upbringing our Great House gives us is the best way to fit us for daily life. Young Exalts who go from an environment where everyone cares for them and loves them and cooperates to help them into everyday adult life — or even everyday school life — are just asking for trouble. Even then, some of the family never quite seem to get the idea. My younger brother, Sonthan, is currently at school and hasn't yet Exalted. You'd have thought he'd never learned how to guard his tongue or how to make a promise without getting trapped into a bad bargain or even how to get information during a conversation without giving away half your own knowledge of the subject in the process. Just because he felt the need to show off in front of his friends and talk about fleet movements — well, let's just say that I don't think the pirate ambush near An-Teng was a coincidence. Nor did Mother. Mother was extremely displeased with him.

But it's the House. You stand by your House, you support your House, and though we may intrigue just a *little* bit among ourselves, you do not betray your House. A thousand fires shall blaze together to create a flame that

will rival the sun. A thousand dragons shall sustain Creation. As in every other case, if you weaken the structure to which you belong, you damage it. On our own, we are nothing. Together, we rule the seas. Together, maybe, we can even sway the Realm.

THE GUILD

My first the reaction is that I wish it was working for us — but it isn't. It's competing with us, and that's a different situation. Unfortunately, in the current political climate, with the Empress gone and the Great Houses feuding, the Guild is managing to serve some of our markets *better* than us. This is unacceptable. But what do we do? March the legions against them? Implausible. Provide a better service? At the moment, that's not practical...

Ideally, we'd find an area where it wasn't already represented, but I don't think that's feasible. The Guild sells everything. That's a fact of life. Removing House Cynis' mandate and nationalizing the slave trade wouldn't work: The Guild's already too entrenched in that area, and it has capacities and channels that the empire doesn't. Admittedly, the Guild has an interest in keeping the Realm as a strong trading partner, but it'll want payment for anything it gives — and do we want to be indebted to it? No. I thought not.

MORTALS

It is our duty to care for them and to rule them justly, in the same way that any good farmer cares for his livestock. Oh, very well, I'm exaggerating. They're humans. We're the Chosen of the Dragons. Of course we're more competent to rule than they are. We're stronger, faster, more intelligent, more powerful — and we've been chosen by the Immaculate Dragons to lead them in both a secular sense and a spiritual one. I do not have time for discussing things that simply make no sense and are totally pointless. We are who we are, and they are what they are.

Yes, I know that we were Exalted from patrician stock. If I must point out the obvious, there has never been (that I know of) any Terrestrial Exalted who couldn't trace his ancestry back to one of the Dragon-Blooded somewhere in her family tree. Patricians are our kin. Humans are the kin of patricians. But we, the Chosen of the Dragons, are something else again.

This means all the more that we should be just and kind mistresses and masters to the humans below us. We have a duty to help them raise themselves, just as they have a duty to serve us. Slavery is merely an extension of that duty of service. I'm not saying we should treat them like animals, but we shouldn't agonize about ruling them either. Life is much simpler if everyone simply pursues whatever roles the Dragons have given them. As for those idiot emancipators, they can spend a few years doing slave labor and see if they like it. Perhaps having to scrub the



floors would convince them that they could serve the Realm better by using their own talents and convince them to leave the slaves to their given duties.

I wouldn't put it like that to the humans themselves. There's no point in being cruel. They already suffer enough from their natural state of existence.

ANATHEMA

I have never met any. I hope never to meet any. I've heard the stories, of course — killing machines, debauched tyrants (though I'll lay odds that a typical Cynis could give them a run for their money on the wine and lust stakes), perverted sorcerers, priests of dark powers... And, most importantly, *gone*. Their great machineries have been taken over by we Terrestrial Exalted or left to fall into ruins. Those Anathema who are reborn are scattered and alone in the wilderness. The Wyld Hunt takes them and slays them and scatters their ashes on the wind. Those pitiful few who manage to escape eke out a miserable living in distant provinces and are usually slaughtered by the locals when they realize the Anathema's true nature.

I'm not stupid. I can see a political ploy when it's under my nose. "We've had the horrible Anathema threatening us and destroying our property and killing our soldiers, send more money," has become one of the rallying cries for satraps and for legion commanders. I find it hard to believe that our legions have grown so incompetent in the absence of the Empress that they can't deal with single Anathema. There may be exceptions, like the Bull of the North, but — am I supposed to believe that we are so weak, that our situation is so hopeless?

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not trying to claim that they don't exist or that they can't be dangerous or that the Immaculate Texts are in error. But frankly, I'll believe the rumors of Anathema when I have more convincing evidence. I know the Great Houses are squeezing the army revenues for money and are running short on the regular tributes. I quite appreciate that they want an excuse for more jade in their treasuries. Why look to the reaches of history for an answer when our current situation explains things perfectly well?

NELLENS MALAKAI

THE REALM

I am not a patriot. I do not feel any need to show knee-jerk support for the Realm just because a few monks say that I'm obligated to do so. Day in and day out, we are told that we have a binary choice: Support the Realm, or watch the world cave in on itself. While it's impossible to dispute that the Wyld gnaws at the world's edges, I do question whether the Realm, in its current state, can do anything to stop it. From what I've seen and heard, the Realm is like a rose that has been eaten from within by worms. Corrup-

tion is common all around us, but we're so wrapped up in our own petty struggles that we take no action against it. House feuds against house, legion turns against legion, magistrates become fewer every year, and support from the Threshold slips day by day. And since we do nothing, we are, in effect, telling ourselves that we're not all *that* uncomfortable with the levels of corruption around us. And in this climate of apathy, the corruption gets worse, and still, we don't act, and for the same reasons, and so on, and so on. And that's how apathy gets a foothold. And since the Empress' disappearance, unfortunately, I think apathy has gained far more than a foothold — it has ladders and ropes as well. If the Dynasty is all that stands between Creation and ruin, Creation is in a world of hurt unless the Empress — or someone else with power — shows up quickly to take the helm and put the Realm aright.

More than when the Empress was around, the houses are in a state of barely civil *détente*. Ethics are forgotten by the wayside. The Dragon-Blooded have shrugged out of their responsibility to lead by example, but they have no problem laying claim to the right to rule, and nobody seems to take note of the fact that the cart has been placed, quite indisputably, before the horse.

It's impossible not to see this, but nobody dares say anything out loud — except, maybe, a sorcerer whose social ranking is already near the bottom of the list. Not when the truth is dirty, but when it is shallow does the wise man hesitate to dive into its waters. Sorcerers are trained to see connections, to attend to coincidences and to sense the flow of Essence in the world. It doesn't take that much adaptation to apply those skills to other areas of life too, the mundane as well as sorcerous, and it's clear to see that the Empress held back the tide of change and madness for as long as she could before it crushed her. She was the capstone in the arch that is the Realm. With her crushed or crumbled under the strain, the other stones are likely to drop or crumble one after the other. While I see what's going on, the only person I share my theories with is Tirhon, lest I imperil my standing in my house or, worse, the standing of my house in the current politicized climate.

I am no less to blame for the Realm's sad state of affairs than anyone else, mind you. I don't support the Realm as a whole except indirectly through my house. If the Realm can't treat my house as the equal of any of the other houses, then it doesn't need my support. I support House Nellens, and House Nellens supports me. Once I am on the committee of elders, then my obligation will be to guide my house to support the Realm, and that won't be for years yet.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not entirely pessimistic about the state of things. The Realm could be strong again if its handlers just showed some willingness to act ethically instead of constantly being willing to take another step down toward corruption. From time to time, I wonder if I'm just being selfish by not engaging myself

more in the political world, but that, in theory, should be the work of those attending the Spiral Academy. My calling is elsewhere.

HOUSE NELLENS

None of us is without obligations. I have obligations to my house, but so does it have obligations to me. Just as I have gone out of my way to marry and impregnate my wife, so to will House Nellens provide for me in return.

My house has a great deal of potential, despite what the other houses might have to say about it. Though we may have far fewer Dragon-Blooded than the other houses, that hardly makes us easy targets. We've simply had to cultivate our power in other beds. It may well be the case that I'm destined to be the savior of my house or, if not its savior, then at least one of its brighter lights. Being both Exalted and a sorcerer, I am already among the more noteworthy members of the family.

And if and when my twin sons Exalt (and I absolutely expect them to), I will be responsible for bringing two more Dragon-Bloods into the line. That will be a fine day for me and for House Nellens, and should that day come to pass, the marriage, the money paid to Ragara and the awkward obligatory mating visits to my wife will all have been worth it.

MORTALS

So long as they remember their place and their function, I have no problem with mortals. At times, they do forget themselves, of course, but how could they not? The Dragon-Blooded are supposed to be their leaders and moral exemplars, and we certainly forget ourselves on a regular basis.

I believe the Elemental Dragons intend for mortals to serve the Exalted, and in return, we are supposed to protect them and guide them to spiritual advancement so they might have a hope of Exalting in their next lifetime. In this regard, I think the Dragon-Blooded are failing to live up to their end of the arrangement, but I have no idea how to make the necessary changes in Dynastic society. I certainly don't have time in my schedule to cater to mortals. Between fulfilling my duties to my house, making trips to the Threshold, researching new spells, maintaining my combat training, servicing my wife and sharing time with Tirhon, my days contain no spare moments for the edification of mortals.

That, of course, makes me something of a hypocrite. Coming from House Nellens, I should be aware of the strengths and abilities of mortals more than most Terrestrial Exalted. And maybe I am in some dim corner of my mind, and maybe I'll get around to doing my part for my less blessed family members at some point, but it seems to me that, just as you don't harness the sun to pull a plow, you don't burden your most talented sorcerer with helping the less capable.

As I see it, there are two ways of supporting the natural order. Providing mortals with moral and spiritual guidance is the indirect method. Supporting my house, my fellow Dragon-Blooded and the Realm is the other, more direct method and the only one I have time for at the moment. I exonerate myself of that responsibility by pointing out that the largest part of that burden should (and does) fall on the shoulders of the Immaculate monks. If they feel so strongly that the Dragon-Blooded are responsible for guiding the mortal herds toward enlightenment, I won't stand in their way.

ANATHEMA

I've come to wonder about the Anathema lately. At the Heptagram, I was surprised to learn that they're not as rare as I'd thought — or at least not as mad as we've been taught. Knowing that makes me wonder what else it is that we're not seeing (or being shown)? While Tirhon and I are perfectly capable of discussing the fact that we're being taught sorcery by some other kind of Exalted — Tirhon thinks they're Sidereals — neither of us has been able to discuss it with anyone who has not also attended the school. This is obviously a state inflicted on us by sorcery, but nothing Tirhon or I have done thus far has been able to counter the effect, and it enrages me, in part because there's no explanation of why this is the case, why it should *need* to be the case or what other positions these Anathema might hold in the Realm. Are all the secondary schools presided over by Anathema, and if so, why haven't they stopped the persecution of their brothers? Is this a recent state of affairs, or has it always been this way? Did the Empress know about these secret Anathema, and if so, are they behind her disappearance? It doesn't make any sense to me. There are times when I get so frustrated with the mystery of it all that I just want to go to the Scavenger Lands and look for other Anathema to question. Is it wrong to want to speak to one of the Anathema instead of killing them all? Are there things we could learn?

There are definitely times when I'd like to meet up with a Sidereal or even a Solar Anathema I could ask direct questions of. I don't think I'll get that opportunity on the Blessed Isle, though. Then again, any excuse to see more of Creation is a good excuse as far as I'm concerned.

CYNIS DENOVAH AVAKU

THE REALM

I have seen what the Realm gives. Sometimes, we forget this. Sometimes, in those moments when we look around and see the suffering of slaves and the poverty of beggars or when we listen to the cries of the vanquished upon the battlefield and hear the lamentations of their children, we can come to suspect our right to rule and wonder whether what is is what should be.





These concerns come to all of us, whether we are children seeing our first beggar and questioning as to how such poverty can exist in the Realm or philosophers pondering the verities of existence or commanders attempting to decide the severity of a punishment for rebellion. I would argue that we are all the stronger for considering these matters, rather than simply setting them aside and ignoring them.

The solution lies in looking at what the Realm gives to its subjects. They have the security of the Realm's legions to guard their borders, the spiritual leadership of the Chosen of the Dragons, moral guidance in proper behavior and virtuous custom from the Immaculate Order and wise laws set down by Terrestrial Exalts who have practiced them for centuries and proven their worth. The Realm's legions keep the roads free of bandits, and the Immaculates journey from village to village to name their children and celebrate the proper ceremonies. We give peace, order, stability, learning, propriety. It is to the Realm's shame, I say, that we have neglected these things for too long, torn by our own internecine squabbles and desires.

We must remember that the Realm gives as much as it takes. Those who live beneath its shelter prosper. If we let ourselves be weakened by our own concerns or by the petty miseries that a few suffer, then we might as well set the knives to our own throats.

When I was on campaign as a young officer, a subaltern only newly serving in the legions, I was troubled by thoughts of this kind. We were serving in the Threshold, and my talon was on wide patrol. We marched through a ruined village, our armor bright, our weapons polished, our bellies full of rations, and we looked around and saw the hungry children, the burned crops and the shattered houses. This was where our troops had swept through the place in order to drive back a horde of Fair Folk and their ravagers. The children looked at us with bitter eyes, too weak and too afraid even to throw stones or call us names, and their parents cowered with fear before us, rather than welcoming us as their liberators.

"You're taking it too hard, sir," my sergeant said that evening, when I spoke to him about it. He was a mortal, not Chosen of the Dragons, but at that point, he had served 30 years in the legions, and I had yet to finish a single year under arms in the field. "See, the way I see it is, we didn't ask no Fair Folk to come raiding through here. If they had, and we hadn't been here, y'know what'd have happened, sir? Those kids who are alive now, they'd have been dead or picked up by the ravagers and taken off to have their souls ripped out of them. Like *that*." He snapped his fingers. "And their parents, well, they'd have been lucky if that was all that happened to them. The Realm doesn't start this sort of thing, sir. It finishes it. You come back here next year, they'll have rebuilt, there'll be girls out there throwing flowers at you, whatever. Don't waste your time thinking about no what ifs, sir. Look at what we manage to do."

And that is what I would say to younger Burning Swords now. Do not waste your time worrying about whether the Realm acts for the best or about the few who suffer. Think about the many that gain — not merely those of your own house and families and regiments, but also the people who will prosper in future generations under our guidance. The Dragons have entrusted us with their power. Let us not betray that trust through our own weakness.

HOUSE

What is there to say about House Cynis that a thousand people haven't said before me — and probably with a great deal more eloquence? I belong to the most venal of Houses. We traffic in slaves, in wine, in drugs, in blackmail, in anything that will turn a profit for the house. Cynis herself trained her daughters, so she must have been of the same nature as they are. I fear she would look upon the house's current machinations and smile in approval.

Why does this trouble me? I don't refuse the trade in wine or drugs or other luxuries — I should be proud that my house has managed to engage in so profitable a commerce. I don't decry the existence of slaves. They perform a useful task in society, and any sane Exalt keeps his or her slaves healthy and treats them firmly but justly, in order to have them provide proper service. I do not even object to the fact that my family is the main (I do not say sole) source of slaves to the Blessed Isle. I will not even comment about the requests that Cynis Belar is making to some of our satraps and the possibility that we will take tribute in slaves instead of jade.

But where do we go from here? Do we supply yet more debased tastes and more debauched requests? Since when did a daughter of the Empress descend to be the mother of a house of procurers? There is no shame in hosting parties, but there is shame in doing nothing else *but* host parties. There is no shame in being masters of trade and shipping, but I would like my house to be more than that.

I say "my" house, and I mean it. Though it took it long enough to note my existence or consider me worthy of its time, House Cynis has supported my candidacy to the House of Bells, arranged my marriage and bought my commission in the legions. I owe it my support. I owe it my strength in making something good of the house, in rebuilding it and guiding its course.

My cousin Cynis Falen Debos goes too far, however. He would tear the entire house down and leave ruins in its place. No, I am not an intimate of his, but words of his diatribes have come to my ears, and I suspect that he has taken certain actions that I cannot yet prove. He is a fool. I sympathize with his feelings — and certainly, as an Immaculate, he must be a man of strong convictions — but to pull down one of the pillars of the Scarlet Empire is utter folly and disloyalty. One does not start destroying a house while still inside it. If the pillars are rotten, then they must

be replaced with stronger wood. If worm has taken the floorboards and cobwebs cover the ceiling, then it is the duty of the members of the house to support where tradition requires and to provide new strength and direction as their spirits dictate. There will be times when I can change things. I intend to gain strength and influence so that I can take advantage of those times. Cynis will be a truly great house once again, worthy of its descent from the Scarlet Empress. I — and others, who have already given me their private pledges — will make it so.

MORTALS

I defy any Dragon-Blooded to serve in the legions with mortals and to come out of it thinking that they are mere arrow fodder or creatures somehow less able to think and reason and feel than we are. We are not somehow miraculously different from them. We were mortals before our Exaltation, we are now the Chosen of the Dragons, but we are still capable of dying for all that, which is at root what the word means.

A mortal can be as heroic a soldier as any Exalt — more so, sometimes, because mortals must face the foe with iron blades and leather armor, while we, their leaders, are clad in the elements and armed with Charms that can slay a hundred men. While we and they both move on our separate paths through life, though we have the good fortune to be several steps ahead of them, we should not

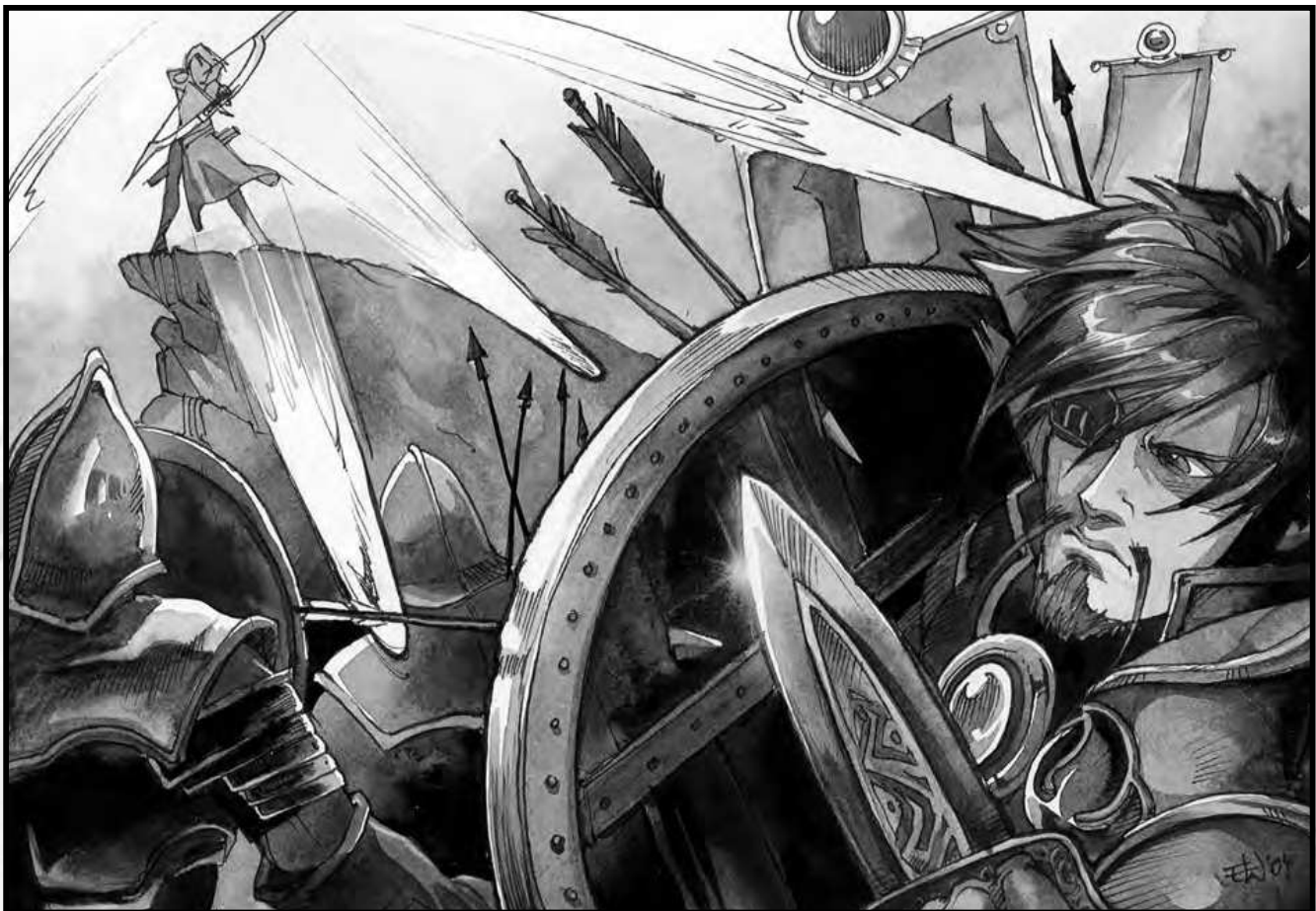
forget to show the virtues of the Dragons toward them. How are they to know better if we fail in our duty? How can we expect them to know their duty when they see us betraying our own?

ANATHEMA

I know the legends of the Anathema. I think all of us know something of the subject, whether it is a full catechism of the signs by which you may tell them, as taught by the Immaculate Order, or whether it is some lewd and bloody account of their fearful deeds or just the facts that they exist and that they are corruption given form, striving to enter Creation and destroy it.

