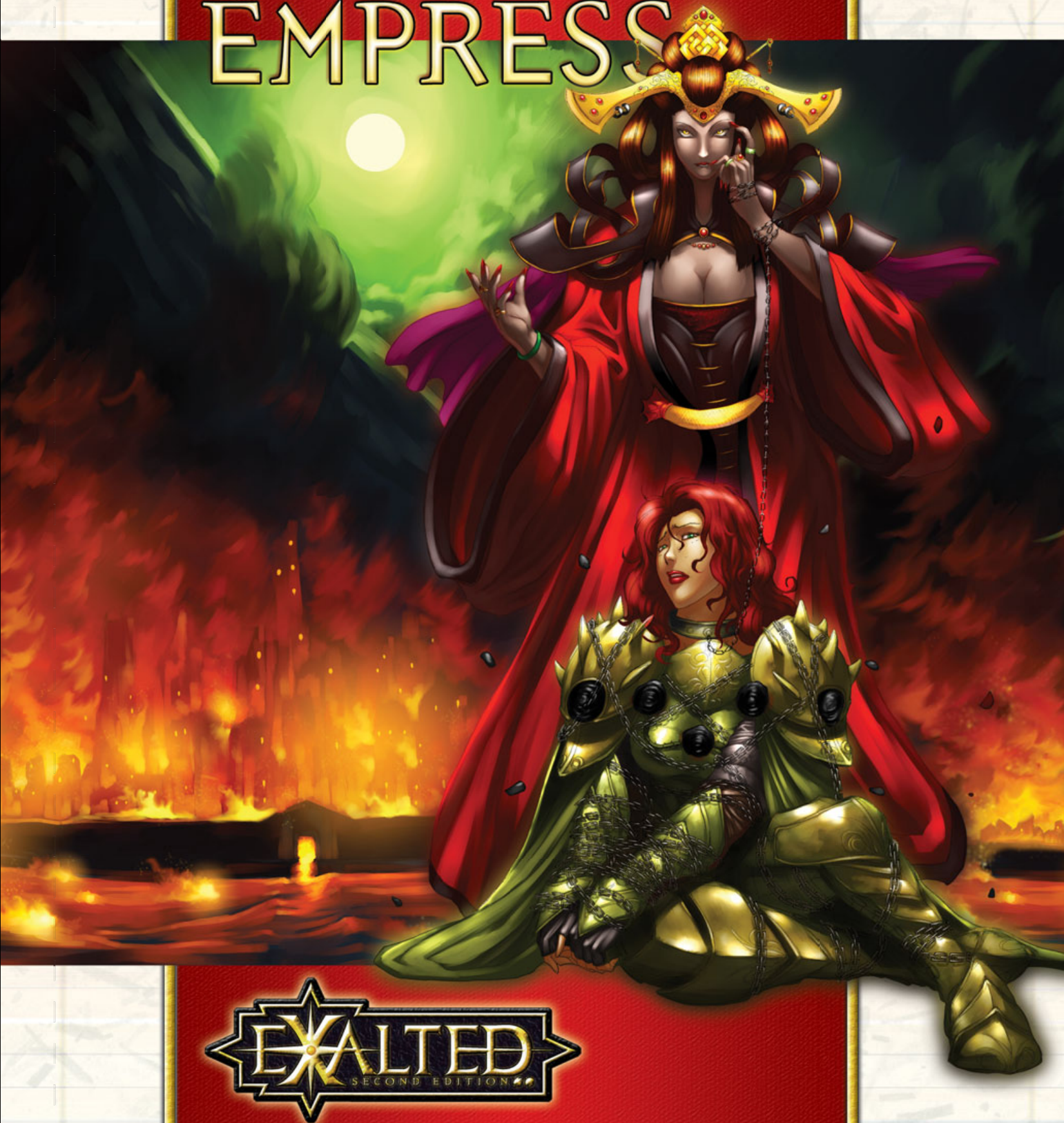


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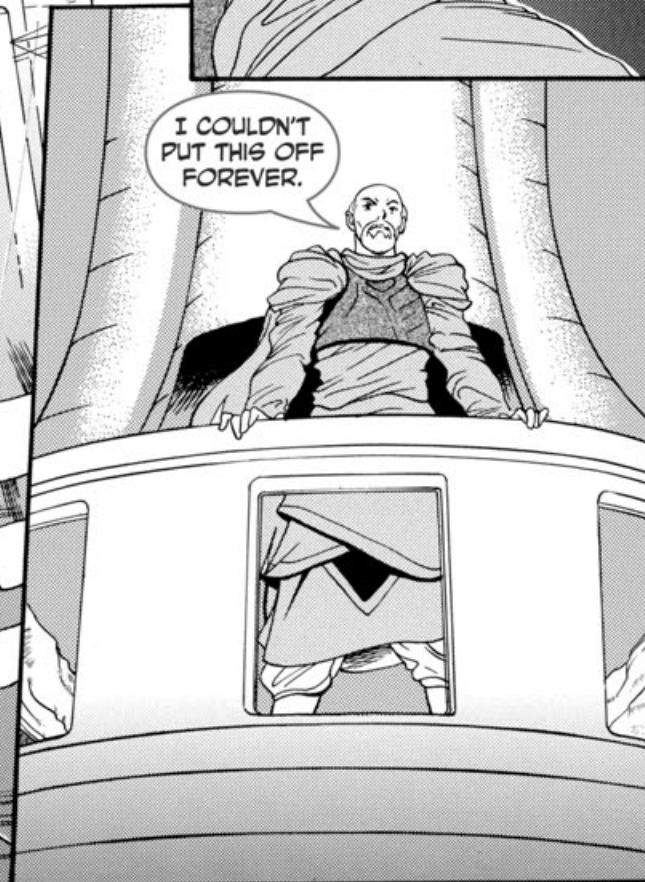
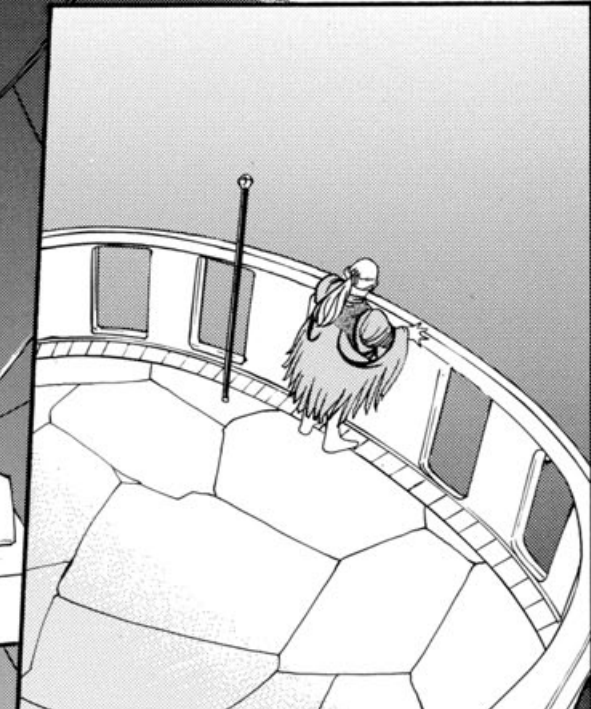


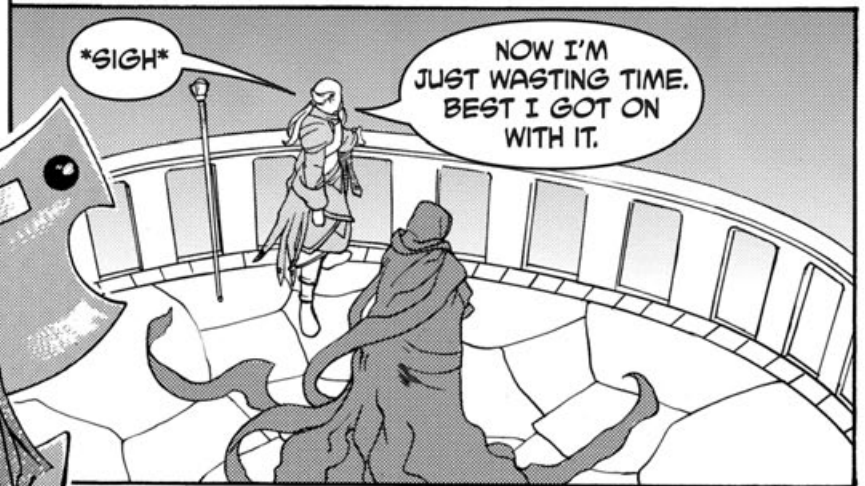
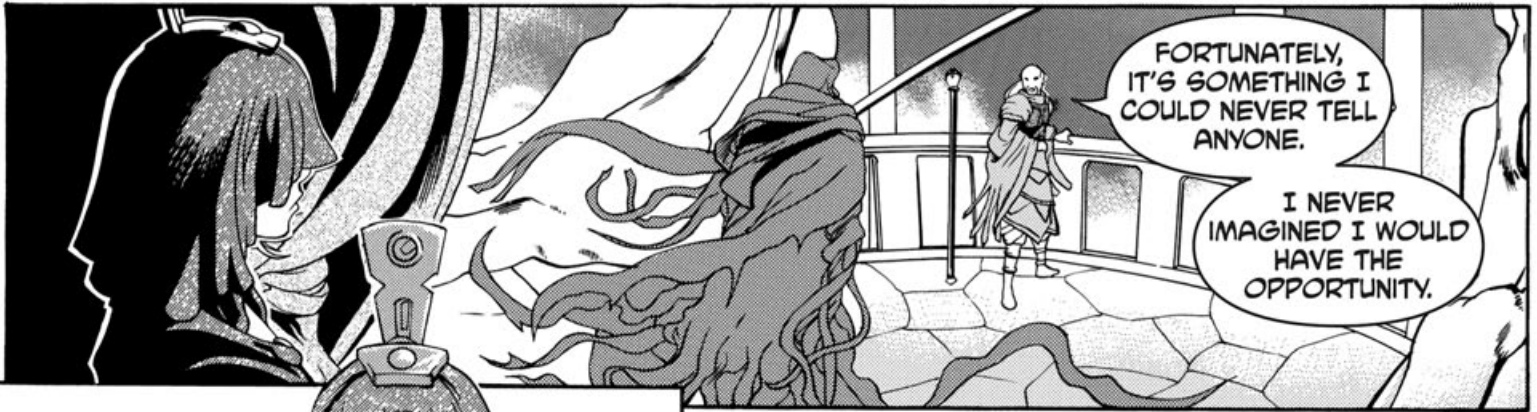


RETURN OF THE SCARLET EMPRESS™

By CARL BOWEN, MICHAEL A. GOODWIN, HOLDEN SHEARER,
DEAN SHOMSHAK AND JOHN SNEAD

THE LOOM OF FATE.





THE EBON DRAGON,
IT SEEMED, HAD
ANNOUNCED
THAT HE INTENDED
TO MARRY...

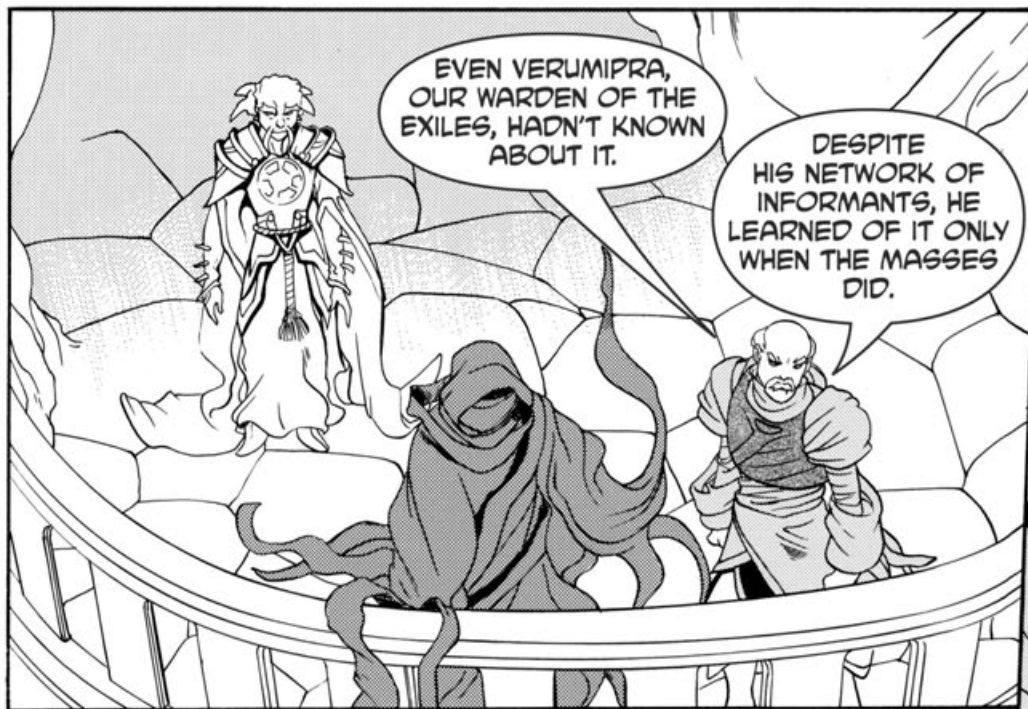
THE STREETS OF
THE DEMON CITY
ROARED IN
CELEBRATION OF
THIS NEWS.





AND YET, MOST DEMONS
WERE AS SURPRISED BY
IT AT FIRST AS I WAS.

THE EBON DRAGON
HAD KEPT HIS BETROTHED
AND HIS PLANS A VITAL
SECRET.



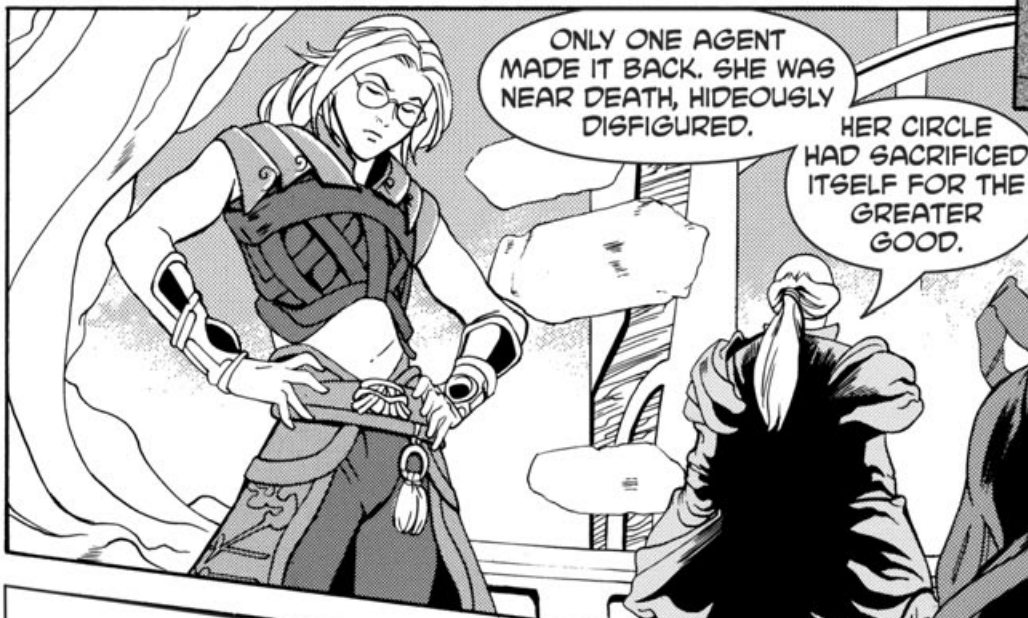
EVEN VERUMIPRA,
OUR WARDEN OF THE
EXILES, HADN'T KNOWN
ABOUT IT.

DESPITE
HIS NETWORK OF
INFORMANTS, HE
LEARNED OF IT ONLY
WHEN THE MASSES
DID.



WHEN HE
INFORMED ME,
I ARRANGED TO
ACTIVATE A CIRCLE
OF SIDEREAL
AGENTS.

THEY
INFILTRATED THE
DEMON CITY ON
MY ORDERS.



ONLY ONE AGENT
MADE IT BACK. SHE WAS
NEAR DEATH, HIDEOUSLY
DISFIGURED.

HER CIRCLE
HAD SACRIFICED
ITSELF FOR THE
GREATER
GOOD.



BEFORE SHE
DIED, SHE TOLD ME
TWO THINGS HER
CIRCLE HAD
DISCOVERED:

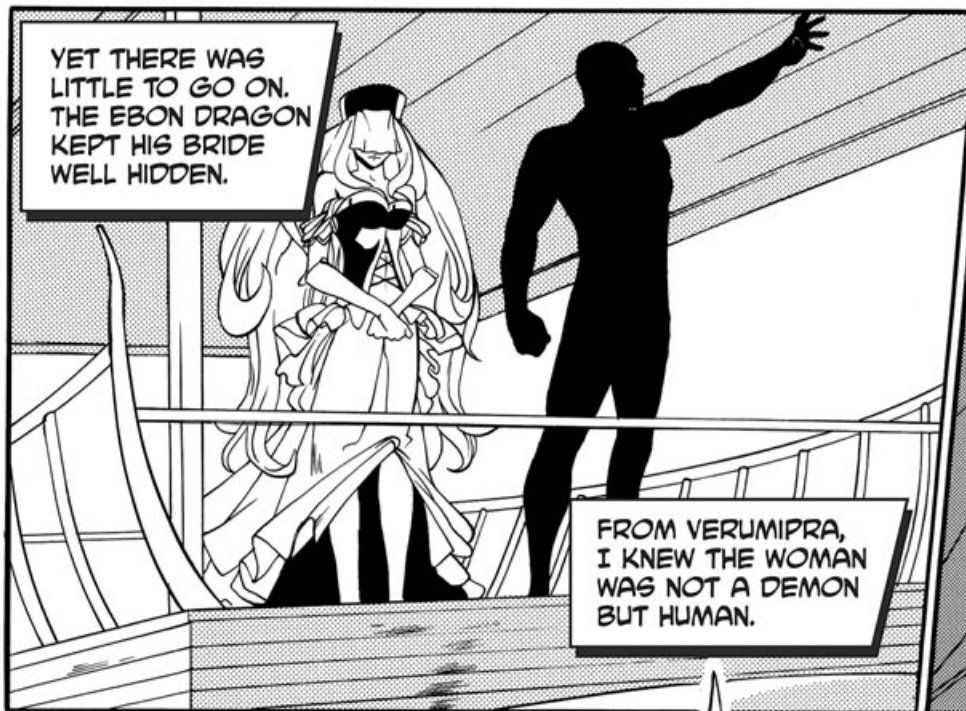
FIRST, THE EBON
DRAGON'S MARRIAGE
WAS PART OF AN
ELABORATE
ESCAPE PLAN.

SECOND, THE
BRIDE HE'D CHOSEN
WAS SOMEHOW
CRUCIAL TO THAT
PLAN.



I DECIDED
THEN THAT I HAD TO
FIGURE OUT WHO SHE
WAS AND WHY HE
CHOSE HER.

PERHAPS IF I
KNEW THAT, I COULD
PREDICT THE EBON
DRAGON'S ESCAPE
STRATEGY.



YET THERE WAS
LITTLE TO GO ON.
THE EBON DRAGON
KEPT HIS BRIDE
WELL HIDDEN.

FROM VERUMIPRA,
I KNEW THE WOMAN
WAS NOT A DEMON
BUT HUMAN.



BUT MY OPERATIVES HAD
MANAGED TO DIG UP ONE
LAST CRUCIAL FACT.

THEY'D
LEARNED THAT
THE WOMAN HAD
PENNED *THE
BROKEN-WINGED
CRANE*.

THE
ORIGINAL,
THAT IS.



I SHOULD
HAVE REALIZED
IT THEN.

HOW OFTEN
HAD I SEEN HER
PORING OVER THOSE
EARLIER, IMPERFECT
COPIES?

THAT
REVELATION SHOULD
HAVE BEEN EPIPHANIC,
BUT I WOULDN'T ALLOW
IT TO BE.

INSTEAD,
I FORCED MYSELF
NOT TO REALIZE
WHAT THE EVIDENCE
SUGGESTED.

HOW COULD I
DO OTHERWISE?
IT WAS TOO
MONSTROUS TO
ACCEPT.

AS WAS
MY OWN
CULPABILITY
IN IT.



I TOOK
NO ACTION WHEN
I HAD THE
OPPORTUNITY.

AND SO THIS
AGE WILL END
DROWNING IN
BLOOD, JUST
AS THE LAST
ONE DID.



I'M SURE YOU
REMEMBER SATURN'S
INFAMOUS PROPHECY
FROM WHEN I WAS
YOUNG.

SHE SAID I
WOULD USHER IN
THE ENDINGS OF
TWO AGES.



THE PROPHECY
WAS RIGHT. I MADE
MYSELF BLIND. I
LED MYSELF
ASTRAY.

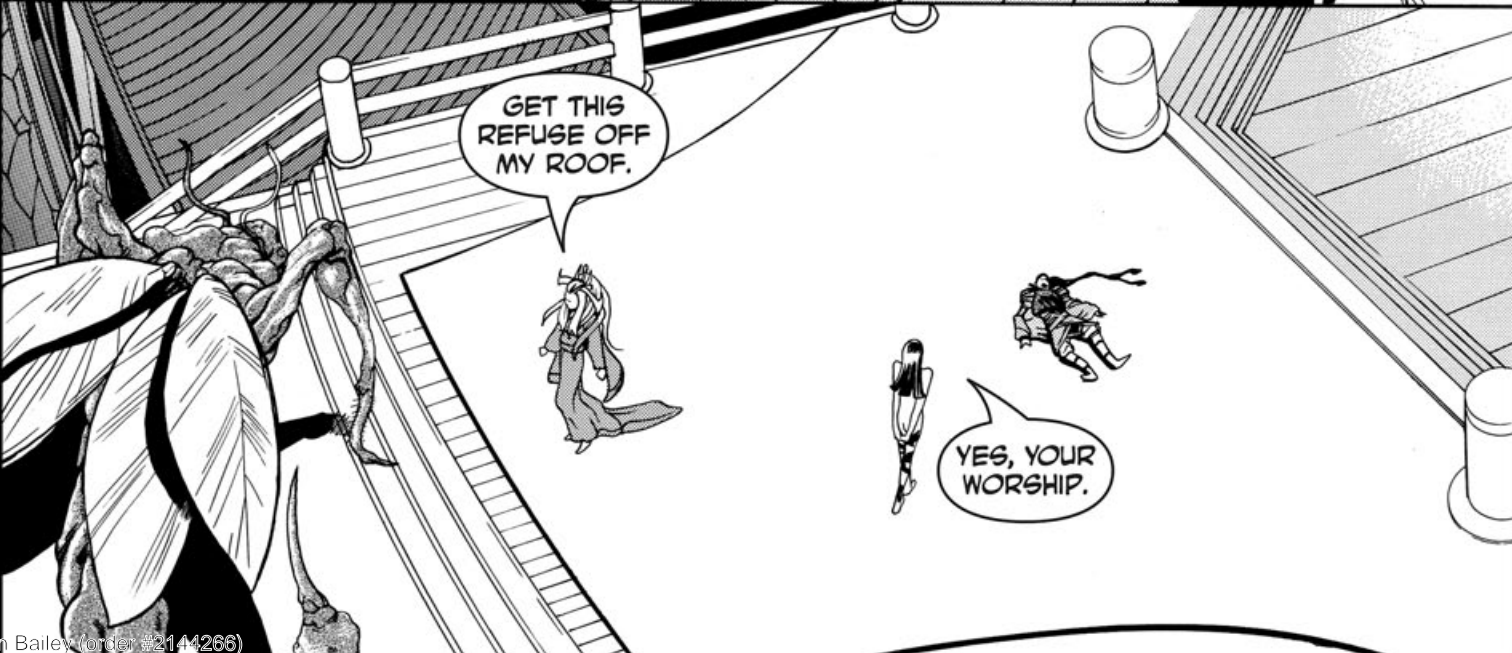


I WAS
WRONG ABOUT
HER, NARA-O. SO
WRONG...

AND
NOW... SHE
WANTS TO END...
MY BRONZE
AGE...



BUT IT
ISN'T OVER
YET. IT
ISN'T...



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WHITE WOLF PUBLISHING
2075 WEST PARK PLACE BOULEVARD
SUITE G
STONE MOUNTAIN, GA 30087

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PRINTED IN CANADA





RETURN OF THE SCARLET EMPRESS™



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MY CHILDREN, MY
SUBJECTS, PEOPLE
OF CREATION: FALL
SILENT!





HEAR ME,
YOUR SCARLET EMPRESS,
CHAMPION OF CREATION,
ETERNAL RULER OF
THE BLESSED ISLE!

FOR YEARS, I TURNED MY
FACE FROM THIS WORLD TO
COMMUNE WITH THE DRAGON
OF MY ASPECT AND HIS FOUR
EQUAL PEERS!

AND NOW,
WITH MY RETURN FROM
MEDITATIVE ISOLATION, THIS
LAWLESS TUMULT ENDS!

TODAY I SET RIGHT THE
CRUMBLING HIERARCHY OF MY
GOVERNMENT, MY LEGIONS
AND THE GREAT HOUSES!

AND WOE BE
UNTO WHOSEVER
DEFIES ME IN THIS
RIGHTEOUS CAUSE!



INTRODUCTION

*The other shape,
If shape it might be call'd that shape had none
Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb;
Or substance might be call'd that shadow seem'd,
For each seem'd either, black it stood as night,
Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell,
And shook a dreadful dart; what seem'd his head
The likeness of a kingly crown had on.*

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

After years of absence, the Empress returns to her people, just in time to halt the long-feared war over who would ascend to her Scarlet Throne. Yet, there's more to her return than meets the eye, and the powers behind it will soon plunge Creation into a more terrible conflict by far, the Reclamation.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE RECLAMATION CONFLICT

The Yozis' Reclamation of Creation proceeds simultaneously on all fronts, throwing the world's would-be defenders into disarray. The grand scheme takes place in three broad acts. In the Threshold, the first act is a time of subtle manipulation and clever social maneuvering, which kicks off upon the advent of the Scarlet Empress's long-awaited reemergence. Using the Realm Defense Grid to project an enormous image of herself standing astride the Imperial Mountain, the Empress

announces her "return from meditative isolation" to the people of Creation in grand style. Confirmation of the terrifying apparition's legitimacy spreads across the Blessed Isle first (instantly), then the satrapies in the Threshold (at the speed of Infallible Messenger) and finally those independent nations and civilizations that are aware of the Realm but not beholden to its government (within weeks). The Empress makes a great show at first of cleaning house, ending (if not averting) a civil war between the Great Houses and righting the foundering ship of government that her absence all but scuttled. These efforts make her people rejoice, believing that their Empress can single-handedly unmake the chaos of the Time of Tumult.

Yet, for all her peacemaking and work reestablishing the rule of law, the Empress's actions conceal a sinister agenda. She streamlines the functioning of the Thousand Scales by replacing weak and ineffectual

bureaucrats with akuma and Yozi cultists. She secures widespread Dynastic loyalty by exerting an insidious infernal influence on her many powerful descendants. Those she can't coerce or convert in the government and the legions, she replaces and sacrifices to her hideous masters. And that's just on the Blessed Isle. In the Threshold, agents of the Reclamation take small steps to sow the seeds of future conflicts while the well informed, the worldly and the ambitious are too distracted by the shake-ups occurring in the Realm.

The second act of the Reclamation is the period of time most will erroneously assume is the beginning of the end of the Second Age—if not the start of a new era of tumult. The seeds of discontent sown in the Threshold during the first act begin to bloom, exciting chaos at the fringes of Creation. Concurrent with this bubbling trouble is a shift in the attitude of the Realm. Now that its government has been set aright, its foreign policy becomes ever more active and aggressive. The Magistracy and the Wyld Hunt once more become forces to be reckoned with in the lawless outer world, clashing constantly with the re-emergent “Anathema.” Tense rivals are pushed toward the brink of war as agents provocateurs play them against one another. Natural disasters crop up more frequently as geomantic saboteurs warp the landscape in efforts to nullify or poison dragon lines. The threads of fate and destiny fray all over the place for no apparent reasons (at least none that Sidereal observers can foresee). And all the while, it seems that even the newly re-energized Scarlet Empire can do nothing to keep the world from going to Hell. In fact, its efforts seem to be doing more harm than good.

It's during this time that those Exalted who dig beneath the turbulent surface of world events begin to see connections between them. They have an opportunity to realize, before it's too late, that chaos is breaking out because of deliberate, coordinated actions rather than some horrible confluence of ill fates. Hard work and good timing might even allow them to realize exactly who is behind these coordinated, deliberate acts. They might not be able to stop the Reclamation in its tracks, but they have time to reach out to Creation's other disparate defenders and begin to forge them into a more coherent, unified whole.

In the third and final act of the Reclamation, all hell tries to break loose. The secret of the Empress's disappearance is revealed, and the forces of Hell push themselves into Creation. If the Yozis' agents have acted unopposed all this time, the lords of the demon realm explode into Creation with their armies, turning vast

expanses of the world into twisted hellscapes attuned to their natures. If Creation's defenders have been diligent and active, at least since the second act, the Yozis' initial gains are not nearly so expansive. The fate of the world hangs in the balance, then, as the Yozis' armies try to expand their territory ever outward and Creation's loyal heroes fight to push the infernal hosts back into Hell where they belong.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Return of the Scarlet Empress breaks the Reclamation conflict down by region, as follows.

Chapter One: The Cursed Isle covers the effects of the Scarlet Empress's return on the Blessed Isle, specifically during the events of the Realm Civil War. It's here that the hidden agendas of the Empress and her husband, the Ebon Dragon, are first implemented. Their actions lead to the land's corruption into the Cursed Isle, which remains the base of her power throughout the series.

Chapter Two: The Scavenger Lands and the Eastern Front deals with Reclamation efforts in the East, guided by Malfeas, and the Empress's attempts to at last defeat the Confederation of Rivers. Creation's heroes must defeat an enemy made stronger by conflict.

Chapter Three: The Northern Front deals with Reclamation efforts in the North, motivated by Adorjan. Even if the infernal forces there are defeated, however, the North's people still face famine, unless Creation's champions manage to feed the starving masses.

Chapter Four: The Western Front deals with Reclamation efforts in the West, fought at the behest of She Who Lives in Her Name. Strange alliances must be formed to defeat the Realm and its infernal allies, alliances that might well offer heroes damnation of a different sort.

Chapter Five: The Southern Front deals with Reclamation efforts in the South, waged for Cecelyne. With the South transformed into a wasteland and its cities turned into desolate prison camps, Creation's heroes have their work cut out for them.

Chapter Six: Other Realms of Existence focuses on the reaction of those outside of Creation to the Empress's return and the Reclamation. Yu-Shan, Malfeas, the Wyld, the Underworld and Autochthonia all respond in their own ways to these events, and this chapter provides the lowdown on those responses.

Chapter Seven: End Game features the final showdown pitting the forces of the Ebon Dragon and the Scarlet Bride against those of Creation and Heaven, with the fate of the world at stake.









CHAPTER ONE

THE CURSED ISLE

The Scarlet Empress founded the modern Realm as a bulwark against the enemies of Creation and to consolidate her own power over the world. Her intentions were largely noble, if dictatorial. She knew the tumultuous history of the Shogunate and witnessed firsthand how the Great Contagion and the Balorian Crusade punished the selfish warlords who squandered their magical treasures on endless petty civil wars. For Creation to prosper and know peace, it must be firmly controlled, and so, the world's unlikely savior crowned herself the Scarlet Empress and turned the Sword of Creation on all challengers until none remained. The Dynasty she built of her own lineage was no less corrupt than the Gentes and military bureaucracy of the Shogunate, but that corruption stabilized the Realm by setting the impudent at each other's throats and making sure that the government depended upon her

leadership to survive. Her solution was elegant, almost perfect. Then she disappeared...

PRELUDE: WAR OF SUCCESSION

It has been years since the Scarlet Empress entered the Imperial Manse and never emerged. Since that time, the Anathema of old have returned in great numbers, the dead have dared to conquer the living with new Anathema at their vanguard and—though it is heresy to admit it—the Wyld Hunt can no longer contain these demons. Meanwhile, the nations of the Threshold have quietly and steadily slipped their leashes, almost daring outright rebellion.

The Time of Tumult does not yet threaten the shores of the Blessed Isle directly, but its chaos threatens its prosperity. Yet, it is also a time of opportunity for the heads of the Great Houses and other mighty Dynasts to vie for the Scarlet Throne. The winner will restore

PEACE IN OUR TIME

Open warfare could ultimately lead to a clear Dynastic succession from which the victor can attempt to rebuild the Realm's influence and stabilize the rest of Creation. Yet, this strategy ignores the fact that such chaos can only hurt the world in the short term and possibly create a window of opportunity for other world powers to enact their own schemes. Averting the Realm Civil War is not a likely or easy prospect, especially given that the Scarlet Empress structured Realm society precisely so that it would self-destruct in her absence.

Exalted is a game of epic deeds, however, and epic peace is certainly one such deed. While preventing or quickly halting the Civil War will not stop the Empress from returning and likely reclaiming her throne, it will force her to move slower and more carefully. In turn, slowing her down buys more time to thwart the Ebon Dragon's schemes and save the world. In a best-case scenario, a stable Realm might prove unassailable to direct retaking by the Queen of Hell, forcing her to wage a diabolic insurgency to set the stage for her husband's release.

peace, crush the Anathema and reassert the political and economic preeminence of the Realm. At least, that's the plan.

CANDIDATES

As of now, none of the Great Houses' legions have engaged one another in open warfare, apart from a few "training accidents" and skirmishes by "off duty" personnel, but each contender for the throne is building up forces for the inevitability of true civil war. Of these, only the candidates mentioned here are assumed to have amassed enough political and military clout to rally others to their banner. The Storyteller should certainly feel free to add other characters to this list as appropriate to his series, especially for a Dragon-Blooded series where one or more of the players' characters has a decent shot of taking the throne.

MNEMON

The daughter of the Scarlet Empress and head of her own Great House, Mnemon is arguably the mightiest sorcerer among the ranks of the Terrestrial Exalted,

and the only one to command Second Circle demons (albeit only with the aid of the Emerald Thurible). Her wealth and power matches that of any of the other heads of the Great Houses, and she is likewise versed in Dynasty Charms to keep her descendents in line. She believes that the Scarlet Throne is her birthright and will do anything it takes to claim this inheritance. Moreover, she is the only person in the Dynasty with certain knowledge as to her mother's whereabouts and current condition, secrets that terrify her beyond mortal comprehension. As immoral and arrogant as she is, Mnemon knows she is better for Creation than the Queen of Hell is, so she cannot help but be somewhat heroic for her efforts to stop the Ebon Dragon.

In addition to her "legitimate" political schemes, Mnemon is not remotely above conspiring with enemies of the Realm or even enemies of Creation to attain her self-appointed grand destiny. Most notably, she has negotiated a secret alliance with the Deathlord Mask of Winters. The two are nothing more than allies of convenience who fully intend to betray each other at the first reasonable opportunity, but both understand the tenuousness of the arrangement and the benefits of short-term cooperation. More information on Mnemon can be found in **Scroll of Exalts**, pages 88–89.

THE ROSEBLACK

There are those who see echoes of the early Scarlet Empress in the charismatic young military hero Tepet Ejava, though only her most heretical admirers dare posit her as a direct spiritual heir of the missing monarch. Most agree that she embodies the best of the Dynasty as a woman of culture, breeding, virtue and martial prowess. Many Dynasts fear her because they know she is better than them, but many more flock to her banner for precisely this reason. It infuriates Mnemon that a relative upstart such as the Roseblack already surpasses her in popularity, and worse, that part of this growing popularity stems from providing a viable alternative to Mnemon's own unpopularity.

Ultimately, Ejava is a symbol that the decay of Realm society has not yet poisoned the great nation's heart. Therefore, her call to arms bring together many factions that would otherwise have nothing in common, from the proudest officers of the most decorated legions to the grizzled veterans of the Vermilion. If Mnemon wins the throne, it will be by underhanded trickery or occult puissance. The Roseblack needs only to be herself to be a living banner of heroism. More information on Tepet Ejava can be found in **Scroll of Exalts**, pages 110–111.





DARK HORSES

A handful of other names persist as possible contenders, especially in the endless rumor mill of Dynastic society. Ragara Bhagwei, master of the Heptagram and son of Cynis and Ragara, is certainly mighty enough for consideration, but he is also thoroughly uninterested in politics. Cathak Cainan is more than capable of being emperor and would be an effective ruler, apart from the minor detail that he is fated to die soon, in which case an even bloodier civil war would follow the brief peace of his reign. His backing would help legitimize either of the front-runners, but he is not convinced that either of them deserve such help. Some young Sidereals even admire Cainan enough to smuggle him a peach of immortality or secretly tamper with his fate to extend his life span, heedless of the consequences of such actions to the destiny of the Realm or the Loom of Fate as a whole.

Perhaps the least likely candidate for the throne is young unknown V'Neef Bijar, whose bid for power has been solely focused on unlocking the Imperial Manse's outer defenses. She thinks she's very close to the solution. If she's right, she could win the prize decisively. More likely, her confidence is simply arrogance, or else the reward for her success will be a quick death as Mnemon seizes the manse for herself.

OTHER PLAYERS

Not all who play a major role in the succession war seek to win it for themselves. Others play a role of king-maker or a possible ace in the hole for whomever can win their loyalties.

REGENT FOKUF

More dirty jokes have been spoken with the name Fokuf as their punch line than any other political figure in recorded history. For this ignominy, and this alone, will he be remembered. Regent Fokuf is mortal and not remotely a contender, but a figurehead whose harmless ineptitude allows the Dynasty to disintegrate less quickly than it otherwise would. There is no question that he will perish in any succession, and he's almost stupid enough not to realize that fact.

It could be that Fokuf's bumbling fool persona is just a ruse masking an exceptionally ruthless mind, but no mere mortal could keep up such a façade for long. Indeed, he would have to be a Celestial Exalt—and a very cunning and powerful one at that—to fool everyone so thoroughly. His epic failure to do anything meaningful with his position and his propensity for vice makes him an ideal candidate for Exaltation as a Fiend, allowing him to sow discord and corruption as the Ebon Dragon's agent in preparation for the Queen of Hell's return.

THE DELIBERATIVE

While the Scarlet Empress reigned, the Deliberative served as a quaint nod to power-sharing rather than a representative body capable of checking her authority in any meaningful way. Its primary purpose was to keep politically ambitious members of the Great Houses in one place where it was easier to monitor their actions and execute them en masse if needed. In the wake of the Empress's disappearance, that body has grown slightly more powerful for lack of supervision, but it remains fractious to the point of impotence with regard to applying that power.

In the buildup to civil war, impassioned speeches on patriotism and calls for patience offer excellent opportunities for demagogues to rail against their rivals, but the looming and grim reality of war is not discussed in open session. Behind the scenes, however, members frantically conspire and trade rumors and make bids for power as factions woo the mighty to their banners. As members resign to prepare for the war and accept leadership positions in the factions, Regent Fokuf appoints the first replacements suggested to him, seemingly oblivious to the competence or allegiance of these appointees.

Once actual war starts, the course of the conflict determines how the Deliberative dissolves. In the best-case scenario, the Deliberative goes into indefinite recess as its members retreat to family strongholds or take up arms on the front lines. No one admits that the dissolution is anything other than temporary. A worst-case scenario sees a massacre within the body's meeting chambers as enemies long constrained to words turn blades and Essence on each other in an epic bloodbath. One or both factions could establish "the true Realm Deliberative" within the territories they control, populated by the original Deliberative members loyal to that side. A culling might also involve one faction's members not showing up for a meeting and sending legions in their stead to "purge endemic corruption" with due prejudice.

THE IMMACULATE ORDER

Both Mnemon and the Roseblack tread very lightly around the Immaculate Order and the Mouth of Peace, since a religious condemnation of either candidate could swing public opinion very dramatically and provide the other side with a large and highly mobile force of supernatural martial artists and broad infrastructural support. As the Realm's official government crumbles from lack of leadership and endemic corruption, the

Immaculate Order remains one of the only bastions of stability and order in the lives of the Blessed Isle's citizens. Temples continue worship on schedule, monks train and police rogue spirits, and the faith sees a resurgence as citizens pray that war will not come. Should the war result in the utter destruction of Realm society without a clear victor, whatever is left of the Immaculate Order will likely rebuild and restructure the people into a highly regimented theocracy for survival, even as monks weep for the sad necessity of dirtying their souls with secular concerns.


True to her title, the Mouth of Peace works very hard to remain neutral while giving the appearance that she is prepared to take either side in retaliation for the other's hostility, faithfully upholding her spiritual responsibilities despite Mnemon being her own grandmother. Mnemon has considered using Dynasty Charms to force the Mouth of Peace to a greater sense of filial piety, but fear of Sidereal reprisal and the possibility that the Mouth of Peace might actually resist using her immense will and start a holy war deters this course of action. Ironically, more members of the Order originally come from House Mnemon than from any other Great House, but most of these members owe more allegiance to the Order and ultimately the Mouth of Peace than to their namesake progenitor. Meanwhile, Ejava continues to grow more popular every day as a living example of the Immaculate ideal.

THE WYLD HUNT

Once the Civil War picks up in earnest, the Wyld Hunt effectively shuts down as an organization, even as its most zealous members such as Peleps Deled continue in their duties as independent vigilantes or sworn brotherhoods that fight against rogue gods and other enemies of the faith looking to take advantage of the chaos.

This is not to say that the war-wracked Blessed Isle becomes a safe place for Anathema, but reprisals come first and foremost from the military resources of the various factions looking to maintain order in their own territories rather than systematic theocratic policing. It is the Threshold that feels the loss of the Wyld Hunt more, since expeditions cease to journey forth to cull the most brazen Anathema. Realm partisans in exile to the Threshold provide some measure of security in the territories they claim, but such islands are few and far between. Elsewhere, Solar and Lunar empires rise, the Fair Folk maraud at whim, the dead extort prayers from the living, and demons stalk the lands.





THE ALL-SEEING EYE

The last intact and functional agency of the government established by the Empress, the Blessed Isle's intelligence network controls what is left of the Realm's coffers and has a far more useful coin—dirt on everyone. Presently, its neutrality and resources make it a prime target for recruitment by all factions, both as a single bloc and through subversion of individual agents via bribes, blackmail or direct coercion. Neither faction can afford to be spied on, but neither can either faction afford to antagonize the All-Seeing Eye into joining wholesale with its enemies. As a result, the organization has a chance to keep gathering useful secrets even as it keeps its options open. The disgraced House Iselsi's desire to regain a position of honor certainly factors into the agency's ultimate loyalty. Members of that House compose the bulk of the Eye's senior leadership, and they look carefully to the Civil War factions to see which might better afford an opportunity for legitimacy and redemption.

Once the cold war goes hot, however, the All-Seeing Eye's neutrality means little since there isn't even a fiction of a central government to which to report. Choosing a side means accepting this grim fact, though, which is not something the uppermost leadership can bring itself to do. These idealists remain deeply attached to the hope that the Scarlet Empress will return and put everything right. Unless this loyalty can be won by one of the factions, the Eye waits patiently and weathers the storm as best it can, faithfully turning over all its secrets to the Empress upon her glorious return.

She is, of course, most grateful.

HOUSE RAGARA

While all the Great Houses are major power players in their own right and certainly affect the outcome of the Civil War through their allegiance, House Ragara deserves special mention for being the wealthiest of them, hands down. Money buys troops, weapons and well-timed betrayals. Preparing for war is expensive; waging it more so. While individual members of House Ragara ally themselves with both factions, dividing the family like all the Great Houses, the House coffers are the true prize. Gaining control of those resources allows the faction that does so to grow dramatically. Of course, the House is not simply a prize to be won, and application of that wealth to the right purses nudges the direction of the war itself long before the elders of the family consider full alliance with one of the factions. The House knows it cannot field any candidate of its

own with a strong chance of winning, so influencing and buying the winner is its next best hope.

THE MOUNTAIN FOLK

Beneath the Realm, the Jadeborn toil and make war as they have always done, largely indifferent to who sits on the throne to whom they send promised tribute. None of the candidates have sought to win the Mountain Folk to their side, mostly because they don't fully grasp how useful the prehumans could be in outfitting or augmenting their legions. All that might change if either side actually does something that directly affects the subterranean world, such as Mnemon unleashing a Second Circle demon whose dance brings earthquakes or the Roseblack deploying an especially devastating piece of First Age artillery. Roused by self-preservation, the Mountain Folk will not hesitate to ally themselves with whoever best assures their survival.

THE SIDEREALS

The Chosen of the Maidens remain curiously unified on the matter of Realm stability. The Bronze Faction wants a stable and strong Realm to maintain authority over the rest of Creation through the usual channels of politics, religion and economics. In contrast, the Gold Faction wants a stable Dynasty so that the newly returned Solar Exalted can focus their efforts against the true enemies of Creation such as the Deathlords, the Fair Folk and the growing numbers of Yozi cults rather than distracting themselves in tedious conquest of a broken Realm. To this end, members of the Fivescore Fellowship who otherwise loathe each other work closely together to keep simmering hostilities from boiling into open warfare. Such efforts cannot continue to succeed indefinitely, of course, and most Sidereals understand this fact. Yet, every day that the conflict does not take place is another day that the heroes of Creation can focus on their true enemies, so the efforts go on.

If there must be war—and that day will come—a short and decisive war will inflict far less damage to Creation than a protracted conflict. Moreover, Chejop Kejak has made it clear that Mnemon is his last choice to become Empress, though it remains unclear whether this dislike is personal disdain for the selfishness of her ambition or has to do with futures he glimpsed in the Loom of Fate. Taken together, these two doctrines make sure that the likeliest course of action will be for Sidereal operatives to provide devastating covert aid to the Roseblack without her ever realizing they have taken the field. Such aid may even extend to direct assassination attempts on Mnemon's life.

THE REALM DEFENSE GRID

The Grid is not a faction, obviously, but it is most certainly the ultimate king-maker. Both sides fear and covet the power of the Imperial Manse, though only Mnemon has the slightest clue how to use it (and not much more than the slightest clue, if truth be told). Presently, the issue is moot. The walls remain sealed and warded by defenses constructed by High First Age Solar engineers and the Primordial Autochthon, before which Mnemon's occult might and superhuman genius might as well be a child's tantrum.

As stated previously, Storytellers who wish to bring the Grid in play as more than a doomsday nightmare can decide that V'neef Bijar (or some other enterprising party) discovers a means to unlock the outer seal and disarm its automated defense systems, allowing a high-stakes race to see who can reach the heart of the machinery and claim it first. Otherwise, the weapon plays no role in deciding the outcome of the Civil War.

THE THRESHOLD

"When the dragon gnaws her own tail, leave her to her feast." So the ancient Immaculate proverb goes, and its wisdom guides most sensible nations outside the Realm when it comes to interfering in the looming war. The Realm is an increasingly fractious superpower, but it is still a superpower, and the slightest hint of an outside threat dangerous enough to threaten the Dynasty in any meaningful way could rally all sides back to devastating unity. The Deathlords know this. The elders of the Silver Pact know this. Lookshy knows this, and it keeps rasher members of the Confederation of Rivers from doing anything too provocative.

Frankly, few other world powers matter enough to pose a viable outside threat, leaving the rest of Creation to fret that a Realm civil war will spill over into tributaries and eventually broaden to a world war. Nobody wants that, but since no one can really stop it, the general consensus is for everyone to keep their heads low and hope the storm blows over quickly. In contrast, the handful of recklessly aggressive powers such as Harborhead, Coral and the barbarian hordes of the Bull of the North view the looming conflict as a welcome opportunity to take their antagonism to the next level. If this helps ignite the sparks of open war so the Realm erupts in a blaze of fire and blood and Dynasts killing Dynasts, so much the better.

COLD WAR, HOT WAR

None of the major candidates for the throne wishes to be seen as responsible for starting a civil war, since

doing so would almost certainly galvanize undecided factions to ally against the perceived aggressor. As a result, Mnemon and the Roseblack remain locked in a very delicate détente with one another, goading each other to make the first move while frantically amassing allies and resources before that first move occurs. The following broad possibilities provide a toolkit for Storytellers to launch a war appropriate to each series, rather than dictating what ultimately shifts the conflict from cold to hot.

PREEMPTIVE STRIKE

If one side sees the other building up sufficient forces to win the war before it even begins, the smaller force might decide to strike first and hard to even the playing field. Mnemon is far more likely to use this strategy than the Roseblack, both because Ejava is accumulating forces and allies more quickly and because an underhanded surprise attack is far more in keeping with how Mnemon prefers to fight. It is not unthinkable, however, that the Roseblack might attack first if she believed that doing so was the only way to stop Mnemon from doing something epic and horrible to consolidate her power. A preemptive strike need not be based on accurate intelligence, either. If one of the factions believed the other was close to seizing the Imperial Manse or other apocalyptic assets, then striking first would be the only hope of victory left. Outside forces interfering in the course of the Civil War might even plant such rumors to precipitate open violence, especially if the Mask of Winters feels his ostensible ally is taking too long to get the killing started.

THE INSULT HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD

The gathering storm of Mnemon and the Roseblack's force buildup polarizes Realm society, introducing schism at every level. The Great Houses, legions and every other institution begin to fracture, sometimes pitting siblings or even spouses against one another as they back their preferred candidates. Disagreements that start as cordial policy debates at parties and other society events heat up as war appears imminent. At some point in the escalating hostilities, peace becomes more notional than reality, a fiction of courtesy that keeps the Dynasty from imploding outright.

In such a climate, all it takes is one spark to set off a cascade of violence—a personal insult that turns to a duel and then widens to a brawl, a riot and, before long, the Imperial City in flames. The sad fact of the matter is that such fights happen all the time, especially in light of the Great Curse nudging even the most disciplined Dragon-Blooded toward bouts of explosive instability.





But the looming war puts *everyone* on edge and lends political implications to otherwise random acts of violence. A flashpoint start to the war likely does not serve either Mnemon's or the Roseblack's agenda, but once the killing starts, there is no going back.

Outside of a petty personal squabble getting out of hand, the most likely trigger for the war is the murder of Regent Fokuf by fanatics loyal to either side. Indeed, the killers might not even really hold the loyalties they fight for and might be suicide commandos sent to frame the opposition for breaking the peace and directly insulting the Scarlet Throne by attacking the lawful regent. Few mourn his loss, but many partisans make a great show over the grievous injustice and how pious and patriotic they are for pursuing a vendetta against his killers and those they serve. In a game where Fokuf is more competent than he appears, he might even fake his own death to avoid being killed for real, with the side effect of unintentionally (or intentionally) setting off the war. For an even darker story combining elements of a first-strike trigger, Mnemon or the Roseblack could be the victim of assassination, leaving her faction to consolidate around a new leader and seek retribution.

OUTSIDE MEDDLING

Forces external to the Realm can push a preemptive strike or sudden flashpoint, but these means are not the only ones in which meddling can start the war. Dragon-Blooded are woefully unsuited to resisting the powerful social Charms of the Celestial Exalted, so any social saboteur with access to the right person at the right time (or the wrong person at the wrong time) can sow the seeds of hate with trivial ease. It is fortunate that the Sidereal Exalted watch over the Realm to prevent this sort of thing, but the Fivescore Fellowship is too overworked and understaffed to be everywhere at once, and Mnemon has already *invited* Abyssal Exalted onto the island.

In addition, the Realm Civil War is merely the backdrop of a larger conflict to follow. The Ebon Dragon has ample reason to make sure that the Blessed Isle suffers terribly and loses its most troublesome and curious heroes in the chaos before he dares send his herald betrothed to prepare for his release. Infernal Exalted move as silent provocateurs throughout the halls of Dynastic power, gleefully seeing to it that every side loses. The Realm's Sidereal protectors cannot divine or predict the presence of the Infernals moving among them as they are inherently outside fate, but the problem of discovering their interference is made worse

by the presence of active Abyssals on the island as an “obvious” explanation for any weird atrocities.

THEATERS OF BATTLE

Once started, the Realm Civil War rages on many fronts simultaneously. The two (or more) sides are not equal in every front, obviously, and each faction tries to focus the war on the type of conflict best suited to its resources. Storytellers should consult **Scroll of Kings** for more information on how nations fight wars in the Second Age, especially the Realm military tactics that all factions use.

CONVENTIONAL WARFARE

At its most basic level, the implosion of the Realm means legions fighting legions, with victory going to the superior forces in most engagements. The Roseblack has a decisive advantage in this type of conflict as a seasoned veteran and skillful military commander, not to mention that she almost certainly has more troops by the time armies clash. In addition to force-on-force engagements, legions lay siege and seek to defend cities, fortifications, ports and other strategic locations with the aim of building their own supply lines and disrupting the supply lines of the enemy. If the conflict starts with more than two factions, or if there are powerful neutral parties remaining, these supply lines get very tangled, very quickly, as forces must go around non-aligned territories or risk pulling them into the conflict as enemies.

The Realm is an island nation, so force deployments by ship allow for creative tactical repositioning without crossing through highly fortified or politically sensitive territory. High seas engagements result, involving naval forces drawn from all of the various directional fleets as appropriate to their loyalties, with the net result that the Inland Sea becomes a lot more unpredictably dangerous and permeable to smugglers, pirates and other outside forces. Any accretion of a large enemy fleet risks unifying opposing Realm fleets to wipe out the aggressor, even if only in temporary truce, but Celestial Exalted or Lookshy rangers who wish to sneak ashore and participate in the war in some capacity will find ample opportunity to do so. What will not happen is a blockade choking off one side or another so thoroughly that the other gains absolute military advantage. The Imperial Navy is too divided for that tactic to work except in the short term as part of besieging individual port cities.

SABOTAGE AND WETWORK


In any fair legion-on-legion war, the Roseblack holds a considerable advantage over Mnemon (and

DIVIDED LOYALTIES

Most soldiers are loyal to their unit ahead of whomever that unit serves. This means that legions and naval battle groups side as one with a particular faction rather than turning on each other. Therefore, the faction leaders woo the officers (especially the commanding officers) rather than hope for mass desertions to their cause that will not come. With this strategy, a faction that wins a large chunk of the chain of command can gain a block of power that may be game changing to the ultimate outcome of the war. For instance, if most of House Peleps takes one side and much of the Navy goes with them, that faction gains undisputed mobility through sea power and can initiate or break sieges of coastal territories almost trivially or flank any legions that lack this support. All factions in the war understand this danger and target their recruitment efforts accordingly.

most other candidates). Yet, fighting fair is hardly the only way to win a war. All sides use assassins, targeting command staff and other high-ranking officers as well as “asset personnel” such as sorcerers, medics, engineers and Dragon-Blooded elders whose high-Essence Charms constitute weapons of mass destruction in their own right. While the Roseblack is not particularly fond of terrorism, neither is she so stupid as to deny herself use of covert operatives entirely. Moreover, not all of her allies are so principled. Once the recalcitrant master spy Sesus Rafara (see **Scroll of Exalts**, pp. 98–99) decides to back Ejava directly, many of Mnemon’s top allies start dying off under mysterious circumstances. Such casualties only escalate exponentially once Sidereals get actively involved, providing much opportunity for upward mobility for junior officers and ambitious players’ characters.

For her part, Mnemon suffers no particular pangs of conscience for striking her enemies while they are most vulnerable. Her mother taught her that was the best time to attack, after all, and Mnemon has always been a quick study. Poison, disease, manse sabotage—these are simply tools like any other. Although she doesn’t have Sidereals, Mnemon can borrow Abyssal killers from the Mask of Winters, who is all too happy to have an increasing number of operatives active on



the Blessed Isle. Some battles are decided by epic duels between Sidereals and Abyssals in the dead of night, with the sleeping legions around none the wiser to the outcome.

SCORCHED EARTH

The internecine strife of the Shogunate saw the deployment of High First Age relic weapons of mass destruction and all-out Essence warfare on a scale that Creation has never witnessed since. So catastrophic were these battles that the Scarlet Empress built the modern Realm and ruled it with an iron fist so that the world would never suffer such chaos again. Sadly, the progression of the Realm Civil War sees a return to such strategies, at first sporadically to turn the tide of a major loss or as psychological weapons of demoralization. After all, both sides want to conquer the Blessed Isle, not a pile of rubble that used to be the Blessed Isle. These weapons and tactics see more use as the war grinds on, however, especially if the other theaters of conflict seem to be headed toward a decisive resolution and the defeated side feels it has nothing to lose. This goes double if the Roseblack appears to be winning, since Mnemon would rather burn the Blessed Isle to bedrock than yield her claim on it.

At the most basic level, the Civil War sees many thousands of Dragon-Blooded deploying combat Charms and spells in every battle, some of which cause significant collateral damage. Once Cathak Cainan and other warlike elders get involved, this trend only escalates until one or more finally unleashes the dread Charm *As In the Beginning* to obliterate entire battlefields in holocausts of elemental Essence. Mnemon's use of Second Circle demons and First Circle demon armies further compounds civilian casualties, especially if the Immaculate Order turns against her and she no longer feels the need to restrain her summoning to placate her granddaughter. Meanwhile, the Realm's modest stores of First Age weapons shake the earth under the tread of warstriders and the scream of thousand-forged dragons awakened from their silos. Should the Mountain Folk turn their forges to the task of arming one side (or both), the dwindling vestiges of the bygone Age could see sufficient replenishment to enable their use as basic tactics rather than weapons of last resort.

Such weapons are hardly precise, of course, resulting in the deaths of untold thousands of civilians caught in the crossfire of warring demigods. Villages lie burned and blasted by anima flux, and vast mobs of refugees camp around Immaculate temples to beg

the Dragons for deliverance. The devastation is so vast that Storytellers might wish to downplay the use of weapons of mass destruction to keep the game fun for all players. Even in a best case scenario, vast tracts of land lie scorched and fallow in the aftermath of the war, ruining farmlands and razing entire towns to slag and dust. The most terrible atrocities stand memorialized by shadowlands, Essence-irradiated blights and other geomantic nightmares haunted by angry and hungry ghosts. A worst-case scenario might fundamentally damage the geomancy of the Blessed Isle itself, setting off manse-cracking earthquakes and volcanic eruptions as Gaia bleeds punishment on those responsible.

PLAYING THE WAR

The epic backdrop of the Realm Civil War provides almost limitless potential for epic stories featuring any type of Exalted, but the specific types of stories vary with the nature of their protagonists.

DRAGON-BLOODED

The Realm is the Dynasty, and the Dynasty is the Realm. Unsurprisingly, the Children of the Dragons hold a greater stake and have greater opportunities for participation in the Civil War than any other type of Exalt. Most of the major leaders and aides to the faction leaders are Dragon-Blooded, and any of them could be controlled by players' characters looking to plan and guide wartime events. Of course, nothing stops a Terrestrial protagonist from making his own bid for the throne or taking over for one of the front-runners if she dies before the war ends. Alternatively, players may portray rank-and-file combatants who fight in the war or labor valiantly (and likely futilely) to remain neutral and protect their homes from being engulfed by the destruction. Pious Immaculates make excellent protagonists for such a game. On the other end, the players' characters might draw weapons and fight the brawl that sets off the war itself.

Wartime Dynasty stories are tragic, glorious or some combination of the two. Instances of sworn brotherhoods and close kin facing one another in battle over factional differences explore and challenge notions of loyalty and priorities. The very core factions themselves provide a philosophical contrast. On one hand, Mnemon is not so different from her mother, but for being slightly more corrupt and selfish. She is not a nice person, but she is an effective leader. If she wins, her reign is not likely to substantially change the structure of Realm society, making her the status quo option. On the other hand, the Roseblack certainly will shake things up if she comes out on top, whether

for better or worse. To choose a side is to choose the path of the future.

Given that the plot arc of the Realm Civil War dovetails into the return of the Scarlet Empress, the Storyteller can also use the philosophical divide between the factions to contrast utilitarianism with idealism. The Roseblack is a better and more just person than Mnemon, but she is ill suited to lead a rebellion against the occult might of the Queen of Hell. If Ejava wins, she might well have handed the Blessed Isle to the Ebon Dragon on a silver platter.

SIDEREAL EXALTED

While the Realm belongs to the Dragon-Blooded, the Sidereals of the Bronze Faction are its secret keepers. This is an exciting and terrifying job to have when everything is falling apart. As war draws near, Sidereal circles labor to preserve the fragile peace as long as possible. After violence breaks out, efforts turn to hastening the war to minimize its destruction on the people and land of the Realm, hopefully with an eye toward keeping Mnemon off the throne. Viziers who agree with this plan but don't much prefer the Roseblack could play king-makers as they search for a Plan C, perhaps coming into conflict with Gold Faction rivals all too eager to set up their most promising pet Solar as a Plan C of their own. Meanwhile, the war draws in enemies of Creation, some known and others not. Sidereals can clash with the Abyssals servants of the Mask of Winters or investigate strange omens that point to the secret machinations of the Infernals behind the scenes. Discovering those plots could give Creation a much-needed head start in preparing for the return of the Empress.

Above all, Sidereals stay busy. They do not rest because they can't afford to rest. Every Vizier who falls as a casualty of the war is irreplaceable and further increases the workload of those who remain. It doesn't help that Kejak has already outlived the span of time allotted to a Sidereal and could die at any moment. Bronze Faction elders spend more time harping on who will replace him than they do attending to the Civil War, ironically aping the conflict in microcosm with their own bids for succession.

SOLAR AND LUNAR EXALTED

The Chosen of neither the Sun nor the Moon find a particularly hospitable welcome on the Blessed Isle, which does not suddenly change just because the Dynasty implodes. On the plus side, the Wyld Hunt effectively shuts down as its members are drawn into the fray, allowing Anathema greater freedom from

directed hunters. On the negative side, the Dynasty at war remains a family and the adage "Me against my brother; my brother and I against the world" still applies. The visible presence of recognizable Anathema could quench the fires of war in sudden peace as both factions unite in common hate of the interloper, though this is probably scant consolation to those who bring about such peace.


Subtle Lunars and Solars can start, take advantage of or even change the course of the war if so inclined. They also might just be the kinds of vigilante heroes the Realm most assuredly does not want and yet desperately needs to foil the schemes of the Infernals and Abyssals. Immaculate doctrine holds sway over the Blessed Isle and condemns the Anathema, but most adherents have never met a Solar or Lunar in person, let alone witnessed one save their friends and family from the unjust cruelties of war. The sight of such deeds tests the faith of the masses. Some fall back on zealous certainty that it is all a dirty Anathema trick, while others abandon their religion to follow the shining champions. The majority live in between, grateful but frightened and desperately hoping that the Anathema move on before their presence brings reprisal from the vestiges of the Wyld Hunt or factional military forces.

ABYSSAL AND INFERNAL EXALTED

The Chosen of Creation's enemies play an important role in the Realm Civil War. Both groups have reasons to foster and worsen the chaos of battle, to kill those who would dare posit peace or guide the Dynasty to rise from its own ashes. The Mask of Winters has at least one circle of Abyssals active on the Blessed Isle, though probably not many more deathknights than that, since this deployment represents approximately half his retinue. Playing this circle affords a chance to indulge in all manner of wickedness under the fog of war and blame the atrocities on whichever party is most convenient or amusing. Mnemon has virtually no control over her Anathema allies and comes to realize that fact with growing horror as the conflict worsens. Yet, she also recognizes that their presence keeps Sidereal assassins too busy to hunt her in the night. Therefore, the best she can do is supply interesting targets and hope for the best.

In contrast, the Infernal Exalted must play a more careful game during the war, lest their presence give away the next act too soon. They become the "anti-Sidereals" of the conflict, secret enemies instead of secret protectors. While some are frustrated by such





constraints, most appreciate that a bit of patience now leads to a lot more fun later. Of course, if no survivors get away to speak of an Infernal rampage in the meantime, that hardly threatens the master plan. More than any other type of Exalt, Green Sun Princes see the bigger picture and understand that the Civil War is ultimately unimportant except as a setup to the return of the Scarlet Empress.