I have fought the Anathema. I have battled the beast called Sleeves of War, and had I not had my comrades at my shoulders, I would have perished there upon the battlefield. See, this scar upon my arm and shoulder comes from one of her arrows. We charged her armies of buck-ogres, I and my brothers and sisters, moving together as one, our Charms and our Essence united, and we broke their formation. The armies that followed us, trusting our leadership and our courage, set them to flight.

Yet, Sleeves of War herself did not flee from us. She withdrew, as separate as the moon above, walking among the corpses till she was stained in blood to the thighs, arrows falling from her bow in a killing rain that left only the dead behind. She chose to withdraw in order to spare





her troops. I will grant one of the Anathema that much praise. She knew her duty toward her men, just as we Exalted know our duty toward our own soldiers. But her eyes, her eyes... they were mercury set in a human face carved out of marble, as blind, as hating, as cold as the Farthest North. There was more humanity in the foulest beastman than in the Anathema who faced us upon the battlefield that day. She was a creature risen from the mouth of Malfeas, beautiful as the moon but viler than the depths of damnation. Her laughter was like crystal and silver, and her body moved more smoothly than that of the Mouth of Peace. She was a creature that should not exist upon this world. May the Dragons grant that I and my brethren may cast her kind out of Creation forever.

I am troubled about what precisely the Anathema did and how great a crime it was and what is happening to our own empire. The Anathema were bloodthirsty and cruel and vicious, certainly — I do not quibble with the Immaculate Texts — and would doubtless have destroyed Creation. I fear where we may be in 100 years time and what damage we may do to the Realm if we tear it apart as the Great Houses threaten to do. We must take action now, before we become as great a corruption and vileness as they were. They sold themselves to the demons who lurk outside Creation. How long before some of us grow so hungry for power that we would do the same?

FAIR FOLK

Can't you just feel them out there, beyond the edge of everything, like omen dogs outside a camp, waiting for the firelight to dim, for the sentries to lose their edge. Circling in the dark, waiting for a chance to score a kill.

If there's any good reason to preserve the Realm and keep our armies strong, it's the Fair Folk. You hear from the outlaw regions that this one or that one lives among mortals, but you know the vast bulk of them hate Creation and everything in it.

I've served in the East, and I've seen them. I've seen what's left of a victim when they're done with him. I've seen villages burned and seeded with madness, the only living things left the soul-burned and the twisted monstrosities the fae leave behind to mock you.

I've seen what the Ravagers will do for their masters, creeping out of the Wyld with Fair Folk miracles to befuddle their victims. They're baby-snatchers and gate-openers, and they might have been the most righteous individuals ever before they came into contact with the Fair Folk. All it takes is one trip under the hill to set heads askew. I've seen it. I've seen men drag their children screaming to a Freehold for a promised kiss. It's especially bad for mortals, but it can happen to the Exalted as well.

Is it really you that comes back? Does it matter after all the lies they'll twist into your mind? I've traveled into the Wyld, but not very far. It is *alien* there. The waters of other

worlds lap at the edges of our own. I feel this is what happened to the Anathema, that they were twisted by the power of the Fair Ones during some sort of adventure and left maddened. I've seen the Fair Folk, and they are as fell and as full of lies as is generally supposed. These aliens walk at the edges of our land. We quarrel while the omen dogs lurk near the fire.

I will tell you what worries me most — it strikes me that, if someone had control over the Realm's defense systems, they'd have probably used them to win the struggle for the throne swiftly and decisively. It therefore follows that no one has control of them. I have met the Fair Folk in battle — thankfully never in conversation — and I think they may be mad, but they are cunning enough to notice our guard is down. If they do not already ready themselves to strike, it is only a matter of time. We cannot let a civil war rend our people and leave Creation vulnerable to the Fair Folk's wicked intentions.

THE LEGIONS

Even the blindest officer can see that the legions are dragged in all directions by the Great Houses, with conflicting orders and influence at the highest levels diluting the legions' strength and capacity to do their duty. It is rare for me to have anything good to say for House Cynis' activities, but at least we are not trying to juggle the legions in order to protect our own interests. The fact that this comes solely through lack of military influence on our part is less consoling. Perhaps the Great Houses should stop giving so many orders and start thinking. Do they believe that the commanders of the legions are incapable of talking among themselves or discussing current affairs? Do they think that we give up our eyes and our ears and our capacity for thought when we take up weapons in service to the empire?

I am aware of the Roseblack's activities. I served under her, a decade or more ago, and she was an inspired leader and a superior commander. What she is doing now is what the Empress herself is said to have done centuries ago. She perceives that the Realm is on the edge of chaos, and she readies herself to meet that need. True, some of the other legions may be drawn into battle with her. But when one considers the personalities involved and the fact that no legion wishes to fight against another legion — well, some commanders would prefer to avoid a meeting on the battlefield and would rather hail her as Empress after she has assumed the position. Whatever the Empress might have done in her rise to the throne cannot be treason, for the Empress cannot commit treason. Simple logic. Many in the legions might feel that a new Empress from their own ranks would be an acceptable solution to the current situation. And if the legions will not fight at the whim of the Great Houses, then what are the Great Houses going to do about it?

WONDERS

For all that the wonders of the Shogunate were supposed to bring leisure and ease, they don't seem to have brought much of either to the people who owned them. The wonders of the First Age were the trappings of the Anathema. Is it any wonder the Shogunate was so unsettled, built as it was on the tools of the Solar despots?

I understand that they're useful for farming and war, but I don't mind the way the Order treats them — as being not unlike Exaltation, something that's best kept religious and mysterious to the commoners. I know I never let my cotters get anywhere near the savants when they come out to operate the sky mantis tower. There's no way that understanding the operation of such a device could bring a peasant anything but discomfort, pain and worry. The last time that such knowledge was widespread, it ended in the Contagion, and I think there's a lesson to be learned there.

Artifacts are matters for sorcerers, savants and generals. We need great weapons of war to fight our powerful enemies, but operating them is a burden that the Dragon-Blooded bear. It is our duty to wield these weapons and to understand their secrets. These devices are tremendously challenging, and using them carries incredible responsibility. Weather changes in one place can bring famine to another. A weapon that can defend a town can lay waste to it just as easily. Many weapons of the First Age draw on the power of the land around them and can kill the unExalted if they attempt to trigger them and even cause widespread geomantic damage.

The Dragon-Blooded are gifted with miraculous power and are capable of great skill and insight. Yet, even we have trouble using these weapons and tools responsibly. How could a commoner be expected to manage it? I know some Dragon-Blooded weep for the lost splendors of the past, but to me, they're nothing compared to the simple joys of a perfected Essence and an upright life. I'm glad to see the wonders wear out and go away one by one. I hope there's a day when we've vanquished all our enemies that we can forswear such cleverness entirely.

LOOKSHY

The place is a blot on the legions' record. Centuries may have passed, but it still shames me and all the warriors who have ever served the Realm to know that a group of soldiers could so utterly fail to recognize what occurred and feel the need to set themselves up in opposition to it. There are Terrestrial Exalted there, chosen by the Dragons themselves (I do not pretend to understand the motives of the Elemental Dragons), who weaken the Realm, and Creation itself, by their obstinance. Blind folly, all of it. And folly that has by now been cemented in their traditions. It will take a thinker as innovative and courageous as the Scarlet Empress

herself to lead Lookshy back into alliance with the Realm and to forge a link that would strengthen us both.

SESUS RAFARA

THE REALM

It is a spy's duty to know people: their past, their joys, their vices, their weaknesses and aspirations. I am very good at getting to know people. I know more Dynasts more thoroughly than any but a handful of others in the Blessed Isle. I can come to know someone well in the space of a day, and I hate it. Every single time I get to truly know another person through his actions, I want to step into a hot fire and stay there until the filth has been burned away. When you watch another with the diligence with which I watch others, it's impossible to maintain any kind of romantic, idealized view. I know the full gamut of behaviors of a host of Dynasts, and when given the choice to do a bold, constructive ethical deed or a petty, filthy, dishonest one, they'll take the latter course every single time.

Common wisdom states that the Realm is in dire straits because the mighty Empress disappeared and the Threshold barbarians smell blood. That's not exactly accurate. The Realm is in dire straits because the domineering Empress disappeared and the one force capable of keeping the Dynastic houses' twisted, petty, ambitious drives in check is no longer there. Worse, the Empress made it this way, and every Dynast on the Isle knows it. The barbarians aren't pushing any harder than they ever have. It's just that the Realm's forces, once effectively allied against the Threshold, now turn against themselves, as the fall of House Tepet clearly illustrates.

As surely as night follows a long day, the Realm is going to fall. Not today, not next week and probably not next year, but the fact remains that the mighty Realm has so many cracks, flaws, traitors and enemies working against it that it doesn't have a chance in hell of lasting another century unless the Empress comes back from her "meditation" or someone else takes the throne and conducts a complete purge and reformation of the Realm's bureaucracy.

What I would really like to know is who had the skill and the opportunity to stop her. She was a fierce woman, and she had to have been hard to take down, even if several powerful Anathema worked together to do it.

There, that's my outsider's view. That's what the Realm wants from me, right? That's the information my family betrayed me for.

The sad thing is, once the Realm falls, there really isn't much to keep Creation from falling apart. I don't see that any of the Threshold cities, or even all of them in some kind of unlikely cooperation, is likely to hold back the tide of Fair Folk and barbarians likely to pour in once the Blessed Isle breaks apart into a handful of feuding nation-states.



HOUSE

Officially? I'm considered one of the two best spies in House Sesus. I'm privy to information that only a handful of other family members have access to. My loyalties are beyond question. I've been given so much by my house, how could my loyalties be swayed?

Unofficially? I've more than paid my dues to my house. I've paid dearly for every hour of every day of training I've received from it. I've paid for what little else it's given me hundreds of times over. I've paid with an undermined social life. I've paid with stunted marriage prospects. I've paid with the aches and pains of excessive training. I've paid with my conscience for killing loyal Dynasts who simply made the wrong enemy. I've paid with over 100 years of murderous service, and if I choose to be loyal to myself instead of to my house, for one time in 137 years, then so be it.

MORTALS

I hope they can survive the predations of the Anathema on their own because they're going to have to in short order. The Dynasty of the Dragon-Blooded is going to destroy itself, and probably soon, and it looks to me like that's going to leave the mortals to fend for themselves in the face of deathknights and Lunar Anathema.

I don't spend very little time dealing with mortals myself. I've killed a few of them from time to time when mortal assassins weren't likely to get the job done right — charismatic peasant leaders who don't know enough to keep their heads down, for example — but by and large, assigning a well-trained Dragon-Blooded assassin to kill a mortal is overkill.

CATHAK CAINAN

THE REALM

Where there is discipline and polite society, there is civilization. While the Empress was in power, I'd say the Blessed Isle was indisputably the last bastion of true civilization in Creation. Since her disappearance, that has come into question. We are in the unenviable position of substituting military discipline for true self-discipline, but that will only work for so long because, without self-discipline, the legions themselves grow weak. I've watched the ethics and character of the Dynasty grow more lax with each passing year since her disappearance. We still claim to be the last bastion of true civilization, but I don't see a generation of moral leaders. I see a generation of pampered children with too much power and too little self-control to wield it well.

That would all change were a Cathak to take the throne, of course, but that kind of push brings enemies out of the woodwork, and alliances are too fickle to risk the

well-being of one's entire house on them. Is the urge for the throne there? You're damned right it is. Not a day goes by that I don't find myself plotting imperial strategy and mapping out whom I would place in the new hierarchy. It was only my self-control, thank you Hesiesh, that kept me from making a move for the throne last year.

Legions are the key to this power structure, obviously. My younger brother Atessis commands the five Cathak legions. They are, without a doubt, the most highly disciplined troops in Creation. I'd pit one of my house's legions against one of anyone else's, no hesitation.

Hesiesh counsels humility in martial matters, however. The shame and horror of the loss of the Tepet legions is a reminder that even great generals can suffer horrible defeat when they do not know their enemies. I know Tepet Arada well, and I can attest to the quality of his leadership. In a fair battle, his legions could have bested an army half again as large as itself. But the Anathema aren't interested in fair battles. I think about Tepet Arada often, and what I think is that it could have been me.

The loss of the Tepet legions is a loss that staggers the imagination, an unbelievable, unfathomable loss. And the Realm is much the worse for it.

HOUSE

I take a great deal of pride in being the head of my Great House. I believe House Cathak to be one of the most committed to the Realm and its ideals. We run the tightest, best trained legions in the Realm. We go about our business ethically, and we turn out some of the most prepared and competent soldiers and officers in Creation. The Cathak line, even those not aspected toward fire, seems to have fire in its blood. While there are exceptions, the Dragon-Bloods of House Cathak seem, to my eyes, to be less — for lack of a better word — decadent than many of their peers. That I take to be the natural result of warriors' discipline. Decadence comes from having too little discipline and too much free time. Any self-respecting Dragon-Blooded soldier who sees what the Realm is up against, especially now, is going to be spending his time in training and preparation for combat, not attending orgies or plotting treason.

I have watched my family for centuries now, and I have personally seen to it that, if need be, children were taught self-control. Nieces, nephews, grand- and great-grandchildren alike have benefited from my guidance. When I had a hand in rearing a child, whether my own, a niece, a nephew or a child taken in when his parents died, I followed in my own father's footsteps and taught them self-discipline through hard work. I can think of no better way to contribute to the strength of the Realm. Were I to do otherwise, I would be shirking my responsibility and undermining their moral development. Power without responsibility is dangerous, both to the possessor and to those around him. Despite the crises besetting us now, the

Dragon-Blooded are the rulers and defenders of Creation, and since we're ruling Creation, the obligation falls upon us to rule it well.

MORTALS

The ungrateful mortal has become such a cliché in recent years that I hesitate to bring it up, but while every stereotype blossoms in folly, most are at least rooted in truth. It was the Dragon-Blooded who martyred themselves to throw off the yoke of the Anathema. It was the Dragon-Blooded who saved Creation from being devoured by the Fair Folk. It was the Dragon-Blooded who reestablished civilization on the Blessed Isle. And, most importantly, it was the Dragon-Blooded in whom the great Elemental Dragons invested their wisdom and access to elemental magic. Even absent all the other reasons mortals should show gratitude and respect to the Dragon-Blooded, that alone should suffice.

And now that the Realm is dealing with an internal crisis, it seems that all the Threshold has decided they've had enough of our rule. "Thank you very much," they say, "but we've no use for you now, and we're not going to pay for your services any more." When I hear those soft, undisciplined, unExalted Thresholders complain about how difficult it is to work under the Dragon-Blooded, it infuriates me, not least because of the heresy it represents. If they think *we're* difficult, just wait until they're serving the Anathema.

I have to remind myself regularly that mortals are not unlike children. They don't necessarily know what's best for themselves, and they need our guidance. That's why we're here as emissaries of the Dragons, to rule and to provide spiritual inspiration — not to suggest, not to argue and certainly not to kowtow. The current crisis makes it difficult to send legions into the Threshold for any but the most crucial reasons, but once that situation is rectified, I fully intend to see to it that the satrapies of House Cathak get all the spiritual guidance they can withstand.

ANATHEMA

I've had a direct hand in the deaths of 12 Anathema and an indirect hand in the deaths of perhaps a score more. I've watched their faces as they've died, always looking for some sign of a demonic spirit fleeing, and not once have I seen any such thing.

That doesn't necessarily mean anything. Clearly, the demons that possess the Anathema are too subtle for me to see.

I've come to look at the Anathema as high-end training exercises — and one that any self-respecting general should have under his belt. Any Dragon-Blood who goes out with the Wyld Hunt and comes back more than, say, 10 times is a proven hero of the Realm and worthy of honors. I've kept a watch on the Hunt. Between teaching tactics at the House of Bells and my connections from my days at the Cloister (nothing bonds people like shared violence), I can get updates on the Hunt's activities when I want to. It's been changing since the Empress' disappearance. When I was on the Hunt, it was a sacred duty, an honor you would never turn down, and couldn't if you wanted to, and depending on where the Order sent you, sometimes you *really* wanted to.

It's not like that anymore.

The Hunt's roster is shrinking month by month as proven heroes are pulling their names from the rolls so they can serve as duelists and "heroes" in the house legions. Heroes my ass. Now more than ever, they should be vying for the honor of being with the Wyld Hunt, not shirking their responsibility to it. What the situation means to me is that every passing day sees the accumulation of more Anathema in the Threshold, with more time to undermine Creation and endanger the Realm. That's why the Tepet legions fell. And it's not acceptable. If the Realm's continuation depends on one thing, it's the eradication of the Anathema. The attrition of the Wyld Hunt has gone on long enough. Luckily, I'm in a position to do something about it. I'm going to demand a mandatory term of service with the Hunt for all candidates applying for the rank of general in the Cathak legions. If those pampered little bastards covet the rank so much, let them earn it.





CHAPTER FOUR

VOICES NOT OUR OWN



The Dragon-Blooded have occupied Creation's center stage for centuries at this point, and there's hardly a sentient creature that hasn't formed an opinion of them, one way or the other. Aspects of Fire are revered, in particular, for their prowess in both combat and social situations. Their dynamism and sheer charm often win them allies where their behavior alone might not. If any aspect of the Dragon-Blooded could be said to be more popular than any other, the Crimson Dragons would win handily.

MORTALS

In addition to the terror instilled by their skill with weapons, the sheer charisma and social acuity of the Aspects of Fire often affords them an extra degree of respect or even awe from the mortals with whom they interact. The Exalts, for their part, rarely notice and chalk such behavior up to their status as Dragon-Blooded, never noticing that even other Terrestrial Exalted don't get treated with quite the same degree of deference and respect.

NELLENS RIANKA ON NELLENS MALAKAI

Being born into House Nellens is a mixed blessing — or at least, it used to be. On the one hand, the houses with all the Dragon-Blooded treat you like dung, but on the other hand, the pressure inside the house to Exalt is nothing like what offspring of the other houses have to put up with. If you're a Cathak or a Mnemon and you don't

Exalt, it's like you're an utter failure and a disgrace to the family. In Nellens, it's a surprise if you do Exalt.

So, I thought I was safe and didn't need to be embarrassed that I reached the age of 20 without Exalting.

Then, Mirar Exalted, and a couple of years later, Malakai followed suit, and all of a sudden, every scion of House Nellens is expected to Exalt as if we actually had the same pedigree as the other Great Houses.

Malakai, in particular, is a bastard. He thinks that he's the guiding star of the entire house, and he expects the entire house to kowtow to his every self-serving whim. And since his graduation from the Heptagram and his battle with the deathknight, it pretty much has. Now, my parents look at me with that same faint look of disappointment that I see on the faces of the Dragon-Blooded any time they're in the presence of their unExalted relatives. Not only is it offensive, it's degrading, and I blame both Mirar and Malakai for this sorry state of affairs. House Nellens is and should always be the mortal house, and on that topic, I have nothing more to say.

V'NEEF YAMURA, UNEXALTED DYNAST VINTNER

Back in school, I was well liked, if a little arrogant. My nanny always used to tell me that I was sure to Exalt, and for whatever dumb reason, I believed her. Since I just knew that I'd be a great Dragon-Blood one day, I figured I had a right to treat the other kids at school any way I damn well



felt like it, particularly that chump Nellens Malakai. Not only was he the least popular kid at school, he was also from House Nellens, and it was a pretty safe bet that he wouldn't Exalt. Sesus Minar thought I was pretty funny when I'd mess with him, and I scored some points with her that way. It was nothing, but it meant a lot to me, and I used to imagine what our wedding would be like and how many Exalted children we'd have together. And so, I'd tease the Nellens kid some more to strengthen my position with her. Looking back on it, I was an ass, but at the time, it just seemed the way to do things. When Malakai Exalted, I thought I was in trouble because he had every reason to make me suffer, but he never even had the time to sneer at me after that. Unfortunately, when Minar Exalted about three months later, neither did she.

I understand the arrogance of the Dragon-Blooded, I guess. I mean, being the Chosen of the Dragons is a big deal and everything, but for those of us who don't Exalt, being permanently in the shadow of the Dragon-Blooded can really suck every last bit of sweetness out of life. It's like, if you're not Exalted, you're just a waste of the Realm's resources. I get tired of that. Really, really tired.

SERGEANT SYNOTHIS, NINE GORGES TALON, ON THE DRAGON-BLOODED

You just have to know how to handle them. Even if they're the Chosen of the Dragons, even if they've got the sparkly lights and the flashy this and the wave-the-fingers-and-everyone-falls-down that, they start off as human kids, and they haven't none of them ever been on a real battleground before. Y'see that lieutenant over there? Sure, he went through the House of Bells — a lot of the officers do — but even if he'd killed people before, war games and executions don't mean shit compared to a proper war.

They take it in different ways. Quite often, you can figure out how to handle it and when to leave it be and when you need to have a little talk with them from looking at what aspect they Exalted in. See, the Fire ones, for instance, they like having things nice and stable and solid and traditional, so they don't mind so much seeing people get killed. You can leave them alone for that or let them go drink with the other officers. But what does get them is stuff like the Fair Folk or the Anathema, sheer wrong stuff that scares the piss out of any man with the brains to be afraid, or stuff that's not proper and traditional.

And when you've got a Fire with brains, you've got someone who starts off from tradition and goes from there. He figures, right, that everything is right and proper at the bottom. Y'know, that the peasants like having their faces in the dirt and that we like fighting and that everyone'd be nice and happy with him on top ruling and that things ought to work that way normally. Not that I'm saying he's wrong, see, but he assumes it's going to be that way, and

when it's not that way, he gets unpredictable. And I don't know about you, but I don't like having someone unpredictable in command. I like an officer who's going to give me the commands I know I'm going to get. That way, everyone's happy.