ALCHEMICAL EXALTED AND JADEBORN

If the Seal of Eight Divinities has opened and Autochthonians have established a strong foothold in Creation prior to the Civil War, their involvement in the conflict follows the same model as that of other major Threshold powers. Of course, this isn't an option if the gateway to the Great Maker opens on the Blessed Isle itself. If given the opportunity, however, the nations of Autochthonia wisely stay out of the way and let the Dragon-Blooded duke it out, involving themselves only with a very compelling reason. If the breaking of the Seal follows the start of the war, however, there is a chance that the Realm will reunify against the alien threat. Such fear might be groundless xenophobia or pragmatic paranoia, depending on why the Autochthonians arrive.

A brutally war-wracked Blessed Isle could prove easy pickings for the Children of the Machine God to loot and conquer, especially in alliance with the Realm-oppressed Mountain Folk. By the time Mnemon or the Roseblack suspects anything, the war machines are already bursting from the ground to discharge millions of magitech-enhanced supersoldiers.

Even absent the return of Autochthon or his Chosen, Mountain Folk characters can get involved in the war as mercenaries or outright allies of any faction that courts them. Pattern Knights could fight alongside Dynasts with the promise of a more egalitarian arrangement between the Realm and its neighbors below if the faction supported by the Mountain Folk wins.

MORTALS

When the Exalted make war, the common people suffer most. Heroic mortals can do little in the face of apocalyptic battles other than flee or die or fight valiantly in the face of impossible odds. Yet, widespread war provides a milieu for all manner of gritty survival stories and grim social commentary rooted in candid glimpses of life in the trenches. What is glorious to the Chosen is hellish to those less blessed. Such games might even continue after death with the ghosts of the slain avenging war crimes or guiding comrades to victory.

ACT ONE: PRAISE HER MAJESTY

The various factions of the Realm Civil War fight to claim the Scarlet Throne on the assumption that the Scarlet Empress is dead or gone. She is neither. The woman who was once the Scarlet Empress is no more, but from her soul and flesh has come the Queen of Hell, bride-to-be of the Ebon Dragon. Of all the partisans to the war, only Mnemon knows this horrid truth, and she hides it from all who follow her. The Shadow of All Things believes his betrothed will free him, for she is the culmination of Ages of scheming. To do so, she must first reclaim her throne, and the Civil War provides a perfect opportunity.

DAMNATION IN PRELUDE

For all her tyranny and wicked acts, the Scarlet Empress remained a hero throughout her reign. Her victims might argue, but what she did, she did to save the world—even from itself. She could have been a kind ruler or a just ruler, but Creation is neither kind nor just, so she forged herself into the ruler the world needed and deserved. She became more than any mere Dragon-Blood had any right to aspire to. She achieved the impossible in winning the Sword of Creation and did the unthinkable in turning its naked fury upon the land to drive back the limitless hordes of chaos. For her deeds, she earned the grudging respect and support of the most powerful Celestial Exalt yet living and proved his peer in ruthlessness and vision. And then, as if this legend were not enough, she birthed the greatest and most prosperous bloodline of Terrestrial Exalted the world has ever known and tasked her descendants with upholding her vision of lasting peace. She mastered sorcery beyond her station and prolonged her life by every means at her disposal, knowing her death would undo her works and deliver Creation into darkness.

In the end, the Empress damned herself with her fear of death, leading her to explore the prophecies and power of *The Broken-Winged Crane* when she finally understood that it is the fate of all things to end. She had no intentions of giving herself in slavery to the Yozis. She sought their prayer book only for its unique relationship with time, that every copy is but a shadow of the original yet to be written, each more accurate than its predecessor as it approached the nexus of its authorship. And so, in the heart of the Imperial Manse, adorned in the raiment of the Mother of Sorcery, the Scarlet Empress surpassed all previous hubris and wrote



Yozis

The Broken-Winged Crane, proclaiming herself Queen of Titans forever beyond the reach of Saturn's knife.

And so she was.

The Ebon Dragon welcomed the Queen of Hell when the portal her authorship scribed into being slammed closed behind her. His claws caressed the flesh from her bones, and the winding kisses of his tongue restored her whole. He learned the truths of pain from the Celestial Incarnae and his imprisonment, and this pain he gave to his Queen in fulfillment of her prayers. What all Yozis had endured, she endured, and when he finished with his lesson, he laughed at the feeble naked thing he held. So small. So human. She begged him for release, and he savored this most heartfelt and useless of prayers. Then he twisted her into a parody of herself and a shadow of his likeness, the instrument of his release.

PEACE AT LAST

The Scarlet Empress can return to Creation at any point in the Realm Civil War, but her timing and the events leading up to that point affect the strategy she employs.

TREADING CAREFULLY

If someone else now controls the Realm Defense Grid, the Empress dares not step through the hell-rift

AKUMA OR NOT?

The question of whether the Scarlet Empress has become an akuma of the Ebon Dragon or merely carries his wedding ring and is therefore bound to him as a herald-slave of his power is left to Storytellers to decide. If she has become an Infernal, then she is a pathetic shell of the woman she once was and ultimately the puppet of a larger villain, beyond redemption or saving. She is simply an enemy—a dangerous one—but nothing more. Her tragedy is that of object lesson in how far the mighty may fall.

Yet, as the unfortunate and unwilling wife of the Ebon Dragon, though possessed of her own will beneath the chains of her bondage, the Queen of Hell can be more—an epic figure who can subtly fight her master and secretly aid the heroes of Creation even as she is the intended instrument of apocalypse. This is a very different story of damnation, and the truth sets the tone for the saga of her return. Storytellers should choose carefully.



that returns to the place where she left Creation. Doing so would spoil the surprise of her true nature, so she returns through a portal somewhere else on the Blessed Isle and marches toward the Imperial City, gathering a vast throng of followers behind her in parade. She personally engages any armed forces in her path who do not surrender and join her army. She uses only her Dragon-Blooded Charms, but her power is sufficient to overcome virtually any opposition that she encounters. In her mercy, she gives a second chance to those she defeats this way to join with her. As a result, her followers number in the tens of millions by the time she lays peaceful siege to her capital and demands her throne.

The Empress does not hesitate to slip away using her Ebon Dragon Charms if she is genuinely threatened, such as by an attack using the Realm Defense Grid, whereupon she sneaks into the Imperial Manse and expresses her displeasure with all her Infernal glory when night falls. Barring such an assault, however, she maintains careful détente and reasserts her claim each day, drawing on her Dynasty Charms to take back the loyalty of her descendants. Eventually, she sways most of the Realm to her cause, so the Imperial Manse's new owner must surrender or commit genocide upon the Blessed Isle's populace with the Sword of Creation. Of course, this is exactly what Mnemon does if she holds the manse and has an opportunity to open fire on her mother. Yet, that scenario turns to a second and more terrible civil war in which unrestricted deployment of weapons of mass destruction utterly devastates the Blessed Isle. Worse, it probably still ends with the Scarlet Empress taking the manse—even if the manse and the cratered peak of Mount Meru are all that remain of the continent.

GRAND ENTRANCE

It is far more likely that the Imperial Manse remains inviolate and unclaimed, allowing the Scarlet Empress to enter Creation within its interior and make a very dramatic homecoming. From within the control room of the Imperial Manse, the Queen of Hell insets the Heart of the Realm and sets the Sword of Creation to warning mode. The sky over the Blessed Isle darkens with heavy clouds seething with elemental energies of every aspect. Red lightning arcs from these clouds and converges into a colossal likeness of the Empress standing astride the pinnacle of the Imperial Mountain. The iconic countenance that most of Creation sees stares scornfully at those beneath and speaks in a thunderous voice that half of Creation hears. In her address, she identifies herself as the Scarlet Empress, rightful ruler

of the Blessed Isle. The rest of her message depends on the state of the Realm at the time she speaks.

If war still rages, the Empress calls for the Dynasty to lay down its arms. The vast majority complies immediately. Some holdouts do not, but the Empress makes an example of whatever fool attacks next with a spell channeled through the Imperial Manse's Metasorcerous Resonator. As the aggressor's ashes blow away in sizzling gusts, the war definitively ends. She then invites the leaders of the factions to attend her in the Imperial Manse to explain their actions and beg her forgiveness for their temerity.

If the war has ended or was prevented from starting, the Empress addresses the current ruler of the Realm. If Fokuf is still regent, he is the target of her sorcerous wrath and is seemingly annihilated. To a more competent Dragon-Blooded emperor or empress, she extends praise and amnesty, inviting that person to attend her in the Imperial Manse and receive a reward for showing the strength of will and leadership to hold the Realm together in her absence. She adjusts her speech to more exotic power-sharing arrangements, addressing the most powerful leaders equally as necessary. This is also the case if the Realm has separated into independent na-

INCONVENIENT CASUALTIES

War tends to kill people, which can include characters important to the plot of this story. Storytellers can handle such deaths a variety of ways. First, they can decide that some of the deaths have been faked or misreported, especially if there isn't a body to verify the demise or it turns out that the person who died was a body double or lookalike bodyguard. This narrative device can feel forced if used repeatedly, though.

Alternatively, the Storyteller can reassign the role the dead character was supposed to play to someone else who is equally qualified, or even divide the role among several characters. For example, Mnemon's sorcerous contributions to the resistance might be replaced by those of Ragara Bhagwei. The last and likely best option is to go "off the map" and improvise a plot that deals with the demise, allowing the narrative to flow logically to its next point, stealing from the "script" only as necessary.

tions at peace with one another, though she has little praise for rulers not mighty enough to win the entirety of the Blessed Isle.

Refusing this invitation means going into hiding or hasty exile from the Realm, since the invitation is simply a courtesy. Spurning her generosity without fleeing prompts military forces suddenly loyal to the Scarlet Empress to arrest the usurper and take her back to the Imperial Manse by any means necessary. Should a successor enter the Imperial Manse—willingly or otherwise—she emerges *thoroughly* loyal to her “rightful” liege as the new Minister of Reconstruction. This conversion could be the result of mind control or replacing that person with a Black Mirror Shintai doppelganger, but the end result is the same. The Empress effectively subdues her challenger and gains a mouthpiece to manage her bureaucracy while she focuses on the more important business of freeing the Ebon Dragon.

In the event that a player’s character has won the throne, the Storyteller should make sure that the successor has plenty of opportunity to oppose the Empress or flee her grasp. It should be fairly obvious that the better part of valor offers a far greater chance to mount effective resistance later, given the perils of assaulting the Imperial Manse, but the option remains open for those brave, clever or foolish enough to make the attempt anyway. Capturing or enslaving a player’s character as a reward for his or her being epic enough to win the throne is probably not going to sit well with that player, unless this plot point leads to an escape or rescue story from which the hero has a reasonable chance to continue as a protagonist.

REBUILDING THE REALM

Even if a bid for peace averted the Civil War, the Realm’s decay in the absence of its Empress means that cleaning house is the first order of business. If Mnemon lives, she casts the spell *Blood Without Ties* on herself (see p. 36) and hides or flees to found the Righteous Orphan Rebellion (see pp. 36–38) in opposition to her mother. This is not done lightly, given that it forfeits her power over her own descendents, but extreme dangers call for extreme solutions. Mnemon does not willingly meet with her mother under any circumstances. This leaves the Roseblack as the likeliest candidate to assume the position of Minister of Reconstruction, but Ejava’s response depends heavily on how the war and her bid for the throne has changed her loyalties. If she decides to rebel against the Empress, the Roseblack takes a First Age vehicle to Lookshy and accepts asylum

from the Seventh Legion. In this case, Bal Keraz, the loyal head of the All-Seeing Eye, is the second pick for appointment.

PUBLIC APPEARANCE


It would make sense for the Empress to hide within the safety of the Imperial Manse and direct events through the proxy of the Minister of Reconstruction. She has many enemies, after all, and a secret identity as the Queen of Hell that she cannot afford to have anyone discern. Yet, she opts not to base herself within the impregnable fortress. Instead, she resumes residence within her palace in the Imperial City (or the largest manse in the largest remaining population center if the Civil War leveled the Imperial City).

The Empress chooses public vulnerability over private safety for a simple reason. After so long of an absence, the people of the Realm need to feel that she is among them once more as a flesh-and-blood ruler and not merely an abstract presence broadcast through the Defense Grid. Without such face time, rumors would circulate that she never returned and that her broadcasts are forgeries by someone who has seized control of the Sword of Creation. Such rumors would corrode her power, so the best way to quell them is by making as many public appearances as possible, trusting in her retinue of bodyguards and her own awesome might to deter assassination attempts. Indeed, she uses social Charms to plant suggestions in several high-profile Dynasts compelling them to make attempts on her life, allowing her to demonstrate the folly of such action and deter future attempts.

THE GREAT PURGE

As her first order of business, the Minister of Reconstruction establishes military courts that investigate and court martial senior Dynasts on corruption charges—most legitimate, but some trumped-up as necessary to dispose of troublemakers. The courts review all actions taken since the Empress ostensibly sequestered herself in the Imperial Manse when filing charges, meaning that many senior government officials and elders of the Great Houses have much to answer for. Those found guilty of treason face execution unless they appeal to the mercy of the Scarlet Empress, which most do. Only those who still seem useful to her receive this mercy, for which they come before her as the Minister of Reconstruction did and likewise return from their audience with newfound faith in the greatness and righteousness of their lawful Empress.

Shortly after the investigations begin, the Empress declares the All-Seeing Eye a subsidiary bureau of the



courts of inquiry, reporting directly to the Minister of Reconstruction. The secret police become more secret, but publicly acknowledge increased recruiting with a stern admonition to the populace that anyone might be an agent of Eye. The rise in arrests of previously untouchable Dynasts and organized crime leaders validates this warning, with the resulting paranoia propagating good citizenship.

HEALING THE LAND

The aftermath of war leaves the Realm a fissured, blasted mockery of its former grandeur, especially if any of the sides unleashed weapons of mass destruction. The first step to reclaiming the land is making sure that it can feed the populace that remains. In places where great battles have torn muddy fissures and craters in farmland, the solution is as simple as public works projects to flatten, plow and re-seed. Dragon-Blooded Charms greatly speed such projects, so the Minister of Reconstruction assigns those convicted of minor crimes to guide and aid work details as punishment. The public cheers the justice of this policy.

Public works cannot repair areas blasted with advanced weapons or sorcery, so the Empress attends to the efforts herself. If the season permits, she casts an Infernal version of Benediction of Archgenesis to make the land life-bearing once more. It is regrettable, but the land cannot be healed back completely from ruin so dire, as attested by the strange and ominous shapes of the flora and the peculiar undulations of the shadows they cast—or so the people are told. The people accept this explanation and do not question the miracle that they can resettle the places they thought lost forever. On a more localized scale, powerful Infernal Exalted loyal to the Reclamation follow the instructions of the Ebon Dragon to aid his betrothed's efforts to consolidate her reign. Out of sight of witnesses, these Infernals use the Charm Constructive Convergence of Principles (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, p. 136) to shape the land back to (tainted) wholeness. Heaven is most alarmed, but response teams arrive too late time and again to catch the perpetrators in action. The Empress responds to inquiries from Chejop Kejak with feigned puzzlement and angry questions of her own, accusing his Sidereals of laxity in protecting the Blessed Isle from these strange, hidden enemies.

Until the Realm restores sufficient farmland, widespread food shortages persist. Once more, the miraculous grace of the Empress (or rather, her hidden Infernal allies) save the day. Distribution centers

open in every province for hungry citizens to come and receive emergency rations of a rainbow-hued gruel conjured with sorcery. The people are grateful for this gift.

Only the wisest savants realize that this gruel is actually a mixture of grain and mashed up locusts created with the Infernal Charms Locust Mana Plague and Spawning Pit Sanctification (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, pp. 126–128). No one really believes the ravings of such savants, especially after their “felonies” come to light and the Black Helms drag the savants away to face the Minister's courts. By diluting the locusts with grain, none of the telltale mutations appear in the populace to betray what is going on. Yet, the meals reinforce loyalty to the Empress for providing the food and build faith in the laws of the strong over the weak that neatly mesh with “everyone in their station” doctrines of the Immaculate Order. As a result, society grows more docile and more civil.

TERRORIST ACTS

If the Realm Civil War never happened or did not do enough damage to the Blessed Isle to justify the sorts of physical reconstruction projects described in the “Healing the Land” section, the Queen of Hell has a simple backup plan: stage a terrorist attack on the Realm. Her Infernal allies are more than up to the task and relish the opportunity to cut loose with some mayhem, especially not-so-subtle Slayers tired of all the waiting and plotting. The goal is to hit hard and fast, and if Sidereals die trying to stop the mysterious Infernal threat, so much the better.

In the wake of this national tragedy, the Scarlet Empress declares a period of mourning and a state of emergency, offering pardons to Dynasts accused of crimes who aid in the relief efforts. She also times the reinstatement of the Wyld Hunt to follow the attack, in which case the anger of her people brings even more hunters to her recruiting stations. Given the social benefits of this scheme, she may enact it even if the Civil War brings sufficient devastation that worsening the situation is not strictly necessary.



THE WYLD HUNT REBORN

Soon into her reign, the Scarlet Empress instates a new Wyld Hunt to police the land and keep the populace safe from the growing threat of the Anathema abroad. If he lives, she appoints Peleps Deled (see **Scroll of Exalts**, pp. 102–103) the Supreme Arbiter of this organization and encourages recruits to follow his holy example. Volunteers flock to her recruiting stations to answer her call, so many that waiting lists for training new *shikari* require the reassignment of several legions to the task. Those descended directly from the Empress receive priority on these lists. Within a month, the academies of the righteous begin turning out new patrols, with each graduating class honored by a personal hologlyphic visitation from the Empress. She commands them—using her Dynasty Charms—to uphold their duties faithfully. The patrols ruthlessly attack suspected Anathema footholds across the Blessed Isle.

THE IMPERIAL LEGIONS

As punishment for the Civil War, the Scarlet Empress disbands the legions of the Great Houses and forbids them from amassing military forces. She confiscates their arsenals, and any objections result in inquiry by the Minister of Reconstruction's courts (at best) or the Wyld Hunt (at worst). The Empress

then drafts all former soldiers of the disbanded legions as legionnaires of the Realm. She provides generously for these soldiers, giving them their own supplies of the rations offered to the civilian populace. Elite units receive an even more powerful magic diet: undiluted locust mash that gradually transforms these regiments into tiger warrior-level supersoldiers.

The casualties of war leave the Realm with far fewer legions than it had at its height, meaning that the nation cannot afford to project force as broadly into the Threshold. The force remaining, however, is still more than sufficient to grind any rogue satrapy to dust, creating a *détente* similar to an angry mob circling warily around a soldier with a drawn sword. Yes, the mob could rush him, but someone is going to get skewered, and no one wants to be that person. Therefore, it is still possible for the threat of force to maintain order and control far exceeding the scope of what actual military action can maintain.

Even without war, the Empress doesn't need much pretense to restructure the legions under her banner, especially given the irresponsible behavior of Great House scions during her absence. She takes a less heavy-handed approach in such a situation, though, co-opting most of the private troops while leaving intact House legions whose leaders already serve her

cause faithfully. Such judiciousness further expands her popularity within the military.

THE IMMACULATE ORDER

Assuming she lives, the Mouth of Peace is delighted to the point of rapture to see her Empress back in charge. She feels the Dragons have smiled upon her, and strictly speaking, this is true. The Immaculate Order encourages and vigorously supports the reinstatement of the Wyld Hunt and approves of the social changes that bring a greater sense of piety and humility to the masses. Little about the Order itself changes, nor does the Empress ask for change. Indeed, she thanks it publicly for helping maintain hope and faith through the darkness and chaos of her absence. Her gratitude is not limited simply to words. To support the training of the new Wyld Hunt, she donates vast fortunes to the coffers of the Order and commissions the construction of hundreds of new temples. Bells ring throughout the land to drive away wicked spirits, and the prowling Infernal agents do their best not to laugh constantly.

THE THOUSAND SCALES

The tangled, almost arbitrary bureaucracies of the Thousand Scales already parody the complexities and contradictions of demon society. Therefore, the Scarlet Empress does very little to restructure the Thousand Scales other than to direct the Minister of Reconstruction to excise the most self-serving corruption and randomly shuffle up departmental membership to break up conspiracies and embedded organized crime. Thus can the bureaucracy get back to strangling itself more efficiently.

THE COST OF REBUILDING

Rebuilding the Realm in the wake of its five-year decay is an enormously expensive undertaking and exponentially more so in the wake of the Civil War that depleted coffers on all sides and functionally destroyed the Realm economy. The Scarlet Empress can always print more money, but this leads to rampant and destabilizing inflation that cannot be sustained for any duration. To back additional paper scrip with jade, she needs to get more jade into circulation and into treasuries.

The easiest way to recoup jade is by appealing to the national pride of the Blessed Isle's peasants in order to have them turn in family baubles and talismans. As part of this appeal, she provides social incentives to rat out those who hoard wealth during the hard times (such as their Dragon-Blooded betters). Demanding increased tribute from the Mountain Folk is also an option, albeit a risky one. With her legions augmented by Infernal

training Charms and her obvious hold on the Defense Grid, the Empress has enough muscle to ensure compliance, but locking her forces into a suppression war ties them up at a time when appearing strong is a necessary deterrent to foreign aggression. Although the confiscation of property from those found guilty of crimes by the Minister of Reconstruction provides a steady influx of cash, this method suffers from the relative poverty of everyone in the wake of the Civil War.

One further consideration is that the Empress is first and foremost the Queen of Hell. Although rebuilding the Realm as a superpower gives her time to enact plans for the Ebon Dragon's release, she does not need the Realm to survive beyond that. Still, she cannot be seen to be instituting obviously unstable governance policies, lest those who follow her economy with supernatural acumen catch on and pry into matters she cannot afford to have studied too closely.

REACTIONS ABROAD

The citizens of the Threshold are not happy to see the Scarlet Empress back, to put it mildly. Expansionist aggressive powers suddenly pull back and rethink their ambitions, not at all interested in testing the power of the Realm Defense Grid for themselves. Even the tributaries of the Realm feel a sense of horror that the tyrant has returned to stomp her booted heel upon their face once more, tempered by some relief in knowing how she protects what is hers from being taken by other worse powers.

THE SCAVENGER LANDS

The Confederation of Rivers has a long history of negotiating a delicate détente with the Scarlet Empress, so her return is disheartening but not exactly cataclysmic. If she shows up and nips the Civil War in the bud or even stops it just before it spreads to engulf Creation, the prevailing sentiment is actually relief. Yes, this means the Realm is a prominent superpower again rather than a crumbling superpower, but a unified Dynasty can be negotiated with. Lookshy has the most mixed feelings on the subject, since the long absence of the Scarlet Empress put it in a position to establish itself as a true superpower. Those ambitions end immediately with her brazen use of the Defense Grid to address the Realm. On the other hand, stability is good, and her return means that the Seventh Legion no longer has to police the world and can focus on matters at home, such as checking the Mask of Winters.

THE DEATHLORDS

The dark lords of the Underworld feel anger and terror at the return of the Empress, especially the two



who have made themselves very visible expansionist targets in recent years: the Mask of Winters and the Silver Prince. The Defense Grid can wipe Thorns or Skullstone off of Creation in a single shot, to say nothing of their armies and fleets. Fortunately for the Silver Prince, the farther away the Sword of Creation fires, the more damage it does to the Blessed Isle. Therefore, he gambles that as long as he does not overtly antagonize the returned monarch, she will not dare risk the safety of her nation to take him down.

The Mask of Winters, however, is a mere stone's throw away by comparison and a very viable target. Since the Defense Grid cannot fire directly into the Underworld, the Mask immediately pulls Juggernaut and the bulk of his military forces back through the shadowlands around Thorns to safety in the Underworld. This development delights his neighbors and warms diplomatic relations between the Realm and Lookshy considerably.

The less visible Deathlords fume and fuss at having to hold back on their grand schemes to murder the world for now, but they are immortal and patient and can afford to wait for an opportunity to present itself. They look forward to the death toll the return of the Empress will almost certainly precipitate. Furthermore, if the Civil War resulted in shadowlands on the Blessed Isle linking back to Stygia, they already have a foothold from which to strike her.

SOLAR AND LUNAR EXALTED

While the cat's away, the mice will play. So it has been for the Celestial Exalted in the time since the Empress disappeared, though they can hardly be called mice. The Silver Pact stirred from the edges of Creation to infiltrate and influence Threshold nations. As for the Lawgivers, only 20 or so repeatedly incarnated into the world throughout the reign of the Empress, with the rest of their Exaltations trapped in the Jade Prison. The Empress has never faced more than a score of active Lawgivers at one time, and even her bolstered Wyld Hunt can only hope to keep most Solar activity off the Blessed Isle. As the Bull of the North demonstrates, Solar Exalted are quite adept at building empires very quickly, and the trouble with his is that there isn't a central base of operations to obliterate with the Defense Grid. More importantly, such empires are popping up all over Creation, and shooting them all down is simply not feasible.

The Celestial Exalted certainly fear the Scarlet Empress, inasmuch as they fear anything, but whereas much of the world lets fear cow them, the typical

response from the Lawgivers and the Stewards is to leap happily into the fray. The Empress cannot stop them from challenging her reign at every turn, testing her borders and poking their noses into her affairs. Of course, what they and the rest of the world don't realize is that the Queen of Hell has no intention of stopping these Anathema. They make excellent scapegoats, after all. More to the point, she doesn't have to stop them, just slow them down enough to complete her mission and free the Ebon Dragon. Punishing his most hated enemies will be his first order of business.

SIDEREAL EXALTED

If the Scarlet Empress is the mother of the Realm, Chejop Kejak is its father. He and the Bronze Faction shepherded the Immaculate Order and the Wyld Hunt from behind the scenes, while Kejak himself provided the Empress with invaluable counsel on metaphysical and geopolitical matters to help her maintain her grip on power—and thus the stability of Creation. The disappearance of the Empress meant that the Bronze Faction no longer had to delicately work around her to accomplish their objectives, but it also meant that they had a far more unstable Realm demanding far more time and resources to keep intact. If civil war has happened anyway, it means that the Bronze Faction has failed and shifted toward ending the conflict quickly with a clear transition of power—likely to the Roseblack.

The return of the Empress throws the Bronze Faction into panicked confusion and dashes its hopes of putting a controllable successor on the throne. The Fivescore Fellowship did not foresee this turn of events in the Loom, meaning her homecoming was somehow outside fate and therefore likely involved the Yozis or the Neverborn in some way. Neither prospect bodes well for Creation. What is more confusing is that the fate of the Empress suddenly reappears on the Loom as abruptly as the strands terminated five years ago. The Sidereals have no way to realize this fate is a lie woven by her Ebon Dragon Charms. Needless to say, Kejak is among the first visitors to meet the Empress. She states she spent her departure within the Imperial Manse and refuses to elaborate further, but assures him before dismissing him that she is fixing the Realm and has matters well in hand. Such explanations do not sit well with Kejak, but he detects no falsehood in her or anything peculiar about her Essence (again, courtesy of her Ebon Dragon Charms).

Kejak continues to monitor the situation and confer with the Empress as the reconstruction progresses. He has a bad feeling about everything, especially as the



presence of so many Infernals laboring on behalf of the Queen of Hell introduce escalating prognostication errors. The use of Blasphemy Charms only heightens his disquiet, proving the active involvement of the Yozis without any clarity as to how or why. The Empress plays cat-and-mouse with every successive visit, cagey but never outright hostile. It serves her ends to have Sidereals running every which way, giving a chance for Infernal covens to pick off a few Viziers they can catch alone. She wants the Green Sun Princes practiced in hunting and killing Sidereals for the next phase of her betrothed's plan.

On the Gold Faction side, the reinstatement of the Wyld Hunt flushes more panicked Solars into the nurturing arms of the Cult of the Illuminated than ever before. This eventuality is a thin silver lining to a very dark cloud, of course, as even the Lawgivers under the tutelage of their Sidereal handlers have much to fear from the remobilization and unity of the Scarlet Dynasty.

THE RIGHTEOUS ORPHAN REBELLION

Not every member of the Dynasty accepts the Scarlet Empress back with open arms, however. Mnemon knows where her mother has been and what has happened to her. While she is not at all eager to share this information during her bid for the throne, matters change after the Empress returns and reclaims power. If Mnemon perished during that conflict, then Storytellers will need to explain an alternative origin for the insurgency, perhaps attributing it to another hero who discovers a secret journal authored by Mnemon and learns the terrible truth. By default, however, Mnemon

lives and goes into hiding the moment the Empress makes her presence known, either heading out to the Threshold or lying low at one of her hidden redoubts in the countryside of the Blessed Isle. Having immunized herself against her mother's Dynasty Charms by means of the spell Blood Without Ties that she invented expressly for that purpose, Mnemon begins gathering her rebellion.

RECRUITMENT

Building an insurgency against the Scarlet Empress requires very delicate maneuvering, and Mnemon has closely studied the failures of those who have attempted such in the past. Infallible Messenger is a dangerous way of communicating, since there is no way to know if the target will be alone upon receiving the message. Therefore, Mnemon summons a First Circle demon, binds it to the task of delivering a particular message to a particular person, and then erases all the demon's memories that could betray her location or other secrets via the spell Theft of Memory (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. II—The White Treatise**, pp. 65–66). Such demon couriers carefully seek out their quarries, particularly the secret network of sorcerers already loyal to her cause and fearful that the social reforms the Empress has put in place will sharply curtail their power.

The sorcerers Mnemon sways to her side she arranges to meet privately and casts Blood Without Ties upon them, knowing that if nothing happens, their intentions are not sincere. She does not hesitate to slay those who fail this test. By teaching Blood Without Ties and letting these sorcerers coordinate and

BLOOD WITHOUT TIES (EMERALD CIRCLE)

Cost: 10m

Target: One willing individual

In casting this spell, the sorcerer recites the maternal lineage of her target's ancestry back five generations by full name and cuts the palm of the target's hand with a knife of tarnished brass. The target then drips a circle of blood around himself and spits out of it. As the spittle strikes the ground, the Shaping alchemy of the spell turns the target's blood to glowing vitriol that illuminates and sears his entire circulatory system, inflicting one level of aggravated damage. The acid turns back to blood in a moment, breaking all Intimacies to individuals known to be blood kin and permanently severing all arcane links based on blood ties. Magically, he is a true orphan and no longer related to his former relatives. He can forge new familial bonds by bearing or siring offspring, but the spell cannot be undone once its transformation has been wrought. Only someone who truly wishes to sever connection with his family is a valid target for the spell, and this decision cannot be compelled or coerced by unnatural mental influence. The sorcerer can target herself.

recruit for the cells of her resistance, Mnemon further insulates herself from counterinsurgency investigations by the All-Seeing Eye. The viral spread of the Righteous Orphan Rebellion is slow at first, but quickens with time. Lost Eggs also provide many recruits for the organization as they are already immune to the Dynasty Charms of the Empress and therefore more likely to have a hunch that something is wrong rather than placidly accepting the Charm-boosted assurances of their monarch.

Mnemon also looks beyond the Blessed Isle to bolster her forces, using proxies to quietly negotiate with Seventh Legion officers and the rogue legion of Saloy Hin, as well as numerous prominent outcastes and even the Forest Witches. Her contact with mighty Anathema remains limited to tentative “off-the-record” alliances focused on mutual enemies, as she fears the prejudices of less utilitarian Terrestrials. Although she does not reveal the extent to which her mother has been compromised, Mnemon has no qualms about insinuating the Empress has meddled with unholy powers and capitalizes on worldwide fear of the Defense Grid in her bids for alliance.

ACTIVITIES

Unable to mount any credible direct offensive against the Scarlet Empress, the Righteous Orphan Rebellion instead focuses on infiltrating and sabotaging her regime. Doing so involves everything from poisoning locust-mash silos to kill off her elite legions to explosive manse sabotage to well-coordinated simultaneous assassinations. Of course, the trouble with such warfare is that the terrorism that is most effective at denying the Empress key assets also leads to significant collateral damage that turns public opinion against the resistance. In contrast, resources spent winning the hearts and minds of the populace allow loyalists to further entrench their hold. Neither proposition is a winning strategy, but doing nothing assures the unassailability of the Empress, so Mnemon wages war the best she can.



COUNTERINSURGENCY

The Scarlet Empress does not crack down on the Righteous Orphan Rebellion nearly as hard as she could. Raids occur and public trials are held in the courts of the Minister of Reconstruction, of course, but these are for the benefit of the public, to provide a face to the enemies of peace. The Empress wants the rebellion to continue. Mnemon's temper tantrum amuses her, but more than that, it provides an ongoing terrorist threat to justify policies at which the public might otherwise balk. This, in turn, frees her Infernal allies from the "tedium" of orchestrated atrocity so that they can prepare themselves for the next step of the Ebon Dragon's master plan.

PLAYING THE RECONSTRUCTION

Opportunities abound for players to aid or thwart the Scarlet Empress in her master plan to rebuild and ultimately corrupt her Realm.

DRAGON-BLOODED

The myriad ways Dynasts can involve themselves in the reconstruction are largely self-evident, as it is the Terrestrial Exalted who do most of the work and who are most immediately affected by the return of their progenitor monarch. There is tragedy in such stories, as some of the best heroes of the Dynasty unwittingly labor on behalf of Creation's most vile enemy to undo everything for which the Realm stands. Fortunately, enough clues remain to guide canny players into realizing something is wrong, perhaps even to the point of their characters joining the Righteous Orphan Rebellion. Other Terrestrials might not need such evidence to believe that the Empress is up to no good and could help establish and take key leadership roles in the Rebellion from the onset.

SIDEREAL EXALTED

Players of Bronze Faction characters shepherd the Realm's recovery even as they are unnerved by it, playing the role of paranoid investigators made more paranoid by the mysterious murders of their colleagues by forces unknown. Gold Faction protagonists can take the initiative in scouting out and saving inexperienced Solars from the Wyld Hunt, while those in the Threshold forge alliances with and between established Lawgivers to create an anti-Realm coalition.

SOLAR AND LUNAR EXALTED

Solars and Lunars active on the Blessed Isle must go to ground or flee the reborn Wyld Hunt, so protagonists who built bases of power during the Civil War must choose whether to imperil them-

selves guarding their followers or leading them into exodus, or else to abandon them to the merciless Immaculate inquisitors for punishment or reeducation. Celestial protagonists in the Threshold can band together in mutual opposition to the Realm, perhaps planning a joint military strike while the Empress hasn't rebuilt her military infrastructure or making a daring raid to the heart of the Realm to sabotage the Imperial Manse.

ABYSSAL EXALTED

Deathknights still on the Blessed Isle when the Empress returns face similar challenges as Solars or Lunars, though they likely don't have any cultists or followers to protect. Yet, the Deathlords are panicking, making it a particularly unpleasant time to be their minions. Abyssals can investigate and perhaps even discover the sinister agenda of the Empress, sabotage her reconstruction or assemble vast hordes in the Underworld ahead of invading the Blessed Isle in glorious slaughter from Stygia through any shadowlands left over from the Civil War.

ALCHEMICAL EXALTED AND JADEBORN

The Immaculate Order has no established doctrine condemning the Alchemical Exalted, so an alliance between the resurgent Realm and the Eight Nations is certainly possible and provides the Empress with resources and technology to hasten her restoration. At the same time, the Ebon Dragon certainly doesn't want his brother meddling in the master plan, so it is vital that Champions not look too closely. Players of Alchemical ambassadors to the Realm can get drawn into the intrigues of the Dynasty and do a little of that unwelcome prying, or have late-night backroom meetings with operatives of the Righteous Orphan Rebellion. Alternatively, in a scenario where the Empress drives back an Autochthonian invasion of her Realm, Alchemical characters can take a more directly adversarial approach, supplying sufficient weaponry to liberate Realm satrapies from the threat of being crushed by the Imperial Army.

Absent any alliance with Alchemicals, the Jadeborn feel initially reassured by the return of the Empress and send delegates to her court. These Artisans offer a play experience similar to that of the Alchemical diplomats described before. As partial outsiders, the Mountain Folk have a greater sense of objectivity about the state of the Realm and may note the signs of its poisoning sooner than its citizens. If they realize the darkness above exceeds the darkness around them, the Conclave quietly mobilizes for (more) war and sends its greatest

heroes to the Exalted of the Threshold to bargain for protection and mutual assistance.

INFERNAL EXALTED

Much as with Sidereals, the reconstruction affords Infernal protagonists a chance to shepherd and study events on the Blessed Isle. Obviously, the Infernals want their Queen to get a firm grip on power so that she can do what the Ebon Dragon needs of her. Yet, the Green Sun Princes also chafe at taking orders from an akuma (or worse, a magically bound Dragon-Blood) and creatively interpret instructions for their own amusement as long as they don't rouse the ire of the Yozis. Playing the *secret secret* police of the corrupted Realm while stalking the Sidereals attempting to be the same offers much high-stakes drama, as does the political arena in which the mighty and noble may be turned into pawns of the regime or harvested as akuma. In the opposite vein, Infernals may assume the role of state-sponsored terrorists whose job it is to do everything in the "Grand Theft Yeddim" play style and then some, just as long as they aren't there when the Celestial authorities show up.

BEHOLD HER POWER

As the Empress consolidates her hold on the Blessed Isle, she looks outward to the threats and rivals on the horizon. She does not fear them exactly—the Ebon Dragon does not allow her that prudence—but she does understand how precarious her position is, especially at first. Her opening display using the Defense Grid in warning mode indicates to the world that she once more controls that ultimate weapon, but drawing a sword does not make the same impression as running someone through. Selecting an example to remove from the map requires careful deliberation, as the Ebon Dragon is very clear that he does not wish for her to win a battle and lose the war by rallying all her enemies against her in retaliation. Thus, the only logical course of action is attacking a target that much of the world hates and fears, a place whose destruction would only deepen her support and make pariahs of anyone who dared assault such a hero.

Naturally, her eye first turns to Thorns, then wavers to the present encampment of the Bull of the North, even as Malfeas strongly lobbies with her husband to prioritize Halta. The Bull makes for an especially tempting target. Militarily, he is one of the strongest of the newly returned Solars, and politically, his destruction of the Tepet legions is still

fresh in the memory of the Realm's legions. Wiping him from the face of Creation with a casual gesture will do much to restore morale among the people of the Blessed Isle and the soldiers of the Imperial Army especially. A raking strike across his encampment would also set Halta ablaze, pacifying the impatient Demon City. Storytellers should, of course, include other targets as appropriate to their series; Creation is full of tactically viable targets, and at least one of the Empress's acts with the Realm Defense Grid should strike close to home, wherever "home" happens to be for the players' characters. Whatever target the Empress decides upon, her wrath is the stuff of legend. A typhoon of envenomed lightning and sun-bright lava descends upon the land from crimson clouds, drowning out the shrieks of thousands or even millions of voices crying out in horror before they fall away to ash and dust. Buildings disintegrate, and even structures that endured from the First Age leave cairns of shattered rubble to mark their once-proud towers. Only those with perfect defenses remain in the miles-wide valley too big to recognize as a crater. They cough in the smoke, stunned by the totality of devastation.

The Empress smiles.

Her cruel mirth does not last, however. Autochthon and the Solar engineers who expanded upon his work built the Sword of Creation as a weapon against the enemies of Creation, and they were wise enough to include extensive safeguards against the doomsday device falling into enemy hands. The Queen of Hell bypasses most of these defenses with her enduring attunement to the Heart of the Realm, but the Defense Grid recognizes the Yozi Essence within her in the moment she fires it and deactivates. Even as she proves her power to obliterate her enemies and the Blessed Isle rumbles with earthquakes from the feedback of its cosmic might, this power becomes a bluff.

The Ebon Dragon is furious at this turn of events and orders his betrothed to begin extensive retrofits to the superstructure of the Imperial Manse using vitriolic technology. Bound demons dig a deep moat around the structure, exposing its foundations, and ever-increasing hordes labor in this pit to install the modifications. The process is slow going, and perfectly loyal legions deter curious onlookers from getting close enough to inspect the strange construction or recognize its abhorrent nature. Only the Mountain Folk sense the unholy poison spreading through the subterranean geomancy of the Blessed Isle, and it troubles them greatly.

ACT TWO: THE LOTUS MASSACRE

In addition to cowering foreign powers, the unleashing of the Defense Grid finally frightens Mnemon into swallowing her pride and realizing she can't fight her mother alone. This goes doubly so if Thorns is gone, and with it, Mnemon's most powerful "ally" against the Empress. The Queen of Hell must be stopped before she uses the Sword of Creation again, and so, Mnemon reaches out to the only power bloc she knows of with the guile and direct access to the Scarlet Empress to successfully assassinate her: the Sidereal Exalted.

The trouble is that Mnemon doesn't actually know any Sidereal Exalted. She knows of them and wounded one as a child during a martial arts training exercise. She knows her mother met with them frequently throughout her reign and suspects that this practice has resumed since her return. Yet, the Imperial City is the last place Mnemon wants to be. Fortunately, she knows another place where these secretive Anathema lurk, far enough from her mother that she dares make the journey herself. So she returns at last to the Isle of Voices to meet the hidden faculty of the Heptagram.

THE NIGHT OF TEN-THOUSAND FLAMES

Mnemon suspects a trap and, for this reason, coordinates her visit with the most epic and destructive acts of terrorism the Righteous Orphan Rebellion has managed since its inception. Legions on patrol die in sorcerous ambushes, palaces topple, and slaves secretly trained in killing arts and conditioned by vile spells strangle their masters in the night and set fire to everything that will burn. The Realm names this tragedy the Night of Ten-Thousand Flames as tens of thousands die across the Blessed Isle.

Mnemon is pleased for the distraction, but her mother is happier and prouder still of her daughter's budding ruthlessness. The All-Seeing Eye knew that the "Riotous Orphan Rebellion" (as the Dynasty has officially dubbed the movement) had something big planned, but it did not anticipate anything on this scale. Declaration of total martial law follows immediately, of course, and public support for the resistance dries up by morning.

That is time enough.

Mnemon bursts into the Heptagram with a strike force of hundreds of bound demon bodyguards, tearing open the academy's front gate by the hands of Octavian and Iyutha (or other suitably martial demons selected by the Storyteller). The students and teachers make

ready to defend their school, but she calls for peace and has her Second Circle demon slaves identify the Sidereals hidden among the staff via their innate immunity to resplendent destiny disguises. She addresses them simply and directly, in words more plain than any she has ever spoken in her life. She reveals what she knows of her mother's true identity and her certainty that the return to power merely heralds something infinitely worse. The Viziers are stunned and horrified. They call down the Calibration Gate before the even more stunned Terrestrials and rush through it to report the news to their superiors.

The lone akuma hidden among the Heptagram's Terrestrial instructors likewise departs to bring word to his Queen that Mnemon has played her part in the plan. The death of the Fivescore Fellowship is at hand.

PLAYING THE MASSACRE (OR NOT)

Dragon-Blooded: The stakes are least for the Children of the Dragons but hardly small. Realm-based Terrestrials may participate in or stem the violence throughout the Blessed Isle or become involved in the Rebellion mission to the Isle of Voices.

Sidereal Exalted: Given what happens to the Fivescore Fellowship, Storytellers might wish to arrange events so that Sidereal protagonists do not attend the conclave. That being said, the events make excellent story material, providing players' characters a chance to bear witness to the slaughter and presumably escape it to warn the rest of Yu-Shan and Creation.

Infernal Exalted: Any Infernals, but especially Sidereal akuma, can undertake deep-cover missions, planting weapons and undertaking other cloak-and-dagger acts throughout the Most Perfect Lotus of Heavenly Design to prepare for the massacre.

PREPARATIONS

The Yozis have claimed precious few Sidereal Exalted as akuma slaves since the dawn of the First Age, likely no more than three, and perhaps only one. One is enough. Since turning to the side of the fallen Primordials, corrupted Viziers have betrayed the secrets of destiny to those who would knot its strands about

their claws. In more recent years, these moles have smuggled various weapons of mass destruction and hell-forged wonders into Yu-Shan and hidden these vile treasures in caches and secret armories throughout the Celestial City, even within the Most Perfect Lotus of Heavenly Design itself.

In the wake of Mnemon's warning, the Heptagram's Sidereals rush back to the Most Perfect Lotus to report directly to Chejop Kejak. They do not bother with usual forms or formalities, bursting upon their eldest in the midst of meditation. Horror quickly replaces his initial irritation as he considers and finally accepts the explanation. Such news must be handled delicately lest the spies of the Ebon Dragon warn the Yozi before the Empress can be neutralized. Kejak rightly fears that the Shadow of All Things would not hesitate to order his betrothed to turn the full power of the Defense Grid upon Creation in a final act of spite. Therefore, the ancient Sidereal resolves to convene a grand conclave of the entire Fivescore Fellowship at which to decide how best to cut the cancer from the Realm's heart.

Word goes out, conveyed through astrological communication rites, Infallible Messengers and other communication magic. Sidereals across Creation and beyond hear and obey, making their way to the nearest gateways or summoning the Calibration Gate out of sight of witnesses. They do not know why their superiors have summoned them, only that the summons supersedes all current assignments.

As the Sidereals gather, their enemies also gather. Smuggled in by traitorous gods, Sidereal akuma and Black Mirror Shintai doppelgangers posing as citizens of Heaven, the Infernal Exalted gather their weapons and wait for the moment their Queen has commanded.

THERE'S ALWAYS AN ENDING

The Sidereals meet with most of their number in attendance. A handful of Viziers do not come, but the Fellowship cannot afford to delay action any longer to wait for them. Kejak explains what he knows, revealing the underlying truth behind the mysterious murders of lone Sidereals on the Blessed Isle by unknown parties and the sinister agendas underlying the reform and reconstruction of the Realm. Arguments rage, fueled by arrogance and fanned by the Great Curse. The Gold Faction gloats that the designs of the Bronze have come to demonstrable ruin, though this isn't how those Sidereals wanted to be proved right. Some in the Gold Faction suggest deploying the Cult of the Illuminated's Solars against the Empress, but the leaders of the Bronze Faction soundly reject this notion.

HOW MANY SURVIVE?

The Lotus Massacre results in the end of the Fivescore Fellowship as it has existed since its inception, wiping out the generation of elder Viziers who guide the organization and much of their traditions along with them. The exact number of survivors depends on the needs of the story. On one end, a series could feature the last circle of Sidereals as protagonists or key supporting characters, especially young Viziers ill-suited to bear such a heavy burden of destiny. On the other, the massacre might be more of a harsh pruning, culling away the mightiest elders to open opportunities for low-ranking Sidereal protagonists to advance and take a more active role in the story. The default assumption is much closer to the first extreme, with precisely enough Sidereals remaining to do what the Storyteller needs of them and not any more.

In the end, the bickering culminates in Kejak's stern command decision. He will face the Empress (and the Infernal bodyguards she must have) with a team of handpicked Sidereals he trusts beyond all reproach. It comes as some surprise to all that he points to members of the Gold Faction as much as Bronze.

The light of the Greater Sign of Mercury fades from the meeting chambers as Kejak's team vanishes into fate. In that moment, the Infernals make their move, with an akuma sorcerer casting Undisturbed Convocation Veil (see sidebar) from outside the meeting area to keep the Sidereals from escaping. With this ward in place, the Yozis seize control of all elder Sidereals who mastered Infernal Monster Style through the backdoor embedded in the Charm One Hand Fury (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, p. 161), against which no existing Sidereal Charm provides adequate defense. These unfortunate puppets join with the Sidereal akuma to launch devastating surprise attacks on the rest of the Fellowship using maximum lethal force. Battle is joined, and when attempts to magically flee or call for help fail, some Viziers attempt to escape the chamber on foot, only to find Infernals waiting to cut them down.

As the possessed elders fall to their peers, the next step in the massacre begins. Infernal relic weapons of





UNDISTURBED CONVOCAATION VEIL (ADAMANT CIRCLE)

Cost: 50m

Target: Area

The sorcerer speaks three profound silences memorializing the souls She Who Lives in Her Name shattered in the Three Spheres Cataclysm. From the stillness of this loss and the stasis of the Pyrian flames, a magical Shaping calm expands to fill a space with a radius equal to the sorcerer's Essence rating in miles and lasts for a span of three hours and three heartbeats. The center of this radius can be positioned anywhere, as long as the sorcerer remains within the sphere. Although the spell emits a distinctive white bonfire of crystallized fire around the sorcerer for the duration of its casting, the resultant radiance of its power can't be detected by mundane senses or Essence-based perception save by the ways that the laws of reality change within it.

Inside the convergence of space and time bounded by the spell, it is not possible to teleport, scry or send information/communication through any form of magic, regardless of that magic's power. In the moment such an effect would take place, it does not, and no costs are paid (though actions spent on the futile attempt still occur). The ward blocks effects entering from outside the radius as readily as effects generated within it. Thus, it is no more possible to leave the area with a Sidereal's Avoidance Kata than it is to send an Infallible Messenger to someone within it. Casting Adamant Countermagic within the radius terminates Undisturbed Convocation Veil with no scattering of Essence. Other magic that can terminate an Adamant Circle spell must target the exact center of the radius to succeed.

mass destruction planted by Sidereal akuma activate, bathing the meeting chamber in a holocaust of burning green light, soul-shredding winds and worse. The onslaught doesn't fell many elders, but it kills swaths of younger Exalted. As the unholy energies dim, the Infernals charge into the fray to assault the survivors. The raid is quick, brutal and bloody, and when the smoke clears, a sizeable number of Infernals and much of the Fivescore Fellowship lie dead. The surviving Chosen of the Yozis flee and disperse into Yu-Shan before the Maidens notice the ward over the Lotus of Fate and before Lytek charges into the Jade Pleasure Dome after the flood of Sidereal Exaltations nearly rattles his cabinet to pieces.

As the Fellowship wars in Heaven and the Night of Ten-Thousand Flames draws to a finish, Kejak and his team appear in the bedchambers of the Scarlet Empress. From the balcony, the Imperial City burns and black smoke veils the stars. The battle that follows is among the most epic of the age, pitting the Queen of Hell in all her terrible glory and her full retinue of demons, Infernal bodyguards and all their blasphemous wonders against the eldest Exalt and all his heroes can muster. Some Sidereals might escape this battle, but Kejak does not. The Empress laughs as barbed shadows pluck out the eyes that failed to see so much. An old blind man dies at her feet.

The Second Age turns to the Third, the strands of destiny dyed with the blood of its keepers. The Loom itself dutifully records the transition. No one sees.

ACT THREE: LAST DAYS

The events that follow presage the Ebon Dragon's release into Creation. In accordance with the spite the Ultimate Darkness embodies, not all these preparations are directly necessary as part of freeing him, but they do hurt those he hates and make him stronger. That is reason enough for him.

CLOSING THE GATES

Once the disguised Infernal assassins return to Creation from Yu-Shan, the Empress initiates the next step of her husband's plan. She originally intended to cast the spell Stone is the Gate (see sidebar), drawing upon the Imperial Manse's Metasorcerous Resonator to simultaneously target each of the 12 Yu-Shan gateways on the Blessed Isle. The Grid's incapacitation mandates a different approach. She dispatches Infernal sorcerers and supporting covens to each gateway to seal it. Deadly guardians stand watch over most of these portals and some gateways are extremely remote, accessible only by hazardous and lengthy travel. Although it is likely that the Yozis know the locations of each gate from spies in Heaven, the Storyteller may determine otherwise, adding an



additional obstacle to the assignment. Protagonists can complete or thwart this mission, as appropriate to their allegiance, though it is unlikely that anyone will realize what is happening until several portals have already closed.

Once the Infernals seal all 12 gateways, divine spies and agents lose easy access to the Blessed Isle. Even if the Aerial Legion mobilizes, it must enter Creation on the other side of the Inland Sea and make an open crossing to attack the Blessed Isle. Unless the forces of Heaven learn that the Defense Grid is inactive, they will not dare such a crossing for fear that the Empress could obliterate the entire Legion en route. Infernals may seal additional heavenly gateways in the Threshold to further cripple Heaven's response.

BLESSED NO MORE

Retrofitting the Imperial Manse with Infernal technology is not an easy or quick task, much as the Queen of Hell and her betrothed might wish otherwise. Thousands of demons swarm and labor in the foundations of the structure, forging their betters into colossal friezes of monstrous faces and clawed appendages grafted into the manse's walls. By design, this unholy architecture


pollutes and poisons the geomancy of the Blessed Isle, infecting it with the Essence of the Demon Realm.

A high security wall built around the manse obscures these modifications from observation, leaving curious citizens to marvel at the strange sounds and scents wafting up from the deep fissure moat where the demons work. Elite units of Dynasts equipped with Air Dragon armor patrol the skies above the manse, bound by Dynasty Charms to serve their Empress with unquestioning loyalty.

PACE AND TONE

The backwash of Infernal Essence across the Realm's dragon lines steadily poisons the geomancy of the entire Blessed Isle. Although each stage of taint receives explanation and rules later in this section, the interval at which the taint worsens depends on the pace of action the Storyteller wants for her series.

Fast Spread: The taint explodes upon the island's geomancy in a drowning caustic tide, worsening one stage every three days. Creation's defenders must take immediate action with very little preparation time. Only the aid of powerful travel magic allows distant Threshold forces to reach the Realm in time to stop



STONE IS THE GATE (ADAMANT CIRCLE)

Cost: 40m

Target: Sanctum Entrance

Twining his fingers together in a fashion impossible for those with lesser understanding of spatial relations, the sorcerer invokes the mantra of Nirupadhika Denied. By displacing the shinma of space and location, the spell conjures an incorporeal stone seal over a targeted entrance to a spirit's sanctum. Only attacks capable of striking dematerialized objects can harm the stone, and it has Soak 65B/65L, but a single level of damage or Adamant Countermagic cast upon it shatters the seal and ends the spell. The stone exists only on the outside of the sanctum, so imprisoned occupants cannot free themselves by damaging it, though countermagic still works. While the seal remains intact, the entrance can't be used in either direction. The only way in or out of the sanctum is by means of powerful teleportation magic that bypasses the entrance entirely.

When cast upon a heavenly gateway from Creation, this spell entombs the entire gate in a jagged materialized stone monolith with the same durability as the basic seal. Casting the spell inside a sanctum renders the target entrance inert, but the seal exists on the inside and must be broken there (barring Adamant Countermagic from outside). Although the Solar Deliberative outlawed this spell under pressure from Yu-Shan, illegal use continued throughout the High First Age.

the taint before it consumes the whole continent. As a result, the only hope for the island might come from within, as the heroes of the Dynasty valiantly fight to save their home.

Gradual Spread: In this model, the Blessed Isle deteriorates by one stage every month, giving Creation's defenders a chance to mount a conventional military invasion against the Realm before the process completes. Even with this generous timetable, however, the world's heroes must learn of the plot and begin preparing a response immediately, or their armies will arrive too late.

Slow Spread: For a doomsday scenario played out over a span of years (not unlike the Primordial War), the Blessed Isle decays by one stage every season, or even slower. Creation's defenders can and certainly will intervene, so the burden falls on the Queen of Hell to hold her besieged nation long enough to complete the process.

TAINT

The transformation of the Blessed Isle into the Cursed Isle progresses through stages at whatever pace the Storyteller sets. This particular plan does not require much work on the part of Infernal protagonists to carry out, as the labor itself is being done by the demons gathered around the Imperial Manse. Yet, Reclamation agents must guard this resource against intruders and would-be heroes, who in turn face the challenges of

stopping the geomantic disaster before all hell literally breaks loose.

Power Drain: Terrestrial aspect demesnes on the island do not suffer decay until a number of stages have passed equal to their rating. Once this grace period elapses, each stage cumulatively decreases, by one, the total number of motes that beings can respire from the poisoned demesnes. Manses double their rating for the purposes of their grace period, but mote decay also affects their hearthstones. Demesnes and manses with a Celestial aspect do not suffer this drain.

Once places of power no longer provide any motes, they become hollow conduits of the Ebon Dragon's lies and seem to return to normal, providing Essence as normal. The aspect of each site secretly changes, however, to that of the Ebon Dragon while pretending to be elemental Essence, requiring a successful difficulty 10 (Wits + Occult) roll from anyone who draws motes from it to realize that something feels wrong about it.

A successful (Intelligence + Lore) roll at a difficulty of (10 – current stage) determines that the diverted Essence flows back toward the Imperial Mountain and the Sword of Creation. Only players of characters who can perceive geomantic Essence directly or spend an hour studying a manse or demesne suffering actual power loss can make this roll, however.

Corruption: The choking miasma of the Ebon Dragon's glory encourages wickedness. Characters who

spend a month on the island once the taint begins to spread become infected after desecration advances to a stage exceeding their Willpower rating. This infection applies the third-purchase curse imposed by the Charm Selfishness Is Power (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, pp. 151-152), including vulnerability to countermagic, but the miasma re-infects those freed of it after another month of exposure. The Essence of this corruption is subtle and can be glimpsed via Essence sight only with a successful difficulty 6 (Perception + Occult) roll. Recognizing that Realm society is crumbling under a subtle corruptive influence requires a successful (Perception + Socialize) roll at a difficulty of (10 – current stage). Although the full effects of rampant moral decay on the Blessed Isle are too extensive to explain, the short form is that life gets worse for everyone as the wicked flourish and the virtuous falter.

STOPPING THE SPREAD

Barring the use of geomantic weaponry approaching the power of the Eye of Autochthon, no single act can stop or reverse the poisoning of the Realm's geomancy. Of course, this just increases the importance of locating such epic relics. The most certain way to stop the spread is by halting the refitting of the Imperial Manse and destroying the blasphemies wrought upon its architecture. Once this happens, the taint fades at the same rate it advanced.

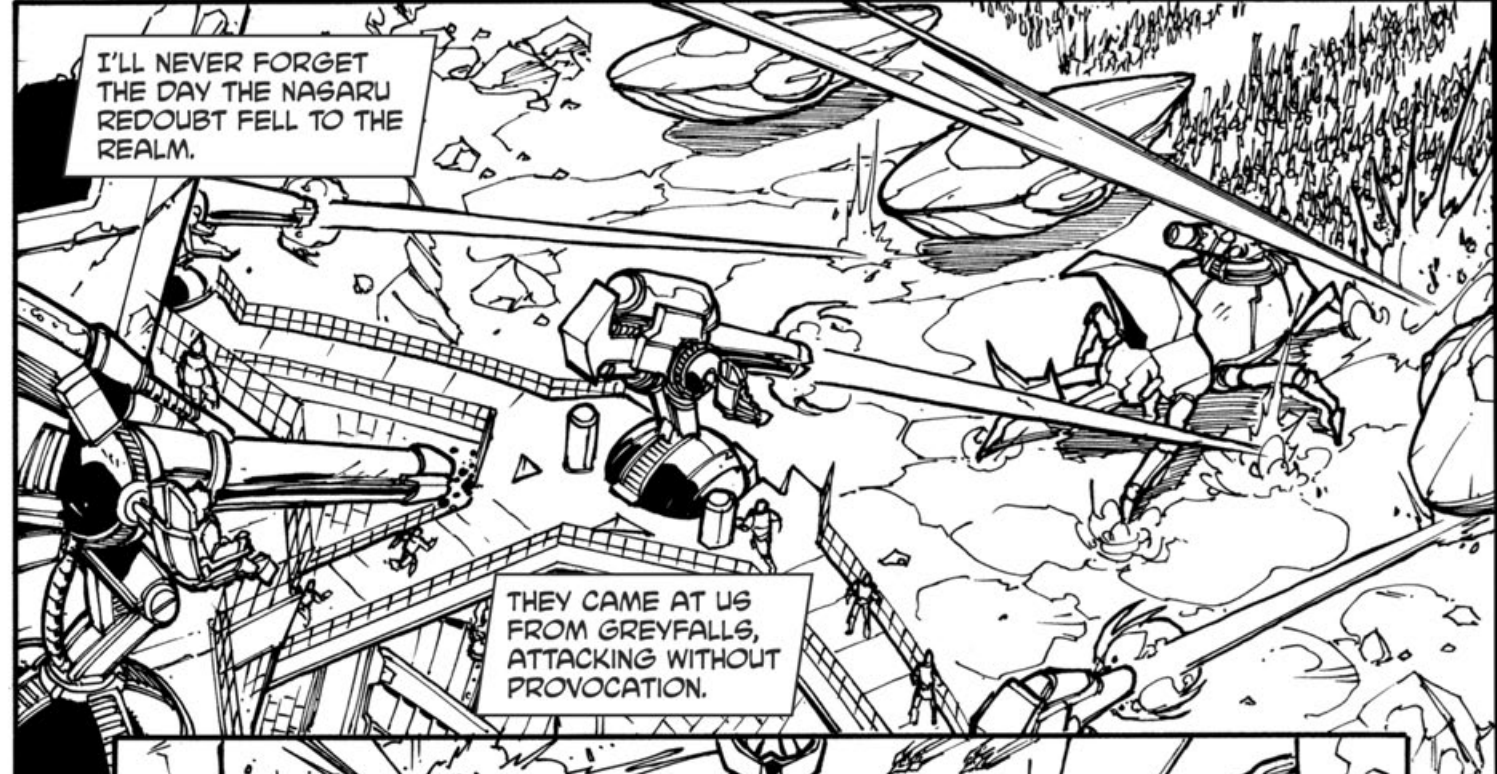
Placing icons venerating the Unconquered Sun near the geomantic center of a place of power stops that site from further deteriorating, but only if the icon is carefully placed (represented with a difficulty 5 [Intelligence + Occult] roll) to ensure auspicious and holy alignment of Essence. Anyone who makes

a successful prayer to the Unconquered Sun asking for his protection receives immunity from ambient corruption for a month, after which the protection must be renewed. The fact that the Immaculate Order considers such icons and prayers gross heresy only complicates matters.

DARKNESS ASCENDANT


Upon the 30th stage of taint, all level-5 manses on the island darken beneath the shadow of the Ebon Dragon, and the Blessed Isle no longer falls under the auspices of Heaven. On top of other effects, all gods on the island suffer the effects of the Charm Darning Petulance Technique (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, p. 151) contesting every action they make. All mortal astrology predictions pertaining to the island's future reveal the Scripture of the One-Handed Maiden and nothing more (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, p. 161).

More importantly, this is the point at which the Ultimate Darkness reveals his presence. Every Ebon Dragon aspect manse on the island physically transforms its architecture over the course of an hour to match the twisted black spires and obscene designs that resonate with the Shadow of All Things. Those who do not flee such structures suffer 30B (piercing) from crushing walls at a bare minimum, but there is no reason anyone has to suffer damage given the pace of change. The new design re-spends the available creation points for every manse in accordance with the Ebon Dragon's wishes (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. III—Oadenol's Codex**). Most level-5 manses convert to house Otherworld Gates leading to Malfeas so that the Reclamation can begin moving demon hordes into Creation.




I'LL NEVER FORGET
THE DAY THE NAGARU
REDOUBT FELL TO THE REALM.

THEY CAME AT US
FROM GREYFALLS,
ATTACKING WITHOUT
PROVOCATION.



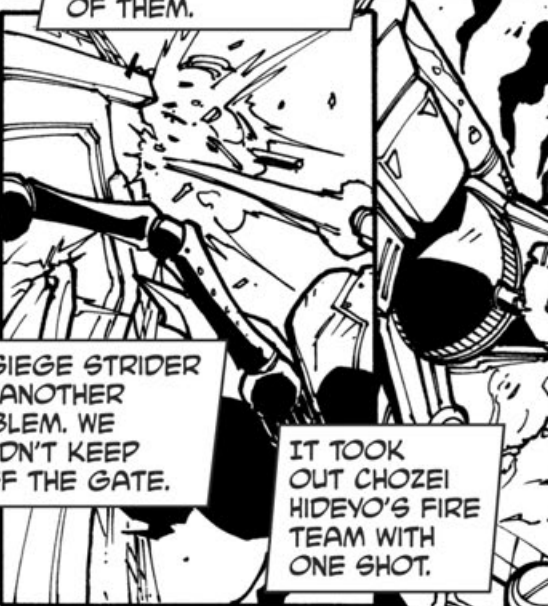
THE QUAGMIRE
MINES BARELY
SLOWED THEIR
SIEGE STRIDER
AND BATTLE
CARRIERS.



IT BOGGED THE FIRST
WAVE OF THEIR HEAVY
INFANTRY DOWN JUST
FINE, THOUGH.