Had one of those a few years ago. A Cynis — yes, I know, you don't get many of those in the legions, or Fire-aspected, they're usually Wood, now let me go on with the story — was our new subaltern, and we'd just been dealing with some fae and ravagers. We'd been having to fight all over a local village, poor bastards, and the place looked like Creation after the Anathema had hit it. Better than if the fae had eaten their souls, Dragons preserve them, but hardly pretty. So, here's this young officer, Cynis Avaku, looking round the place and looking at the villagers and biting his lip like he's trying not to chuck up his lunch or grab one of them and say he was sorry.

So, I take him aside that evening, and I tell him how things are. That nobody likes it ending up this way, but that the peasants will be feeling a bit more grateful next year, when they've rebuilt and when it sinks into their worm-grubbed little skulls that they're alive and not dead. That sometimes things don't seem to make sense, but that the Realm's doing the best it can. Like the story of the farmer and the fox, you know, the one the Immaculates trot out all the time. He took it well. Chewed his lip some, gave me a nod and went off to join his friends. He was better after that. Hear he's a lieutenant these days, off serving against the Anathema bitch Sleeves of War.

But you see, you've just got to know how to handle them, like you do with any new lads you've got serving. With the Air ones, you tell them that it's all down to planning, then you let them go off to sort things out. With the Earth ones, you have to remind them that we're only a little bit of the legions, that the Realm as a whole's still sound. With the Water ones, you talk about how they need to adapt and cope, and with the Wood ones, you give them the whole cycle of life sermon and remind them that they die someday too. But with the Fire ones, you just need to remind them that the reason tradition is tradition is because it's been working for 500 years and more, however things look right this second with all the blood and the muck. They'll listen to you when you say that because that's what they want to believe. It's what they live.

MNEMON CARAS MINATA, ON HER HUSBAND

It used to frighten me at first, lying there in his arms as he slept. He looked like a human, but I knew that he wasn't. He was more. There was fire in his veins. I used to be afraid that one day he would lose his temper and that the fire would rise in him and I'd be burned by it. I was a mere human, and he had been Chosen.

You cannot know how sick at heart I was that I was never Chosen. We all knew in Mnemon that only the

spiritually worthy were Chosen by the Dragons. That was what Mnemon herself always called it. If you weren't Chosen, then there was something wrong with you, poor sick fool, tainted in some way, and the best you could possibly hope for was to join the Immaculate Order and scour yourself down to nothing in order to become pure.

I hated myself.

Now, when I look into Avaku's eyes, I know that I have a place in his heart and that I am not worthless or tainted or somehow vile. I am an unExalted Dynast, and he is among the Exalted, but the Dragons have given us both our places in this world, and the best we can do is live in them. Mnemon preaches the Immaculate Doctrine, but my husband actually believes it and cares for me as I am. What does it matter if he's more spiritually advanced than I am or if I will die long before he does? We both do what we must and follow tradition, and together — together — we will make a household, we will strengthen his house, and we will work for the empire.

Perhaps I am more of a child of Mnemon than I ever realized.

I have despaired, more than once. I have been lonely, I have been afraid, I have screamed in pain on the childbed, and I have read his letters and feared for him abroad with the legions. But at the moments when I most needed him, he has been there, to guard me and to tell me that I matter to him.

For that passion, for those moments, he has my heart and my faith till I die.

LUNARS

The Dragon-Blooded occasionally find themselves in violent conflict with Lunar barbarians, particularly when making occasional patrols of the edge of Creation to see to it that the Wyld — under the direction of the Fair Folk — isn't gnawing away at the edges of the world. These are the kind of Anathema the Dragon-Blooded hunt most often.

RED JAWS, CHOSEN OF THE FULL MOON

They sent their so-called "Wyld Hunt" after me one time. One thing I can tell you is that it's misnamed. They don't know much about dealing with the Wyld, and they damn sure don't know anything about hunting. We picked off about four of them in the space of one night, and they decided that they had misjudged the hostility levels of the locals, and they left like the pampered treacherous cowards they are.

One thing I can say for the Dragon-Blooded, though, is that they taste good when they've been roasted on a spit long enough to make 'em tender. The fire ones have kind of a smoky taste to 'em.

SLEEVES OF WAR, LUNAR EXALT

The snow smells the sweetest on mornings before battle. Then, when the wind comes down over the peaks

like a great cascade of water and the air stirs with shaken flakes of snow as though it were water full of grains of sand, then you can smell it — the pure ice before the spilling of blood, all winter in a single lungful of breath.

I had met that warrior with the scarlet breastplate before, on other battlefields, and we had faced each other there, my claws against his blade. This time, he had brought his brothers to stand beside him, but I do not fault him for that. The wolf runs with his pack. Screams pierced the air like arrows as they fought through my children. Fire blazed around him like red flowers, as beautiful as fresh-spilled blood, and I tasted my own sweat as I ran to meet him and to take him between my hands and tear his flesh asunder.

Once before, his kind ran at our heels, our dogs — do they remember? Can they remember? These tales we know because our elders tell them to us, but what can their elders tell their children but lies? Poor dragon children, so eager for the fight, so lost without knowing it.

The air burned hot as I came close to him, like the molten lava that springs from the ground deeper in the mountains, but his sweet flesh was as cool and beautiful as gold. I ran my claws through it, and blood sprang free. He buried his sword in me, and so, the dance ended, and I fled again.

How soon before I can breathe the winter air again, before we meet again? He is a worthy opponent. His blood will be hot in my mouth, his breath loud in my ears, his eyes proud as he dies a warrior.

SIDEREALS

The Sidereals are the only Celestial Exalted the Terrestrials have any peaceful interaction with, and that's only because the Sidereals have transparently insinuated themselves into the very fabric of Dragon-Blooded culture.

As aggressive catechists for the Elemental Dragons, the Aspects of Fire have endeared themselves to the Sidereals in control of the Immaculate Order. They have, consequently, been blessed with control over a disproportionate number of the Realm's legions.

While the Sidereals fancy themselves immune to the charms of the Crimson Dragons, that may not be as true as they like to believe.

MAY BLOSSOM OF THE GOLD FACTION ON

CYNIS DENOVAH AVAKU

Occasionally predictable, occasionally unpredictable, much like the rest of the Terrestrial Exalted — oh, in more detail. Take this one, Cynis Denovah Avaku. Impoverished parents, tolerable but not particularly impressive bloodline, straightforward enough. Exalted at the usual sort of age, went straight for a military career, House of Bells and all the usual extracurricular work that you might expect. Now, I'm not saying that his Exaltation was





unexpected, but equally — well, it did come out of nowhere in particular. I've been checking up on him every now and again when I've been in the area.

Now, tradition in the Great Houses usually has impoverished descendants of junior bloodlines doing whatever the current top dogs in the house in question wants. Nothing strange in Avaku going for the legions, and nothing particularly abnormal in his rise there. However, his attitude toward the house itself is... interesting. Cynis usually either breeds collaborators or reformers, and even the reformers have a businesslike sense about where to hit the house so that it hurts. Avaku appears to be an intelligent reformer, and he's saving his influence as he grows in power and rank for occasions when it can make a real difference. He also wants to strengthen the place rather than tear it all down like that cousin of his — you know, the Immaculate. I need to submit another report on him. If we want to slow down Cynis' slipping into new markets, Avaku could be a useful agent. He's a strategist as well as a tactician, and it's up to us to direct where he chooses his battlegrounds.

MAY BLOSSOM OF THE GOLD FACTION ON SESUS RAFARA

Sometimes, the fainter stars can go unnoticed until their full effect on fate comes to pass. There is one such star even now that could well play a key role in several crucial

outcomes in the Realm and, by extension, on the misguided crusade against the Solars. Chejop Kejak is keeping his eyes on so many threads right now that I suspect he may have missed this one. I hope he has.

CHEJOP KEJAK ON CATHAK CAINAN

The Realm can no longer afford to drift the way it has been. The petty squabbles of the houses need to come to an end before the wounds inflicted these last five years become mortal. Cainan is both a pious man and an excellent general. He has truly taken the precepts of the Immaculate Philosophy to heart with a fervor that I wish other Terrestrial Exalted could manage. He's one of the few elder Dragon-Bloods whose voice does not assume an ironic tone when talking about the Immaculate Philosophy. If the threads of his destiny were just a little longer, I think I would be inclined to nudge him toward the throne. If I could gain a clear glimpse of who would become Cainan's successor, I still might support his bid. As it stands now, however, I fear I would be offering the Realm a taste of order only to see it followed by a banquet of calamity were the wrong Cathak to follow him to the throne.

OTHER DRAGON-BLOODED

Among the Dragon-Blooded, the Fire Aspects have a reputation as talented athletes, promiscuous seducers and smooth courtiers. As with most stereotypes, these beliefs



fit some Burning Swords better than others. Regardless of the accuracy, however, many Dragon-Bloods are inclined to jump to conclusions about Aspects of Fire until their experience of the individual proves the stereotype wrong. Clever Fire Aspects can usually use their social skills to turn such assumptions to their advantage.

LEDAAL KES

Damanchina — Peleps Danic Damanchina? Yes, she's not bad, though she's not as good as she thinks she is. She has an eye for timing, which counts for a lot, but she hasn't yet learned how to plan 10 moves in advance. Five at the most. I've played her at Gateway a couple of times. You know how it is at public parties, when all the children just out of school are lining up for "the honor of a game," and quite certain that they'll be able to pull off a coup and bask in the notoriety of having beaten the Ledaal Kes? She didn't expect to win, and played quite credibly, using one of the classic defenses. I have no complaints there. But she needs more dash on the attack and more planning in advance about how to use the moment when it comes. Give her another five years. If she survives, she'll be worth some investment of jade and interest.

PELEPS DANIC TAMIRA, ON HER DAUGHTER

DAMANCHINA

I am extremely pleased with Damanchina so far. She hasn't seriously disappointed me yet. There were a few moments in childhood, of course — that time she forgot the couplet at the end of *The Seven Heroes at White Gorge Bridge* epic while she was reciting for our friends and the time she had to stay behind and do extra work over the summer holidays — but generally speaking, I have no complaints. After that little problem with the exams, she proved very quick to learn when she should apply her full energy to a problem and when she could leave matters to resolve themselves or follow the easiest course.

Maturity brings a whole new set of problems with it. Ambition is the biggest one. Children operate on a different scale from adults, of course, but as one's vision grows larger, one's ambitions grow with it. Damanchina isn't thinking in terms of sweets or privileges any longer. She's thinking in terms of sworn brotherhoods and satrapies and holding ministerial posts. I'm so proud of her.

And, of course, her Exaltation has taken her in a completely different direction from myself and from her father. We were both Exalted as Water-aspected, and Damanchina is Fire-aspected. Sometimes, the difference in aspect is barely noticeable, and sometimes it's brutally obvious. Where I would work around a problem or mollify my opponent into slowly coming around to my point of view, my daughter is much more direct in her approach. On the other hand, she seems to have developed her ability to keep her temper in the face of provocation,

which is such a change. Why, when I think back to how she and her cousin Alrya used to get into screaming matches, I feel quite mortified that Damanchina didn't learn how to control herself faster.

Still, House Peleps has always felt that an interesting diversity of Exaltations can only strengthen the family. Damanchina's self-control and direct approach to problems will be an asset to us. I can think of several junior subordinates in her ministry alone who are so busy looking behind them for people attempting to stab them in the back that they aren't bothering to watch out in front of them for someone who's simply efficient, hard-working and able to bide her time. Yes, my little daughter makes me very proud sometimes.

Oh? If she's developing into someone so devious and complex that I haven't yet realized it — well, I'd be delighted to hear it, but Exaltation only goes so far.

GENERAL NELLENS DENESTHIO, COMMANDER OF THE 23RD LEGION, ON JUNIOR OFFICERS

Junior officers? Cynis Denovah Avaku? Yes, I remember him.

There are few things more splendid than seeing a group of the Chosen of the Dragons matching stride and charging the enemy together, their animas meeting and blending around them in a glow that rivals the sunset, the earth shaking beneath their steps. A disciplined movement of troops can be like a tidal wave or as unshakable as a raised cliff. The Dragon-Blooded are a forest fire rushing down upon their enemy. I train my junior officers to work together, as we did in the dawn of time to cast down the Anathema and as we must do now to defend the Realm.

Some of them take longer than others to learn this. Some of them have dreams of single-handed heroism. Every year, I hope that the House of Bells will beat this out of them, and every year, I get new idiots. However, the boy Avaku wasn't one of them. He'd learned early — and I think that the Fire-aspected are one of the first to learn it — that our strength comes through cooperation. He marched in step, and he held the formation, and he lent his Essence to the Charms that we all worked together. He and his brother officers broke the charge of Sleeves of War's buck-ogres, and even if we didn't manage to stamp that Anathema bitch into the mud she came from, Avaku and the others held their ground. I tell you, I saw the fire blazing around him, that same holy fire that Hesiesh himself perfected, and it was something to warm my heart in that freezing Wyld-tainted winter. The Fire-aspected don't just epitomize tradition, they give meaning to that tradition. They remind us why that tradition's worth fighting for. They're the spirit behind it, the flame that fuels the Realm and the blaze that strikes back when the time comes.



TEPET ELANA, MAGISTRATE

Sometimes, I have been called to investigate, shall we say, matters in polite society between persons of Exalted rank. Now, what was it that the manuals said? “One does not want to suggest in front of the unExalted that crimes such as murder take place among their rulers. It might give them inappropriate ideas about their social superiors and about the natural laws that the Dragons have set in place.” (Inappropriate, hell. Last time I looked into one of these, my archon Beren told me they were taking bets about it down in the local teahouse. There is no crack so small that a mouse cannot listen at it.)

So — imagine a household of Cathaks, all sitting there watching each other, with the corpse of a notably unwanted patrician cousin cooling in the cellars, waiting for the local Immaculate to arrive for full funeral rites. Imagine me trying to look into the matter.

Now, I won't say that a Fire-aspected (for they all were) can't choose her time and moment. I had no way of knowing, and indeed I never found out, which one of them did it. It was eventually forgotten, and my report never went anywhere significant — apart, of course, from the Empress' own desk.

But I will say that only a Fire-aspected would have chosen her time and moment while using a double-headed great axe and then tried to claim that the victim died while falling downstairs.

SESUS CHENOW MAREQ ON SESUS RAFARA

An excellent experiment, so far as I can tell, which has reaped great benefits for House Sesus. She is an aggressive researcher of her subjects, and not once has she failed in her work. When we need someone to disappear, they disappear. When we need information of a personal nature as bargaining leverage, we get solid information. That's the kind of competence you want in a spy, after all.

What worries me is that she just doesn't show the kind of enthusiasm I would like to see in a woman with so much information. I don't mean that she needs to adopt some kind of false mask of excitement about her work, but it would not be a bad thing were she to evince some kind of appreciation for her role and duties. We've invested far too much in her to lose her, but even if she were about to turn on us, we would never know it because she's so wholly and frustratingly inscrutable. That's how she should appear to her targets, not to those of us who sponsor and depend on her.

TEPET EJAVA, THE ROSEBLACK, ON SESUS RAFARA

Who?

VERSON JYSON, OUTCASTE

It must be nice, living on the Isle, being part of a great clan, immersing yourself in religion and training and having servants and the like. Yeah, I'd love to live like

that. We've got nothing like that our here. Out here, we're cold when it gets cold, we're hot when it gets hot, and while we may not have line after line of crack troops, we can pick up a sword as well as, and often better than, the next guy. But those Dynast guys, especially the Fire Aspects, are something else. Gods, I envy them.

Sometimes, I daydream about going to the Isle and seeing what they make of me. I think it would make them think a lot. I think that maybe I'm the great-great-great-grandson of somebody famous, and they would recognize that, and I'd get trained just like them and stuff, but that's only a daydream because if it ever really happened, I would tell them what I really think of their stupid Dynasty, and they'd probably kill me.

There's a thought for you, huh?

KASIF, IMMACULATE, CHOSEN OF MELA

The Chosen of Hesiesh are proud of their forebear's reputation as the Reciter of Loud Hymns and Efficacious Prayers, but how many of them truly value the meaning behind this title? I have seen far too many Fire-aspected Dragon-Bloods who cling to tradition when it suits them and throw it to one side when it is no longer in accordance with their wishes and claim that they are merely “following the example of Hesiesh.” And then, of course, the Exalt in question gives me a look designed to ask how I, as an Immaculate, dare to find anything wrong with his actions.

Of course, many Chosen of Hesiesh are acting sincerely, cleaving to tradition where appropriate and finding new courses of action when the situation requires such things. It would be inappropriate of me to suggest that there are those among the highest placed of the Terrestrial Exalted who mouth dogma while casually playing with blasphemy. Possibly, my time out walking the roads and doing my duties among humble villagers and traders has led me to a simplistic understanding of the Immaculate scriptures and blinded me to their deeper meanings in a world full of shades of gray.

But if one more young lordling proud of his noble birth lounges in front of me and cites the name of Hesiesh in order to justify some pettiness of his own devising, well, I may lose my temper just as Mela did.

PELEPS ROKONA

No offense to the Fire Aspects — I'm related to a few, after all — but they're not the sharpest skewers in the roast, if you know what I'm saying. They're great fighters and great commanders on the battlefield, and they're competent politicians. When they get fired up about something, though, they can be pushy. It's like they have so much boundless energy to channel into their interests that when they get fired up about something, no pun intended, there's not a lot you can do to stop them. The best thing to do is bide your time and wait for them to burn out and move on to their next obsession. That's normally not too hard to do. Unless, of course, you're what they're all fired up about.

DEATHLORDS AND ABYSSALS

Before the return of the Solars, the Deathlords saw the Dragon-Blooded as their primary opponents, and among them, the Aspects of Fire were the most direct and immediate threat. While the sorcerer-kings of the Underworld are cautious of the Crimson Dragons, they are perhaps less thoughtful than they ought to be, for at their hearts, the Deathlords are the shades of the Solars of the First Age, and to them, the fires of the Dragon-Blooded are but pale shadows of the dimly remembered fires of the Unconquered Sun. Yet, the Dragon-Blooded vanquished the Solars once when they were alive and more numerous, and though the Deathlords are arguably mightier than the Solars, they are far fewer in number. Only fate will tell if the Deathlords arrogance is well-studied or poorly advised.

THE BODHISATTVA ANOINTED BY DARK

WATER TO SPEAKER FOR THE SEA

Despite suspecting that you might be trying to push the Realm into action against me through your actions, as one who shares your ultimate goals, I will — as an excessively doting father ignores the hurtful words of an angry son — overlook this act of indirect hostility, and continue to provide you with the wisdom I have accrued over centuries.

I told you that preying on ships too close to the Realm was unwise.

Allowing a recently Exalted deathknight, particularly a Child of Dusk, to enter Creation and rashly board Realm ships was nothing but arrogance and folly.

Perhaps now, since you've lost Ravishing Bone Structure Bride, you'll listen to me.

Incidentally, I know the name of the young Fire Dragon who destroyed the Bride.

I can provide you with that information if you'd care to repay his little kindness.

It is not yet too late to save face.

If I supply that knowledge, I will expect in return, a small token of your loyalty and appreciation, but I'm sure you already anticipated that.

THE MASK OF WINTERS, ON THE ASPECTS OF FIRE

They are all predictable, just as we are. They pride themselves on their imitation of their Dragons and fail to see how easily manipulated it makes them. The Fire Aspects delight in following tradition and blind themselves to how their traditions lead them into ruin. Shall I tell you a story?

Once, I faced three Fire-aspected Terrestrial Exalted. I wore my full panoply as a Deathlord. They looked at me and knew fear. I said to them, "Bow down and adore me, and I shall spare your lives, and you will serve me in a glory that few of your kind shall ever reach."

The first said, "It is not the way of Hesiesh to abide such things. Tradition bids me to slay you." She attacked, and I ripped out her heart and cast it to my raitons.

The second fell to his knees, and said, "Spare me, I beg you." But it was in his mind to wait for the right moment, and then strike me down, for it is also part of their beliefs that one must wait for the perfect moment to strike. I set my hand on his head and bound him as my servant, and he still waits, and that moment will never come.

The third looked at her friends and then looked at me and then spent all her Essence in a conflagration that destroyed her body and slew her utterly — and deposited some flakes of ash upon my boots. I believe that she caused me the most damage.

FAIR FOLK

To the Fair Folk, the Exalted present an irresistible allure — powerful Essence and equally powerful passions. Among them, the Aspects of Fire are some of the most attractive, second only to the viscerality of the Lunar Exalted. But even the Fair Folk know to walk wide of the silvery gods of the wild tribes, and so, it is the Aspects of Fire, particularly outcastes closer to the marches of the Wyld than to the protection of the Blessed Isle and the Dragon-Blooded Host, who suffer the bulk of the Fair Folk's depredations.

LUMIZENT, FAERIE QUEEN OF THE WINTER

PEOPLE, ON CATHAK CAINAN

Oh, of course I remember Cainan. He was a lovely man, tall and graceful as the night is cold. I had the privilege of watching his legion annihilate a number of my kind. It was... unspeakable. I summoned him to me one night in an optimistic attempt to parlay with him, but his silly soldiers restrained him, and I never got to speak with him or touch his hot red skin the way I really wanted to.