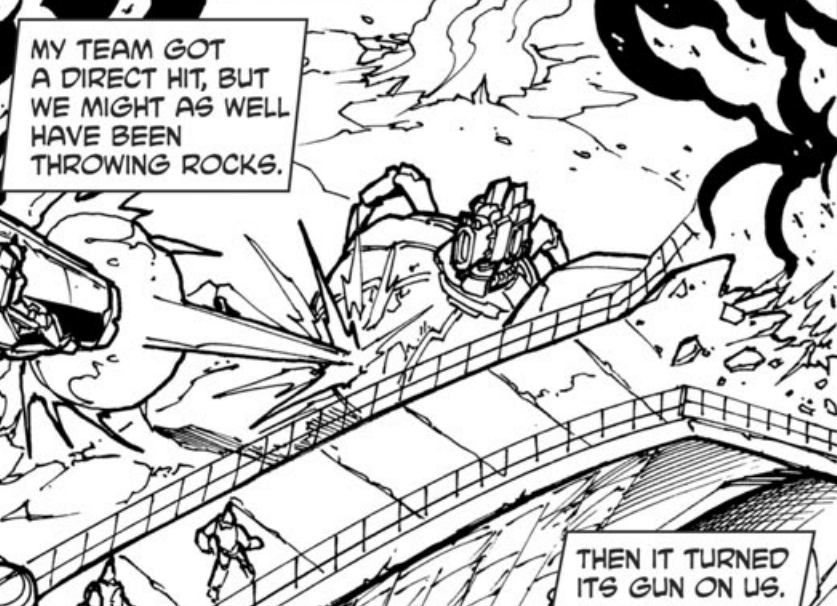
OUR WARBIRDS
MADE SHORT WORK
OF THEM.



MY TEAM GOT
A DIRECT HIT, BUT
WE MIGHT AS WELL
HAVE BEEN
THROWING ROCKS.

THE SIEGE STRIDER
WAS ANOTHER
PROBLEM. WE
COULDN'T KEEP
IT OFF THE GATE.

IT TOOK
OUT CHOZEI
HIDEYO'S FIRE
TEAM WITH
ONE SHOT.



THEN IT TURNED
ITS GUN ON US.



BUT THAT'S WHEN
OUR SALVATION
TOOK FLIGHT.




IT WAS HAIZEI
KARAL, PILOTING
SUMMER STORM.



SHE STOPPED THE
SIEGE STRIDER ALL
BY HERSELF. OR SO
IT SEEMED.

ONLY, IT TURNED
OUT THE MACHINE
WASN'T A SIEGE
STRIDER AFTER ALL.



IT WAS A
WALKING SUICIDE
BOMB.



CHAPTER TWO

THE SCAVENGER LANDS AND THE EASTERN FRONT

Bitter, enraged Malfeas is in charge of Reclamation efforts in the East. It's his desire to spread carnage and destruction across this, Creation's most populous direction. To that end, his agents work tirelessly to sow the seeds of violent chaos wherever humans dwell. Their aim is not initially to rampage against civilization themselves—there'll be plenty of time for that later—but to stir up the denizens of the East to run wild against each other. When blood flows in the riverbeds and the strong exist only to terrorize the weak, then will the land be sufficiently similar to the demon realm for Malfeas's tastes.

THE GOALS OF THE EASTERN CONFLICT

The following section examines the broad, major goals to which Malfeas and his agents pay special atten-

HOW TO USE THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is not a strictly scripted story or series that leads a single group of characters from Point Alpha to Point Omega. It focuses on only this one geographical direction, highlighting key areas of strategic importance in the war for Creation. The information here gives a sense of what the architects of the Reclamation want to accomplish in the East and how they deploy their agents to get it.

Storytellers who want to run a series showcasing the ruin or salvation of Creation can use this chapter as a toolkit of what the East has to offer their players' heroes.



tion in the three acts of the Reclamation. The demons' plans are geographically modular, so as to absorb potential failures at the local level without endangering the greater mission. Malfeas doesn't want early efforts in, for instance, Lookshy to rely on success in faraway Halta or Greyfalls. Total success is not required in every theater for the greater Reclamation efforts to proceed. The main idea is to start ugly quagmire wars throughout the region and weaken the participants, not to destroy Eastern military powerhouses remotely by proxy. There will be time enough, Malfeas reasons, to subjugate the East's powerhouses directly with his own demon troops at the culmination of the Reclamation.

GOALS OF VARIOUS INTERESTED PARTIES

Storytellers can create stories or series set in the Reclamation Era for all types of characters. Such tales can be as broadly epic or as intensely personal as the players enjoy. The overarching goals of characters active in the East are sure to vary in response to the players' needs or the circumstances of the local settings, but some generalizations can be made based on characters' general affiliation.

INFERNAL EXALTED AND YOZI CULTISTS

Characters operating under the banner of the Yozis toward the Reclamation of Creation have the best defined and most active goals, no matter what direction they call their own. They have specific orders (and broader Urges) to take certain steps to make the regions of Creation more suitable to their Yozi masters. In the East, the main idea is to inflame its disparate peoples' mistrust, enmity and blind hatred for one another in hopes of plunging the direction into ceaseless, bitter war. This goal is twofold in that it not only makes the region suitable for Malfeas, but it also weakens Creation's powerful potential defenders in advance of the eventual onslaught of the demon armies to come.

SOLAR EXALTED

As the Threshold's most populous direction, the East enjoys a statistically higher concentration of Solar Exalted. Those Exalted have enjoyed a relatively weak Realm and withered Wyld Hunt presence in recent years thanks to the Empress's long absence. In the first and second acts, then, most Solars are likely to resist the Realm's resurgent aggression. In the early stages of the Reclamation, however, they are likely to play into the Yozis' hands if their beloved nations are driven to war and their Celestial might is needed to defend their people. Yet, rare would be the Lawgiver who would side with the Realm or the armies of Hell once demons

BUILDING YOUR OWN SERIES

This modular format is also intended to make you individual Storytellers' jobs (i.e., lives) easier. No matter how powerful or well equipped your players' characters are, they simply can't be everywhere at once. Therefore, while they can have enormous effects at the local and national level, there's always more work to be done in the next nation over. Yet, you don't want to have to drag your characters from nation to nation to nation starting (or putting out) brushfires as the Reclamation Era drags on and on with no end in sight.

Instead, you can structure your series around one or two popular locales and have your characters work to put those places' mortals and resources securely in the hands of either the Yozis or the defenders of Creation. You can then decide, off stage, who controls the other theaters of conflict and have your characters act at the regional level to pit their larger resources against those of their foes.

You might worry that these modular treatments give the complexity of **Exalted's** many rich settings short shrift, but all a supplement such as this one can do is build a sturdy frame on the groundwork that previous supplements have lain. Creation is so vast, and its manifold Exalted are capable of effecting such sweeping change across it, that attempting to lay down a more rigid, structured series detailing the end of this Age would be an exercise in futility.

Finally, most of the text affects an assumption that you'll be running a series of Green Sun Princes or other Yozi-loyal agents of the Reclamation. (Hence the focus on the Yozis' goals and the steps they take to achieve them.) That said, you need only read between the lines to structure series for Creation's defenders. Simply think of what obstacles the assumed Yozi loyalists would face in pursuing these listed goals and cast your defender characters in the role of said obstacles. Or, if your characters are ruthless conquerors, cast them directly in the roles set out for the Yozis' agents and pit them against rival conquerors.

begin to mass on the earth and make war on Creation. Be they philosophers, conquerors, engineers, assassins, peacemakers or what have you, just about every Solar can find a reason to oppose the Reclamation and fight the forces of Malfeas.

LUNAR EXALTED

As with the Solars, the Lunar Exalted enjoy a relatively high concentration in the East. They have more accessible species of animals with which to tinker and countless human populations upon which to perform their social engineering experiments. Stewards have much at stake in the East, so they have much there for which to fight. Those of the Silver Pact still stand against the Realm, and that isn't likely to change once it's revealed that the Realm's forces are working the will of the Yozis.

The only Lunars who might potentially diverge from the general goals of their brethren are those whose Exaltations are bound to those of the Green Sun Princes and any Solar akuma currently operating in Creation. Wicked, twisted heroes of Hell might be able to convince their bonded Lunars that the best way to steward humanity is to help the Reclamation proceed

as smoothly and quickly as possible so the fewest number of people suffer in the transition.

SIDEREAL EXALTED

Whichever Sidereals *aren't* running themselves ragged keeping up with the growing turmoil on the Blessed Isle will need to keep wary eyes on the East. A high density of mortals means a higher thread count in the Tapestry of Creation. Once the Reclamation efforts are underway, that high thread count means a higher percentage of snarls, dropped stitches and outright tears in the fabric of reality.

That said, factional partisanship is likely to determine a Sidereal's goals initially. Those who support the Gold Faction will probably fall quickly in line with Creation's defenders. The burdens of coordination and information gathering will more than likely fall on them since they have better access to divine resources (such as the Loom of Fate) and a support structure of gods who don't want to see the Yozis take over Creation any more than mortals do.

Sidereals of the Bronze Faction are harder to predict. On one hand, they are Celestial Exalted and are devoted



to the well-being of Creation. On the other hand, they believe that uplifting the Terrestrial Exalted is the best means of serving that devotion. Many Bronze Faction Sidereals unwittingly serve the Yozis in the early days of the Reclamation by supporting the resurgent Scarlet Empire. They'll simply be incapable of anticipating the Empress's manipulation and betrayal or detecting her infernal allies' activities. Many Sidereals won't realize what havoc they're helping to wreak until it's obvious to even the lowliest mortals by the third act. Those who don't flee or kill themselves in despair will then have to make a difficult decision: try to wring control of the Terrestrials from the Empress's grasp or give up on the Terrestrials and take up with a different faction.

DRAGON-BLOODED

The higher percentage of Dragon-Bloods in the East are outcastes, members of Lookshy's Gentes or former Dynasts who have broken off ties with the Realm. As such, they are not in immediate danger of falling under the Empress's evil sway and are more likely to stand up against the machinations of the Yozis. Whether they coordinate with Creation's Celestial Exalted defenders or try to go their own way is up to their individual upbringing and judgment. It's not out of the question

THE LOTUS MASSACRE

It is the intention of the Empress to manipulate her daughter Mnemon into luring the majority of the Fivescore Fellowship to its doom. (See pp. 40–42 in Chapter One.) Employing a refinement of the Sidereal's own Usurpation strategy against them, the Empress's loyal killers will surprise and slaughter the Chosen of the Maidens en masse in Heaven itself, then harry and hunt down the stragglers whithersoever they flee.

Should this plan succeed, the longstanding factional dynamic breaks down, and the surviving Sidereals' goals are personal and based on the individuals' Motivation. Some might join with Creation's defenders. Others might withdraw into self-pitying seclusion. Still others might work to locate the next generation of Sidereal Exalted, gather them in secret and do whatever they can to protect and instruct them in the unraveling times to come.





that some former Dynasts might come back into the fold once the Realm seems to be getting its act together, of course. Even some outcastes might ally with the Realm if it looks like the Scarlet Empire is the best stabilizing force in the Time of Tumult. Most Eastern Dragon-Bloods are too comfortable with the power and free reign they enjoy out from under the Realm's thumb, however, to want to give that up—especially to the Yozis.

As for the Realm-loyal Terrestrial Exalted in Greyfalls and the East's scattered satrapies, their general goals in the East will prove similar to those of Bronze Faction Sidereals. Many will likely spend time unwittingly abetting the Yozis until they realize what's actually happening. After that, they have to make the decision whether to break away and then how to escape the Yozis' notice long enough to make contact with Creation's defenders. As for those Dragon-Bloods who never attempt to break away—such as those too closely linked by blood to the Scarlet Empress to save themselves—they will likely remain on the side of the Reclamation until the bitter end.

ABYSSAL EXALTED

The Neverborn and their Exalted are not exactly in on the Yozis' escape plan, but the Yozis still must account for those Exalts' presence in the East. The threat of the Empress lashing out with the fury of the Realm Defense Grid deters large-scale Deathlord aggression for a while, but it doesn't keep the Deathlords from deploying circles of their most puissant agents. Nevertheless, the region's deathknights probably see no reason to oppose the Yozis' agents' activities in the first act of the Reclamation or early in the second. Taking steps to start ruinous wars and spread outbreaks of uncontrolled violence swells the ranks of the Deathlords' armies and weakens fortified nations against those Deathlords seeking temporal gains.

The active Eastern Deathlords have their own goals, though, which do not include seeing Creation turned into a newer, larger demon realm. It might not be possible, after all, to plunge such a realm into the Abyss and end the mistake of life as the Neverborn demand. Once they realize how incompatible their ultimate goals are with those of the Yozis—or once those who already realize it have turned the Yozis' agents' hard work to their advantage—the servants of the Neverborn could strike an uneasy temporary alliance with the defenders of Creation. The Mask of Winters, for instance, already has a burgeoning understanding with Mnemon...

EVERYONE ELSE

Pretty much no one else drawn into Eastern Reclamation conflicts is likely to side with the Yozis' minions on purpose. The gods and elementals have a vested interest in doing all they can to keep Creation out of Yozi hands. The shaped raksha active in the East are likely to defend their mortal prey against the minions of their Primordial enemies on principle, though some might perversely aid Reclamation efforts for a while just to be contrary. If the Alchemical Exalted are active in the region as the Reclamation Era begins, they have every reason to oppose the Yozis—the least of which is that a transformed Creation probably wouldn't offer them the material they need to nourish and repair their ailing world-god. Also, the Yozis despise their ailing world-god.

Finally, mortals will largely follow their supernatural betters' lead. Yet, even those with the capacity to consider the situation objectively and make their own decisions will find themselves best served opposing the Yozis' efforts. Of course, it's true that the Yozis have no intention of wiping human life off the face of Creation. Doing that would irrevocably damage the Games of Divinity and rob the Yozis of a vital source of empowering prayers. Nonetheless, life in a realm ruled by demons would be no kind of life for humanity at all. Existence would be much worse with the Yozis in charge than it ever could have been in the times before the Primordial War. No promise or coercion by the Yozis will ever change that fact, and so, it behooves Creation's defenders to make sure that humanity at large understands that. Likewise, it behooves the agents of the Reclamation to either keep humanity ignorant of what awaits it or so thoroughly conquer humanity that people have no choice but to accept Yozi domination.

DIRECTED INSURGENCY AT THE CORE

If they aren't stopped, the Legions of Hell march across Creation by the third act of the Reclamation saga, subjugating it in their Yozi master's name. Yet, the East being so populous, there are countless peoples and Exalts standing in the way of total victory. And as the Scavenger Lands' several victories against the Realm in the early days of the Scarlet Empire show, allowing those various peoples to unite into a coherent fighting force could prove extremely taxing in the long run. Therefore, Malfeas's general plans for the region seek to distract and isolate these fractious nations so they never cohere.

And then to crush them.



Yozis

THE CONFEDERATION OF RIVERS

There isn't exactly a unified plan to overcome the countless petty nations of the Scavenger Lands in one fell swoop. The general idea is to have small cells of available akuma and Yozi cultists commit acts of terrorism and guerilla insurgency at the petty local level and fabricate evidence that a recognized local enemy of each victimized nation is responsible. Alternatively, they are to see that long-standing national enemies carry out such acts with Yozi-sponsored help. The more hate, paranoia and war these agents can stir up, the better. Temporary alliances of convenience between small nations are permissible as long as working coalitions don't get big enough or powerful enough to rally more nations against the Yozis' armies in Act Three. While lesser agents carry out these local operations, Green Sun Princes coordinate the efforts at a remove. They're to get involved at the local level only if Celestial Exalted or powerful gods pop up in prominent leadership roles.

More important than setting the various Scavenger Lands' nations against one another, though, is to undermine the *idea* of the Confederation of Rivers. As local agents spread chaos and sabotage relationships, other Yozi cultists travel abroad spreading bad news (or outright lies if necessary) to the disparate regions of the Confederation. They could be Guild merchants,

cultists secreted among traveling mercenary armies, pilgrims on sham journeys, wanderers or even refugees from blighted lands later on in the Reclamation. These operatives' job is to demoralize people and make them think that associating with the Confederation of Rivers does them no good. In more worldly and cosmopolitan regions, they're to spread the idea that the Confederation Council is a weak, ineffective and ultimately pointless organization. They can do so with grass-roots protest efforts, civil demonstrations, riots or whatever else it takes to shake the Scavenger Lands' faith in the Council of the Concordat.

These efforts are to be ongoing throughout the first and second acts of the Reclamation, dovetailing with local efforts to actively pit neighbors against one another with covert acts of insurgency and geomantic sabotage detailed elsewhere in this chapter. In the second act, however, the Yozis' agents strike a more telling blow against the Confederation. Currently, there exists a baffling phenomenon in which the Confederation Council seems like every bit the fractious, ineffective body the Yozis' agents want to portray it as, *except* in times of widespread war. Whenever some external force threatens the Scavenger Lands as a whole, some nigh-supernatural internal force energizes the Council and turns it into a well-oiled machine.



Therefore, in Act Two, while Reclamation agents are working hard to keep the nations apart, a coven of Slayers is deployed to the city of Marita in the heart of Scavenger Lands territory. Marita is where the Council of the Concordat meets, and it seems to exist for no other reason, having no trade to speak of and lacking geographical strategic significance. These Slayers are to wait until the Council is in session then get in, lock the doors behind them and kill everyone inside. If there aren't enough Slayers available to do the job, a coven of Scourges could work just as well. A Defiler with a particularly nasty chemical helltech weapon (or a hellstrider) would do in a pinch. The important thing is to see that every member of the Confederation Council—possibly excepting Thorns' delegate if he's willing to help out—dies horribly. More important is to carry this massacre out *before* the rest of the Scavenger Lands nations get wind of the fact that their Confederation is in jeopardy. Then, when the Confederation is threatened, it won't have its Council to help it organize and coordinate.

LOOKSHY

Lookshy is the heart of the Scavenger Lands' military might and the linchpin of its defenses. That this rogue state has consistently and successfully held off Realm subjugation for centuries is an affront to the Empress's pride. That its people are so arrogant about it is simply inexcusable. For those reasons, if for none other, Lookshy must be destroyed.

ACT ONE: DIPLOMATIC INCIDENCE

The first act of the Reclamation sees surprisingly little overt action against Lookshy from Realm forces or other agents of the Reclamation. In fact, the Scarlet Empress takes pains to turn a cold shoulder to the errant Seventh Legion. Its ambassadors are summarily evicted from the Blessed Isle and from any Realm-controlled satrapy in the Threshold. Every member of the Realm's tiny diplomatic presence in Lookshy is recalled and reassigned. All official communication from the Realm ceases, and any attempts from Lookshy to send envoys or reopen communication are summarily rejected. Spies caught operating in Realm territory are executed, and their bodies never returned home. The Imperial Navy turns Seventh Legion boats away from Realm-controlled waters. The Imperial Post reads and destroys all mail from Lookshy senders. Government-employed and military recipients of Infallible Messengers from

Lookshy senders are instructed to ignore them. No explanation is given for this behavior.

Yet, for all that the Realm suddenly pretends that Lookshy isn't there, agents of the Reclamation abroad don't ignore it. They don't engage in campaigns against Lookshy directly, but work to damage the esteem in which other Confederation of Rivers nations hold Lookshy. Lookshy has few true allies in the Scavenger Lands, so this work won't prove too difficult. Many nations see Lookshy's people as arrogant would-be conquerors waiting for some trumped-up emergency to give them the excuse to quarter foreign troops in people's homes and start bossing everyone around. In the guise of rabble-rousing malcontents, educated foreign-policy specialists, worldly traveling merchants and slick pundits, agents of the Reclamation will help reinforce and spread these notions.

It's also during this act that unwitting and wholehearted agents of the Reclamation perform covert reconnaissance against Lookshy and its non-secret redoubts in the Scavenger Lands. It is the job of whatever spies can insinuate themselves into the redoubts and Lookshy proper to gather the most up-to-date information on Lookshy's troop strengths, its current deployments around the Scavenger Lands, the state of its magitech materiel and even the private lives of important military and civic personnel. All weaknesses, no matter how insignificant, are noted and explored. Efforts of this nature have been going on for years already, of course, but to existing operations are added the abilities of peerless akuma and Green Sun Prince master spies. The intelligence they collect goes to analysts in the Realm and to the architects of the Reclamation. Two sets of plans for two different courses of action result.

Meanwhile, other Reclamation agendas go forward that affect Lookshy indirectly. Widespread acts of geomantic sabotage (see pp. 59–60) add to the growing confusion and chaos on the fringes of the Scavenger Lands. Provocative diplomatic tampering abroad also weakens the region's stability, pitting uneasy neighbors against one another in pointless wars. As this instability spreads, Confederation nations call for Lookshy's help increasingly often. Every unit of troops Lookshy is able to send to help out is one less unit at Lookshy's immediate disposal. Every polite-but-firm denial it has to issue is one more hammer tap driving the wedge in between Lookshy and the other Confederation nations.



ACT TWO: LOST OPPORTUNITY

Early in Act Two of the Reclamation, a lone emissary comes to Lookshy's General Staff from the Realm with a diplomatic pouch bearing a scroll sealed with the Empress's personal insignia. The scroll bears an enchantment that allows only its intended recipients to read it and alerts its sender when the scroll has been read. The message, in the Empress's own hand, reads simply, "I gave you every opportunity." When this message has been received and read, one of two things happens, conforming to one or the other of the two aforementioned sets of plans derived from current intelligence-gathering operations.

The first set of plans is more direct and would change the face of the Scavenger Lands in an instant. Provided events on the Blessed Isle have not conspired to remove this capability from her (per Chapter One), the Scarlet Empress activates the Sword of Creation and obliterates Lookshy as quickly and brutally efficiently as possible. The destruction targets the Old City first and spreads out ring by ring until nothing remains alive from the coast to the Lookshy Wall. The next day, a flurry of surrender demands is sent out to Lookshy's non-secret redoubts. Shortly thereafter, a grand, magnificent fleet launches from the Blessed Isle headed for the Lookshy promontory. With the Confederation momentarily cowed to quiescence by Lookshy's defeat, the Empress's legions deploy into the empty city. They populate it and re-fortify it quickly, claiming it in the name of the Empress—not as a satrapy or a protectorate, but as an extension of the Blessed Isle. It is renamed Reclamation Prefecture.

The alternative set of plans is a contingency drawn up in the event that the might of the Sword of Creation is unavailable (or in the event that the Storyteller would rather not have the Seventh Legion summarily wiped out). In this case, the receipt of the Empress's sealed message coincides with the launch of the largest imperial war fleet the Scavenger Lands has ever seen. Top-of-the-line triremes surround the Lookshy promontory from the Inland Sea while even more seek harbor to the north, up and down Calin's coast. The forces that arrive at Calin overwhelm the Calinti either militarily or with such threats of conquest and occupation that they regret ever turning their backs on the Scarlet Empire. Before Calin's Confederation allies can mobilize, the legions force a lopsided treaty on the Calinti and occupy the bewildered nation. Establishing a military presence at Goodharbor and points east, the legions fight to keep the mouth

of the Yanaze River open to its vessels. Meanwhile, more ships deploy soldiers to the south of Lookshy, littering the field behind them with magitech mines and simpler fortifications to stymie the advance of Lookshy's horselord allies.

What follows is a bitter and protracted siege against Lookshy, the likes of which the Scavenger Lands hasn't seen in centuries. The Realm's superior naval forces cut Lookshy off from sea and river access and pound it with naval artillery. Imperial land forces surround the Lookshy Wall and hammer at it with every piece of Essence-powered and mechanical siege weaponry they have. Wall-eaters are deployed. Sorcerers unleash hell. Warstrider teams wield enormous battering rams.

Unlike the efforts being carried out elsewhere by agents of the Reclamation, this siege is not an exercise in warfare and bloodshed for its own sake. The Empress means to cow and conquer Lookshy for good this time, and she's willing to throw unbelievable forces at the recalcitrant city until she gets what she wants.

The Empress has every hope of victory this time around. She isn't intimidated by Lookshy's magitech arsenal, for one thing. She's got one of her own. She isn't as concerned about Lookshy's allies interfering as she had been in wars past. If Reclamation efforts abroad are going as planned, many of Lookshy's allies are either dealing with their own problems or they're holding back because of successful anti-Lookshy smear campaigns. What's more, the Empress knows she's cheating. While her forces lay siege, subtler and more powerful Green Sun Princes, Exalted akuma and duped Bronze Faction Sidereals are working covertly to undermine Lookshy's defenses. That might mean blackmailing a traitor into opening the gates at a crucial moment. It might mean sneaking into the Caverns of Lookshy and poisoning emergency food supplies. It might mean smuggling into the city helltech weaponry that makes a soulbreaker orb look as harmless as a folding servant. (The specifics are best left up to the Storyteller or the players.) The siege will not be a short one by any means, and it will cost the Empress the lives of many soldiers, but she believes the deck is stacked in her favor and that Lookshy will eventually be hers.

If she becomes convinced she can't win, however, her forces change tactics to achieve and maintain a stalemate. She won't waste soldiers on an obvious lost cause, but neither will she allow her legions to be thrown back into the Inland Sea and forced to retreat. If the tide of battle turns such that her forces are the ones that have to turtle down and weather a siege themselves,

she can accept that. After all, she need only hold out until her husband's forces join the fray.

ACT THREE: AFTER THE FIRE

Act Three of the Reclamation in the East begins once Lookshy's fate is decided. If the Empress's forces are victorious, the demon armies begin to break through into Creation just as the Scavenger Lands' spirit is crushed from every quarter. The demons spread out eastward into the Scavenger Lands, gobbling up broken cities and nations and trampling down those who get in their way. They pause only when they get to Greyfalls—whereupon they regroup, refresh and fortify their holdings before spreading out to expand their conquests.

Should the Empress's forces be stuck holding Lookshy to a draw, the arrival of Hell's armies definitely shifts the balance of power. The Empress believes that that shift can't but be in her favor and that victory over

Lookshy will be swift. Thereupon, it's "Legions, east!" and onward to total conquest.

NEXUS

Nexus is the Scavenger Lands in microcosm: a fractious lot of disparate peoples constantly trying to get one over on each other but rallying together in times of crisis because the alternative is ruin and disintegration. Lookshy might be the Scavenger Lands' strong back and good right arm, but Nexus is the region's heart and soul.

Nexus, therefore, must know the chaos and terror that awaits the rest of the Scavenger Lands.

ACT ONE: SINS OF THE FATHERS

The return of the Scarlet Empress has no effect whatsoever on the average citizen of Nexus. It's a political curiosity across the sea, one expected to reestablish

THE EMISSARY

Employing the Emissary in a story set in Nexus is always a tricky proposition—not least because there's no "official" version of who or what the Emissary is. That being could be anything from a charlatan thaumaturge living it up to a lost Primordial lying low. It might be not an individual but a host of entities with a wide range of powers. The description is entirely up to the Storyteller.

That said, one important thing has been set down about the Emissary, referenced in **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**. At some point in the years between the Scarlet Empress's disappearance and her reemergence, the Emissary had a confrontation with the demon Jacint in the sky above Nexus. The confrontation ended with the Emissary removing its silver mask, Jacint being thrown back into Hell and Jacint's nature changing such that he can no longer appear simultaneously in Creation and Malfeas. Afterward, the Emissary withdrew to a place of solitude to recuperate. Since then, it's appeared regularly in the Big Market and at the Council Tower to announce the Council of Entities' decrees and mediate disputes, but no one knows of any reliable reports of it using any of its fearsome powers to enforce the city's harsh Dogma.

What hasn't been stated thus far is that as a result of the confrontation, Jacint figured out the secret of the Emissary's true nature and reported that information back to the architects of the Reclamation. Soon thereafter, the Yozis sent a coven of Green Sun Princes into Nexus covertly to the Emissary's secret sanctuary. They informed the entity that its secret was known to them and to their masters. Certain threats were levied. Certain promises were made. Certain oaths were offered (though none were accepted). The Emissary made no response throughout, and the coven eventually left it alone.

This scene is a prologue to Nexus's tribulations, either off stage or with players' characters as the coven in question. How you use the Emissary after that is up to you. The base assumption is that it remains in seclusion—either hiding or building up its depleted power—until well into Act Three, barring the persuasive influence of Creation's impassioned defenders. By the time the demon armies are on the loose and Creation itself is in jeopardy, the Emissary has nothing to lose and takes part in the battle against the Yozis. The outcome of its involvement is up to the Storyteller, who should make sure not to let it invalidate the players' characters' hard work or render the characters passive spectators for longer than one dramatic scene, if at all.



the status quo of a few years ago and nothing more. The citizens of Nexus have more important things to worry about, like where their next meal is coming from or who's fighting in the Pit tomorrow or who's casting a lean and hungry look at their coin purses. Yet, agents of the Reclamation are already at work in Nexus. One of their early efforts is a rash of kidnappings throughout the city. The children and other loved ones they take are not the prizes of upper-class families or civil employees, however, but those of the city's most notorious rival criminal figures. Incidents of violent crime increase as desperate gangsters scour the streets and shadows looking for their family members and other precious ones. The kidnappers make no contact with their victims' friends and families, working hard instead to plant evidence that implicates their rivals in the taking. They egg the crime lords on, escalating the tension as best they can.

The most vicious of these crime lords is the Night Castesnakeman boss of the Tang-Zen syndicate, Ophilis Ses. He cracks down on his enemies more brutally than most, in an apparent fury over the taking of his son, Maxillas Ses. Yet, his rage is all a sham, as Ophilis Ses is actually a Fiend posing as a Solar Exalt. Organizing the kidnappings and pushing Nexus's criminals toward gang warfare is his responsibility.

Meanwhile, other agents of the Reclamation commit subtler acts of economic sabotage in more legitimate business circles. They insinuate themselves into the Guild or work to bend pliable Guildsmen to their will. These agents, dupes, converts and blackmail victims manipulate the supply of goods, artificially inflate prices and line their pockets in the short term at the expense of long-term security. Other agents manipulate currency-exchange rates, undermine investors' faith in banks through rumor-mongering and make out irresponsible loans to countless untrustworthy applicants. None of the activities the Yozis' agents engage in are baldly restrictive to trade (in fact, many of them seem to have positive short-term effects on the economy), but they lay the groundwork for future economic strife.

And as with Lookshy, Reclamation efforts elsewhere in the Scavenger Lands have an indirect effect on Nexus, primarily in its mercenary market. As more petty kingdoms outside the city's walls are driven to saber-rattling and eventual armed conflict, more and more mercenary companies receive job offers abroad—especially from nations to whom Lookshy refuses to send soldiers from its field forces. Most Nexus mercenaries aren't cheap, but they're in ready supply and don't ask

troublesome questions. Reclamation efforts aren't able to strip the city bare of defenders—the Council of Entities always has peacekeepers on contract—but the number is reduced measurably as Act One plays out.

ACT TWO: HELL AND DAMMED NATIONS

In the second act, the bubbling cauldron that is Nexus boils over into violence in the streets as disaster strikes the city from without. Ophilis Ses and the agents working with him finally escalate the squabbling between crime syndicates into a gang war that rages throughout Nexus's Undercity, where many of the crime bosses base their operations. When the fighting spills out onto the surface streets, the residents and the Council of Entities take notice. They also notice that the Emissary seems bizarrely unwilling to put a stop to the violence. The Council mobilizes several of its mercenary companies to pacify the Undercity and break up the criminal gangs. This move only intensifies the violence, setting Nexus's citizens on edge and causing the first ripples in the economy.

While these effects build up, Reclamation agents feed the flames of locals' discontent. ("Why isn't the Emissary putting a stop to this? Why isn't the Council of Entities doing more to get things under control? Should the Council of the Concordat be taking steps here if the Council of Entities can't? We don't have to answer to mercenary peacekeepers, do we?") They also spread the idea among malcontents across the city that if the Emissary and the Council of Entities aren't being terrifically effective, maybe now's the time to see what one can really get away with.

Mounting tensions and escalating violence come to a head fairly quickly in Act Two. Acting the part of the distraught father, Ophilis Ses breaks into the control room that operates the Yellow River Dam, gets the controls working (with the help of his coven) and closes the dam. As the imperishable walls force upward against the power of the river, Ses sends a list of demands to the Council of Entities—among them that his son be returned to him—and seems to barricade himself in. What the Council doesn't know, however, is that Maxillas and the other kidnap victims are due to be sacrificed to the Yozis even as the dam is closing. Many of Ses's other demands are impossible or contradictory, meant more to keep the city's would-be saviors busy and distracted. In fact, Ses himself doesn't remain in the dam control room after issuing his demands. He and his Infernal coven sabotage the dam's controls and slip away in secret to watch the chaos ensue.