His legions have not been around here lately, alas, and my people have grown both powerful and fractious. We've been giving a great deal of thought to taking some sort of joyful action that might summon the handsome Cathak Cainan and his mighty legions back to us that we might entertain them further. With the Realm being as insular as it has been of late, I daresay we will have to stir up quite a festive ruckus indeed; something big; something worth the Realm's full attention; something that could lay waste to an entire city — at least — were it to get out of hand.

Yes, I do remember Cathak Cainan, and I daresay I'll be seeing him and his kind quite soon.

RAITON COCKADE OF THE

SEVENTH BALORIAN CRUSADE

I demand a Fire-aspected enemy — no, make that two at least! You of this court fail to understand the true glory





that comes from taking one of the Dragon-Blooded as quarry, the speed, the excitement, the challenge of it. You prey on pitiful, petty human children and think that you aspire to the glory of our days beyond the bounds of this so-called Creation. I tell you that you lack courage! You lack elegance! Oh my kin, I remember when you faced the Solars blade against blade and waded thigh-deep in blood and laughed sweetly enough to shatter diamonds. Look at you now, hesitating to attack a single Terrestrial Exalt, cowering before the “Chosen of the Dragons.”

I love them all — the fluid Water, the elegant Wood, the swift Air, the steadfast Earth — but most of all, I love those who are blessed by the Fire of Creation, who dance like the lightning come down to earth, striking with such utter precision. Their movements are a caress to the air, their steps pound heartbeats on the earth like a lover’s pulse in your bed. I yearn to challenge one of them, to see the scarlet flames of their anima scorching around them, to feel the crackle of the fire on my skin. Oh, my beloved sister, you may rule this court, but you have forgotten the sweet thrust of conflict, the pride and anger that sing within us when we face a worthy foe. I must have an enemy who will draw my blood, who will wrap me in the fierceness of his anger! And so, I demand that we challenge at least two of the Terrestrials and that at least one of them be Fire-aspected! Or I refuse to ride out with you today.

SPIRITS

METAL RENDER, ROGUE FORGE ELEMENTAL

What do I think of Dragon-Bloods? I think they’ve forgotten the place assigned to them.

What do I think of Dragon-Bloods? I think they’re delicious and full of Essence and that they put up a much better fight than most.

I think they’ve put their elemental birthright to shameful and boring uses.

I think they are petty and spiteful, forgetful and rash. I think they’re obsessed with controlling a world that doesn’t want to be controlled, most especially not by them.

And that’s why they responded so quickly and aggressively when the imperial forge got a little... high-spirited. They took it personally, as a challenge to their hegemony.

That first day, after the initial round of fires, they sent in some little Dynast who didn’t know what he was doing, and I ate him all up in a matter of minutes. What did they expect me to do?

That must have caused rather a lot of consternation, because the next day they sent in some Immaculate monks, two of whom were Wood-aspected and the third of whom was Air.

They were certain they were going to teach the stupid spirit a lesson or two. They lasted maybe five minutes before I’d melted their weapons, shattered their pretty jade armor and scorched the meat from their bones. Initially, I was quite pleased with myself.



But they're not stupid, the Dragon-Bloods. They may not be the equal of some of the other Exalted, but they have learned how to play to their strengths.

The next day they sent one old Fire Aspect against me, head of some noble house or other. At first, I was offended that I only warranted one old man, but after a few traded blows, I realized I was in trouble. My hottest attack didn't so much as raise a blister. I struck at him repeatedly, and he got out of the way every time. The reverse was not true. I could not block all of his blows, and when they landed, I felt them. And when I took flight, he chased. He did not seek to destroy me once he'd beaten me. On the contrary, he took great pains not to do so. Instead, he gave me to his friend, the sorcerer, who bound me into this damned hammer for a period of twelve score and six years, during which I will be forging bells for the shrines to the Dragon-Bloods.

What do I think of Dragon-Bloods?

I hate them — the traitorous Fire Aspects most of all.

MORNING OFFERINGS FIRE, GARDA BIRD

It is interesting to speak of the Fire-aspected Dragon-Blooded. They resemble us in so many ways — they are passionate, outspoken, dangerous, martial — yet they are human. Despite the teachings of the Immaculate Philosophy, so many live regrettable lives full of horrible deeds, simply staggering around drunk with the power of the Exaltation.

I suppose one can come to understand it. These Dragon-Blooded have only a few hundred short years to fulfill their destiny. As creatures of fire, it is natural they seek to expand to the greatest possible extent. Yet, they lack the eternity of true elemental fire and the balance that brings to the need to rage, to grow. The Dragon-Blooded do not learn to simply *burn*, and this is a great loss to them.

I remember remarking upon the very subject to Kal Bax, the Solar sorcerer, shortly before the Usurpation. He was visiting for a luncheon of some sort, and he was accompanied by two Fire Aspects, quite young and fierce.

We had to restrain them when two of my guards attempted to goad them into battle, explaining that the survivors would be executed for breaking the peace, and that, whether slain in battle or beheaded, the dancing flame princes would spring forth from the hearth of my Demesne three days after their destruction. I told the Dragon-Bloods that I knew of no mortals who could equal that trick, and only my personal intervention stopped Bax from slaying them on the spot.

The thing I enjoy least about the Dragon-Blooded is, of course, their willingness to enforce the Immaculate faith directly rather than pursuing the proper bureaucratic options. Again, this is to be expected — even the Empress would not have had enough clout to see justice done in Heaven. Still, it is annoying, especially if one speaks out or perhaps acts against their interests, even when they are clearly unrighteous. I was set upon by monks from Paragon who came because the Perfect had begged them to intervene against me, as I had spoken “slandorous” things of his practices as a governor.

I slew the monks with my blades, for they were rather young, but both knew ghost-destroying Charms, and had the fight not ended in my favor, I would surely have been killed. Regardless, I have since fled into outlawry. Offending one monk draws the attention of two others, and success in battle against the Immaculates merely invites challenges by increasingly powerful masters. I fled my Demesne mere hours after I slew the two Immaculates. Just a few days later, over a dozen monks arrived and destroyed my possessions in the Demesne and warned the countryside against me.

Since then, I haven't surfaced. I might spend most of my time in Creation, but I know that, if you offend the Immaculates, they have ins in Heaven. Transact some business, and a few days later, the Immaculates are at your gates. Still, they are mortal, and it will not be long until their short attentions lapse. With the recent strife within their ranks, perhaps not long at all.



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CHAPTER FIVE RECORDS OF THE BEFORE



*Dragons found the demons,
Dragons fought the demons,
Dragons killed the demons,
And burned them all to ash.
Now, we honor dragons.
The righteous noble dragons.
Without the strength of dragons,
The Realm would cease to be.*
—Children's chant ubiquitous on the
Blessed Isle

Unlike Solar Exalted, who have flashbacks of the First Age, the Dragon-Blooded are dependent on artifacts and documents from that period to inform them of what life was like in the pre-Contagion era.

The Realm's Shogunate period — the time immediately after the purge of the Anathema but before the Contagion and the ascent of the Empress — is often thought of as the golden age of the Dragon-Blooded. Many in the Realm, Dragon-Blooded and mortal alike, have a

fascination for the mysteries of the Shogunate period that dwarfs all other academic interests.

Some extant texts from the period are widely reproduced in the history books used to teach patricians and Exalts alike. Others, however, are considered too apocryphal, unintelligible or heretical by the Immaculate Order to be made generally accessible. These are kept in the locked and guarded Repository of Inauspicious Antiquities in the warded knowledge vaults of the Heptagram.

LETTER FROM CHUMYO TATENAE TO HER HUSBAND

The disposal of Anathema “pets” and slaves has proven more complex than we originally anticipated. While it was easy enough to dispose of the obviously nonhuman ones or those who attempted to defend their masters and mistresses, we eventually found ourselves faced with problems of, to be frank, pure morality. Moral dilemmas came up when considering the unwilling slaves (or those who claimed to have been taken against their will) and the near-human beastmen who had been bred in servitude. Simply slaughtering them wholesale would have been morally reprehensible. Having the troops put them to the sword would have been setting a poor ethical precedent and creating butchers rather than warriors. We want our soldiers to kill on command, but having them slaughter innocent creatures who look mostly human and who are screaming for mercy — well, anyone can see the potential problems there.

We were faced with a difficult situation, however. The battles with the Anathema had damaged a lot of arable farmland, and often, their stored food and grain had been destroyed along with their Manses or looted by the mobs, despite the military’s best attempts to maintain public order. As such, releasing large numbers of slaves into the general population — especially when most of them were only trained for military or personal service and, therefore, would have been little use in farming or harvesting — was decided by our commanders to be unwise. There was also, and I admit that I had strong feelings on this point, the question of the beastmen breeding with the normal humans in the area.

We managed to resolve matters to some extent. The beastmen were seconded to frontier territory garrisons, where I understand there have been some incursions by the Fair Folk. Their leaders have been given some guarantees about territory and founding their own tribes, but frankly, I wouldn’t be surprised if they all die tragically with arrows in their backs. We both know how this sort of thing works out. Of the human slaves and servants, the ones who’d been trained as soldiers were drafted into the army and will receive full citizenship after a decade’s service. The concubines, minions and the like were divided among officers and staff with the position to warrant personal retainers.

In some ways, it’s the last that actually disturbs me the most. How can we guarantee that these apparently harmless servants aren’t actually traps waiting to be sprung? You and I both know that the Anathema were capable of twisting a person’s mind like paper between their fingers. You know better than I how many of their toys and tools have proven to be booby-trapped in some way, usually lethally. Your division’s already lost several sorcerers.

Personally, I didn’t take a single concubine for myself, nor do I intend to. They should have been disposed of quickly and cleanly, and damn the consequences to our soldiers. If the slaves were innocent, well — they’d have had their reward in the next life, whenever that came around for them. Morals or not, you can’t trust anything the Anathema have touched. Fire is the best solution for their dead bodies and for anything they left behind.

DISSECTION OF THE CHILDREN OF THE MOTHER OF SERPENTS

This document was published near the end of the First Age. However, the tragic deaths of the author and the main researchers put an end to much of the scholarly inquiry in the area.

Analysis of the snakemen has revealed much that was hitherto unknown about the precise melding of physiology between the reptilian and the base human. Diagram 1 shows the lung structure, which — as you can see from three comparative samples taken from pure human slaves — is base human in itself. Observe the main channels for air, the bulbous air cells and the lining surrounding the lungs. However, and this is what greatly interested my team, we can see that the muscles of the chest are more of the snake or lizard type, giving the subject much greater lung *capacity* in terms of being able to hyperinflate. Later tests with living specimens and increasingly high water pressure demonstrated that the snakemen could survive at far greater depths and for longer periods of time than base humans — even humans from the distant West with experience in swimming and diving. However, the actual structure of the limbs is purely human — possibly, as my colleague Soft Mirror has hypothesized, due to the fact that snakes have no limbs, thus forcing the hybrid organism to remain human in this area. On the other hand, we have the expandable throat structure seen in reptiles, the retractable penis and the scale structure, which are entirely reptilian. The actual forked tongue, while reptilian in structure, is humanoid in muscle pattern and not extendable, which has caused some debate among my colleagues as to whether only useful physical changes are grafted onto the human form. The counterargument to this is that, while scaling itself may be useful, the scale patterns which we have observed are generally aesthetic.

As we can see from our preliminary work, there is still much to be discovered as to how human and animalistic physiology can best be combined in order to produce servitors of the precise nature and abilities that we might want. We would like to thank Dancer on the Wind for his generous contribution of subjects, both human slaves and snakemen from his spouse’s descendants.

CATECHISM OF HESIESH

Found in Nexus by one of my cousins, Peleps V—. I don't ask about the trade he does there, and he doesn't tell me, and we both get on very well that way.

Q: Who epitomizes the element of Fire?

A: Hesiesh.

Q: What is the full title of Hesiesh?

A: The Reciter of Loud Hymns and Efficacious Prayers.

Q: Why are the prayers of Hesiesh efficacious?

A: Because, by them, the bodies of the Anathema were burned until no single ash lay beside any other, and their souls were shut within the Prison of Jade until the world should change.

Q: What is the mark of Hesiesh?

A: The descent of the element of Fire.

Q: Shall the Children of Hesiesh ride to the Hunt?

A: Yes, as shall all of the true blood and the true element.

Q: What shall be the task of the Children of Hesiesh upon the Hunt?

A: They shall burn the corrupted bodies that have hosted Anathema.

Q: By what signs shall the Children of Hesiesh know the Anathema?

A: They shall bare the brow of their prey, that the mark of the Anathema may be seen. They shall smite the Anathema with all their speed, so that the Anathema shall betray himself and flee with unholy swiftness. They shall chain down the Anathema's body and exhort the Anathema to repent his ways and to return unto the Jade Prison whereat he was consigned, and by the Anathema's pride and strength, shall they recognize the power that is given by corruption.

Q: Why did Hesiesh smite the Anathema?

A: Because he perceived that their power comes from corruption, that they lead men astray from the proper paths by their nature, their presence, and their conversation and that, in their pride and folly, they brought ruin to the land and quenched the fires of his presence.

Q: Why is it that the power of the Anathema comes from corruption?

A: Because it does not come from the path that leads to the Dragons.

Q: What is the will of Hesiesh on the tools of the Anathema?

A: The fires of Hesiesh may cleanse tools as they cleanse bodies. Let the tools of the Anathema be brought to the Children of Hesiesh and cleansed for the service of the Dragons.

Q: What is the will of Hesiesh on the children of the Anathema?

A: They shall be slain without mercy and put to the fire.

Q: What is the will of Hesiesh on the dwellings of the Anathema?

A: Let the fire take them and their servants also.

Q: What is the antithesis of Hesiesh?

A: The Illiberal Churl is the antithesis of Hesiesh.

Q: Why is this so?

A: The Illiberal Churl clings to the past without thought and follows in the steps of the Anathema, seeing not their corruption and knowing not their folly.

Q: What shall be the fate of the Illiberal Churl?

A: He shall be driven forth into the wild places until he shall learn wisdom.

Do you think the Cloister of Stone Bells would like it as a curio?

SHADOWS OF THE GOLDEN CHAMBER

Taken from the classic novel The Doom of the Emperors by Lady Sennaka, proscribed under the Anathema, but now back in circulation.

"But, sire," the maiden pleaded on her knees, "have mercy on my brother! His folly was merely that he loved the people as he loves you. He gave from his own treasures to buy them bread only so that they might serve you with renewed devotion!"

The Anathema chuckled darkly from the opal throne on which he reclined and tossed a fragment of doves' liver to the leopards that crouched at his feet. An unholy light blazed around his temples, emanating from the Caste Mark that throbbed on his brow. "And what of the people?" he asked, quoting his masters in the Deliberative. "Who am I to care that they should starve? Are they not honored to serve me? Should they not cast themselves bodily into the fires, if it should be my will?" He bent his fearsome gaze upon the girl. "Abase yourself before my throne, cringing child — your brother's fate may or may not be the torture chamber, but your fate lies in obedience to me, body and soul."

The maiden Anata was young, but she had Exalted long ago, and the power of the Dragon of Fire coiled within her body and pulsed along her veins. She knew her duty to her Solar lords, but she also remembered that the place of the Exalted was to guide and protect those who were set below them in the paths of existence. *As you are above them, so shall you lead them, so that, in time, they too may know the glory of the Dragons*, her teachers had said. Every fiber in her body yearned to throw itself before the Anathema's feet and crawl to him in feverish obedience, but the spirit of the Dragon of Fire itself seemed to whisper in her ears and hold her back.

Here, in this castle of orichalcum and ebony that floated miles above the earth below, the Anathema ruled body and soul. Their twisted sorceries drew power from the worlds of the demons and the blood of the innocent and gave them inhuman strength and unthinkable power. But in



the lands below, the Dragons were speaking to their Chosen, telling them of the future that was to come.

At that moment, Anata felt the might of the Dragon of Fire fill her, and she rose to her feet in fury. "I am your servant, my lord, but not your slave! I will obey you, as is my sworn duty, but hear me now — if you continue in your cruelty, the day will come when the Dragons themselves will take human bodies to stand against you and cast you beyond the boundaries of Creation!"

The Anathema laughed coldly, and the light of his bloodstained aura danced around him as he gestured to the guards. "It seems this girl thinks that she can challenge us. Very well. Have her taken to the arena. I shall watch her perish in agony. So shall die all who dare defy our will! Unconquered Sun, may our power never fail!"

A FIRST-AGE LEAFLET FOUND PRINTED ON MAGICAL PAPER THAT WILL NOT BURN:

The Shogun advises you that Anathema have been sighted in this sector. Dragon-Blooded enforcers are on maximum alert in this vicinity in order to safeguard your well-being and the integrity of your property and goods. Help the Shogun help you by following the recommendations below:

1. Remember, the infernal Anathema can take over the bodies of those you know — even loved ones. If a loved one exhibits the signs of Anathematic possession, *do not hesitate* to inform the authorities! However similar this foul doppelganger may seem to your loved one, know that the soul of your loved one has been destroyed by the invading demon and that it is up to you to prevent the demon from twisting the body of your loved one into a foul and unnatural mockery of its former state. Should you see anything that indicates that someone you know has been taken over by Anathema, seek a Dragon-Blood *immediately!*

2. Non-Terrestrial anima banners are to be reported at once! Remember that it is better to err on the side of security than to provide one of the Anathema with the time he needs to summon the full power of his dark infernal gods.

3. Be on the lookout for the demonic Caste Marks of the Anathema! If you do not remember what these look like, refer to the illustration on page 389 of your civic responsibilities guide.

4. If possible, relieve the Anathema of any advanced weaponry it possesses prior to involving the authorities. Do this only if you can avoid drawing undue attention to your actions.

5. Know that any who die while taking decisive action against the Anathema will be rewarded by the Great Elemental Dragons. All such blessed martyrs shall reincarnate immediately as Dragon-Blooded from noble families.

6. Remember, all that stands between our peaceful Shogunate and a world overrun by the power-mad Anathema is your unflinching vigilance. An alert Shogunate is a free Shogunate. The enemy is listening.

LAST ENTRIES IN THE WAR JOURNAL OF KEB J'LACET

It is unknown how a cell of Solar and Lunar Anathema came to be working together. It is also unknown how they were able to bypass our security, but our Essence monitors reveal that it was three of the former and two of the latter that stole the warship *Slicer of Waves*.

My ship, the heavy warship *Fathom's Master*, is leading the rest of the nautical capture party. The stolen ship is handling perfectly for the Anathema, much to our collective disappointment. Count on us to be attacked by the one remaining Anathema in Creation who knows how to pilot a warship.

I can't claim to be anything but frustrated. *Fathom's Master* is big and fast and powerful — when she's working right. And at the moment, she's not. Something in the engine's not functioning properly, and we can't get up to full speed. This weird Anathema construction is so complex as to be nearly unworkable, but our engineers have figured out how most of it works. "Most of it" isn't cutting it today, though. We're still doing better than the rest of the fleet, however, which is already out of visual range. Our goal, first and foremost, is to destroy the Anathema. If, by some stroke of fortune, we are able to do that without destroying the *Slicer of Waves* in the process, we are to make the attempt to do so.

I don't know where they think they're going. We're already well beyond the westernmost islands. I've asked some of the others if any of them have been this far west and none of them have. Enetar is the only Aspect of Water on board, and he's joking about how he can swim back if he has to, while the rest of us will drown if the Anathema hit us.

We don't think the idea is particularly funny.

More later.

[Next entry]

The ship's telesensors show that the rest of the fleet has returned to Deheleshen. We're the only ship still in pursuit of the *Slicer of Waves*. Sazei Deiji, an Aspect of Fire like myself, must have some plan up his sleeve or something, because he's not turning back.

I just came down from the deck. Things get weird this far out. The sky and the water blend together imperceptibly. It's hard to get my bearings when I'm up on deck unless I can see the sun.

More later.

[Next entry]

The *Slicer of Waves* has stopped. Our entire crew is on high alert. I'm technically supposed to be sleeping right

now, but even those on sleep shift have been woken up and put on standby.

More later.

[Next entry]

I don't think I'm going to make it back to Deheleshen, but I'm hoping that this journal will. The sazei has told me to take note of the Anathema's' attacks in my journal so we can put it on a carrier capsule and send it back to the Shogunate as a warning.

The battle was joined about 10 minutes ago now. Our lookouts up on the mast saw one of the Anathema out on deck performing some kind of sorcery. When advised of that, the sazei assumed the worst and fired a light barrage at the *Slicer* in hopes of disrupting the spell. I think he was too late. The salvo dissolved once it got within a few yards of the *Slicer*. The sazei has gone below decks to ready some of the ship's original weapons, although he hates using them, saying that he's not sure how many times he can pull that trick.

The *Slicer of Waves* doesn't seem to have any of the limitations our vessel does. On the contrary, she's working better than she ever has. The *Slicer* released some kind of luminous green fluid into the water that made directly for us like some horrible glowing snake under the water's surface. It moves much faster than our ship, even under full sail, so we can't out run it. We've tried to disrupt its flow to our hull with rocks and with discharges from various weapons but to no avail. The green substance has completely coated our hull. Anyplace where the hull has been repaired below the waterline (and there are many such places in a ship this old) seems to be dissolving. Everyone else is below decks, either manning the pumps or trying to stop us from taking on water. When the green-water weapon pours through the breeches in the hull, it dissolves men as easily as faulty hull repairs. Unfortunately, I know this because Enetar — may he Exalt again in his next incarnation — tried diving into the water. He didn't last 30 seconds.

I'm putting this journal in the subaquatic capsule now. They just rained something down on us, and the men who were hit, including our one sorcerer, are all dead. While they're too far away to be sure, it looks like they're deploying implosion bows. My life will be far briefer than I had hoped. I am Keb J'Lacet, firstborn son of Daimyo Keb Kijawa and devoted disciple of Mela, the Dragon of Virtuous War.

FROM THE SILVER JOURNAL

A resplendent array of daimyos, ministers and nobles of the Shogunate in full regalia arrived today at the Sacred Flame Academy of Hesiesh in Chiaroscuro to announce the winners of the final round of competition in the Shogunate-wide flame-sculpting competition.



Records of the Before



The three finalists, all truly transcendent fire sculptors, have been in competition for this title now for five years. The winner of this lengthy and arduous competition will have beaten out a field of nearly 900 contenders for the much-sought-after title of Incomparable Master of the Beauty-Yoked Flame and will hold that august title for a period of 10 years before needing to compete once more. Contestants in this popular competition are judged on the intensity, stability, creativity and color palate of their flame sculptures.

The three finalists in the competition are all Aspects of Fire and are considered the best flame sculptors in all of Creation:

Koji Dazula is a veteran of eight of these competitions and has held the title of Incomparable Master twice. His sculpture, entitled *Three, Ineffable*, depicts an ever-blooming and -evolving yellow rose alternating with the image of an enormous and exquisite phoenix of orange flame and a beating heart of deepest crimson. This sculpture is said to represent the three virtues of the Shogun: aesthetic beauty, indestructibility and compassion.

Imbani Kekela is a newcomer to flame sculpture and has never before competed for a title, although she is considered something of a prodigy at the Sacred Flame Academy. Her piece, entitled *The Thousand Fortuitous Fireflies*, represents a meteor shower of felicitous omens for the Shogunate and all its citizens.

The last competitor for the title is Mijen Ku, the current title holder. Larger and more detailed than his competitor's, competitor Mijen's sculpture, called *We Are Eaten and Burned, Even as We Flow*, presents a vast rolling seascape of polychromatic fire. Throughout this incendiary ocean swim an array of siaka and other predatory creatures of the deep that occasionally devour one another. This work is said to represent the oceanic blaze of time, which is both inconceivably vast and primordially insatiable.

The winner of the competition is assured of the most generous patronage of the Shogun himself as well as that of many of his most powerful daimyos.

FROM THE PERSONAL JOURNAL OF ORCHID

ORCHID, SHOGUNATE SORCERER

The talks have broken down again, and probably for the last time. Not only did negotiations cease, but the spirit court representatives refused to hear any more of our arguments and walked out, ending this round of talks altogether. They continue to refuse to acknowledge our spiritual authority in any way, and they utterly refuse to extend to us the agreements they made with those thrice Dragon-damned Anathema. We have pointed out *repeatedly* that the Terrestrial Exalted are now the highest-ranking spiritual entities in physical Creation (or, at the very least, the only legitimate ones). We have pointed out *repeatedly* that the Terrestrial Exalted are also the beloved of the

Great Elemental Dragons and should, on those grounds alone, be acknowledged and bargained with.

They were clearly underwhelmed, and that terrifies me.

There's clearly more politics at work in this picture than we're acknowledging, but we've researched as much of the salient cosmology as we can — and with so many of the old sorcerous libraries being destroyed or stolen by the enraged Anathema, that's not very much — and we've still not found a way around this impasse.

I can't believe this is happening. Without the cooperation of some of these spirits, lightning spirits in particular, there are whole portions of Creation (in general) and the Shogunate (in particular) that will cease to function properly (or at all) two years from this Calibration. I don't even like thinking about the catastrophic results of that kind of mass spirit rebellion (that's the best word I can think of for it), but not only are we going to have to think about it, we're going to have to *prepare* for it unless we can work some kind of agreement. At this point, *anything* that lets us save face and keep the Shogunate going is acceptable. None of us, not even that uppity prig Cyrena Frond, is being picky at this point because we realize that we are in almost unspeakably dire straits.

On the bright side — and while it's pretty dim, it is the *only* bright side to this situation — Wind Lily Atavist, the lowest of the spirit folk at the talks today, hinted that she might be willing to come back in two lunar cycles if we can prove that something fundamental has changed by then. We thanked her for her forbearance, but we know that's not going to happen. And so does she. The spirits of the Celestial courts *despise* us. *Mortals* have a better chance of negotiating with them than we do, despite all the desperate brainstorming we've been doing these last two years.

On a personal level, it just doesn't seem fair to me that I should train and train and train some more to be a sorcerer — one of the Shogun's own, *the* sorcerers — and *still* be ignored by spirits. If I wanted to be ignored, I could go home to my husband.

Making matters worse, a pack of smarmy demon emissaries arrived this afternoon *just* after the spirit court representatives left. They came to offer their services in exchange for "tribute." The entire council of sorcerers refused, thanks be to the Dragons, but the demons know how to accentuate the bleakness and sheer desperation of our situation to *great* effect. They know how to prey on the fears of the weak, and the time has come to acknowledge that we are not the Anathema, nor do we know whatever dark rituals they possessed to force complicity from spirits.

The council refused even to hear what kind of "tribute" the demons would find acceptable, but I fear that if we've not resolved this issue a year from now, the other members of the council might just be willing to listen to the demons. And, of course, there's only one real outcome once you've reached the discussion stage with a demon.

A FRAGMENT OF A FIRST AGE SORCERY MANUAL KEPT AND STUDIED AT THE HEPTAGRAM

Not even the Heptagram's most distinguished instructors of sorcery or First Age lore can ascertain the meaning of the text or its particular context. This fragment is commonly presented to beginning students as an example of the worst complexities of First Age artifacts and texts.

...refine the luminance engine as necessary to reach the requisite value of z . Unless the engine is properly calibrated, the diascendent assemblies will not manifest, stemming the polychromatic bloom, and the attempt will fail. Attaining the requisite value of z may take a few moments and cause a brief subduction of the Essence zone. This is normal, as is a slight seismic surge. If the subduction endures for more than a single *enhanced* rotation, the luminesce engine may be the result of substandard sorcery and must be sanctified by a Solar plenipotentiary agent or discarded altogether.

Once the diascendent assemblies have manifested, you will note the presence of a small gemlike metastructure between the two. So long as the metastructure is diaphanous and cyanochromic, it is acting as a coupling nexus between the two. If it is *not* doing so, increase the countertension on the hyperion keys until it is. That radiant metastructure is the undulance knot. *Do not touch the undulance knot!* Any interference with the undulance knot will result...

[The fragment ends here.]

USING THE SHOCK PIKE

The most important things to exercise when wielding a shock pike are a disciplined stance and practiced moves. Because the attack is carried by the Essence echo, there is no feedback to the pike wielder. In the hands of an inexperienced user, this can make the fighter's blows clumsy and inaccurate. To a fighter who has practiced extensively

with the pike, and who knows that practiced motion and disciplined stance are the keys to successfully attacking with one of these weapons, the shock pike's lack of feedback is a devastating advantage, allowing for attacks that would normally bow or expose the spear.

There are two main ways shock pike may be employed in combat, defensively and offensively. The shock pike is used defensively by troops on guard duty or fighting against insurgents or some other diffuse foe. A defensive combat is essentially a hand-to-hand engagement where one can strike at extreme range.

The shock pike is employed offensively on the battlefield to aid in concentration of combat power. With a range of up to 50 yards, several hundred individuals can strike at a given target. The advantage in combat against Exalted foes should be obvious. Through constant attack, several hundred crack troops should be able to strike down most Exalts before their pikes exhaust their charges.

Defensive shock pike use has its place, but it is not the main purpose of the weapon. No matter how much skill you develop in its defensive usage, you must still understand that the shock pike is a weapon designed to allow hundreds of troops to attack a single target simultaneously. Each time you make a strike that is not part of a mass attack, it diminishes your capability in your actual mission.

The eight charges in your pike have been estimated by the Shogunate to be sufficient for fighting any one Dragon-Blood or Anathema, with two charges to spare. This estimation is not based on how long it will take you to kill your foe. It is an estimation of how long you will live in combat against an Exalted Essence wielder. Every stab you make outside of your unit's combat drill is one last death-blow you might have struck against the Essence wielder who has already probably killed you. Do not sell your life cheaply by exchanging thrusts with escorting troops. Defensive fighting is for policemen and gangsters. As a soldier, you are neither.







CHAPTER SIX MIRACLES OF HESIESH



Aspects of Fire are volatile, passionate and unpredictable. They might use Essence to channel the destructive power of fire to devastating effect one moment, as in the case of their savage martial arts, and the next moment, they could utilize the passionate facets of fire to rally troops to battle — or seduce a political rival. Fire-pected Dragon-Blooded are natural athletes, warriors and social operators, and as such, they are often incredibly competitive. They frequently seek out rare, old or exotic Charms, Hearthstones or artifacts in hopes of finding just the right combination of advantages to surpass their rivals.

This chapter details the Charms, artifacts and Hearthstones used by Fire Aspects, as well as those strongly influenced by the element of fire. Many of the Charms herein are passed from teacher to student at the House of Bells and the Cloister of Wisdom. Some are particular favorites of Fire-pected Dragon-Bloods, while others have been popular with the Children of Hesiesh at points throughout history but have since lessened in popularity, having come to be considered too passé or inefficient to master.

NEW CHARMS

ATHLETICS

FLAWLESS BALANCE DISCIPLINE

Cost: 3 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Athletics: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Effortlessly Rising Flame

Use of this Charm grants the Dragon-Blood the ability to maintain his footing and move gracefully regardless of adverse conditions. By becoming intensely attuned to his sense of balance, the Exalt can keep his footing at all times and never need worry about falling. Anything he could normally do on flat ground, he can do on slick ice, on a slanted roof, on a lurching ship's deck or on a wire suspended between two towers (while being buffeted by winds), without penalties of any sort.

DODGE

UNASSAILABLE BODY OF FLAME DEFENSE

Cost: 4 motes and 1 Willpower

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Dodge: 5

Minimum Essence: 4

Prerequisite Charms: Smoldering Karma Strike

Perhaps the most difficult of all the Dodge Charms known to the Dragon-Blooded, Unassailable Body of Flame Defense momentarily turns the character's body to pure flame where an enemy's weapon touches it, generally allowing the weapon to pass harmlessly through the character's body. The Fire Aspect must have his fiery elemental anima ignited in order to use this Charm. Only then can he become sufficiently attuned to the element of fire that he can transform his own body into insubstantial flames. In any turn in which the character has used this Charm, he can dodge all physical attacks with his full Dexterity + Dodge pool.

MELEE

FIRE INCITES WATER TO A RIOT OF CLOUDS

Cost: 2 motes + 1 mote per turn beyond the first

Duration: Instant

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Melee: 2

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Dragon-Graced Weapon



Seen by some as a refinement of Dragon-Graced Weapon, Fire Incites Water to a Riot of Clouds allows the Dragon-Blood to channel her connection with the element of fire through a metal weapon and into a body of water to generate a large volume of steam. The moment the Exalt activates this Charm and plunges her weapon into a body of water at least two feet deep, huge roiling clouds of white steam surge from the water around the Dragon-Blood's weapon. This steam isn't particularly hot and cannot be used to scald others, but it is highly effective at dampening opponents and creating a dense, billowing curtain of fog through which enemies cannot see. Due to its thickness, this fog is equal to fog at night on the visibility table (see **Exalted**, p. 237), limiting those caught in it to a maximum of three yards of murky visibility. The Exalt's weapon generates another 10 yards of steam each turn it remains in the water. The steam will tend to roll away from the Dragon-Blood, and in the absence of any prevailing wind, the character can make a Willpower roll (difficulty 3) to control which direction the cloud of steam billows.

Using this Charm to supplement an attack on a water elemental inflicts aggravated damage.

BLINDING SPARK DISTRACTION

Cost: 2 motes

Duration: Instant

Type: Reflexive

Minimum Melee: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Dragon-Graced Weapon

It is common in the course of combat for clashing weapons to give off sparks. This Charm gives the Exalt the ability to elicit a strategic spray of sparks into her opponent's face any time their weapons clash.

The Dragon-Blood can use this Charm any time she parries an opponent's metal weapon with her own or whenever her weapon hits anything metal or stone in the course of combat. Essence multiplies what would normally be a few flying sparks into a crackling blue and gold spray aimed right into her opponent's eyes. The opponent will be blinded the following turn (as per the poor visibility rules on p. 239 of **Exalted**), subtracting two successes from all attack rolls made for him. The player of the target of the spray of sparks gets a reflexive Wits + Dodge roll to have his character turn away from the spray of sparks. If the roll succeeds, the Exalt is down only two dice on his next turn's attack roll instead of two successes.

SPIRIT-BRANDING BLADE TECHNIQUE

Cost: 4+ motes

Duration: Essence in days

Type: Supplemental

Minimum Melee: 4

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Ghost-Fire Blade

The Dragon-Blood channels Essence to her weapon on an attack, and if that attack succeeds, not only does the Exalt cause lethal damage with the blow, she also marks the target with a smoking brand that can lead the Exalt to her target should the target escape. The brand is difficult to hide and smolders through any clothing or fur that hides it. While the brand cannot burn through metal armor, it can make the armor tremendously hot — so much so that it's intensely uncomfortable to wear next to the skin. Every three turns the target keeps the mark covered with armor, he suffers one level of bashing damage (which may be soaked as normal). This mark is plainly visible to all who see it, including mortals (who see it as a red and inflamed tattoo), but the brand also remains visible if the target becomes invisible or takes on a new form (making it very helpful when dealing with Fair Folk and Lunar Exalts). While marked by the spirit brand, the target cannot lose his pursuers using non-supernatural evasion techniques, and his player suffers a three-die penalty to all Stealth and Survival rolls.

A trail of black spirit smoke pours from the brand, which is visible to any who can perceive dematerialized spirits or Essence effects. This plume of smoke rolls in the direction the target traveled. It cannot be touched or smelled, nor can it be dissipated by wind, by hands or bodies passing through it or by any natural means.

The burning mark is usually in the shape of the Dragon-Blood's weapon, although some advanced combatants have learned to deliver a more personalized brand (use the rules for marking targets from **Exalted**, p. 238, but the roll to mark is reflexive, and the attack does damage as normal).

STYLE-COUNTERING MEDITATION

Cost: 5 motes

Duration: Varies

Type: Simple

Minimum Dodge: 4

Minimum Melee: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: None

This Charm allows the Dragon-Blood to adapt perfectly to an opponent's combat style. By watching and analyzing an opponent in combat for no fewer than five turns (during which she can do nothing else), the Exalt reads the subtle strengths and flaws in the target's fighting technique and adjusts her own combat style accordingly, exploiting the target's weaknesses and defending against particular strengths. Roll Intelligence + Melee (or the appropriate Ability). This Charm lasts three turns plus two turns per success, during which the Dragon-Blood gains a bonus of one die per point of permanent Essence on all Dodge and Melee rolls made by her character against that one studied target.



Versions of this Charm exist that use Brawl or Martial Arts in place of Melee, but the minimum requirement of 4 remains the same, and all versions require Dodge 4. The Melee, Brawl and Martial Arts versions of this Charm must be learned separately. These versions are still Melee Charms. They simply analyze an enemy's use of different combat Abilities.

Due to the complexities and mental demands involved in reading and analyzing a target so thoroughly, the Exalt can use this Charm no more times in a scene than she has points of Intelligence. This is a dice-adding Charm.

PRESENCE

AUSPICIOUS FIRST MEETING ATTITUDE

Cost: 2 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Presence: 2

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: None

This simple Charm can only be used the first time the Dragon-Blood meets another in a social context. It allows the Exalt to read the other perfectly, allowing him to adjust his own behavior in any way necessary to make a perfect first impression. The Charm gives its user some insight into what drives the other person (political power, love, resentment, etc.) and also leaves a lasting impression on the target. The other person is left feeling that the Exalt is an unusually worthy individual of good breeding, great virtue or the like. The difficulty of all Social rolls against this individual are at -2 for this initial meeting and -1 the next time the Exalt meets the subject of this Charm (neither difficulty can be lowered below a minimum of 1). Even if the target never sees the Exalt again, she will be inclined to speak well of him to others.

Note that this Charm works only in social circumstances where a pleasant first impression can realistically be expected. A Dragon-Blood trying to use this Charm on the field of battle is going to be sorely disappointed (although if the Dragon-Blood is killed after doing so, his enemy may be less likely to desecrate his corpse out of spite).

PASSION TRANSMUTING NUANCE

Cost: 3 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Presence: 2

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: None

The Presence-savvy Exalt knows that the three passions — lust, rage and terror — are all closely linked. Through the use of subtle vocal and facial cues, the Dragon-Blood can transform a target's passions from one

to another, thereby making an enraged target feel amorous, a terrified target feel enraged or the like. Roll the character's Manipulation + Presence. The difficulty is the target's Essence, minus one for every point the character has above the target's (minimum of 1). The effects of this Charm do not take effect immediately. The Exalt must spend a number of turns in conversation with the target equal to 10 - her Essence in order to nudge the subject's emotional state in the right direction.

Successful use of this Charm results in a two-die bonus on pertinent rolls (on seduction rolls if the Dragon-Blood changed rage into lust, for example). A target who has been manipulated into a rage by the Dragon-Blood acts as though he had a Temperance Virtue of 1 for the remainder of the scene.

INCENDIARY FIRE DRAGON SHOUT

Cost: 4 motes

Duration: Instant

Type: Simple

Minimum Presence: 4

Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Aura of Invulnerability

The Dragon-Blood using this Charm binds his powerful affinity with the Fire Dragon to his voice, resulting in a shout so powerful that it ignites flammable objects, even up to 40 yards away. This Charm cannot damage flesh directly, but it can ignite clothes, wooden wagons, thatched huts and the like from a distance. The size of the fire started by this technique is not large, only about the size of a man's open hand, but the initial blaze is fairly hot and will easily ignite nearby material in the absence of countervailing conditions (rain, extreme humidity), often resulting in a huge blaze. If the substance is wet, the fire flickers out after one turn per point of the Exalt's Essence.

The player of a target whose clothes have been ignited must succeed on a simple Stamina + Endurance roll, or her character takes a level of lethal damage each turn until the garment is removed or the fire is extinguished.

This Charm has a range of (the Exalt's Essence x 20) feet.

SOCIALIZE

JADE DEFENSE

Cost: 5 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Socialize: 3

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Sweeten-the-Tap Method

Jade Defense is used to protect the Exalt from con games, seduction and intimidation attempts and similar forms of social or emotional manipulation. Years of

interminable intriguing attune the Dragon-Blooded to a wide variety of political and social engineering techniques. Wise social operators quickly learn that any manipulation technique they can use on others can just as easily be used on them. Any Exalt feeling that he might be the subject of such techniques can spend Essence to amplify his own sense of ennui and sheer jadedness and, thereby, render himself resistant to any and all social control or manipulation techniques being used on him. Activating this Charm increases the difficulty of all Charisma, Manipulation and Socialize rolls used against the Exalt by half his Socialize (round up), rendering him utterly bored with nearly everything, including those using Socialize Charms on him. For the duration of this Charm, the character's Essence is considered one higher than it really is when he's targeted by mind-affecting or social Charms that do not work on individuals of high Essence.

LOYALTY-READING MEDITATION

Cost: 5 motes

Duration: One scene

Type: Simple

Minimum Socialize: 4

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Brother-Against-Brother Insinuation

Clever courtiers learn early on to watch and analyze every gesture made by others in a social setting to see how — and in which direction — the wheels of loyalty and obligation turn. Knowing whom to trust with dirt on another — and whom *not* to — can be critical to a Dragon-Blood wanting to go far in Dynastic society.

This Charm heightens the Dragon-Blood's sensitivity to the minute details of social interaction: whose eyebrow goes up at what comment, who's especially ingratiating to whom, who laughs just a bit too loudly at another's tired witticisms, etc. This Charm can let the Dragon-Blood know (among other things): if a particular individual is loyal to her, whom in the room an individual is loyal to and who is feigning loyalty to whom. This Charm does not *explain* these loyalties in any way. It simply reveals them.

MEDICINE

SPARK KINDLING RESCUE TECHNIQUE

Cost: 5 motes

Duration: Varies

Type: Simple

Minimum Medicine: 2

Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: None

Dynasts in the Cathak legions developed this Charm as a means of retrieving fallen comrades from the field of

battle. By sending a potent surge of Essence through the target's body, the Fire Aspect sparks an incapacitated target into furious action for three turns for every success on a Strength + Medicine roll. The target does not regain consciousness and cannot take actions of his own, so the Exalt using this Charm must guide the target's somewhat uncoordinated running, but the target can move at his maximum speed for the duration of this Charm, provided the Exalt guides him around obstacles. Targets affected by this Charm are, albeit only briefly, stabilized and will not lose blood again until three turns after the Charm concludes. If the target takes damage beyond the maximum dictated by his Stamina while this Charm is in effect, he dies the moment the Charm concludes.

For the rules on death and dying, see page 233 of *Exalted*.

ENCHANTED ITEMS

The Hearthstones and artifacts contained herein are either those that are unusually popular with Fire-pected Dragon-Bloods or items powerfully associated with the element of fire. Aspects of Fire frequently like to make the most of the immunity to fire granted them by their animas. Fire is a toy to Fire-pected Dragon-Bloods, but to their enemies, it is a powerful and destructive force of nature.