The effects of Ses's dreadful act are immediate and catastrophic—the single largest stroke of geomantic sabotage and ecological devastation thus far in the Reclamation. Water-flow around the northern edge of the city ceases at once, shutting down water-powered mills and sewage-disposal systems. The water level on the Yanaze River drops considerably and the Gray River running northwest along Nexus's southern border backfills partway up the empty Yellow River's bed. The levels of the canals that crisscross Nexus, especially on its western side, all drop precipitously, and travel across them either bogs down or is cut off. Needless to say, river travel due east out of Nexus via the Yellow River ceases entirely.

On the eastern side of the dam, the effects are calamitous. Rising water rushes backward, flooding the land out to the outer ring of Emissary statues almost immediately and steadily pouring back in three directions toward Great Forks, Melevhil and Walker's Realm. The paddies of "swamp rice" on which the city's poor depend are obliterated. Those who live in flooded areas flee their homes and seek refuge wherever in the Scavenger Lands they can find it. (In many nearby

cities, Reclamation agents are waiting to stir up anti-refugee sentiments.)

This catastrophe is more than Nexus can bear, not least because the Emissary and the Council prove completely unable to prevent it or deal with it. The bubble of its artificially inflated economy bursts. Desperate people take to the streets, where they clash with warring gangs, overworked mercenary peacekeepers and unruly mobs who can't take the strain that's unraveling their way of life. The Council of Entities does everything it can to restore order, but Yozi agents keep stoked the fires of mob hatred and do everything *they* can to direct that hatred toward the Council itself. Guild factors and merchant princes evacuate the city like rats from a floundering ship, which sends shock waves throughout the economy of the Confederation of Rivers and ugly ripples farther out in the Threshold. Carefully cultivated chaos blooms in the heart of the Scavenger Lands.

This madness reigns for as long as agents of the Reclamation can keep it going. They hold out until the forces of the Scarlet Empress besieging or occupying Lookshy downstream are freed up to move east toward Nexus, as determined by the success of Reclamation



efforts in Lookshy and on the Blessed Isle. If the Yozi loyalists have been doing their jobs, the desperate people of Nexus should be so strung out and trodden down by their local catastrophe that they might welcome even the Realm's stabilizing influence. (This should be especially true if the Empress managed to make short work of Lookshy's field forces.) Act Two ends either with the people of Nexus crying out for help from the Realm or with the Empress's legions swarming east to conquer the city in its darkest hour.

ACT THREE: THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD

Regardless of Nexus's wishes, its Emissary and Council of Entities won't stand for Realm domination. They rally their loyal mercenaries and call in favors from allied nations, hoping to push back the Empress's advance. Nexus is more than likely a wreck by this point, however, so the best it can do is duck down under cover and force the Realm to lay siege. It's in no condition to mount a counter-offensive. It also suffers from an infestation of saboteurs loyal to the architects of the Reclamation.

Yet, should Nexus hold its own and keep the legions out, the demon armies are on their way to incorporate the Empress's legions and conquer Creation once and for all. The Emissary might make an appearance if the armies of Hell are literally at the gates, but only if it feels it has nothing to lose here at the end of days.

And even it alone might not be enough to save the city from demonic conquest.

PERPETUAL CHAOS AT THE FRINGES

The second major initiative of the Reclamation, running concurrently with the first, is to maintain a state of chaos at the fringes of the Scavenger Lands and elsewhere throughout the East. The goals of this widespread campaign are to distract, isolate and eventually subjugate the region's disparate nations. Much of the work occurs in the first and second acts of the Reclamation, ideally without Creation's prospective defenders realizing that agents of the Yozis are involved. After all, the nations can't rally against a common enemy if they don't recognize one working against them. In fact, if each nation thinks all the others are its enemies, Malfeas's demon troops can pick the scattered forces off one by one, when the armies of Hell arrive.

GEOGRAPHIC/GEOMANTIC SABOTAGE

While spreading warfare, bloodshed and hatred throughout the region is key to Malfeas's being able

to emerge into Creation, it's not enough. The region's very Essence flows have to be altered sufficiently so that Creation doesn't simply reject Malfeas on the strength of his supernatural surrender oath. Warping Creation's natural Essence, and the dragon lines that sustain it, is not easy to do within Creation itself, but it is possible with concerted manipulation of terrain and demesnes.

To that end, Malfeas has many corps of minor agents (including cultists and handfuls of akuma) at work throughout the wilderness committing acts of geomantic sabotage. Such acts include setting off major landslides in remote areas to dam tributaries at key choke points to flood low-lying areas and redirect the course of rivers. Saboteurs might also spark unscheduled forest fires or even seed storm clouds with helltech concoctions to make them rain poison onto fertile fields. Yozi-loyal geomancers (many of them Exalted) take great pains to calculate where the smallest actions in the ecosystem can lead to the largest-scale deleterious effects.

Most such activities are carried out far from civilization, but this isn't to say they go unnoticed by mortals. Poisoning uninhabited land changes the travel patterns of migratory animals or free-grazing herds, which shifts them away from the nomadic barbarian tribes who rely on them. Lacking their customary prey, the barbarians stray out of their territory into that of other tribes or even into civilized lands. If these nomads aren't welcome and the natives try to force them out, the nomads turn in desperation to raiding. And thus begins in microcosm the cycle of warfare, bloodshed and hatred on which Malfeas thrives.

Cells of Yozi worshipers monitor the progress of such chains of events, nudging them back on track when it seems they won't play out correctly. Their akuma sergeants major coordinate the actions of individual cells to wreak havoc on the city and city-state scale. They oversee projects such as polluting or changing the course of certain rivers that define the borders between fractious kingdoms, and making sure that mortals on one side of said rivers blame those on the opposite side. Many cells are at work on similar projects all over the Hundred Kingdoms, for instance, twisting minor dragon lines out of true and whipping the petty kingdoms into hornet nests of paranoid, xenophobic hysteria.

Corollary to these efforts are those of Exalted covens specializing in the occupation and renovation of demesnes and manses. Locations that are lost in the wilderness or unoccupied for other reasons are easy enough to claim and make their own. Those that have



Exalts, gods or mortal refugees in them take more work. Once the areas are in the Yozi loyalists' possession, the covens withdraw and turn them over to specialists in infernal geomancy. These savants then work to convert existing demesnes from whatever their current aspect is to an infernal aspect and to build or alter manses to properly cap them. Failing that, they'll settle for creating hidden Essence-sinks or building ugly manses based on intentionally flawed geomantic principles, so as to exert disharmonious influences on the local dragon lines. (This corruption proceeds much as it does on the Blessed Isle, as described on pp. 43–45, unless Creation's defenders intervene. Without the focusing tool of the repurposed Sword of Creation, however, the process occurs at the Slow Spread described there.)

These efforts are ongoing throughout the East in Acts One and Two of the Reclamation. Interference is most likely to come from local gods in the wilderness, but a small coven of Exalts can certainly deal with backwater gods in the hinterlands. To keep from stirring up interference from local mortals and their occasional Stewards, the Yozi's agents take great pains either to make their sabotage look like natural occurrences or to cast the blame on rival mortals or mad local gods. Eventually, their work will have broad enough effects to pique the attention of those watching the Tapestry of Creation, but that will hopefully not occur until it's too late to reverse them—especially with all the other chaos and warfare going on at the same time. Even still, if the Bronze Faction Sidereals have it in mind to try to fix the region's geomancy anyway, the best option in their eyes would be to have units from the nearest Imperial legion's corps of engineers deployed to change the landscape back by force. Should they try that, the Empress can always see to it that her agents delay the necessary men and equipment indefinitely—or at least until the Lotus Massacre, after which point Sideréal oversight will be a non-issue anyway.

By Act Three, those agents of the Reclamation assigned to geographic and geomantic sabotage will be absorbed into the greater Malfean army.

GREAT FORKS

Great Forks has no real strategic significance to the agents of the Reclamation and no real military might to speak of. Nevertheless, the existence of a city that exists only to venerate the usurper gods annoys Malfeas to no end, so he can't just let it alone. He's devoted some precious resources to making the residents of Great Forks miserable before his armies finally march on the city and raze it.

Most of what the agents of the Reclamation are up to in Great Forks occurs during the first and second acts. Early on, subtle Yozi worshipers set up shop in some of the more sparsely populated neighborhoods of the city. There, they hide from the Enforcers and reach out in secret to desperate, jaded and warped mortals for whom the gods in the Temple District just won't cut it. Throughout Act One, the cultists spread their twisted faith and insinuate themselves into important low-key positions in the city.

In Act Two, these sleeper Yozi cultists wake up and start needling the city in various ways while the rest of the Scavenger Lands is preoccupied. For instance, Yozi agents in the North Quarter sneak into the municipal slave dormitories and taint the supplies of mete (which is doled out to the slaves daily to keep them pleasant and pacified). Some might spread poison that sickens or kills slaves in large numbers. Some might introduce hallucinogens that render the slaves unable to work effectively. Others might introduce modified Chayan fire tree pollen (see p. 66) to nullify the mete and make the slaves uncontrollable. Whatever will cause the most trouble.

As that situation plays itself out, other Yozi cultists in the North Quarter (possibly a cell of akuma if one is available) get to work pouring poisoned words in the ears of the local thugs and back-stabbers who make that quarter their home. The goal there is to inspire either a concerted crime wave that keeps the Enforcers busy or wild riots that not only tie up the Enforcers but put the citizens more on edge.

Elsewhere, saboteurs take such steps as to set fires in the city's southern warehouse district, to release helltech pathogens during popular festivals in the Temple District, to interrupt communications with Confederation allies, to snipe volunteers leaving military recruitment centers and to steal products from West Quarter processing plants. The idea is not so much to bring Great Forks to its knees through terrorism, but to keep everyone preoccupied with terrorism. The only objective of any real military value in Great Forks is to get spies close enough to the Palace of the Three to notice if the trio of gods starts working on a spell similar to the one that brought low the Princess Magnificent with Lips of Coral and Robes of Black Feathers. Should such preparations appear to be underway, a coven of Green Sun Princes can be cobbled together to interrupt them.

During Act Three, Malfeas is in no hurry to destroy Great Forks. The only real threat it poses is in the logistical, financial and medical support it can offer its



allies. The plan, then, is to choke off the city's major and minor trade routes so that support cannot get out.

GREYFALLS

Reclamation events in Greyfalls represent a microcosm of events on the Blessed Isle, just as those in Nexus represent the Scavenger Lands' tribulations. They are set in motion shortly after the Scarlet Empress makes her announcement towering over the Elemental Pole of Earth. One day later, the Empress transmits a message via hologlyphic telepresence directly to her Greyfalls estate, the Scintillating River Palace, confirming the authenticity of the earlier more spectacular message.

Weeks later, countless Realm ships are spotted making their way upriver. The ships bear building supplies and countless workers, all of better quality than what can be rounded up locally. Soon thereafter, more ships arrive full of Dynastic Dragon-Bloods bearing the Empress's new orders for Greyfalls.

Satrap Nellens Rombulac is recalled to the Blessed Isle, as is General Cathak Kitono and many of the Terrestrial officers in his pet legion. Construction begins on an enormous fortified compound intended to house the numerous influx of soldiers and Immaculate monks who have been reassigned to Greyfalls. Yet, as the locals quickly learn, this structure is no mere temple or garrison, it's a brand new chapter house of the Wyld Hunt. An imperious Earth Aspect, Imminent Thunder, is transferred to this chapter house to act as its exarch. Shortly after the exarch's arrival, replacements for Nellens Rombulac and Cathak Kitono arrive with yet more Dragon-Blooded soldiers and patrician bureaucrats. Their arrival sets off a wave of transformation that leaves Greyfalls' nearest neighbors stunned.

The new Realm officers' first goal is to unequivocally crush the Greyfallers' burgeoning nationalistic pride. Anyone who wants the Realm out or believes that Greyfalls should govern itself locally is rounded up and executed. Those who evade the initial roundup are made the targets of assassins working for the All-Seeing Eye. This crackdown sparks off an abortive rebellion, but the legionnaires crush it. When all is said and done, the satrap's replacement informs the populace that Greyfalls is no longer a satrapy with Realm backing, it is now a wholly owned Realm prefecture. It's renamed the Greyfalls Prefecture, whereupon it evicts all Guild merchants, adopts a strictly orthodox interpretation of the Immaculate Philosophy (practice of which is compulsory) and closes its borders.

Greyfalls Prefecture's borders reopen in Act Two, but only after the social upheavals ongoing in Act One

have settled and the locals have come to accept their new status. Yet, Greyfalls takes the same aggressive posture endemic to the Blessed Isle's foreign policy. Its soldiers spread west into the Hundred Kingdoms annexing its weaker eastern constituents or demanding lopsided treaties from the petty nations who seem to have their acts somewhat more together. Nations that agree to those treaties are effectively annexed anyway. Those that refuse feel the might of a reinvigorated and highly organized Imperial military and are quickly pressured to surrender. In this way do the forces of the Scarlet Empress intend to spread Realm influence throughout as many of the Hundred Kingdoms as they can manage. Meanwhile, cells of agents of the Reclamation work in secret to destabilize the various Hundred Kingdoms nations so they can't effectively unite against Greyfalls.

This insidious conquest goes on throughout Act Two for as long as no one does anything to stop it. With each quick conquest, the army conscripts more soldiers and grows more formidable. The rhetoric (which actually averts a few wars of resistance) is that the Realm is working to pacify and stabilize the region in this tumultuous time. The truth, however, is that the steady conquest and buildup of forces is a long taunt to Ma-Ha-Suchi, whose nameless lair is southeast of Greyfalls. If the campaign goes on long enough, the mad Lunar will eventually snap and lead his army of beastmen, Lunars and barbarians onto the field at last. Whether the Greyfalls forces can actually defeat Ma-Ha-Suchi's army (even with infernal agents aiding them against the Lunar in secret) is immaterial. The goal is not to beat Ma-Ha-Suchi, but to convince him to spread savage warfare and bloodshed. If they can keep leading him around long enough—especially without allowing him to ally with other Eastern fighting forces—the demon armies of Malfegas can mop him up in Act Three. Or, so the plan goes.

LINOWAN

Linowan and Halta have been at each others' throats for so long that agents of the Reclamation were initially tempted to simply let them carry on as-is. With the two of them engaged in endless war, the Yozi's agents would need only commence geomantic-sabotage operations to make the region covered by the two nations suitable for Malfegas. The Bull of the North changed things, however. His activities present potential benefits and obstacles to Reclamation efforts in the East. On the plus side, he's got a vast army and isn't afraid to engage it. On the negative side, however, the more powerful his army gets, the harder it will be for the demon armies to crush him.

Dealing with the Bull is primarily the responsibility of Adorjan's operatives in the North, but Malfeas has ways in mind for the Linowan to contribute.

At present, Linowan is an ally of the Realm, though that association did little to save the nation from the ravages of the Bull of the North. Linowan's queen and its Realm ambassador have been pleading with the Blessed Isle for more aid and a tighter alliance, but they have had little expectation of receiving either since the Empress's disappearance. The Empress's return heralds a new era of hope for the Linowan, though. As the Empress cleans house on the Isle, she renews ties with Linowan and establishes firm ties with Linowan's southern neighbors (themselves devastated by the Bull's icewalker armies). She also has loyal agents from the Immaculate Order renew ties with Golden-Eyed Jorst, Linowan's patron god.

Yet, for all the favor the Scarlet Empire shows Linowan, the Empress elects not to send her armies to occupy, fortify and defend Linowan against its enemies. She deploys some units to reinforce and man Linowan's scattered border fortresses on a more permanent basis, but feels that a mass deployment of field forces into Linowan would be imprudent. Instead, she assigns legionnaires with specialized commando training to

long tours of duty in Linowan country. It becomes these commandos' mission to train the Linowan not how to integrate themselves as auxiliaries to larger Realm legions (as was the military model in the past), but how to improve their own native tactics exponentially. The Linowan are best at mobilizing quickly in smaller units and striking out in wild, lightning-fast raids, so the Imperial commandos are to capitalize on those skills. They also bring with them higher-quality equipment such as armor, weaponry and fast-moving magitech river craft. As Act One of the Reclamation unfolds, the legionnaires teach the Linowan how to choose high-value raiding targets, how to act as effective sappers against fortified positions, how to coordinate widespread small groups and how to disappear into one's home terrain where an unwieldy foreign force can't follow.

This training comes partly from *The Thousand Correct Actions*, but mostly from the legionnaires' frustrating experiences dealing with weaker, nimbler enemies on foreign soil. It takes hard work up front to tamp down the raiders' lack of subtlety in pursuit of personal glory, but the Linowan eventually learn what's expected of them. The local leadership is concerned at first that the nation will be defenseless if the Bull of the North comes back, as it still has no visible army to hold the





icewalkers back. The Empress's goal for Linowan, however, is not to turn the Linowan into a force that can hold off the Bull, but one that can harry and frustrate his forces with a multitude of smaller wounds. If there's no large force of opponents for the Solar's icewalker army to pound on, all the Bull can do is run roughshod over the land while his enemies disperse and vanish into the forests. Such fighting might not be enough to defeat the Bull's Eastern fighters outright, but it can certainly wear them down and soften them up in advance of Act Three.

While this training and the subsequent raiding that derives from it goes on throughout Acts One and Two, other agents of the Reclamation steadily maintain geomantic-sabotage operations along much of the Linowan-Halta border. That region—so long embroiled in constant warfare and hatred—is to be a key breakthrough front for Malfeas's forces as Act Three begins.

HALTA

Of course, the Empress is under no illusion that the Linowan will ignore their war with Halta while they're learning how to counter the Bull of the North's strength with their mobility. Fortunately, the tactics the Realm's commandos bring with them work just as well against the Haltans as against anyone else. The Realm troops are also able to supply more and better-quality iron weapons to help the Linowan defend against the Fair Folk that stand between them and prize Haltan targets. Plus, the influx of legionnaires sent to help man the Linowan fortifications along the border goes a long way toward keeping raiding Haltans out. It also frees up more Linowan to go raiding themselves.

Meanwhile, non-Realm agents of the Reclamation are at work in Halta, doing their best to undermine its stability. Akuma and even Green Sun Prince sappers work to support Linowan raiding activities. For instance, they round up Vatal cannibals from Linowan, smuggle them into Haltan territory and set them loose to prey on unsuspecting Haltans. They burn trees deeper in Haltan land than regular Linowan raiders can penetrate and use helltech chemical weapons (or simply summon vicious demons) to spread death and terror in Haltan communities. They also work to undermine the so-called "alliance" between the Haltans and the Bull of the North. The ideal result of their efforts would be to eventually turn the Bull of the North against the Haltans so that the two nations and the icewalkers spend all of Act Two fighting each other and wearing each other down. Then, when the demon armies come, the Bull's

army is overextended and open on too many fronts to fight effectively against them all.

PROMINENT DEATHLORD HOLDINGS

The Yozis don't exactly want to declare war on their Neverborn brethren. Their primary concern is with the living defenders of Creation. All the same, though, it wouldn't do to allow the Deathlords and the legions of the dead to capitalize on the chaos of the Reclamation and have the Abyss swallow up the world before the Yozis have a chance to take it back. The following are some of the means Malfeas will employ to contain the threats the Eastern Deathlords pose to the Reclamation.

THORNS

Shortly after the Scarlet Empress's return, Thorns' foreign policy undergoes a change that allows its Scavenger Lands neighbors to breathe a sigh of relief. As the Empress's commanding visage appears in the sky astride the faraway Imperial Mountain, the Mask of Winters realizes that the Realm Defense Grid is once more fully armed and operational. He also recognizes signs of a burning zeal for conquest in the Empress's body language and decides that discretion might be prudent for a while. As mighty as Juggernaut and his armies of the dead are, the Deathlord's well aware that the Sword of Creation could wipe them all from the map. Knowing a sudden thrill of fear for the first time since the Usurpation, he withdraws his corpse-fortress through a shadowland and into the Underworld. His military warily backs its way home and closes off its borders, waiting to see what the newly reinvigorated Realm is about to do.

For its part, the Realm's main idea for dealing with Thorns involves deterrence, distraction and containment rather than outright obliteration. Without letting on that a major offensive is in the works for Act Three, agents of the Reclamation (primarily Fiends) seek out contact with the Mask of Winters in Act One. They warily propose joint operations between Yozi forces and deathknights in pursuit of Malfeas's other major and minor goals. Underneath this tentative proposition is the unspoken threat that interference in Malfeas's activities from the Mask of Winters' agents will not be tolerated.

These overtures are unlikely to pay off, however, as Mnemon already has a tenuous agreement with the Mask of Winters. Yet, should the Deathlord be



unwilling to try to play both sides against each other, all is not lost. Diplomacy notwithstanding, agents of the Yozi also use Act One to insinuate spies into the various layers of Thorns' living society. Then, in Act Two, they use those spies' information to foment rebellion between the city's living and dead residents. A rebellion is already brewing in Thorns at the hands of Realm loyalists, and there's no shortage of living men and women in the current administration who are predisposed to treachery. (That's how they achieved their positions when the Mask of Winters first came calling.) Act Two, then, is a time of Yozi worshipers making contact with, and insidious promises to, those traitors, while agents of the Scarlet Empress make contact with the Realm-loyal insurgents to offer them support and contraband and help them ferret out the Mask of Winters' spies in their midst. Truly clever agents of the Reclamation can even convince influential leaders in Thorns' living army to lead a coup against the Deathlord's intimidating Thornguard.

Between the second and third acts, a full-on rebellion should be going on in the bleak city. Yet, as with so many conflicts in this period, this one's goal is not to overthrow the Mask of Winters directly. (At least Malfeas doesn't want his Exalted and akuma resources tied up trying to do this. If the locals can do it on their own, good on them.) What's more important is to direct the Deathlord's focus inward. Then, as Act Three progresses, Malfeas's armies can deploy to either close Thorns off or lay siege to it, depending on how well the rest of the war is going by that point. It is only during Act Three, when his armies come into the world, that he will consider laying siege to the city. Even then, he might not, though, if some means could be employed to close up the Deathlord's shadowlands behind the withdrawn undead behemoth. Malfeas has at least that much respect for his fallen Neverborn cousins. Should the Mask of Winters deploy Juggernaut against Malfeas's armies, however, the Yozi has no compunctions about obliterating the horrid behemoth with whatever means are at his disposal.

THE NOSS FENS

The architects of the Reclamation have no plans to undermine or otherwise sabotage the rule of the Dowager of the Irreverent Vulgate in Unrent Veils in her own realm during the earlier acts of the Reclamation. The Noss Fens represent undesirable, strategically unimportant territory that lies uncomfortably close to the domain of the raksha. Better, then, to leave

the Dowager alone while she's not doing any harm. Then, once Act Three is underway and the armies of Hell march, diplomatic agents of the Reclamation can approach the Dowager and magnanimously offer her the opportunity to withdraw into the Underworld and trouble Creation no more.

Should the diplomatic approach fail—or should the Dowager pull something truly awful out of the Well of Udr—Malfeas is not afraid to maneuver a sizeable contingent of his demon army to overrun the Fens and put her down.

LIKEWISE, SIJAN

As with the Noss Fens, Malfeas has no immediate plans to involve Sijan in his war. He's willing to allow Sijan to remain neutral in the conflict. All the same, he still wants spies in Sijan just in case agents of the Deathlords try to use it as a neutral meeting ground to conspire. Otherwise, he's potentially willing to leave the city alone even after the Reclamation as long as its only purpose is to take care of the dead and not to forward the agendas of the Deathlords or the Neverborn.

WALKER'S REALM

The Walker in Darkness is a warmonger with a powerful army. Fortunately, he doesn't work well with his fellow Deathlords and doesn't have an enormous, unstoppable behemoth smearing shadowlands across Creation behind it. Therefore, Malfeas believes that containment and distraction should work as well on the Walker as it will on the Mask of Winters. Alternatively (or additionally), stirring up tension between the Walker and Creation's living defenders could keep both forces at each others' throats.

And as with Thorns and the Noss Fens, Malfeas is confident that he can maneuver his emergent demon armies around the Walker in Darkness well enough to convince the Deathlord that withdrawal into the Underworld would be wiser than a head-to-head confrontation. Of course, he doesn't expect the Walker to take that wise option, and he's confident that he'll enjoy crushing the haughty ghost's dead forces underfoot.



STANDALONE GOALS IN THE EAST

As stated earlier, Malfeas does not expect total victory all across the East before he arrives. He just needs enough of his primary goals sewn up so he'll have the power to overwhelm those regions where his agents failed. That being the case, he's willing to let some of these following initiatives fall by the wayside if more time or energy is required to accomplish his primary goals. He won't be happy about it, but he'll probably get over it once the Reclamation is complete.

CHAYA

Chaya plays a minor role in the Reclamation, though a not insignificant one. The groundwork is laid before the Scarlet Empress returns, with clever akuma infiltrating the nation's Rabinal secret police force. The akuma involved need not even be Chayans, as the Rabinal employs outsiders to operate abroad and to keep an objective eye on native Chayans. The infiltrators study the phenomenon of the fire trees and the Chayans' yearly madness for many years. They periodically arrange the disappearance of small numbers of Chayans, who are then smuggled back to Malfeas. The fire tree mystery has a low priority in Hell, but demons and akuma savants study it when time permits. Yet, none are able to puzzle out the fire trees' secret until the advent of the Green Sun Princes. It turns out that one of the mad Defiler geniuses holds within him the twisted Exaltation of the Twilight Caste who originally created the radiolari—the microscopic synthetic organisms behind the secret of Chaya's fire trees. (See pp. 92, 94 and 96 of **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. III—The East.**) This Defiler takes over the project, recognizing a hideous new potential for his Solar predecessor's defective, unfinished invention.

ACT ONE: THE CHAYAN CONNECTION

In the early days after the Scarlet Empress's return, life goes on as normal in Chaya. The natives hear of events on the Blessed Isle from gossiping Guildsmen, but the news has no effect on them. Some of their nearest forward-thinking neighbors build up their local militias or work extra hard to make nice with Lookshy, but they leave the Chayans alone. Even the slag tribes that haunt the First Age ruins around Chaya are blissfully quiescent. This last circumstance has more sinister applications, however, for these twisted mutants are being rounded up and subjected to awful experiments. The Defiler working on the radiolari sets

up a secret laboratory on the ruins of a broken manse near Chaya, which once sheltered one of the smaller slag tribes. The team converts the underlying demesne into an infernally aspected one and carefully conceals it from prying eyes—relying on the original place's unsavory reputation to keep those who are aware of it from getting too close. Coordinating between that research outpost and his larger laboratory in the Demon City, the Defiler extracts living radiolari samples from kidnapped Chayans and studies them to fill in the gaps of his First Age memories.

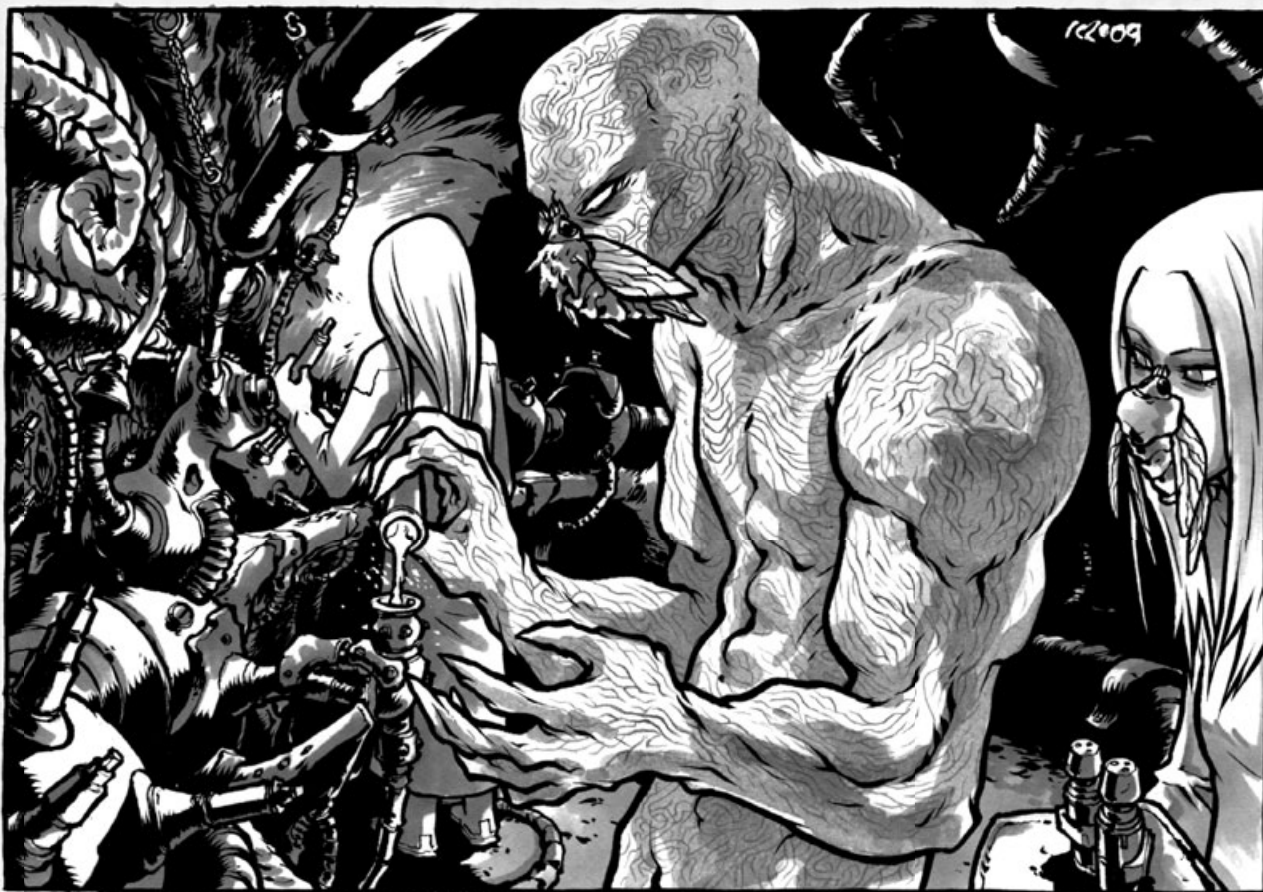
Once he's done that, he experiments with reprogramming and refining the extracted radiolari. In each testing phase, he infects captured mutants from the slag tribes, often with gruesome and fatal results. It takes time to get it right, but he finally manages to change the nature of the radiolari at his disposal in three crucial ways. First, he imbeds in them the capacity to overwhelm and rewrite the defective programming in other radiolari organisms. Second, he refines the psychological effects that his new radiolari impose on affected humans' psyches. He damps down the consuming urge to breed that comes on when the fire trees bloom, for instance, while leaving intact and intensifying the fearless, manic wildness for which Chayans are already feared. He also includes programming to make infected persons highly susceptible to supernatural powers of suggestion. Third, he keys the effects of his reprogrammed radiolari to remote control technology so he can turn them on and off as needed. Unfortunately, he can't work out how to improve the range of transmissibility, so he can't cause the super radiolari to spread much farther than the original radiolari already do.

By the end of the first act of the Reclamation, the Defiler's work is finished, and he infects the most recently kidnapped Chayan citizens with his new super radiolari. The akuma agents in the Rabinal cause that organization to look the other way as those infected citizens are secreted back into the general population, often before anyone notices they were gone.

ACT TWO: WISPS OF FURY

During this phase of the Reclamation, Chaya changes rapidly, although its neighbors hardly notice. The Defiler's super radiolari spread quickly between the walled cities of Chaya. The akuma Rabinal agents monitor the spread and silence those rare Chayans who somehow resist the super radiolari or who have unexpectedly violent immune-system reactions to them.

As the radiolari change in the Chayan ecosystem, so too do the radiolari gods. Their personalities change



in fits and unpredictable mood swings as the epidemic spreads throughout Chaya. Only too late does Chaya's personal god, Xochichem, realize just how serious the other radiolari gods' condition is. By that point, however, he's isolated and held hostage by not only the radiolari gods, but the priesthood and citizenry of Chaya—all of whom believe that Xochichem is the one who's changing and must be protected until he gets better.