HEARTHSTONES

JEWEL OF FIRE SENSE (FIRE •)

Trigger: Concentration

Perfectly round, red and translucent, this gem grants its wearer the ability to sense the largest source of fire within a one-mile radius. His player merely makes a Perception + Awareness roll against a difficulty of 3. Even one success lets the character know which way the fire is and how far away it is. This Hearthstone does not indicate if there are any obstacles (such as rivers) or dangers between the character and the fire. This gem is particularly coveted in the North, where access to a fire can mean the difference between life and death for even Exalts stranded in the cold and unable to make a fire of their own.

BLAZING SOUL SHARD (FIRE ••)

Trigger: Concentration

Strangely unattractive for a Hearthstone, the blazing soul shard is a long, jagged, violently yellow gemstone containing red flecks throughout. The only Exalted who can benefit from this jewel are Fire-pected Dragon-Bloods. Once a Dragon-Blood has attuned this Hearthstone, the Essence cost of igniting his anima banner (see *Exalted: The Dragon-Blooded*, p. 169) decreases from 5 motes of Essence to 2.



PRISM OF FOCUSED PASSION (FIRE ••)**Trigger:** Concentration

This Hearthstone is a pyramidal carnelian stone with flecks of orange throughout. The Exalt wearing this gem can inflame passions in such a way that a small amount of an emotion can be incited to flare up like a spark catching fire under the breeze of a bellows. This Hearthstone works to amplify those feelings into fiery passions, turning vague attraction into uninhibited lust, amplifying dis-ease into terror or fanning annoyance into a full rage.

The bearer of a prism of focused passion gains two additional dice on all applicable Presence dice pools (seduction, intimidation, etc). For the purpose of inciting rage in another, the target's Virtue is treated as if it were one dot less than it is. This effect works only on one target at a time.

FIRE DRAGON'S SCALE (FIRE •••)**Trigger:** Taking damage

A popular form of protection for those who can get one, a Fire Dragon's scale appears to be a small wedge-shaped cat's-eye gem. Once the scale has been attuned to its wearer, any melee weapon inflicting damage (before soak) on her taps into the elemental heat of the Dragon of Fire. Metal weapons instantly grow searing hot, while weapons made of wood catch fire. The player of the wielder of such a weapon must make a successful Willpower roll, difficulty 3, or his character drops the weapon. If the target's player succeeds on the roll and refuses to have his character drop the blade, the target takes two levels of lethal damage to his hands. If the player succeeds on a simple Stamina + Endurance roll, the damage is halved. Any Aspect of Fire who has ignited his anima banner beforehand is immune to the effects of this Hearthstone.

GEM OF WHITE HEAT (FIRE •••)**Trigger:** Activating a Solar or Fire Anima

Very popular with Fire Aspects of the Immaculate Order, the gem of white heat is a translucent red-orange gemstone with 12 pentagonal facets. When the wearer of the Gem ignites his anima, he effectively doubles the intensity of the flaming nimbus around him. The flames both flicker more quickly and burn more brightly, appearing blue and white instead of red and orange. Damage inflicted by the wearer's anima is doubled accordingly. This is compatible with the character's aspect power but only triples it, rather than quadrupling it.

LIQUID FIRE CABOCHON (FIRE •••)**Trigger:** None, constant

This Hearthstone takes the shape of an uncut crimson oval. The liquid fire cabochon is unpopular despite its power because of the sometimes unpredictable and destructive effects it brings about.

The liquid fire cabochon causes its wearer's bodily fluids to ignite and blaze intensely upon leaving the wearer's person. Blood, tears, urine, semen and sweat all erupt into a white blaze like burning phosphorus upon leaving the wearer. A single tear will deliver one level of bashing damage to anyone it falls on, a wad of spit will inflict one level of lethal (or easily ignite flammable objects such as wood or cloth), while a significant gout of blood will inflict up to six levels of lethal damage. Pissing on the side of a wooden hut will send the edifice up in flames. These Hearthstones can provide a powerful disincentive to those attacking the character with melee weapons. In addition, anyone drinking the wearer's blood (an Abyssal consuming Essence, a Lunar wanting heart's blood and the like) will take the full six lethal health levels of damage each turn she persists in consuming the target's blood.

In combat, assume that attackers take one level of lethal damage for every three levels they inflict on the wearer with edged weapons. Powerful Dodge Charms such as Flow Like Blood (and any others that allow the user to dodge unsensed attacks) allow the attacker to avoid sprays of blood, but the effect must activate separately each time the possessor of the Hearthstone is injured.

BATTLE FIRE RUBY (FIRE ••••)**Trigger:** None, constant

This Hearthstone is found in the shape of a perfect 10-sided ruby. So long as the character is wearing the battle fire ruby, she is driven to act in accordance with her more aggressive nature — sometimes to her detriment. Dragon-Bloods who question their own aggressiveness in battle sometimes seek out these gems as a means of attaining some martial ideal. When rolling the character's Conviction or Valor, any result of 9 or 10 count as *two* successes. Likewise, when rolling Compassion or Temperance, 10s count as only a single success.

BRIGHT EYE OF THE FIRE DRAGON (FIRE ••••)**Trigger:** Concentration

The bright eye of the Fire Dragon is a luminous and perfect octahedral ruby with an iridescent black fleck at its very center. The wearer of the bright eye of the Fire Dragon can see anything in line of sight of a natural fire, great or small, in a radius in miles equal to the Exalt's Essence. The wearer's player rolls Perception + Awareness, and the character can see through any fire within a number of miles equal to the number of successes on the roll. The bearer could spy on his enemies through their lamp flame or engage in aerial reconnaissance by firing a burning arrow into the sky. At the Storyteller's discretion, this Hearthstone may allow the wearer to perceive locations through magical, supernatural or unnatural fires or through the fiery substance of fire elementals.

PEARL OF WISDOM (WATER ●●●●)**Trigger:** None, constant

Always forming in the shape of an iridescent blue pearl, the pearl of wisdom grants its bearer a degree of inner serenity and calm, even under the most intense conditions. Those with a surfeit of violence in their souls (including no small number of Fire Aspects) often seek out a pearl of wisdom as a means of moderating their more impulsive tendencies. When rolling the character's Compassion or Temperance, any result of 9 or 10 counts as two successes. When rolling the character's Conviction or Valor, 10s count as only a single success.

FIRE-EATING ROCK (FIRE ●●●●●)**Trigger:** Concentration

Taking the form of a round chunk of matte black stone containing bright red flecks, the fire-eating rock has the ability to consume fire. Campfires, bonfires and even whole conflagrations can be sucked into the Hearthstone, leaving any material that was burning cool to the touch (although it doesn't heal or repair any damage the fire has already caused). At its bearer's will, the rock can consume any and all fire in a radius of (wearer's Essence) yards. The fire-eating rock's wearer can cut a swath through a vast inferno simply by holding the rock out in front of him and walking into the fire.

Magical flames are not affected by the fire-eating rock, including the fiery animas of Fire-aspected Dragon-Bloods and any fire directly created through sorcery (although normal fires *caused* by sorcerous fire *are* affected).

Fire elementals, however, *are* explicitly affected by this Hearthstone. If the wearer attempts to absorb a fire elemental into the fire-eating rock, the elemental gets an opposed Willpower roll against the Exalt. If the Exalt and the elemental do not have equal Essence ratings, the party with the higher Essence adds the difference to his dice pool on the opposed roll. If the Exalt wins, the elemental is drawn into the Hearthstone and dispersed into the Essence background of Creation to reform again as a new individual soon thereafter. The Exalt immediately regains motes of Essence equal to the elemental's Essence rating. If the elemental wins, the fire-eating rock shatters, although a new one will form in the Manse in 28 days.

JEWEL OF THE BLAZING GATE (FIRE ●●●●●)**Trigger:** Anytime the bearer suffers fire damage or summons a fire elemental

This Hearthstone — a perfect deep-blue cube with a pulsing crimson center — is a connection to the deepest South, where the world turns to elemental fire. Attunement to a jewel of the blazing gate connects the bearer subtly to the South and to the element of fire. All fire damage dealt to the bearer is halved. Furthermore,

possession of this Hearthstone greatly facilitates the summoning of fire elementals, reducing by three quarters both all Essence costs and the time involved (as per the spell on p. 219 of *Exalted*).

ARTIFACTS**FIRE PEARL (ARTIFACT ●)**

Common in the First Age, fire pearls were the standard means of lighting small fires. Fire pearls resemble large scarlet pearls and were used primarily to ignite small flammable items. The user need only press the fire pearl to the substance he wants to ignite. Though the pearl feels warm to the touch, it doesn't get hot, even after lighting several fires in a row. Candles, tinder, dry leaves and the like can all be made to catch fire after a single turn. Dry logs, desiccated corpses and other moderately combustible substances will catch after two or three turns. Wet wood, low-quality coal, fresh corpses and other substances that are not as readily flammable require between five and ten turns to catch, but once the blaze has begun, they'll burn steadily, barring efforts to extinguish them. Fire pearls cannot be made to burn living skin, nor do they have any effect on metal or stone.

Relatively common in the Realm and anyplace where First Age artifacts are found in abundance, fire pearls are highly prized by barbarians throughout the North, who will pay handsomely for these artifacts.

A fire pearl is typically found in small red-lacquered cube just large enough to store the pearl in. Fire pearls are reusable, but they do eventually lose their magic. After each use of the fire pearl, roll two 10-sided dice. A result of two 1s indicates that the pearl has burned out and cannot be used again. A burned out fire pearl turns stone gray and corrodes to dust within a day.

TRANSCENDENT PHOENIX PINIONS (ARTIFACT ●●●)

Many images dating from the purge of the Anathema and earlier portray Fire-aspected Dragon-Blooded with fiery wings extending from their backs. This artifact is the one responsible for those images. Under normal circumstances, the pinions look like nothing more than a harness made from red-scaled leather and embedded with studs of red jade. When a Fire Aspect ignites her anima, however, two enormous wings of red fire unfurl from the flames along her back, granting her the ability to fly. The Exalt must channel one mote of Essence into the pinions per turn of flight, but they allow her to travel through the air at incredible speeds (up to 60 miles per hour). Expert flyers (of the kind not seen since the Great Uprising) have been known to master techniques of rising high in the air and making devastating dive attacks on opponents.

While flight is the wings' primary function, they can also block incoming attacks. Each wing gets five dice with





which to block an attack (treat this as an extra Dodge roll against attacks the character can see coming).

Transcendent phoenix pinions were once common among the soldiers of the Terrestrial Exalted. The few that have been recovered and repaired have been effectively commandeered by the legions of Houses Sesus and Cathak who use them for reconnaissance purposes on major military campaigns.

FORGE-HAND GAUNTLETS (ARTIFACT ●●●)

The Exalted craftsmen of the First Age didn't need to slowly heat metal with coals and a bellows and work it using a hammer and tongs. They could simply put on these light red-scaled leather gloves and use them to simultaneously heat metal to malleability and manipulate it with the dexterity of their own skilled hands. So fine were these wondrous gauntlets that the Exalted smith wearing them could still feel the slightest imperfection in an item she was creating without needing to wait for the item to cool (or needing to reheat the item if it was not yet as its creator wanted it to be). Forge-hand gauntlets instantly superheat metal to the point of ideal malleability (whatever temperature that happens to be for the metal being worked at the time) and protect the wearer from the heat they generate. These gauntlets can be used to work metal or even to dig through solid stone, although heating each handful of stone to the claylike consistency necessary to dig through it takes five turns.

Wearing these gauntlets during the act of creating an artifact counts as employing First Age tools if the character is working metal and, additionally, reduces the difficulty of any Craft roll by one. This affects only the time spent actually creating the item, not the time spent researching or gathering ingredients.

These gauntlets grant the wearer the ability to craft any of the Magical Materials — except one. These gauntlets do not help in the creation of soulsteel objects in any way. The dead have their own ways of working that dread metal.

As with so many artifacts from the past, the Dragon-Blooded have overlooked the gauntlet's constructive uses and think of them primarily as weapons. When so used, forge-hand gauntlets inflict horrible heat damage on their targets. Armor is not proof against the deadly effects of these gloves either. If the damage dice pool exceeds the lethal soak rating of any armor it hits, the gloves melt a hole through the armor, effectively destroying it (or permanently reducing its soak rating considerably — -5/-5, if its soak is higher than that). Even if the armor survives the hit, it is superheated and inflicts one die of lethal damage to its wearer unless the character has thick insulation between her armor and her skin. This effect does not work on armor composed of the Five Magical Materials.

<i>Exalted</i>					
Name	Speed	Accuracy	Damage	Defense	Minimums
Forge-Hand Gauntlets	-3	-1	+4A	+2	S••
Eye of the Fire Dragon	+10	+3	+8L	+2	D•••, S••

<i>Exalted Power Combat</i>						
Name	Speed	Accuracy	Damage	Defense	Rate	Minimums
Forge-Hand Gauntlets	+3	+1	+3A	+1	2	S••
Eye of the Fire Dragon	+15	+3	+12L	+6	4	D•••, S••

EYE OF THE FIRE DRAGON (ARTIFACT •••••)

Forged in secret before the Great Uprising for use in hunting the Anathema, the Eye of the Fire Dragon was used by various Immaculate heroes during the war, including the Righteous Pirate and Dee the Hook. Hesiesh himself is said to have carried it for a time, but he never wielded it in battle. Most notably, it was used in the battle at Hollow and struck the killing blow against the Solar Anathema Desus. After the war, it passed into the hands of various religious sects, including the Hesiesh Youth Fiery Murder Society, who used it in the Bloody Hands Uprisings.

By the time the Immaculate Order became well established and institutionalized, the time had largely passed when artifacts such as the Eye of the Fire Dragon were especially important to the rulership of nations. When the weapon passed out of the hands of the temple societies and into the hands of the rapidly legitimizing Order, the senior clerics found it easy to take such weapons out of the public eye — and the hands of the daimyos. They were “preserved for use by the Wyld Hunt” and kept out of the hands of champions and assassination teams.

Occasionally used during the Shogunate, the Eye of the Fire Dragon was not especially well favored by the Wyld Hunt because of its particular orientation toward killing Solar Anathema. Such a powerful weapon was hardly needed in the hunt for young Solars, and so, this valuable relic was generally held in reserve. Immediately after the Contagion, it fell into the hands of Mazur, one of the Seven Tigers, who looted it from a deserted monastery and used it as a standard of his authority. After his destruction, the weapon was rediscovered, apparently having survived the fires of Heaven.

The weapon passed into the hands of the Scarlet Empress, who had it decontaminated and kept it as her battle lance against Anathema. After several centuries, she apparently tired of this, and still not relenting to the Immaculates pleadings that it be returned to the Wyld Hunt, she passed it to the Tepets as an heirloom weapon. The Tepets kept it in their armories, and it was sent to Fallen Lapis, where it was lost on the field fighting Fear-Eater. It was not recovered by the Bull of the North’s forces and may be lost in the field or, more likely, stolen by some third party.

The Eye appears to be a thick-handled, broad-headed, two-handed spear. Its head has a lightly textured, matte-black finish with exposed red-jade cutting surfaces, and the grip is a textured synthetic covered with a specialized gripping surface. The spear’s head has a socket in the center for a single Hearthstone. The Eye is clearly designed for infiltration, and its coating makes it seem perfectly mundane to the effects of All-Encompassing Sorcerer’s Sight, Pulse of the Invisible and similar Essence perceptions. However, effects operating at range touch can still perceive the weapon’s power, and it may be seen as a brightly glowing, red-jade chevron unless the blade’s special Essence-muting hood is installed (effectively, the weapon cannot be ready for use and invisible to Essence perceptions). Removing or installing the hood, which on its own would be an Artifact ••• item, takes one turn. If the spear is not unhooded, it does only bashing damage.

This weapon requires an investment of 10 motes of Essence in order to operate. The spear adds 3 to the difficulty of any attempt to hit the character wielding it with any attacks powered by or enhanced with Solar Charms. Damage inflicted with the spear against the Solar Exalted is aggravated. A character wielding it inflicts aggravated damage to the Solar Exalted with her anima if it is Fire-aspected.



APPENDIX I SIGNATURE CHARACTERS

Aspects of Fire are the challengers and point men of their society, searching out opportunity on the bleeding edge of possibility and driving their people to reexamine their assumptions. They are salesmen but not merchants, swordsmen but not generals, socialites but not master manipulators. Their desire to change, challenge and overcome has driven Dragon-Blooded society from the earliest days. Self-ruled, independent, charismatic and perhaps just a bit out of control, the Burning Swords are the literal firebrands of their people, their enthusiasm tempered only by the rigid discipline that the veneration of Hesiesh imposes upon them.

What follow are the statistics for the book's five narrators. Of them, Peleps Danic Damanchina and Nellens Malakai are on the power level of starting characters and can be played in a beginning-level Dragon-Blooded game or used as peers, rivals, love interests and so on for players of Dynastic characters.

Cynis Denovah Avaku represents the young middle age of the Dynasty. As depicted here, he's a strong but not incomparable fighter who might represent any experienced and dedicated military officer from lower-quality Dynastic or outcaste stock. Sesus Rafara is a combat-capable infiltration specialist. While her personal circumstances are unique, her skill set is not uncommon, especially among career bureaucrats and members of House Iselsi.

Cathak Cainan is at the top of the Dynastic food chain. He's aged, mighty and both a supernaturally skilled administrator and a master of Fire Dragon Style. Cainan might form the core of a powerful Wyld Hunt, command an important army, act as bodyguard to an aspirant to the throne, challenge a Deathlord to a suicidal duel or otherwise form the core element of a story involving the Dragon-Blooded. His kind are rare and mighty and will never appear on the battlefield without strong supporting forces.

These characters are intended primarily for use as Storyteller characters in Dragon-Blooded games, but there's no reason why they need to be used as such. Each character demonstrates a specific sort of Dynast, and they can be used by any Storyteller who wants detailed Dragon-Blooded statistics of an antagonist, for example.

PELEPS DANIC DAMANCHINA

Quote: *The data for the last three years, as well? With or without the normal quotes for bribes?*

Prelude: You grew up one among several children in a rich Peleps household, and you sucked in Peleps concepts of competition and rivalry with your wet nurse's milk. Naturally, you were sent to one of the best boarding schools. You only slacked off once, and the memory of having to stay behind over the holidays to repeat your work is one of the major shames of your life, both in terms of social humiliation and family disappointment. You never made that mistake again. Since then, you've made the best of all your opportunities, whatever field they arose in. Exaltation was a gift, an opportunity and a responsibility. You intend to use it.

Rising through the Spiral Academy into the Thousand Scales, you took to political intrigue and social courtesies like a raiton to corpses. You're an accountant and quartermaster first and a scholar second, though you know all the traditional poems and can make all the right epigrams at parties. You know what's required of young bureaucrats who want to rise in the Thousand Scales, and if you do fail, it won't be for want of effort on your part. You're also aware that you'll probably have to marry soon and are hoping that your parents will arrange a husband who will be able to support you in your rise to power.

Roleplaying Hints: Greed is good for you, for your house and for the Realm. The Scarlet Empire is corrupt, and trade and bribery are two of the necessities of life. That's how things are. If you hadn't come to terms with it, you would have sunk long ago or lost your position to another classmate or bureaucrat more aware of that hard reality. While you've resolved to rise through the ranks on the grounds of competence and efficiency, you wouldn't hesitate to grease the slide of a colleague who'd already betrayed his own lack of ability or intelligence.

But you're young. You're capable of mistakes and misjudgments, and you aren't quite as good as you think you are. Older Dragon-Blooded are aware of your ambitions, and once they start regarding you as a serious threat, you're going to be in trouble. At least

you have your house behind you, in case of trouble, and you're well aware of how much your own fortunes are tied up with your family's.

Image: Damanchina's golden hair is worn back in neat coils, pinned with jade pins, and her other jewelry is expensive but not ostentatious. Her robes, similarly, are quietly valuable but not gaudy. She dresses the part of an up-and-coming young functionary and takes care to stay in the background most of the time. She relaxes more at parties with those of her own age, but she is constantly aware of the need to make a good impression on her elders and superiors.

Equipment: Jade Hearthstone amulet (see *Exalted*, p. 337), gem of the calm heart (see *Exalted*, p. 339), sensible but expensive clothing and jewelry, writing supplies, spare purse of coins for bribery, pair of daggers, very quiet slippers



PELEPS DANIC DAMANCHINA

Element: Fire**Concept:** Ambitious Young Bureaucrat**Nature:** Architect

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 4, Temperance 4, Valor 2

ABILITIES

Archery 1, *Athletics 2, Awareness 3, *Bureaucracy 3, *Dodge 2, Endurance 1, *Investigation 3, Linguistics 3, Lore 2, Martial Arts 1, *Melee 2 (Daggers +1), *Performance 2, *Presence 2, Resistance 1, Ride 1, Sail 1, *Socialize 3, Stealth 1
* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Backing (Thousand Scales) 2, Breeding 2, Connections (High Society) 1, Connections (Thousand Scales) 1, Manse 1, Mentor 2, Resources 3

CHARMS

Bureaucracy: Benevolent Master's Blessing 2 or 1 and 1 per 2 dice, Confluence of Savant Thought 3**Linguistics:** Language-Learning Ritual 6, 1W**Lore:** Elemental Concentration Trance 6, 1W**Melee:** Dragon-Graced Weapon 1**Socialize:** Loquacious Courtier Technique 1 per 2 dice, Sweeten-the-Tap Method 2

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 7**Attack:**

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 4 Damage 2B Defense 4

Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 3 Damage 4B Defense 3

Dagger: Speed 10 Accuracy 3 Damage 3L Defense 4

Dodge Pool: 5 **Soak:** 1L/2B**Willpower:** 8 **Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-4/
Incap**Essence:** 2**Personal Essence:** 12 **Peripheral Essence:** 26 (27)**Committed Essence:** 1

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

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

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

Dagger: Speed 7 Accuracy 7 Damage 4L Defense 3 Rate 4



NELLENS MALAKAI

Quote: *If you really think spirit dealings are that simple, you haven't been paying attention.*

Prelude: You grew up in the midst of a nonstop party. Your parents were small-time celebrities in House Nellens, in part due to their lavish and somewhat decadent parties. Your upbringing has jaded you somewhat. You were bored with wild parties and debauchery before you even left home for primary school, and now, you find such things beyond tedious.

When you Exalted, you suddenly became aware that your new state brought your family a great deal of prestige. Your Great House, for its part, made you feel like a star in return, and you found that that's exactly the way you like to be treated. You chose to attend the Heptagram not just because it played to your intellectual strengths, but also to make yourself all the more precious to your house.

Now that you're a sorcerer, the world is yours to play with. You feel fairly sure that House Nellens will back you up no matter what you choose to do, and you're right.

The only hard part now will be living up to your reputation.

Roleplaying Hints: You aren't particularly concerned with anyone but yourself and your intimate companion. You are a brightly shining star in a house that is all too dim. You take great pride in being not only Dragon-Blooded, but a sorcerer as well.

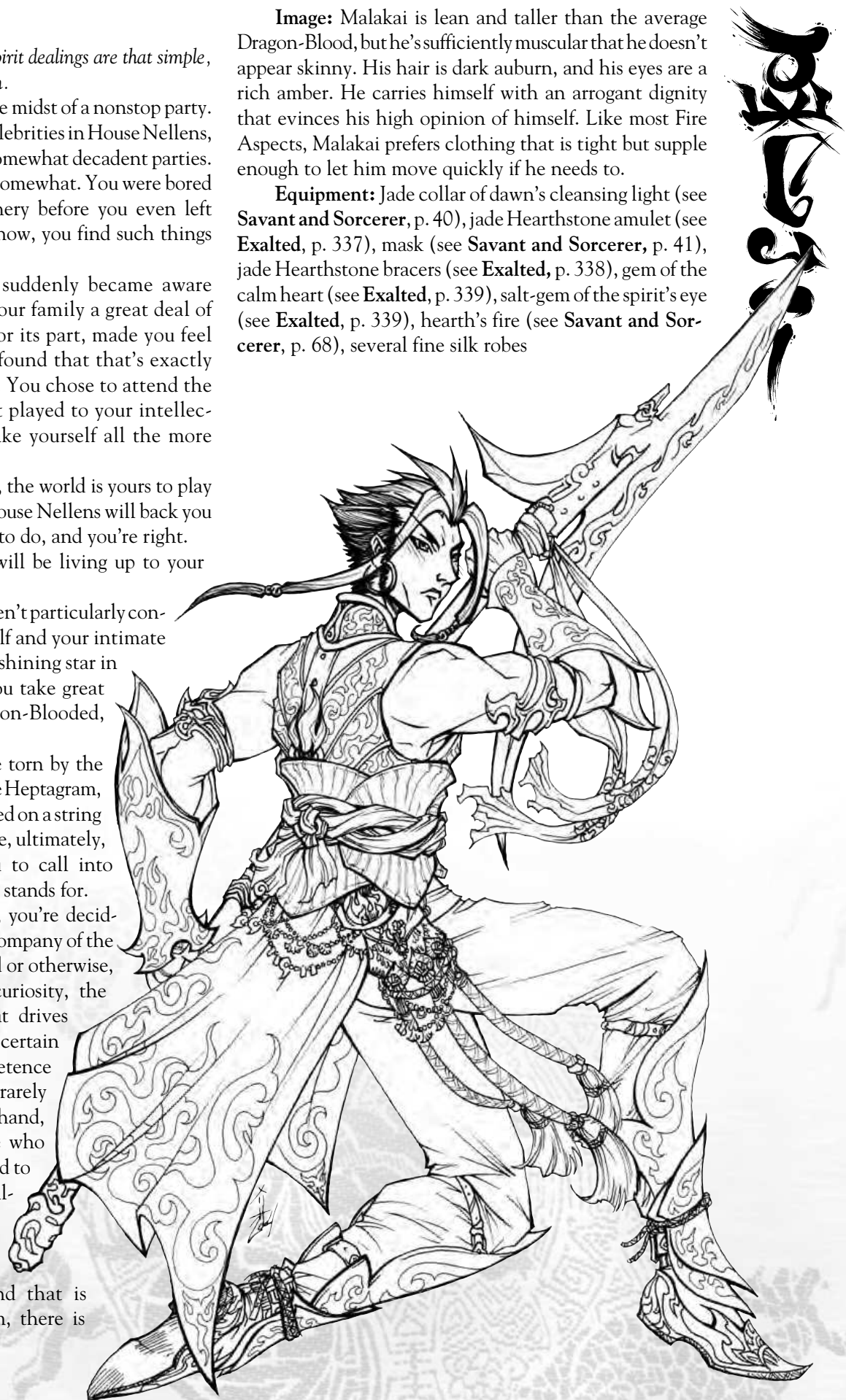
On the other hand, you're torn by the fact that, since your studies at the Heptagram, you feel that the Realm is founded on a string of cleverly woven myths that are, ultimately, lies, and that has caused you to call into question everything the Realm stands for.

Unlike most Fire Aspects, you're decidedly introverted. You find the company of the vast majority of people, Exalted or otherwise, tedious. They lack the real curiosity, the desire to question things, that drives you. You've come to expect a certain very average degree of competence from those you meet, and they rarely disappoint you. On the other hand, when you run across someone who *does* spark your interest, you tend to become very animated and willing to talk with them for hours.

There is one person in your life whose well-being you care for more than your own, and that is Mnemon Tirhon, and for him, there is nothing you would not do.

Image: Malakai is lean and taller than the average Dragon-Blood, but he's sufficiently muscular that he doesn't appear skinny. His hair is dark auburn, and his eyes are a rich amber. He carries himself with an arrogant dignity that evinces his high opinion of himself. Like most Fire Aspects, Malakai prefers clothing that is tight but supple enough to let him move quickly if he needs to.

Equipment: Jade collar of dawn's cleansing light (see **Savant and Sorcerer**, p. 40), jade Hearthstone amulet (see **Exalted**, p. 337), mask (see **Savant and Sorcerer**, p. 41), jade Hearthstone bracers (see **Exalted**, p. 338), gem of the calm heart (see **Exalted**, p. 339), salt-gem of the spirit's eye (see **Exalted**, p. 339), hearth's fire (see **Savant and Sorcerer**, p. 68), several fine silk robes



NELLENS MALAKAI

Element: Fire
Concept: Spoiled Dynast Sorcerer
Nature: Rebel

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 3, Temperance 3, Valor 1

ABILITIES

Archery 2, *Athletics 2, *Awareness 3, *Dodge 3, Investigation 1, Lore 2, *Martial Arts 2, Medicine 2, *Melee 3, *Occult 4, Performance 1, *Presence 3, Ride 2, Sail 2, *Socialize 2, Stealth 2
 * Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Artifact 3, Breeding 4, Manse 3, Resources 4

CHARMS

Awareness: Precision Observation Method
Dodge: Threshold Warding Stance
Occult: Terrestrial Circle Sorcery
Presence: Glowing Coal Radiance
Spells: Death of Obsidian Butterflies, Emerald Countermagic, Invulnerable Skin of Bronze

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 7

Attack:

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 4 Damage 2B Defense 4
 Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 3 Damage 4B Defense 3
 Slashing Sword: Speed 10 Accuracy 6 Damage 4L Defense 6
 Composite Bow: Speed 7 Accuracy 5 Damage 4L (Rate 3, Range 250)

Dodge Pool: 5

Soak: 1L/2B

Willpower: 6

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

Essence: 3

Personal Essence: 13 **Peripheral Essence:** 13 (24)

Committed Essence: 11

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 7 Accuracy 5 Damage 2B Defense 6 Rate 5
 Kick: Speed 4 Accuracy 5 Damage 5B Defense 1 Rate 3
 Slashing Sword: Speed 13 Accuracy 6 Damage 6L Defense 5 Rate 2
 Composite Bow: Speed 7 Accuracy 5 Damage 4L (Rate 3, Range 250)



CYNIS DENOVAH AVAKU

Quote: *If the Realm has grown weak, it is because we have forgotten our roots. We must remember our ancient strength and grow strong again.*

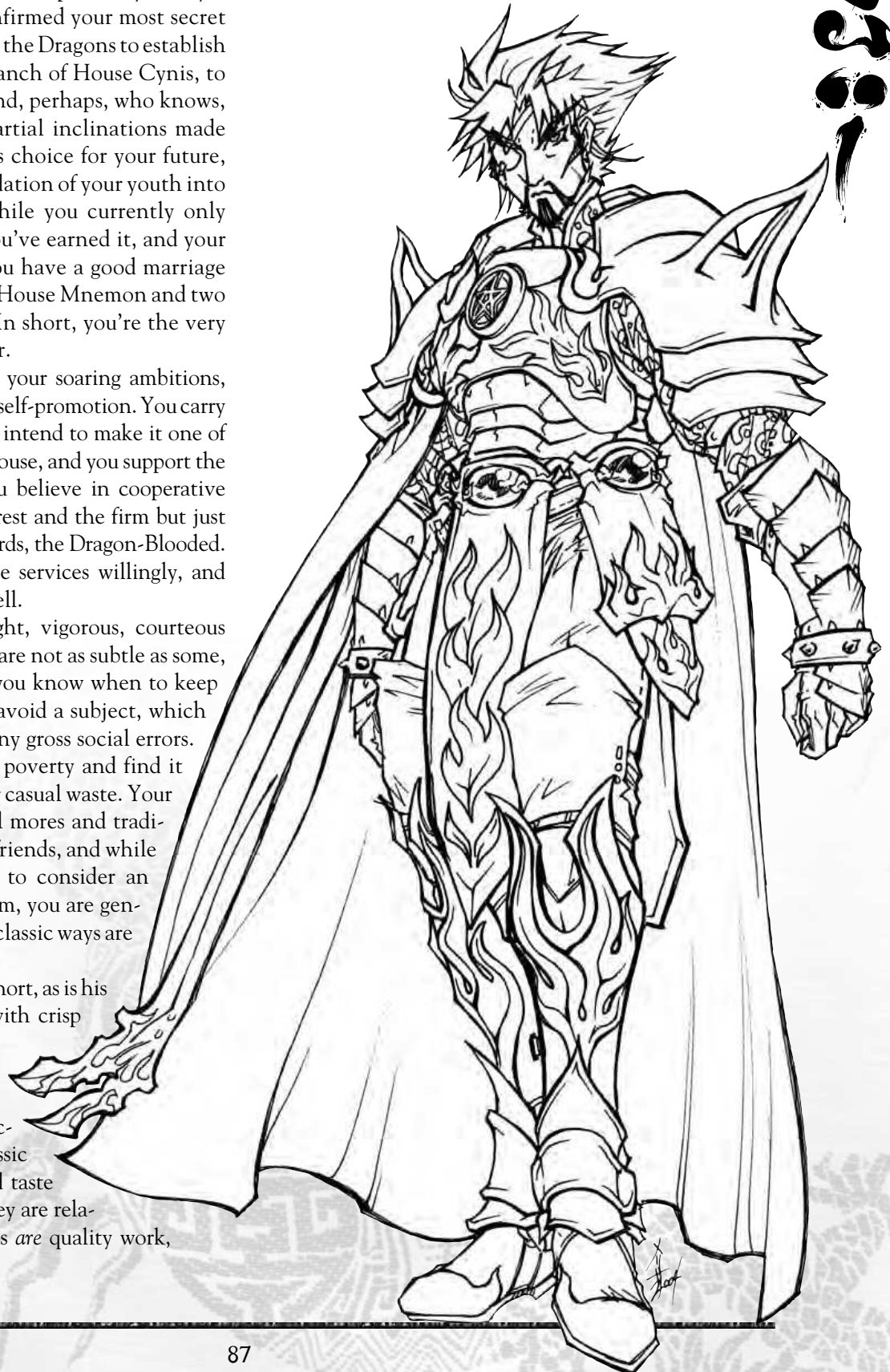
Prelude: You were the unimportant child of an forgotten line of the family, and you only got into the proper boarding schools due to major sacrifices from your parents — some of which you suspect they have yet to pay off. Your Exaltation confirmed your most secret fantasies about being chosen by the Dragons to establish your family line as a named branch of House Cynis, to support and purify the house and, perhaps, who knows, even more some day. Your martial inclinations made the House of Bells the obvious choice for your future, and you've built the solid foundation of your youth into a promising legion career. While you currently only hold the rank of lieutenant, you've earned it, and your superiors know your worth. You have a good marriage with an unExalted daughter of House Mnemon and two children who may well Exalt. In short, you're the very model of a young legion officer.

However, notwithstanding your soaring ambitions, you aren't solely about your own self-promotion. You carry your parents' name because you intend to make it one of the accepted bloodlines in the house, and you support the house in almost all things. You believe in cooperative ambition, enlightened self-interest and the firm but just rule of the strong — in other words, the Dragon-Blooded. You actually attend Immaculate services willingly, and you take your family along as well.

Roleplaying Hints: Upright, vigorous, courteous but straightforward. While you are not as subtle as some, preferring military directness, you know when to keep your mouth shut and when to avoid a subject, which has stopped you from making any gross social errors. You were raised in aristocratic poverty and find it hard to disguise your distaste for casual waste. Your firm adherence to proper social mores and tradition are well known to all your friends, and while you are occasionally prepared to consider an innovative solution to a problem, you are generally quite convinced that the classic ways are the best ways.

Image: Avaku's hair is cut short, as is his beard, and he carries himself with crisp precision. He is in military uniform more often than not, even when on leave and on the Blessed Isle. However, for ceremonial occasions, he wears robes in the classic style, whose old-fashioned good taste mostly disguises the fact that they are relatively inexpensive. His weapons are quality work, and they show it.

Equipment: Military gear, jade reaver daiklave (Kiss of Thunder), reinforced jade breastplate, fire pearl, long bow and quiver of broadhead arrows, war horse



CYNIS DENOVAH AVAKU

Element: Fire**Concept:** Traditional Virtuous Soldier**Nature:** Paragon

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 3, Temperance 2, Valor 4

ABILITIES

Archery 3, *Athletics 2, *Awareness 3, Bureaucracy 1, *Dodge 4, *Endurance 4, Lore 2, Martial Arts 1, Medicine 2, *Melee 4 (Daiklave +2), Performance 1, *Presence 4, Resistance 2, *Ride 2, *Socialize 2, Survival 2, Stealth 1, Thrown 1
* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Allies (Brother Officers) 2, Artifact 3, Breeding 1, Command 2, Connections (Legions) 2, Reputation 2

CHARMS

Athletics: Effortlessly Rising Flame, Falling Star Maneuver, Fiery Prowess**Awareness:** All-Encompassing Earth Sense, Feeling the Dragon's Bones, Precision Observation Method**Dodge:** Flickering Candle Meditation, Hopping Firecracker Evasion, Threshold Warding Stance, Virtuous Negation Defense**Endurance:** Ox-Body Technique (x3)**Melee:** Dragon-Graced Weapon, Ghost-Fire Blade, Refining the Inner Blade, Stoking Bonfire Style**Presence:** Aura of Invulnerability, Blazing Courageous Swordsmen Inspiration, Glowing Coal Radiance, Phantom Fire-Warrior Horde**Socialize:** Loquacious Courtier Technique

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 6**Attack:**

Punch: Speed 6 Accuracy 4 Damage 4B Defense 7

Kick: Speed 3 Accuracy 3 Damage 6B Defense 3

Jade Reaver Daiklave (Kiss of Thunder): Speed 9 Accuracy 11 Damage 12L Defense 9

Long Bow: Speed 6 Accuracy 7 Damage 6L (Rate 3, Range 200)

Dodge Pool: 7/5 **Soak:** 11L/12B (Reinforced jade breastplate and target shield, 10L/9B, -2 mobility penalty, +1 difficulty to hit)**Willpower:** 8 **Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap**Essence:** 3**Personal Essence:** 12 **Peripheral Essence:** 20 (29)**Committed Essence:** 9

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

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

Kick: Speed 3 Accuracy 5 Damage 7B Defense 1 Rate 3

Jade Reaver Daiklave (Kiss of Thunder): Speed 16 Accuracy 12 Damage 13L Defense 9 Rate 4

Long Bow: Speed 6 Accuracy 7 Damage 6L (Rate 3, Range 200)

SESUS RAFARA

Quote: *We've never met, but I know some things about you that you don't want to get out, and I have a very important favor I'd like to ask. Are you amenable to that?*

Prelude: You had an idyllic childhood that ended abruptly when your mother killed your nannies in a fit of jealousy and rage. That was the most extreme betrayal of your life and the first in a long series of betrayals that have slowly but surely chipped away at anything in your heart resembling human warmth.

Roleplaying Hints: You are a masterful spy and a deadly assassin. You are so good at what you do that you've grown bored. You like to play little games in your head and sometimes with your targets as a way of distracting yourself. While you're quite adept at socializing when you've been given a role to assume, you're somewhat reserved when it comes to interacting with your peers in a social setting.

You feel that you have given your house all the loyalty it's earned from you and then some, and now, you're growing bolder in your small, undetectable rebellions against it. It's dangerous game, but you've grown so inured to danger that you just can't make yourself care about the house you spy for anymore. Every time you think you've crossed the line and gotten away with some new outrage against the family you've grown to loathe, you find yourself drawn to something just a bit bigger and more dangerous.

Trust does not come easily to you. You've been betrayed too many times for that. Nothing short of clearly aboveboard behavior over a long period of time is going to earn your trust.

Image: Rafara is an extraordinarily graceful woman who appears to be in her late 20s. She moves with a fluidity more commonly seen in big cats. Her hair is black, and her eyes are a light amber. She has been known to change her appearance dramatically when she needs to masquerade as someone else, however.

Equipment: Collar of dawn's cleansing light (see *Savant and Sorcerer*, p. 40), Hearthstone amulet (see *Exalted*, p. 337), Hearthstone bracers (see *Exalted*, p. 338), salt-gem of the spirit's eye (see *Exalted*, p. 339), stone of healing (see *Exalted*, pp. 339-340), variety of clothes from many walks of life, several safe houses, ciphered writing kit, court poison (see *Exalted*, p. 243), slashing sword, knife, silk climbing rope, black silk intrusion suit



SESUS RAFARA

Element: Fire
Concept: Bitter Spy
Nature: Conniver

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 4, Temperance 2, Valor 4

ABILITIES

*Archery 3, *Athletics 4, Awareness 3, *Dodge 5, *Investigation 4, Lore 2, Martial Arts 3, Medicine 2, *Melee 3, Occult 2, Performance 1, *Presence 2, Ride 2, Sail 2, *Socialize 1, *Stealth 5
 * Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Allies 2, Artifact 2, Backing 3, Breeding 1, Command 1, Manse 2, Resources 3

CHARMS

Archery: Dragonfly Finds Mate, Spring Follows Winter, Swallows Defend the Nest
Athletics: Effortlessly Rising Flame, Flawless Balance Discipline, Falling Star Maneuver, Bellows-Pumping Stride, Incense Smoke Ladder
Awareness: All-Encompassing Earth Sense, Feeling the Dragon's Bones, Precision Observation Method
Dodge: Arrow-Consuming Flame Defense, Flickering Candle Meditation, Hopping Firecracker Evasion, Safety Among Enemies, Smoke Obscuring Effect, Smoldering Karma Strike, Threshold Warding Stance, Virtuous Negation Defense

Melee: Blinding Spark Distraction, Dragon-Graced Weapon, Stoking Bonfire Style
Occult: Spirit-Detecting Mirror Technique
Presence: Auspicious First Meeting Attitude
Stealth: Distracting Breeze Meditation, Dragon Shroud Technique, Feeling-the-Air Technique, Soundless Action Prana, Trackless Passage Style, Wind-Walking Technique, Zone of Silence Stance

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 8

Attack:

Punch: Speed 8 Accuracy 7 Damage 2B Defense 7

Kick: Speed 5 Accuracy 6 Damage 4B Defense 6

Knife: Speed 11 Accuracy 7 Damage 3L* Defense 5

Slashing Sword: Speed 11 Accuracy 8 Damage 4L Defense 8

* Plus court poison if it inflicts one or more lethal health levels of damage (see **Exalted**, p. 243).

Dodge Pool: 9 **Soak:** 4B/2L

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

Essence: 4

Personal Essence: 13 **Peripheral Essence:** 28 (34)

Committed Essence: 6

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 8 Accuracy 8 Damage 2B Defense 9 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 5 Accuracy 8 Damage 5B Defense 4 Rate 3

Knife: Speed 8 Accuracy 8 Damage 4L* Defense 5 Rate 4

Slashing Sword: Speed 14 Accuracy 8 Damage 6L Defense 7 Rate 2

* Plus court poison if it inflicts one or more lethal health levels of damage (see **Exalted**, p. 243).

CATHAK CAINAN

Quote: *Without discipline, not even the blood of the Dragons can save you.*

Prelude: You are the product of an extremely strict family, and you learned the value of discipline at a young age. You were trained to be a warrior and a general from the time you took your first steps, and it shows.