The spread of the Defiler's super radiolari takes time to noticeably affect the landscape, but the effects become more prominent as Act Two progresses. The biggest change is visible in the fire trees. As more super radiolari replace the outmoded radiolari, the trees' sap takes on a silvery sheen that stains the trunks of the trees as the sap runs. New fire trees grow taller and more lush than their forebears, designed to eventually tower over the older trees when they're fully grown. Most importantly, however, the pollen of the fire trees changes. The Defiler and his akuma research assistants collect it and learn how to refine it into an ugly chemical warfare agent that can be preserved almost indefinitely. They combine it with an aerosol to form an airborne poison with the following traits

(5*/1 hour, 5, —/—, -0). This poison does not cause physical damage exactly. Instead, it infects affected victims with the uncontrolled abandon that Chayans naturally suffer during Resplendent Fire, minus the urge to procreate and minus the sense of community that Chayan xenophobes typically exhibit. That is, the refined poison turns large groups of people into bloodthirsty maniacs who want nothing more than to tear apart everything and everyone around them, including each other.

By the end of Act Two, Chaya has become an even more insular and xenophobic culture devoted to the production of this chemical agent. It withdraws from any association with other nations, including Lookshy. Yozi-worshipping merchants in the Guild help the locals distribute their chemical weapon to wealthier nations, which provides the Chayans enough capital to better fortify themselves against the outside world. And yet, even up to this point, the Chayans do not wholly realize that they are working the will of the Yozis. All they know is that their local gods have somehow changed the nature of their beloved fire trees and given them this means of keeping the world at bay so that they can live their lives in peace.

SWITCHING UP

As with the Yozi's larger goals in the East, agents of the Reclamation need not proceed in Rathess from point to point as those points are outlined here. They might decide, instead, to try to conquer the Dragon Kings first and use their might to crush Han-Tha. They might reach out to the leech gods in the city's dank underways for help against the raksha. They might simply summon a Third Circle demon into the ruins and work together to kill everybody who doesn't run. Alternatively, they could try to loot the city on the sly with none the wiser that they were ever there.

It's all a question of player and Storyteller choice. The Yozi only know where Rathess is and that it was once at the heart of Dragon King and First Age Solar society. They only want in the beginning to know if it has any value relative to their goals. Any benefit they derive from Rathess is gravy.

ACT THREE: RETURN OF THE YOZI

By this point, Chaya has become a heavily fortified chemical-weapons manufacturer for the Yozi cause without even really knowing it. Its 12 cities surround themselves with high stone walls, and their streets are lined with tall, silvery trees that whisper uncomfortable truths whenever the wind blows. The Defiler in charge of local operations quietly suborns the local religious establishment and takes over the Shrine of the Fire Tree from pitiful, overwhelmed Xochichem. He converts it into his primary headquarters and research facility in Creation and has its defender monks converted bit by bit to worship of the Yozi.

Otherwise, Chaya plays no further active role in the Reclamation. Should the Reclamation completely succeed, Chaya could be one potential place Malfeas would allow Szoreny to break through into the world. Should the Reclamation fail, it is likely that the devices the Defiler uses to moderate the effects of the fire tree pollen on the Chayans infected with super radiolari will be lost or destroyed. Should that happen—assuming Chaya has not been razed or overrun already—the Chayans will finally succumb to the intensified madness and destroy themselves when the fire trees next bloom.

The same fate is possible if the Defiler and his crew are discovered and defeated earlier in the Reclamation, provided the victors don't figure out and use his suppression technology.


DENANDSOR

At least one of the 10 Green Sun Princes of the Defiler Caste has memories of working in Denandsor in the First Age. Likewise, some Second and Third Circle demons have uncomfortable memories of having been summoned there long ago to do the bidding of Solar savants. Weaker demons have also reported back in the intervening years about outcaste Scavenger Lords' failed attempts to breach the city's many vaults. The architects of the Reclamation, therefore, are interested in investigating Denandsor to see what remains of its former glory. After a few harrowing reconnaissance expeditions into the quiescent City of Makers, however, they realize that they must first find some way to deal with the miasma that permeates the city. If they can do that, they stand to gain a sizeable stockpile of elegant and powerful First Age magitech devices.

The first order of business is to find the source of the miasma that causes victims to go mad with fear. Doing so, they must then develop helltech means of resisting the miasma or uncover its source and deactivate it. Should they accomplish either, the next step is to deal with the city's automaton guardians. The agents of the Reclamation have a slight edge over Creation's treasure hunters or defenders, in that they know that the automatons can all be reprogrammed at the cognition device at the heart of the central mind unit deep inside the former daimyo's manse. Managing to reprogram the guardians will be no mean feat for an Infernal savant, however, even without the added challenge of eluding and/or fighting off the guardians between himself and the cognition device. And that's saying nothing about the city's other magitech traps and sorcerous defenses.

Gaining free, unfettered access to Denandsor is work enough for the entire first act of the Reclamation. During the second act, the Yozi have the city repopulated with their own sorcerer-engineers and thaumaturges, as well as abundant slave labor to do the savants' grunt work. They loot the city of its useful materiel then set to work altering the native geomancy to change the aspect of its central manse. Finally, they adapt the various factory-cathedrals and municipal workshops to run on infernal Essence so they can step up production of helltech wonders for their forces in Creation. They spend the rest of the act ramping up for





mass production. The first wonders come off the line in Act Three, and Denandsor remains a heavily guarded (though not densely populated) infernal industrial facility until the Reclamation is settled.

Should the agents of the Reclamation fail to deactivate the miasma or reprogram the guardians, however, they don't throw good resources after bad. In Acts One and Two, they're content to establish covert lookout stations near the city to watch over it. If interlopers come near, the watchers get word back up the chain of command. If those interlopers are as successful as all those before them, the Yozi agents eliminate the escaping survivors (if there are any) and continue to wait. If the interlopers manage to succeed where the Yozis' agents failed, the watchers send for a coven of Exalted to deal with them. If that coven is successful, the Yozis' forces proceed as described previously.

If the Yozis' people still can't get in safely by the time Act Three rolls around and Creation's defenders are equally unsuccessful (or just ignorant of Denandsor's presence), the Yozis take one last precautionary step. They break off a wing of the nearest demon legion and order it to set up a fortified installation nearby to keep out everyone who's not working toward the Reclamation.

MAHALANKA

With a handful of cursory intelligence-gathering missions in the ruins of what once was Sperimin, agents of the Yozis determine Mahalanka to be a low-priority and low-value target in the Eastern wilderness. Sure, it might be nice to have *The Book of Three Circles* or access to the materials in its great library, but none of the Yozis' other objectives actively require those materials. The architects of the Reclamation consider it more important to keep Creation's defenders away from those rare and informative texts instead.

To that end, akuma and some disposable First Circle demons are dispatched to the area to keep watch on the jungles surrounding the city. Should interlopers come, the watchers are to report back. More often than not, Raksi, her barbarians or her beastmen will deal with the intruders. Should the intruders get away (or should they make arrangements with the Queen of Fangs and be allowed to leave), the watchers are to track them and eliminate them if at all possible. Should initial attempts of this nature fail, the Exalted akuma in charge of the operation mobilize to deal with the escapees personally—hopefully before word spreads about what wonders are available in the City of a Thousand Golden Delights.

By the late second or early third act of the Reclamation, the Yozis change tacks slightly and send diplomatic envoys to speak to the Queen of Fangs. Their goal is to arrange a non-aggression agreement with Raksi in which she'll stay out of the way of their armies and keep her treasure trove of First Age knowledge out of the hands of her enemies. In return, they'll leave her in peace to enjoy her sybaritic indulgences. Perhaps in time, they offer, they'll even introduce her to new ones. In the Yozis' agents can convince her thus to stay out of the way—and possibly even start her down the road to becoming akuma—all the better. If not, the armies of Malfeas will be more than content to have their Fiends release them from their obligations and stomp Mahalanka's people flat. Yes, Raksi is a powerful sorceress and an ancient Lunar, but she's just one Exalt with a city full of savages and talking monkeys. She might hold out for a while against a demon army, but not forever.

RATHESS

The Yozis' plans for Rathess start out with simple reconnaissance but evolve quickly as the agents of the Reclamation learn the facts on the ground.

ACT ONE: RUINS OF RATHESS

Act One of the Reclamation in Rathess begins with clever akuma and Yozi cultists stealing into the city and exploring. Their masters expect them to find out not only how much of the city's magitech infrastructure is still intact but how much of its horde of imperishable treasures has been looted. (Although the Yozis are aware of Rathess's existence and location, they have not been keeping careful tabs on it throughout the centuries since the Terrestrial Usurpation.) With care and cunning, these stealthy explorers should be able to find out about the city's current inhabitants and the state of the city in the modern Age. As their preliminary reports come back, an Infernal coven consisting of at least one Scourge and appropriately skilled Exalted akuma is dispatched to the city for further information. Between them, they should be able to piece together all the information about Rathess available in **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. III—The East**.

Once the command structure in Hell is filled in on this information, the original plans for Rathess are put on hold. The exploratory coven is recalled and re-deployed, and a new one is dispatched to the region. This coven's assignment is to make contact with Han-Tha, the corpse-eater forbidden god hiding in Rathess, and Filial Wisdom, the deluded Solar Exalt who follows



him. Doing so, the characters are to convince Han-Tha by any means necessary to grant Filial Wisdom to them so they can bring him to Hell and have him invested as an akuma. In return, the forces of the Yozis will help Han-Tha spread his philosophy (and the practice thereof) in the coming years of the Reclamation and thereafter. As long as he restricts his appetites to the fallen, the armies of Malfeas will provide him and his worshipers with plenty to eat.

Should the coven fail to convince Han-Tha, the characters are to attempt to convert Filial Wisdom secretly (perhaps by helping him finish his masterwork of poetry in such a way that he realizes the righteousness of their actions). Failing that, they are to secretly subdue him, kidnap him and spirit him away to Malfeas. There, either he'll be broken and become akuma, or he'll remain imprisoned until his demon jailers tire of having their twisted way with him.

ACT TWO: CULT OF THE DEGENERATED

Assuming things work out well enough in the previous act, Act Two of the Reclamation sees the conquest of Rathess by the forces of Hell. Ideally, the Yozis' agents will have the full cooperation of Han-Tha and access to his loyal followers, not least of whom is an akuma Filial Wisdom. The first order of business is to defeat and incorporate into the army those savage barbarian tribes that make their crude homes in jungles around the city. Failing that, they could simply kill all the savages—which would make Han-Tha happy—or drive them off so they won't be a nuisance.

Next is the stalking and extermination of the lingering raksha presence in Rathess's ruins. The ideal force of an Infernal coven, Han-Tha's followers and co-opted barbarian savages should be more than enough to clear out the raksha by force. Smaller forces will have to be subtler and cleverer. They might even have to play the raksha against one another. Regardless, a competent force can do the job easily enough.

The final stage of Act Two is the corruption of the stalker Dragon Kings. At present, Rathess is home to hundreds of feral Dragon Kings who have the potential to awaken their refined intelligence and shared species-memory but have not had the chance to do so. It's essential to the forces of Hell that these stalkers *not* get that chance. Instead, the Yozis' agents are to intimidate and train the stalkers to accept the Reclamation's agents as their superiors and masters. Doing so is certainly within the realm of possibility for Exalted akuma and Green Sun Princes, though they'll assuredly draw the ire of Rathess's caretaker gods when they get started.

They might have to put the gods down in brutal combat, but especially slick Fiends or other supernaturally smooth talkers might be able to convince the gods that the Yozis fully intend to elevate these Dragon Kings to a new and different regal station.

ACT THREE: HOUSES OF THE GHOUL GOD


Act Three of the Reclamation sees Rathess becoming a Yozi-loyal stronghold in the East (assuming all has gone well in the previous two acts, of course). It is the center of Han-Tha's cult, and it becomes a training center for a new breed of soldier in the demon army: stalker handler. As more Yozi-loyal soldiers learn how to use the stalkers effectively, the reptiles are farmed out to battle groups as terrifying shock troops. With them go priests of the burgeoning religion of Han-Tha to help spread the word and keep the corpse-eater god content.

Meanwhile, Yozi-loyal savants study the city to see what it has to offer. Once they work out its geomancy, then begins a long process of tearing down infrastructure and rebuilding it wrong. In addition, sacrifices to the Yozis are carried out on a staggering scale to properly taint the local demesnes' Essence to better suit the Yozis' agents. While that's going on, troops will have to be garrisoned at what is currently the Pyramid of the Rising Sun to cordon off the gateway to Yu-Shan built

KINGS IN STASIS

Considering how little the Yozis know about Rathess at first, it is no surprise that they are unaware that a handful of intelligent, cultured Dragon Kings wait in suspended animation beneath the city. Considering the state of Rathess when the Yozis' agents arrive, it's possible they might not find the sleepers' stasis pods for quite some time. The decision to include the sleepers at all is entirely up to the Storyteller. Bear in mind, though, that if the sleepers are awakened, they are not inclined to support the aims of the Yozis, Han-Tha's minions, the leech gods or the raksha. To them, all four of those factions are inimical to the Dragon Kings' way of life. More than likely, they'll either fight or run when they realize what's happening.

Of course, if the defenders of Creation are the ones who explore Rathess and make it their own, that's a different story altogether.



at the top of it. The Yozi certainly don't want heavenly forces deploying through it, and they might need to use it as a back door into Heaven themselves later.

Finally, if it hasn't been done already, the savants on staff labor around the clock to repair and adapt Rathess's most useful N/A-level artifact, the Orrery of Arainthu, to work in the current celestial situation. If, for instance, Ligier has taken a place in Creation's sky or the wasteland of Cecelyne has displaced significant portions of the South (thus replacing the starry sky above with her own black non-sky), the Orrery must be updated to reflect those changes. In fact, the speed and facility with which these adaptations can be made as Act Three of the Reclamation proceeds makes the Orrery of Arainthu nimbler and more focused than the Loom of Fate. Using it can grant the agents of the Reclamation a significant advantage over any surviving Sidereal Exalted or Maidens working the Loom.

MOUNT METAGALAPA

On a surface examination, the floating Mount Metagalapa seems like it would make an ideal stronghold for either agents of the Reclamation or the defenders of Creation. Yozi loyalists have a high-priority plan to make it so in the early days after the Scarlet Empress returns. Yet, Mount Metagalapa hides a secret that could easily turn the war around in the East for whichever side figures it out first.

ACT ONE: WHERE HAWKS DARE

The first step in this plan involves dealing with the biggest impediment to taking the mountain: its inhabitants. The mountain's remoteness and isolation makes a direct assault problematic, so the key is to first upset its delicate social balance and distract its people with internecine turmoil. The biggest fault lines of social tension in Metagalapa exist between its isolationists and adventurers, its nouveau-riche hawkriders aristocracy and grounded working class, and its contentious prominent families. Considerable enmity remains between its hawkman slave class and the Metagalapan humans who enslaved them long ago.

As the Reclamation begins, agents of the Yozi must spend most of their time simply making inroads with the insular Metagalapans. Akuma and Green Sun Princes can smooth the way and speed the process with Social-keyword Charms, but even mortal cultists can be of use if they're persistent and persuasive enough. Once they establish contact and relationships with the Metagalapans, the Yozi's agents offer whatever they can to interested Metagalapans, from riches to power

to freedom. They do this not only to bait the hook for future converts, but to deepen the social tensions that already exist.

Meanwhile, other agents take less subtle measures to suborn the hawkmen on the surrounding peaks of the Ravanashi mountain range. These agents tell the wild hawkmen about the horrid treatment their cousins receive on the mountain and that the Metagalapans' hawkriders will be after them and their eggs next unless they do something about it. As for what that something might be, the agents offer specialized training to forge them into an effective fighting force against the hawkriders. Should these agents fail to make any headway with lies and manipulation, the more powerful ones receive the go-ahead to simply conquer the recalcitrant beastmen and forge them into a fighting force that way.

If the Yozi's agents get their way in Act One, the denizens of Mount Metagalapa will soon be too content with their growing wealth, too paranoid about the ambitions of their neighbors or too terrified that the hawkmen are on the verge of mass revolution to notice what's going on around them. While the Metagalapans are distracted, agata-borne akuma and mortal cultists (possibly even a coven of Green Sun Princes) sneak onto the mountain and set up secret camps in played-out iron mines low on the mountain's surface.

ACT TWO: FLIGHT WITHOUT END

The second act of the Reclamation sees the end of Metagalapan civilization. Yozi-worshipping agents provocateurs work to simultaneously whip the Metagalapan humans into a paranoid frenzy, cut them off from contact with the outside world, convert as many of them as possible to Yozi worship and foment rebellion among their hawkman slaves. When the fervor of the latter is at its utmost, the agents of the Reclamation working on nearby peaks lead the barbarian hawkmen in a vicious preemptive strike against their would-be enslavers. As hawkmen tangle in the skies with hawkriders, a Yozi-loyalist strikes a match on the powder keg in Metagalapa itself, igniting a full-blown slave rebellion. After that, it's just a matter of making sure both sides of the conflict suffer sufficient casualties to render the eventual victor too weak to defend itself. It would also do to have a coven of Exalted akuma and/or Green Sun Princes on hand to deal with Onibala or Rage of the Birdmen if either Metagalapan god should try to interfere. Then, once the fighting is over, the agents of the Reclamation and any willing converts

they've won over thus far spread out and mop up the remnants of the victors.

ACT THREE: THE GUNS OF METAGALAPA

The Yozi's plan going forward calls for a steady buildup of forces on the mountain, followed by rapid construction of fortifications against aerial attackers and ritual preparations to make the mountain suitable for habitation for all sorts of flying demons and airborne Hellspawn. If some way can be found to maneuver the flying mountain as well, all the better.

Late in Act Two and onward, however, the conquerors make certain discoveries beneath the surface of the mountain. The first sign that something is amiss comes from the Yozi cultists who hole up in supposedly played-out mines the Metagalapans have long since abandoned. They find the mines not only rich with usable minerals, but much shallower than historical oral tradition suggests they should be. The second and more significant sign comes from the savants and geomancers who study the mountain and nearby landscape to try to figure out what keeps the mountain aloft and whether it's possible to make it move. They manage to work out that all the manes and demesnes within a 25-mile radius are significantly less powerful than the local arrangements of dragon lines and the prevailing Essence currents indicate they should be. Stranger still, the very mountain itself seems to be somehow respiring enough ambient Essence to cause that widespread draining effect. Exalted savants with particularly vivid memories from the First Age might realize just from that minimal evidence the secret that Mount Metagalapa hides. Others might not realize it until many years later when their constant mining efforts strike what appears to be an enormous vein of jade except that it's perfectly smooth and far too straight to have accreted naturally. It might not even become clear unless an Exalted savant can extrapolate the size and shape of the jade vein enough to realize that it is part of a manmade support frame.

However they put the pieces together, those who conquer Mount Metagalapa have the chance to realize that what they've got in their possession is not some flying fluke left over from the Balorian Crusade (which the locals believe it is). It's actually *Scattered Petals of the Thousand-Toothed Blossom*—the First Age Titan-class aerial citadel of the Eastern direction. Thought lost in the Wyld millennia ago, this dormant, mountain-sized superweapon had actually powered down and crashed among the Ravanashi Peaks during the strife that ended the Solars' reign. There it lay, dormant and

forgotten, until the end of the Balorian Crusade. The woman who would be Empress broke that crusade with the power of the Sword of Creation, scouring much of overrun Creation with purifying energy. Yet, what she still doesn't know about the Sword is that when it is active, it opens an encrypted communication channel to all *Titans* in range. That channel is reserved for emergency communiqués between Meru and a *Titan's* commander in times of catastrophe. At the end of the raksha invasion, then, when the Sword of Creation drove the raksha back, a signal went out to *Scattered Petals of the Thousand-Toothed Blossom*. The *Titan* received this signal, automatically powered back up after so many years and hauled itself aloft. Yet, with no commander and no crew—and, indeed, no message carried on the signal it received—all it could do was float there awaiting further instructions.

If agents of the Reclamation are the ones who wind up in possession of this directional *Titan*, their Yozi masters change tactics immediately. All available hands in the region (be they akuma, cultists, Green Sun Princes or even Realm troops on the march in the region) are re-deployed to the mountain to begin the arduous process of digging down through its outer shell to find some way into its superstructure. The next step is to send as many savants and magitech craftsmen as possible into the bowels of the *Titan* to repair it and get its full complement of armaments running again. Should they succeed in this (at some time in Act Three, definitely), the mountain shudders and emits a long, hellish groan as the *Titan* sloughs off its excess rock carapace in a storm of falling stone. Then, to the wondering horror of any living witnesses, the flying city begins to move across the sky. At long last, *Scattered Petals of the Thousand-Toothed Blossom* is active once more.

SCATTERED PETALS OF THE THOUSAND-TOOTHED BLOSSOM (ARTIFACT N/A)

Larger than many mountains, the four directional *Titans* embodied the gratuitous pinnacle of the Old Realm's aerial fleet, replacing the earlier directional mobile platforms built during the Primordial War as the predominant military bastions of the First Age Threshold. In standard flight mode, the pentagonal ziggurat hull of *Scattered Petals of the Thousand-Toothed Blossom* stretches more than five miles at its widest point and a mile from base to peak, allowing it to shade an entire city beneath it. The fortress can also expand into a siege configuration eight miles across, separating the outer hull into five equal triangular





segments connected to a circular inner hull so the Eye of Judgment weapon system within it can fire. Most of the superstructure is built from living stone monoliths cultured in genesis labs from behemoth organ templates and symbiotically grafted together onto a magitech skeleton of jade alloy. This synthesis of living and non-living technology allows the hull to regenerate from damage and perform limited autonomic upkeep without the metabolic complications of a fully organic vessel. For conventional armament, the citadels mount 500 Essence beam cannons set in turret emplacements over the entire hull, allowing roughly 100 cannons to converge fire on any point within range as coordinated by the onboard AI. If these barrages prove insufficient, the Eye of Judgment superweapon is a one-mile-wide circular crystallized orichalcum lens that aggressively absorbs ambient sunlight from the area and converts it into a coruscating pulse that could ignite an entire First Age metropolis with a jade-melting holocaust of solar fire. As a command base, the *Titan* also has 50 thousand-forged dragon launch silos for continent-spanning infrastructural assaults, as well as hangars for hundreds of skyships of varying sizes. (See **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 113–115, for more info on thousand-forged dragons.) Besides its nearly indestructible Shaping-resistant hull, the vessel can project an extremely powerful Essence shield, though the shield is deployed against only those enemy forces deemed a direct threat to the security of the ship—which is to say almost never.

The *Titans* existed for two purposes. First, they were among the most visible and awesome displays of Exalted power ever conceived. One's mere presence on the horizon was sufficient to cow enemies into submission and bolster allies without ever firing a shot. In this capacity, each citadel drifted over its direction in semi-regular patrols or in response to significant domestic unrest. Second, the fortresses provided a central stronghold against the slim possibility of the Yozis' escape or theoretical incursion by shinma aspects or alien Primordials dwelling in outermost chaos who had yet to stumble upon Creation. To prepare for such invasions, the *Titans* and their support fleets engaged in war games every few decades against armies of bound Third Circle demons and other similar force-level combatants such as the Kukla in order to keep their crews ready and to develop new Armageddon strategies. To support these two missions, each *Titan* contained a full

factory-cathedral-equivalent workshop with archival templates of every artifact deemed important enough to preserve in the extreme event it must abandon Creation and colonize the Wyld. The archives possessed similarly comprehensive biotemplates, though the fortresses did not have onboard genesis labs and would have to construct many such facilities with their factories before they could mass produce extinct species to self-sustaining viability. Since such dire conditions had yet to present themselves before the Usurpation, the workshops mostly carried out Solar Deliberative-sanctioned pet projects of prominent Solar elders.

Each *Titan* bears a name commemorating victory over a Primordial loosely associated with the element of the direction the fortress oversees. Hence, *Scattered Petals of the Thousand-Toothed Blossom* stands as perpetual insult to Metagaos.

Speed: 10/20mph (5/10mph while shielded or in siege configuration)

Maneuverability: -4S (Lore 5, Sail 5)

Endurance: A *Titan* harvests its own Essence. Each requires Repair 6 maintenance every week by a 100-member team (only once per month while suspended in a paramagnetic web). Each missed upkeep disables the following systems in order: auxiliary systems (including the workshop and all other systems not associated with actual operation), siege mode, energy shield, Essence cannons, maneuvering engines and finally AI. If its AI is disabled, the fortress exists in a state of depleted hibernation as an inert mountain held aloft only by sufficiently strong geomancy upon which its immortal stone can respire.

Crew: 5,000/(-1 maneuverability per 1000 less crew, to minimum skeleton 2,000; also requires functional AI and Solar commander attuned to hologlyphic control dais for 10 motes); (1,000 officers: Lore 4, Sail 4; 4000 auxiliary personnel: Lore: 3, Sail 2)

Cargo: An entire city-sized complex of hangars, vaults, laboratories and barracks, with effectively unlimited storage appropriate to this scale.

Armor: 60L/60B (When activated, the ablative Essence shield is solid to dematerialized beings, completely impervious to Shaping effects and has Hardness of 100L/100B. Any attack that would penetrate it collapses the barrier without damaging the *Titan* and the shield cannot be reactivated until it has received Repair 5 maintenance.)

Health Levels: Ux200/Mx100/Cx50/Ix30/D (Due to the *Titan's* size, each attack against it cannot inflict

more levels of damage than the attacker's Essence or an artifact weapon's rating, whichever is higher. Large area attacks encompassing most of the vessel's volume inflict damage normally.)

Weapons:

500 Essence Beam Cannons: Speed 5, Accuracy (gunner's Wits + Archery + 2; turrets provide telescopic Essence sight and highlight the current target selected by the citadel's AI, so that gunners can see and attack virtually any target in range and fire coverage), Damage

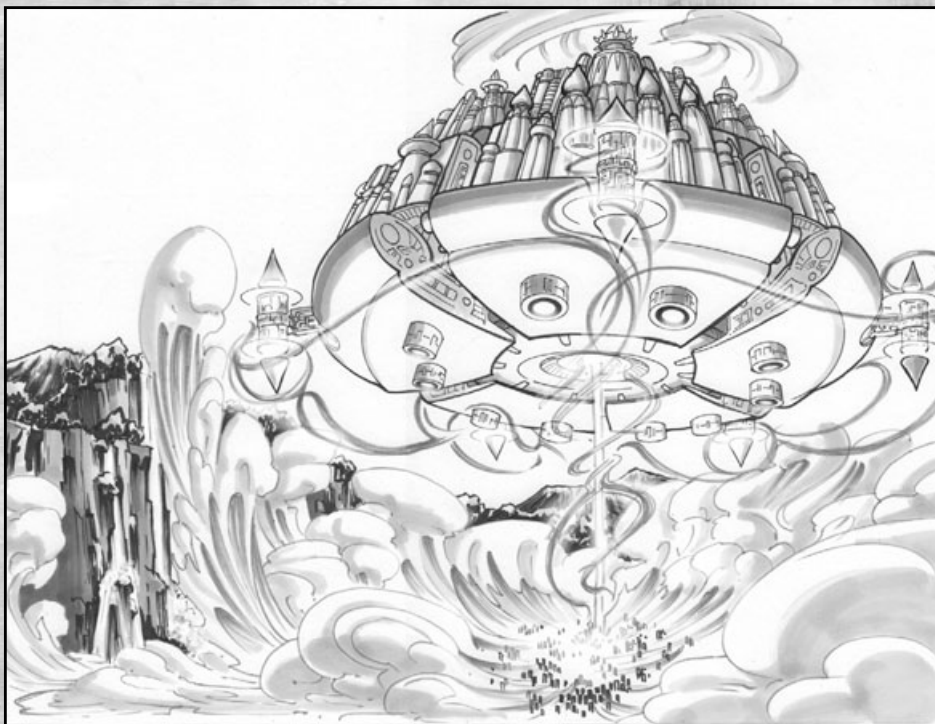
15L piercing (damages everything within five yards of impact; affects dematerialized beings normally), Range one mile, Rate 1 (commander can use control dais to override and remotely fire any of the cannons; otherwise each is manned by its own gunner)

Eye of Judgment: Speed 7 (opening the hull to ready this weapon or closing back to flight mode takes 10 minutes), Accuracy Perfect (cannot target individual objects; lens fires a one-mile-wide pillar of light straight down), Damage 100L levels of piercing

DEALING WITH THE *TITAN*

Check out the traits of a fully functional *Titan*-class citadel. Yeah.

Depending on the events of your series, either the Yozis' agents or the defenders of Creation can get this thing. At full power, this superweapon will either change or set in stone the balance of power for the side that gets it. Either way, using it in your game allows you to craft some of the most spectacular action set pieces **Exalted** can offer. Just imagine it. Power-armored



Exalts and airships and demons and dragons and gods and flying behemoths and magitech fighter craft and even thousand-forged dragons all zipping around one another in an aerial ballet of death, all while dodging Essence cannon blasts, and one side trying desperately to get aboard before that dread mile-wide orichalcum lens powers up again...

It's likely the final conflict in the East will revolve around daring heroes on the side that doesn't have the *Titan* trying either to take it over from those who do have it or to get onboard and destroy it so neither side can have it. Until that point, though, the *Titan* is essentially a plot device allowing you or your characters to remove armies, fortifications, cities, behemoths or what have you from the map by fiat.

As for the other directional *Titans* that were built in the First Age... Well, one was destroyed by its commander during the Usurpation, but the others are probably still out there somewhere.



(aggravated to creatures of darkness; permanently obliterates killed spirits and sears deceased mortal souls into Lethe; the expanding holocaust rippleskims outward from the point of impact with a blast wave cresting at 100 yards high to a radius of five miles, damaging everything material and immaterial in the ripple's path not protected with a perfect defense), Range Special (see Accuracy), Rate 1/hour (during day) or 1/night (focusing the iconic anima of the commander rather than harnessing sunlight)

Other Notes: The living stone armor of the *Titan* can heal itself, albeit extremely slowly—one bashing level per week, one lethal per month, one aggravated per year. The living stone armor protects inhabitants against Wyld exposure and similar radiation up to Middlemarches-strength, though anything stronger requires the shields. As a final life-support measure, the unshielded living rock mutates in the presence of stronger energies, growing a stabilizing carapace in the course of a minute that fully obscures the ship's Essence and protects inhabitants from transformation. The carapace completely incapacitates all systems other than levitation and respiration until removed as per repairing a broken Repair 6 artifact.

A *Titan* fortress is simply too large to power with hearthstones, as it would take a quarter of the

geomantic gems of a Threshold direction to do so and would present unacceptable risk of sabotage. A small bank of protoshinmaic vortexes (see **Dreams of the First Age: Book Two—Lords of Creation**, p. 95) might have sufficed, but *Scattered Petals of the Thousand-Toothed Blossom* was never refitted with that tech. Fortunately, the partially living hull embeds most of the superstructure with thousands of miles worth of respiration microfilaments, allowing the vessel to power itself by draining ambient Essence. In flight mode, all manses and demesnes within 25 miles of the *Titan* are considered to have a rating one dot less than normal. (This drain does not diminish or disable hearthstone ratings.) In siege mode, the drain increases to two dots and temporarily disables hearthstones from drained manses. With both modes, full power resumes as soon as the fortress leaves the area. Without major refitting, a *Titan* cannot stay aloft in Essence-dead areas (such as the Underworld).

If a *Titan*'s reactor is destroyed (or deliberately overloaded for self-destruct), the resulting explosion inflicts effectively infinite damage to every material and immaterial object within 500 miles, obliterating the geography of that area (though on land, the crater quickly fills in with lava bleeding up from beneath). Only those with perfect defenses survive.



THEY'RE
FIRING AGAIN!



SAY WHEN,
PLEASE.

NOW! NOW!



BOOM!



LET'S SEE IF I
CAN'T CONVINCE
THEM TO STOP
THAT.