You have not only survived battles where the odds were clearly in your enemy's favor, you have guided your legions to glorious victories. While you have not won every conflict you've entered into, you have skillfully kept your casualty rates down in even the worst combat.

In recent years, you have turned over direct control of Cathak's legions to your younger brother, but you watch over them — the legions and your brother — constantly. Since the disappearance of the Empress, your primary focus has been your house's satrapies in the Threshold. You feel that they owe you much more loyalty than they're showing for the years of protection your legions have provided. In an ideal world, you would deploy three of your legions to those rebellious lands to illustrate that the Realm is still a force with which to be reckoned. With politics and the current situation being what they are — and with the effective disintegration of House Tepet still weighing on your mind — however, you are forced to resort to diplomacy, which, as far as you're concerned, doesn't have nearly the same effectiveness, and you're getting ever more frustrated with the situation.

Roleplaying Hints: You have completely adopted the values that you were force-fed as a child. Discipline and self-control are the focus of your life. You revere Hesiesh and worship him as the very model of perfect self-control and resource management.

You feel quite strongly that the role of the Dragon-Blooded is to rule Creation and that they should do so with a very firm grip. You see mortals as ethically and spiritually stunted creatures, and while you pity them, you also understand that it's your role to teach them to respect their betters.

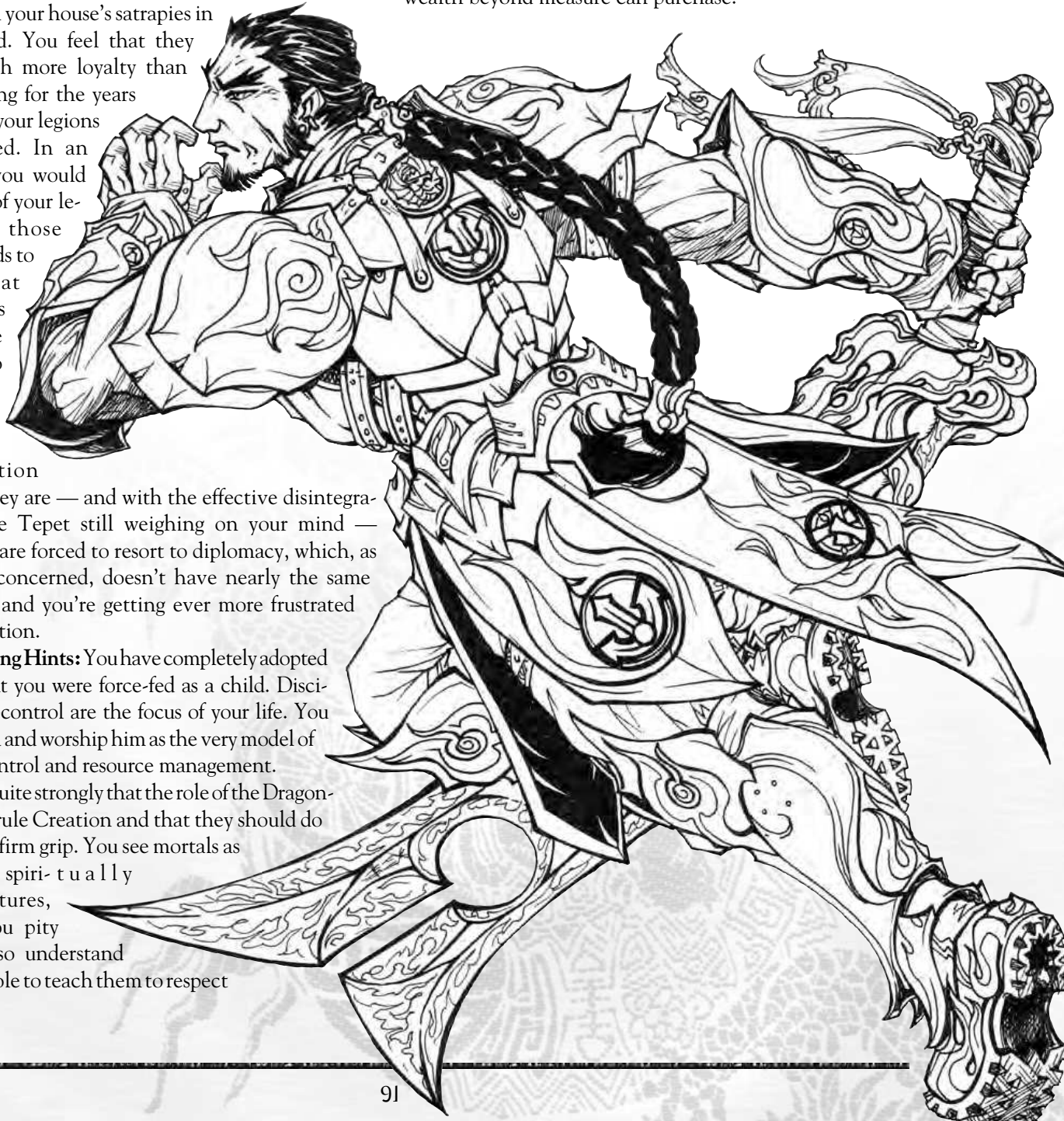
Just as Hesiesh saved his Essence for when it was truly needed, you save the full fury of your wrath for three enemies: enemies of Creation, enemies of the Realm and heretics of the Immaculate Order. To all others, you may be show mercy, but no foe of any of those three types earns any quarter from you.

While you are extremely strict, you are not averse to enjoying yourself on appropriate occasions, and you have an appreciation for a good joke well told.

Image: Cainan is an enormous and remarkably dexterous man who wears his long red hair tightly braided down his back. Forged by a lifetime of combat, Cainan carries himself with a strength and assuredness that awes other Fire Aspects.

Equipment: Anything he needs, including heirloom weapons and armor, military formations and all the things wealth beyond measure can purchase.

カイン



CATHAK CAINAN

Element: Fire**Concept:** Demanding Patriarch**Nature:** Architect

ATTRIBUTES

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

VIRTUES

Compassion 2, Conviction 3, Temperance 4, Valor 5

ABILITIES

Archery 2, *Athletics 5, *Awareness 3, Brawl 3, *Bureaucracy 3, *Dodge 5, Endurance 2, Investigation 2, Larceny 1, Lore 2, *Martial Arts 5, Medicine 2, *Melee 5, Performance 1, *Presence 4, Resistance 2, Ride 3, Sail 3, *Socialize 4, Stealth 1, Survival 3, Thrown 3
* Aspect or Favored Ability

BACKGROUNDS

Backing (House Cathak) 5, Breeding 5, Connections (Cloister of Wisdom) 2, Connections (High Society) 2, Connections (House Cathak) 5, Connections (House of Bells) 4, Connections (Legions) 4, Connections (Order of the Immaculate Dragons) 3, Connections (The Thousand Scales) 2, Manse 5, Reputation (Great General) 5, Resources 5

CHARMS

Athletics: Effortlessly Rising Flame, Fiery Prowess**Awareness:** All-Encompassing Earth Sense, Precision Observation Method**Bureaucracy:** Benevolent Master's Blessing, Confluence of Savant Thought**Dodge:** Flickering Candle Meditation, Hopping Firecracker Evasion, Safety Among Enemies, Threshold Warding Stance**Endurance:** Ox-Body Technique (x2)**Martial Arts (Fire Dragon Style):** Fiery Hand Attack, Fire Dragon Form, Flame-Flicker Stance, Flash-Fire Technique, Overwhelming Fire Majesty Stance, Perfect Blazing Blow, Searing Fist Attack, Spirit Sight, Spirit Walking, Smoldering Wound Attack**Melee:** Deadly Wildfire Legion, Dragon-Graced Weapon, Ghost-Fire Blade, Portentous Comet Deflecting Mode, Refining the Inner Blade, Ringing Anvil Onslaught, Stoking Bonfire Style, Threshing Floor Technique**Presence:** Blazing Courageous Swordsmen Inspiration, Glowing Coal Radiance, Phantom Fire-Warrior Horde, Unbearable Taunt Technique**Resistance:** Impervious Skin of Stone Meditation, Mountain Toppling Method, Strength of Stone Technique**Socialize:** Loquacious Courtier Technique, Seizing-the-Tongue Technique**Survival:** Wild-Wandering Forester Charm**Thrown:** Seeking Throw Technique, Whirlwind Shield Form

COMBAT STATISTICS

Base Initiative: 9**Attack:**

Punch: Speed 9 Accuracy 10 Damage 4B Defense 10

Kick: Speed 6 Accuracy 9 Damage 6B Defense 9

Paired Jade Short Swords: Speed 12 Accuracy 11 Damage 6L Defense 11

Dodge Pool: 10 **Soak:** 2L/5B**Willpower:** 9 **Health Levels:** -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap**Essence:** 5**Personal Essence:** 19 **Peripheral Essence:** 37 (47)**Committed Essence:** 10

EXALTED POWER COMBAT

Attack:

Punch: Speed 9 Accuracy 11 Damage 4B Defense 12 Rate 5

Kick: Speed 6 Accuracy 11 Damage 7B Defense 7 Rate 3

Paired Jade Short Swords: Speed 14 Accuracy 11 Damage 7L Defense 10 Rate 3

APPENDIX II

OTHER NOTABLE FIRE ASPECTS



The Children of Hesiesh are a driven lot. The fire that warms their blood nudges them toward action every moment of their Exalted lives. Every Fire Aspect has the innate ability to be a gifted athlete, a lethal warrior and a charming seducer nigh effortlessly. At times, it is only the self-discipline modeled by Hesiesh himself that keeps these powerful Dragon-Bloods from falling prey to their potentially scorching passions. Other times, as seen occasionally in the portraits below, that self-discipline is not equal to the task.

SEBUS TAIKONA

Though only out of the Spiral Academy a handful of years, Sesus Taikona has been noticed by those much higher up in her house as a result of her passionate dedication to diplomacy.

On one hand, this is seen by some as surprising given that House Sesus is so renowned for its martial prowess, but the elders of the house, particularly Sesus Alon, see Taikona's skills at diplomacy as just what the house might need to further clinch its connections with Houses Cynis and Mnemon.

For her part, Taikona is an almost obsessive student of human nature and motivation. Combined with her affable nature and undeniable charisma, this makes her a force to be reckoned with.

On her last mission, Taikona was dispatched to Valis, a small outpost in the northeastern Threshold, to negoti-



ate with the woodcutters there in order to soothe tensions between the tributary and House Sesus. The trip was a resounding success, and Valis is once again delighted to be a tributary of the Realm, and the high marks Taikona's been given by the residents of Valis are likely to lead to more (and more demanding) diplomatic work with the house's tributaries.



While her sensitivity to the psychology of others is of great use in her role as diplomat, it has been causing a great deal of strain in her private life. House Sesus has, for some time now, been trying to marry Taikona off to a scion of House Mnemon, and her extraordinary beauty and career potential make her the object of affection (or desire) for many young Mnemon men. Unfortunately, her quick perception of subtle quirks and foibles has made her painfully oversensitive to any character deficits on the parts of those potential candidates for marriage. So far, not one of the six young Dragon-Bloods introduced to her has passed her demanding scrutiny. While Taikona's pickiness was initially the source of much amusement, it is rapidly becoming a source of much embarrassment to House Sesus and much umbrage on the part of House Mnemon. Thus far, her diplomatic skills have warded off the worst outcomes, but she knows she'll have to choose soon or have the decision taken out of her hands entirely. To make matters worse, she has recently developed a strong romantic attachment to a young Dragon-Blood fresh out of secondary school, and he is neither from House Mnemon nor House Cynis. Taikona already knows that her family is going to take this news poorly, and she's trying to figure out how best to resolve the situation. In the meantime, however, she buries herself in diplomatic work and tries not to think about marriage.

V'NEEF BIJAR

Daughter of the house founder and granddaughter of the Empress herself, V'neef Bijar is the only Fire-aspected Dragon-Blood in her house and her mother's least favored Dragon-Blooded child. While the founder appreciates having someone with Bijar's skills associated with the house, she finds Bijar a little too passionate about the wrong things and not entirely worthy of trust.

A graduate of the House of Bells, Bijar now serves her family as the head of security for her house's homes and trade concerns. She hires and fires those soldiers that guard V'neef caravans and vineyards, and she personally watches over her family's Manse in the Imperial City. The former duty she despises, largely because it requires her to deal with representatives of the Guild, whom she finds generally reprehensible. The latter duty, however, she likes a great deal. As the Empress' granddaughter and as one of the elite in charge of security around the Imperial Manse, Bijar has a great deal of freedom to wander anywhere she chooses in the Imperial City. For the last three years, Bijar has used this authority to investigate the magical defenses of the Imperial Manse. If her grandmother figured out its defenses more than 700 years ago, she reasons, there should be no reason, in theory, why she shouldn't be able to do the same now.

Bijar's entire intellectual life centers on researching the Imperial Manse and its defenses in hopes of supplying a surprise ending to the power struggles of the various Dynastic houses. Nothing would please her more than to



decode the defense systems of the Realm and become the new Empress. She has interviewed her grandmother and various other older relatives about the Manse and its security systems under the pretext of trying to recreate a similar degree of defense in other important buildings.

While some others, including her mother, are aware of her fascination with the Imperial Manse, they *don't* know just how far she's actually taken her interest. Bijar has found ways around some of the Manse's outermost defensive magics, and each additional level she works her way through only causes her interest to blaze all the brighter.

V'neef has recently decided that it's high time to marry off Bijar as a means of mitigating her obsessive tendencies, but the house founder has a challenge ahead of her. Bijar is not known to be a pleasant woman. She frequently has unrealistically high expectations of others, particularly mortals, whose frailties frustrate her on a daily basis. Bijar's biggest social deficit in dealing with others is her tendency to subconsciously condescend to anyone she does not feel to be her superior. Much of her short-temperedness actually stems from Bijar's utter lack of interest in anything but the puzzle around which her life revolves.

SESUS CHENOW LAHOR

There was a time when Sesus Lahor was being groomed for the leadership of the Sesus legions and possibly the entire Chenow wing of the family. Though Lahor himself hasn't realized it yet, that time is past.

Lahor is the eldest son of Sesus Chenow Mareq, the current matriarch of the Chenow line of House Sesus. Both of Lahor's parents are Exalts, and he Exalted at the precocious age of 10. A bully and a sadist even before his Exaltation, he was insufferable afterward. Even while in primary school, Lahor humiliated and tormented several unExalted classmates into changing schools.

Following in the martial footsteps of his mother and grandfather, Lahor attended the House of Bells, where his performance was deemed good (though not excellent — the first in a long string of minor failures).

Upon graduating, Lahor immediately became a lieutenant in the Sesus legions. Exalts under his command liked him well enough despite — or perhaps because of — his witty (if sadistic) sense of humor. But for every like-minded Dynast, 100 unExalted legionnaires suffered the brunt of Lahor's interminable taunts, insults and sadistic practical jokes — and hated him for it. Every unit led by Lahor experienced increased tensions between Dragon-Blooded and mortal legionnaires.

Lahor never noticed. To his way of thinking, this was how it was supposed to be. To others in the legions, however, Exalt and mortal alike, his attitude was an insuperable obstacle to unit cohesion and, therefore, a problem. If the legions couldn't fight together without fear of Dynasts and mortals "accidentally" killing each other or "inadvertently" allowing the enemy to make such kills, the legions were hamstrung.

More problematic to Lahor's standing in the legions, however, is his apparent refusal to utilize sensible tactics when in battle. The Sesus heir takes great enjoyment in overwhelming his opponents with sheer numbers, even when such artless tactics are inappropriate for the situation. Lahor's casualties are nearly always higher than those of other officers of his rank, something Lahor blames entirely on his enemies.

While nothing has been said aloud, the fact remains that Lahor is becoming an object of scorn among his fellow Dynasts. They still laugh at his cruel humor, but once out of earshot, it is Lahor who becomes the target of snide commentary by other commanders. For his part, Lahor is blind to his shortcomings or their consequences. His family, social standing and likely ascension to the head of



the Chenow line assures that he is surrounded by toadies no matter his behavior.

Lahor's last and most egregious offense was the rape of a young unExalted Dynast from House Ragara — who Exalted during the attack. The rape easily would have gone unnoticed had the woman remained mortal — all the others certainly had — but her new status as an Exalt changed things and rendered Lahor's behavior criminal. Ragara Banoba himself gave Sesus Chenow Mareq an ultimatum: Pay a vast sum in hush money, or let a magistrate decide Lahor's fate. The latter option risked a severe loss of face for the Chenow line and was therefore not acceptable for Mareq, so she made the necessary monetary transactions and immediately arranged for Lahor to be deployed as far from the Imperial Isle as possible, far to the extreme Northeast.

For his part, Lahor hasn't yet realized that he's been, in effect, banished, and he's treating his exile as a holiday. When he *does* realize what's happened and sees that he's no longer the favored scion of the Chenow line (a position now occupied by his younger sister, Tessani) — and he undoubtedly will once he realizes that he keeps getting deployed to the farthest reaches of Creation — his feelings of betrayal and persecution will be nigh palpable. Some generals of House Sesus have actually met to discuss Lahor's response. They fully expect Lahor to have the military equivalent of a temper tantrum and to push the legionnaires under his control into a series of strategically unsound offensives in an effort to reclaim the standing he feels entitled to. If that happens, the family has already decided that Lahor will be deployed against the Bull of the North, where he will at least have the opportunity to clear his name by becoming a martyr in the struggle against the Anathema.

For Lahor's stats, see **Time of Tumult**, page 29.

SENATOR CATHAK CACEK MATARIN

Cathak Cacek Matarin's glory days are past. Everyone who knows her, or knows of her, agrees on that. Her dazzling orations in the Deliberative Senate occurred decades ago, and the days when she could silence debating opponents with a single well-chosen word or awe the listening masses to a hush with the brilliance of her words are now remembered as past triumphs rather than as current events likely to be surpassed at any moment. She fritters away her time touring the edges of the Realm and traveling round the satrapies as a pensioner of her house, given the job to keep her out of trouble now that her use to the house is gone.

And this is precisely how Cathak Cacek Matarin wants it.

In the days of her middle age, after returning from decades of adventuring, she married as was proper and settled down into a career in politics. Matarin found to her surprise that she was even more gifted with words than she had been with a sword and served House Cathak as a Senator in the Greater Chamber. Her husband died on the battlefield 20 years later, but by then, she had three healthy children and felt no need to marry again to bear more.





A few years ago, just after the Empress' disappearance, Cathak Cainan asked her to sacrifice her ambitions and her public name for the good of the house. He'd already noticed a certain lack of enthusiasm in the satrapies when it came to handing over tribute and had heard whisperings of Fair Folk, Anathema and other possible enemies or rabble-rousers on the horizon. Cathak Cainan wanted Matarin to serve the house as a diplomat in the satrapies but as an unobtrusive one who would soothe the local powers with honeyed words, so that House Cathak need not spend too many of its soldiers in putting down rebellion.

Cathak Cacek Matarin knew her duty — and, to be frank, the idea of herself as a secret diplomat for her house pleased her far more than the jousting for position in an increasingly rowdy and assassination-prone Chamber. She let herself slip from public view, making fewer speeches, and, finally, allowed herself to be “sent on a tour of the house's satrapies” as cover for her mission. Her detractors point out how frequently she is sent to trouble spots and speculate that House Cathak is trying to dispose of an aging Exalt who has become an embarrassment. Her more intelligent enemies observe her course, note the altered opinions that she leaves behind her and ponder.

Cathak Cacek Matarin has begun to show signs of age, with graying hair and slowing gait, but she has not forgotten her combat Charms, even if she is more prone to use her Presence ones these days. She travels with a couple of younger unExalted Dynasts from the house. Though neither is Exalted, they know her mission and are efficient spies, poisoners and diplomats themselves. She may turn up in any part of the Threshold, particularly in the case of a situation which is about to spectacularly implode and will do her best to intervene subtly in favor of House Cathak's interests — and the Realm's interests, of course.

SESUS MAGEL KENRUYO

Sesus Magel Kenruyo is a graduate of the Heptagram, a noted sorcerer and one of the leading lights of a noted physicians' collaborative in the Imperial City. He's still young, but he is beginning to make a name for himself in designing new and innovative spells for treating diseases and poisoning. However, his particular genius is in surgery. With the help of his knives, sorcery and Charms, patients who other doctors had long since given up for lost are now walking the streets of the Realm.

Sesus Magel Kenruyo hides more than one secret. Sesus Alon, his great-aunt, has suggested that he consider the advantages to his house in researching spells that *cause* disease and ways in which they could be applied to remove the house's enemies. On the other side of the family, his uncle Sesus Magel Talor has suggested that Kenruyo research methods to rejuvenate — or at least strengthen — aging patricians and commoners. While Talor claims that this is purely in order to improve the house's resources, by freshening up valuable slaves or granting a longer lease of life to non-Exalts, Kenruyo suspects that his uncle has a much more personal motive.

Sesus Magel Kenruyo is an intelligent and witty young man but short-spoken and precise when it comes to discussing sorcery, Charms or surgery. He has no time for fools and only puts up with some of the older members of his own house because he lacks any choice in the matter. He is genuinely motivated by the study of healing, but he has no particular attachment to any of his patients. He maintains a regular correspondence with other sorcerers and physicians across the Blessed Isle and, in consequence, is usually well-informed about general news as well as about medical and sorcerous advances. He realizes that he needs some help, but he doesn't know who to ask for it.



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