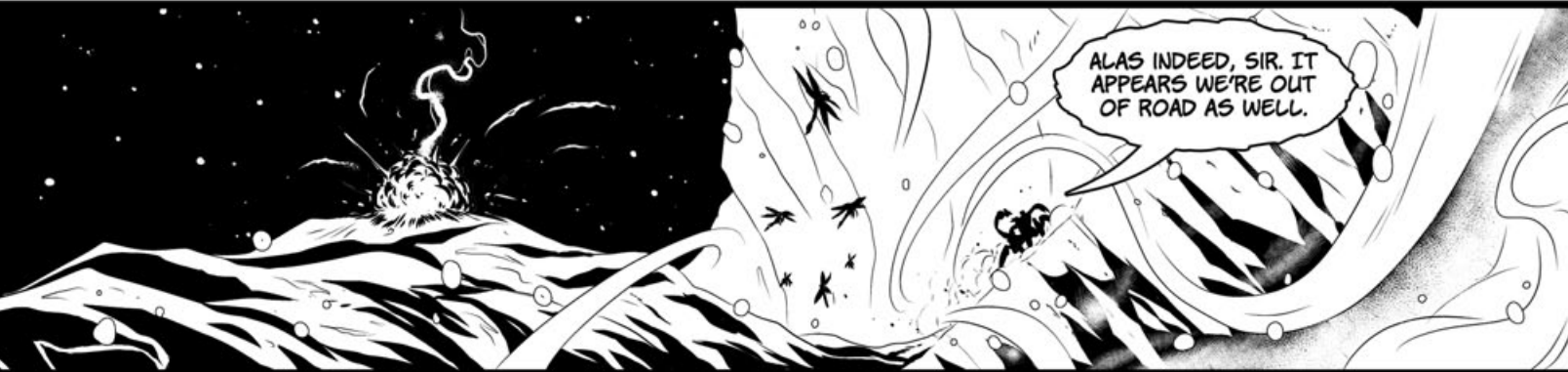


CRACK!



AN EXCELLENT
SHOT, SIR.

THANK YOU. ALAS,
I'M NOW OUT OF
AMMUNITION.



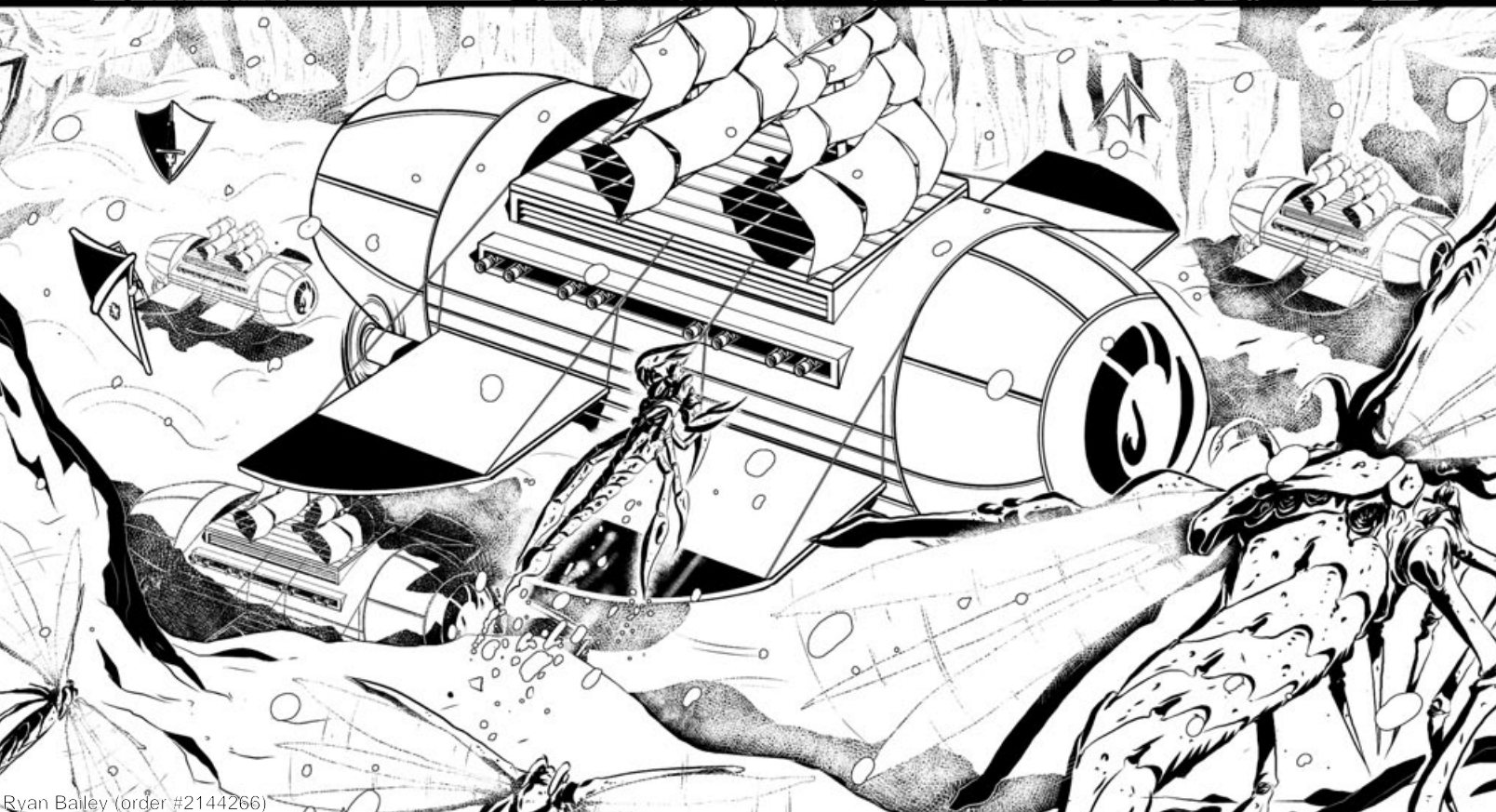
ALAS INDEED, SIR. IT
APPEARS WE'RE OUT
OF ROAD AS WELL.



NEVER MIND THAT,
LODESTAR. WHEN YOU
REACH THE END, SIMPLY
LEAP.

THE WIND IS WAITING
TO RECEIVE OUR
STOLEN SECRETS.

THE WIND?
NAUGHT ELSE?



CHAPTER THREE

THE NORTHERN FRONT

The Yozi Adorjan chose the North as her servants' field of battle, as the barren, wind-swept wastes of the Great Ice already suit Adorjan's tastes. Between the Great Ice and the Inland Sea, however, lies a broad band of tundra, steppe and forest—and human life, from nomad encampments to the great city of Whitewall and the nascent empire of the Haslanti League. The Silent Wind wants this region cleansed of humanity.

Yet, the minions of the Yozis cannot simply kill everyone. Even if this were possible, mass exterminations tend to create shadowlands—of which the North already holds a great many, including the vast Marama's Fell and the domains of two Deathlords. The North also holds many freeholds of the Fair Folk. The Yozi's servants need to reduce the human presence in a way that does not strengthen the power of the Underworld or the Wyld. Otherwise, the dead or the raksha could

become just as great an obstacle to the Reclamation as could the spirits and Exalted of the North.

THE GOALS OF THE NORTHERN CONFLICT

For their principal weapon, the Empress and the Green Sun Princes choose famine. In Act One, humanity in the North suffers a gradual winnowing, with the small tribes and villages suffering the most. As the young, the old and the weak succumb to hunger, the survivors seek places that still have food. Some people, of course, decide to rob their neighbors, worsening the famine. (Nomads such as the icewalkers, who already view settled folk with contempt and frequently rob them, are particularly likely to do this.) Refugees who go south arrive in the Realm's coastal satrapies along the Inland Sea. The Empress makes a show of



IMPORTANT REFERENCES

This chapter refers to several places and creatures described in **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. V—The North** that receive little treatment anywhere else. Chapter Five of that book provides details for Shanarinara and the Realm's coastal satrapies, Chapter Six gives an overview of the Bull of the North's empire, and Chapter Seven describes the demonic apheliotropes. For the demons mentioned in this chapter, see Chapter Three of **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II** and Chapter Five of **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas**.

philanthropy, shipping in extra food for the hungry... but the dole of food carries a price of submission to the Realm and prayers to Heaven for the welfare of the Empress. Refugees who go to Whitewall, Shanarinara, the Haslanti League and other free nations will overstrain those countries' resources, perhaps causing secondary famines—and weakening them before the coming battles. Meanwhile, Hell's minions lay the groundwork for future atrocities.

In Act Two, the Empress and Hell's other servants attack the free nations of the North. The forces of the Realm and Malfeas still operate separately, for the most part, since the Empress does not believe the Scarlet Dynasty is ready to serve demons and Anathema. While the Imperial Army marches against the Bull of the North, Shanarinara and such ilk, the Infernals and their allied akuma attack Northern leaders and embark on special missions to acquire greater power. While Creation's defenders might suspect that all these plots and battles are part of a greater plan, they lack proof.

In Act Three, the Empress no longer conceals her intent. The Scarlet Dynasty is fully brought to heel. Demons and akuma march with the legions and fight beside Dragon-Blooded champions. The forces of Hell assault the two mightiest mortal nations of the North, Whitewall and the Haslanti League. The entire North is lost if these bastions fall. If Creation's defenders can defend them, there is at least some chance that the North can contribute something to the final battle and that Adorjan remains pent in Hell a little longer.

Victory, however, could depend on alliance with the sinister Fair Folk or the dead—entities as malign and dangerous as any demon.

ACT ONE: A RISING, HUNGRY WIND

In the early stages of the Empress's plan, mortal agents do much of the work, with no knowledge of the grand strategy. Brigands raid farmsteads and villages. They take unusual care to burn anything they cannot steal—including crops still in the fields. Only the brigands' leader knows the reason why. The leader might even be a minor demon cultist. More likely, someone simply offered the leader a bounty for each settlement destroyed.

The icewalkers and other Northern nomads are far too dangerous for mere bandits to attack in this manner. Instead, hirelings can attack the herds of reindeer, mammoth and other animals that form the nomads' chief food supply. They merely need to leave bundles or bales of poisoned fodder in a herd's path. Even 10 percent mortality in a herd, inflicted in winter, could gravely reduce a tribe's food supply.

Green Sun Princes and Exalted akuma leave such petty villainy to mere mortals. A single Exalt might organize a campaign to ravage an entire province. Any heroes who try to find the person who pays the bandits or poisoners finds, at most, a mortal akuma left to manage the attacks. This akuma does not know the grand strategy either. Only if defenders of Creation learn of similar ravaging conducted in many regions might

STORYTELLING HINTS

Much of the famine campaign happens in the background. Green Sun Princes and akuma set up attacks on herds and farms in between tasks of greater importance. Other Exalted encounter the attacks amid their other adventures. Storytellers should take care not to reveal what's going on right away. Characters should encounter the first famine-causing attacks in the middle of some completely different story, such as a story arc of battle against a raksha freehold or coping with an escalating conflict between two gods. Only later do players realize that the vicious bandits defeated by their characters were part of something much larger.



they recognize a systematic campaign against the food supply of the North.

Stopping one attack—even rolling up a conspiracy in an entire region—does not stop the wave of famine from sweeping the North. Too many other places have suffered, and too many hungry people turn brigand themselves. Crop burning and herd poisoning are not even the most dangerous and effective aspects of the campaign, they are merely the easiest for the servants of Hell to organize. By themselves, such activities would take years to force a significant number of people out of the North. Other plans are in motion too—villainies that require true power to commit, or to stop, and that might give Creation’s defenders an inkling of the forces at work.

ILL WINDS

Northern folk often fear the weather more than they fear each other, and with good reason. Human survival through the long, icy winter is always precarious. Cultists who can influence the weather (through spirit Charms or thaumaturgy) can threaten whole provinces with starvation just by calling a late blizzard to freeze newly sprouted plants or an early frost

to kill crops right before the harvest. If a cult (or lone Demon-Blood, akuma or thaumaturge) cannot perform such feats, it might be able to summon a demon with the necessary power.

Such activities require a powerful guiding hand, at least if a group of demon servants wants to attack more than once. Even if no Lunar, outcaste Terrestrial or other protective local hero notices the attacks, local spirits will definitely object to this interference with their territories (and perhaps with their worshipers). The weather saboteurs need a leader who can stand up to angry small gods and elementals—at least an experienced mortal akuma and maybe even a corrupted Dragon-Blood or an inexperienced Green Sun Prince.

In this case, a powerful apheliotrope leads a cult of the Second Circle demon Zsofika (an emanation of Adorjan) in a plot to raise a massive blizzard that can wipe out everyone in a large Northern region (or at least wipe out their food supply). In addition to bandit gangs and their own magic, the cultists have a stolen Haslanti air boat, a few First Circle demons and a shrine they have powerfully desecrated to Zsofika.



CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT

Characters can get involved in this story in a variety of ways. For instance:

- Wandering heroes can encounter a bandit raid, discover that the leader is a demon cultist and follow the trail from there.
- Rumors of demons can draw in demon-hunters (Sidereal, Immaculate, heroic mortal, whatever).
- Local spirits can demand that priestly characters find who is disrupting the weather.
- Ghosts of people slain in the attacks ask to be avenged. This works especially well for characters who already have local ties, but even an Abyssal might receive an appeal from influential local ghosts—a chance to cultivate new vassals for her Deathlord master.
- Characters with ties to the local people naturally want to find who is harming them. The Storyteller can set the story wherever is most plausible: for instance, in an outlying territory of the Haslanti League if one of the characters is Haslanti, or among icewalkers if a character has friends or associates among that culture.

THE OTHER SIDE

Note that this scenario, and most others, can be run in reverse, with the characters as Green Sun Princes or akuma, working to implement the plan. Other Exalted, heroic mortals or beings of power such as ghosts, gods or Fair Folk interfere and must be fought. For “Ill Winds,” novice Infernal characters can supplement or replace the apheliotrope. If they can complete the plan, their dread masters will assign them to greater duties. In this case, however, the shrine of Zsofika is not yet so tainted that the cult can call her at any time. That asset is one toward which the characters must work. Perhaps it becomes available only once the characters have successfully sacrificed an entire region to her glory.

CULT OF THE SYRINX PROPHET EXECUTIONER

The worshipers of Zsofika gain three concrete benefits in addition to the awe of associating with such a potent creature. The cult’s criminal activities enrich them, the Kite Flute kills their enemies, and she provides foreknowledge in matters important to the cultists. In

return, the cultists bear Zsofika’s Demon-Blooded progeny. The cultists don’t know it, but the omen weather that accompanies Zsofika—rains of blood, basalt pellets or stranger things—serves the Reclamation by inducing hellish phenomena within Creation.

An apheliotrope who calls himself Ebon Rime leads this cult cell. He is an unusually powerful Shrouded One. In addition to the basic spirit Charms and powers of his kind, he has Essence 4 and knows the Bane Weapon and Essence Bite Charms, both with cold-based effects. (His Essence Bite takes the form of intense cold that inflicts four dice of lethal frostbite damage on anyone who touches him.) He also knows the thaumaturgic Arts of Demon Summoning (Master), Geomancy (Initiate) and Weather Control (Initiate), plus a few single Procedures. He wields a Malfean umbraklave, a type of shadow weapon (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, p. 178).

Ebon Rime’s cadre consists of four heroic mortal thaumaturges (see **Exalted**, pp. 280–281, for base traits) who have Adept Degrees in the Arts of Demon Summoning and Weather Control, a teodozjia who acts as Zsofika’s immediate representative and four marottes as a labor force to help expand the fortress. The demons serve because Zsofika commands it and are not bound in any way. Cult members who lead bandit groups are heroic mortals and experienced soldiers, while the other cult members are extras comparable to green troops.

About half the cultists live in villages throughout the region. Their information about their neighbors guides the cult leaders in choosing targets for bandit attacks. They can also harass heroes who hunt the cult, though their attempt to shoot arrows from hiding or to poison a character’s drink are more likely to provide leads to the cult than to harm an Exalt.

The other cultists live at their headquarters in a sort of monastic community. In fact, they call it the Priory. The reconditioned fortress is not easy to find, located in rough country at least 10 miles from the nearest settlement.

The cult’s bandits strip all the food and valuables from the farmsteads before they burn them. The bandits then leave most of the food in earth-sheltered barns hidden in lonely places. A few nights later, the cult sends its air boat to collect the food and bring it to the bandits’ keep. The hopping puppeteers do most of the work. The air boat can hover 20 yards above the barn while the spindly demons hoist up the sacks and

casks. The cultists also hunt from the air boat, poaching beasts from farms or icewalker herds without ever touching the ground.

THE PRIORY

The bandits' headquarters occupies an oval valley about a mile wide, surrounded by rounded hills. Small evergreen trees grow between the hills, but the hilltops are bare. The cult's Infernal backers found a long-abandoned tower-house in the valley and destroyed a few resident ghosts. The cultists repaired the old keep and added outbuildings. They currently work on a curtain wall.

Auxiliary buildings around the Priory hold dormitories, storerooms, a prison for sacrificial victims and other mundane facilities. The largest outbuilding is disguised with dirt and rubble against the walls so it looks like a small hill, but it is actually the hangar for an air boat second class (see **Scroll of Kings**, pp. 151–152). The arched roof of lathes and painted canvas opens in sections to let the air boat enter and leave, while people use a door in the side of the “hill.”

The chief alteration to the tower-house itself was to rip out the internal walls, leaving it as one large, rectangular hall with a pair of fat towers at opposite corners. Ebon Rime lives in one tower, the four thaumaturge-priests in the other. The cultists cut holes in the great hall so winds blow through it, and adorned it with crude wooden carvings of demons, loot from the robberies and the bones of people the cult's sacrificed. In particular, the cultists take the long bones, cut off one end and arrange them so the drafts play them like flutes. They also make thick braided cords from their victims' hair and hang these relics from the baldachin of their altar. Zsofika gifted the cultists with five of her own flutes. The cultists keep these in a locked cabinet in the altar, along with their jeweled sacrificial dagger, a box of costly Southern incense and other typical cult paraphernalia. A brick-lined depression before the altar holds a low fire the cultists never allow to go out.

Zsofika has visited her shrine many times. Such visitations and many sacrifices have thoroughly consecrated the hall to her. The Kite Flute has a sanctum here, accessed through the fire pit. It resembles an ornate version of the hall wrought in discolored brass and iron, with the entire floor covered in hot coals. Thanks to her strong connection to the shrine, the thaumaturges can beckon Zsofika any night, though the thaumaturgical Procedure required takes as long as usual.

THE BIG RITUAL

The cult's bandit attacks are bad enough, but Ebon Rime wants to destroy the entire region as a sacrifice to the Yozi. He plans to evoke a huge, unseasonal blizzard that destroys all crops within several dozen miles. He doesn't need to perform the ritual at a particular time, but the weather-working Procedure takes a long time to complete.

Evocation of the Great Winter (3, Intelligence, 3, eight hours): This foul rite involves human sacrifice as well as stringing taut cords to form a massive Aeolian harp and placing five precisely tuned pipes for the wind to play. The base area of effect is a two-mile radius. Each additional participant (the four cult thaumaturges and the teodozjia) doubles the radius, so the cult will spread a blizzard over a 64-mile radius.

Initial preparations for the rite take five hours. Every hour thereafter, the cultists perform a human sacrifice. In the first hour, the wind in the two-mile radius turns cold and raw, and dense clouds (already present over the manse because of the teodozjia's presence) spread outward. In the second hour, the cold, cloudy region's radius doubles, and light snow falls within the two-mile core. An hour later, the region of cold doubles again, the snow flurries expand to a four-mile radius, and heavy snow falls in the core region, with high wind and numbing cold (see **Exalted**, p. 131; also p. 135 for visibility in the blizzard). The snowstorm doubles in radius every hour thereafter until it reaches its maximum size, eight hours after the ceremony began. The cultists can maintain the blizzard for four hours after that. Then the supernatural storm takes an hour to dissipate. Only a small area around the participants remains free of snow, though the wind blows fiercely there.

FINDING THE CULT... AND BEING FOUND

The ordinary bandits know nothing about the cult, but they know about the hidden barns where they leave food. If those hunting the cultists stake out a barn that holds food, they can try to ambush the air boat. The marottes, however, are under orders to let no crew member fall into enemy hands. They produce sickles and try to cut the throats of any cultist the enemy can capture. Of course, the cultists who lead the bandit gangs know the location of the bandits' keep.

If characters can identify a cultist without the cultist knowing it, they can tail her (or the person she contacts) back to the Priory.

Anyone who asks about local ruins can obtain directions from local hunters. The local people know



about the old fortress back in the hills and shun it because it was haunted.

Clever players no doubt can think of other ways to find the cult's headquarters. The only real issue is whether they find it before the cult strikes at them.

If Ebon Rime believes he faces merely mortal enemies, he sends a group of bandits to attack troublesome characters. If that doesn't work, cultists who secretly observe the battle tell a waiting marotte to grab several local children and carry them off to a hiding place (but not to the bandits' keep). This action is purely a delaying tactic (assuming that characters hunt the demon down to save the children) while cultists hurry to the fortress with reports on the battle. Once Ebon Rime realizes he faces Exalted foes, he calls Zsofika and begs her to destroy the enemies of her cult and her glory—which the Kite Flute is glad to do. If the apheliotrope believes the characters are just unusually competent mortals, however he prepares the Evocation of the Great Winter.

LOOSE ENDS

The cult is crippled by the loss of Ebon Rime and his four thaumaturge-assistants. Yet, attentive characters might find some unanswered questions that lead them to other adventures.

- How did the cult obtain a Haslanti air boat? The Haslanti League is pretty careful with its aircraft. Perhaps the cult has infiltrated the Haslanti government... in which case, the cult of the Syrinx Prophet Executioner is much bigger than the characters first thought.

- For that matter, how did the cult obtain such a powerful thaumaturgical Procedure? Judging from the books that Ebon Rime and the cultists had, they weren't especially good at the Art of Weather Working. Evocation of the Great Winter was both weather magic and demonic magic. A lore-demon could easily have taught them the Procedure... but again, this conclusion suggests unusually diverse and powerful backing for a local cult that's only a few years old.

- Zsofika demands that her summoners host a supernatural fetus that she implants in them. A few cultists (both male and female) carry such Demon-Blooded offspring. Several others already gave birth (about a third survived). The hell-spawned infants, however, are all gone. Ebon Rime passed them to someone who arrived and left in the night by air boat. The characters probably killed Ebon Rime before they knew about the demon children. So, where are the little abominations? Alternatively, the cult kept the

children, leaving victorious heroes the question of what to do with Demon-Blooded toddlers. (Kill them? Compassion rolls...)

- If the cult seems insufficiently powerful, add some more demons, give Ebon Rime's assistants enlightened Essence (maybe even make them akuma with demonic Investments), or go all the way and give the cult Exalted leadership.

ACT TWO: COLD CRUELTY

Within a year, the Empress's Infernal allies have greatly weakened the North. Heroes have stopped some cult groups and bandits, but most Northern folk live on the edge of starvation. Hell's surviving minions have grown strong and established formidable strongholds. In the coastal satrapies, refugees must pray to the Empress for their food and shelter, and the able-bodied are recruited into new legions. The Empress advances from destroying tribes and villages to destroying nations.

This act provides two scenarios. The first continues the campaign to ravage the North through banditry, as pirates in air boats attack the most remote and vulnerable city-states of the Haslanti League. In the second, Green Sun Princes seek to annihilate the city-state of Gethamane and capture a tremendous power long hidden below it.

SKY PIRATES OF THE HELL VALLEY

The Haslanti League comes under attack. Someone is assaulting the air boats that supply Diamond Hearth and Crystal, the League's two most vulnerable city-states. Later, searchers find only corpses and air boat wreckage. Raiders also step up their attacks on outlying villages and isolated farmsteads. In addition to the loss of life, foodstuffs and expensive air boats, the two city-states are near starvation. If this campaign cannot be stopped, the Haslanti League could lose two of its members. The Oligarchs have already posted soldiers and glider pilots on the air boats, but nothing stops the attacks. The League needs mightier warriors and cannier scouts to trace these sky pirates back to their source and put a stop to them.

The Haslanti commanders are simply outmatched. Their archers and glider pilots can't compare with demons, akuma and Exalted. Adorjan's servants have learned from their early ventures in banditry and built up their forces. They now construct their own air boats and set out to starve the League's two most vulnerable city-states... which also happen to supply precious



diamonds and artifacts the Hell-servants would like for themselves.

CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT

The Haslanti Council of Oligarchs recruits Exalted characters through the Ears of the North (ever alert for news of such powerful people). The Oligarchs appeal to the patriotism of Haslanti characters, but offer to pay handsomely if that isn't enough. Non-Haslanti characters are simply offered lots of money.

Anyone who agrees to help the League receives a full briefing about the known attacks. The Ears of the North have reached a few conclusions:

- The attackers have their own air boats. People nearby have seen air boats when none of the League's were scheduled to be in the area.
- The attackers have at least limited personal flight capability too. People who fled attacks, on foot, beast or glider, were caught and slain by people who left boot-prints only at the sight of the kill. Slashes in the top and sides of air boat gasbags support this conclusion.
- The attackers include Exalted or other supernatural beings. No one less could dispatch the Ears' best commandos, some of whom are God-Blooded.

THE OTHER SIDE

Once again, the scenario assumes that characters are heroic defenders of Creation, but Infernals can tackle this scenario from the other side. They plan the attacks on the League's shipping and settlements, battling increasingly potent defenders and counterattacks. The Haslanti escalate from ordinary Wind Fleet soldiers to elite commandos from its spy agency, the Ears of the North, to spirits and Exalted mercenaries. Use the provided Storyteller-characters, but make them Haslanti agents rather than cultists (while Bloodstained Pinion is God-Blooded rather than Demon-Blooded). The final assault might even involve the League's patron gods, the Ennead (**The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. V—The North**, pp. 125–138). For their part, Infernal characters would not receive such extensive facilities as the Wordless Chantry right away, but they could work to build something like it.



- The air boat attacks happen far from settlements, so there's no chance of anyone escaping. Weather conditions always include limited cloud cover—enough to hide an air boat, but not enough that a victim could easily hide and escape pursuit. They don't attack every air boat, and they don't attack air boats leaving the two cities.

- Raids on villages chiefly happen along trade routes, denying sheltered rest stops to merchants. Raids on farms chiefly happen in small emeralds—and the raiders steal the soil along with everything else. The Haslanti have experience with soil thieves, but it rarely happens systematically. Some group is creating its own emerald... a big one.

- The sky pirates are not selling any of their loot. At least, they aren't selling it anywhere near the League. (Backtracking them would be so much easier if they did.)

OPTIONAL: ADDITIONAL INCENTIVE

Characters who seem on the fence or try to extort too much from the Oligarchs might receive a visit from Gerd Marrow-Eater, the legendary founder of the Haslanti League. The powerful Lunar hits them with the full force of his Charm-enhanced presence as he quietly tells the characters that failure to help the Haslanti would *greatly disappoint* him. Anyone who knows anything about the Haslanti League or the Silver Pact knows that Gerd's favor counts for much in these societies. So does his displeasure.

Characters do not offend Gerd if they ask what *he's* doing about the attacks. He merely smiles grimly and says that he does not want the Haslanti to become dependent on his protection... and he's working another angle.

PIRATE HUNTERS

Given the lack of clues, characters who want to hunt pirates have few options (unless they come up with something remarkably clever and unexpected). Detectives could guess that the pirates have inside information and try to find the leak. (The Ears of the North already pursue this line, though they'd appreciate help from Investigation Charms.) The Oligarchs believe that the surest way to find the pirates' lair, though, is to capture some of them.

Characters can come up with their own plan if they like. Their liaison with the Ears of the North, a hard-bitten, middle-aged woman named Signy Sigridsdottir, suggests setting a trap. The Wind Fleet secretly (but not *too* secretly) prepares to send something immensely valuable to Crystal, such as an artifact to use in excavating Old Realm ruins. Actually, the artifact is a sham and secretly (*very* secretly) the characters are on the air boat instead, disguised as crew or passengers. If any of them can fly (personally, using artifacts or piloting gliders), so much the better. Anyone who wants a crash course in glider piloting or parachuting can receive one.

BATTLE IN THE SKY

Assuming that characters follow something close to Signy's plan, it works. An unfamiliar air boat emerges from a nearby cloud and, with it, a half-dozen figures riding strange winged creatures. Everyone prepares for battle.

Creation's defenders are in an air boat first class. The boat really does carry 10 tons of food for Crystal. The remaining cargo capacity is taken up by 30 archers with longbows (use the elite troops on p. 280 of **Exalted**, but with Archery 4, Melee 2), six glider pilots (elite soldiers with Ride 3, plus a +1 specialty in "Gliders"), a pair of heavy ballistae hidden under tarps (see **Scroll of Kings**, p. 137)—and the players' characters. The archers intend to shoot flaming arrows, while the artilleryists will try to puncture the enemy's gasbag. Instead of normal gliders, the air boat carries the rare folding gliders. Their pilots hope to fly above the pirates' air boat and drop fire pots on it. (See **Scroll of Kings**, pp. 151–153, for all the various aerial vehicles).

The sky pirates have an air boat second class carrying a single light ballista. The 18 crew members are all elite soldiers (and cultists) with Archery 4, Melee 2, and the pirates command 10 of the flying demon-beasts called unju. The air boat also carries a hopping puppeteer and a tomescu.

A potent Hellspawn named Bloodstained Pinion leads the pirates. (Use the base traits of Tepet Lisara from page 326 of **Exalted** to represent the Demon-Blood, but give her a selection of generic spirit Charms and Adorjani Charms from **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, with an Archery emphasis.) She also has the demonic mutations of Wings and Claws, in the form of wings with razor-edged feathers of silver-gray metal. She wears a perronele and carries an Infernal moonsilver short powerbow.

Five of the pirates fly ahead of their air boat on their unju. They try to rise above the Haslanti air

boat before dropping to slash at the gasbag. When the air boats come within 500 yards, Bloodstained Pinion shoots at the Haslanti crew with her powerbow, and her artilleryist shoots at the air boat with the ballista. At 200 yards away, five more pirates leave their air boat on the remaining unju, to dogfight with the Haslanti gliders.

The hopping puppeteer has a special task. It does not fight. Instead, it repairs any damage to the pirates' air boat, deftly stitching up tears to the gasbag, patch-

ing holes in the gondola and beating out fires. It can mend two levels of damage every miscellaneous action. The tomescu waits on the air boat as well, to protect Bloodstained Pinion if enemies board.

The pirates' goal is to make the Haslanti air boat crash, hopefully killing the entire crew. Despite the greater number of defenders, the pirates expect they can wreck the Haslanti air boat while the hopping puppeteer keeps theirs intact. That might be

WIND FLEET ARCHERS

Commanding Officer: Player's character

Armor Color: Mottled blue and light gray surcoat

Motto: "Keep the Skies Haslanti"

General Makeup: 30 light infantry wearing chain shirts and pot helmets, armed with long bows, broadhead arrows and straight swords.

Overall Quality: Elite

Magnitude: 2

Drill: 3

Close Combat Attack: 3 **Close Combat Damage:** 2

Ranged Attack: 3 **Ranged Damage:** 2

Endurance: 7 **Might:** 1

Armor: 1 (-0 mobility penalty) **Valor:** 4

Formation: The archers have limited space but usually manage to stay in skirmish formation; this also represents the extra mobility of the glider pilots. Two soldiers act as sorcerers by manning the ballistae.



SKY PIRATES

Commanding Officer: Bloodstained Pinion

Armor Color: Gray streaked with scarlet

Motto: "Deaths for the Silent Wind"

General Makeup: 18 fanatical cultists wearing buff jackets and pot helmets, carrying self bows and slashing swords; 10 are mounted on unju.

Overall Quality: Elite

Magnitude: 2

Drill: 2

Close Combat Attack: 3

Close Combat Damage: 2


Ranged Attack: 3 **Ranged Damage:** 2

Endurance: 6 **Might:** 2

Armor: 1 (-1 mobility penalty) **Valor:** 4

Formation: The sky pirates stay in skirmish formation as they wheel about the Haslanti air boat or shoot from the deck of their air boat. If Bloodstained Pinion dies, the tomescu acts as a hero to take command.





a reasonable belief... except the Haslanti boat now carries a group of Exalted.

Bloodstained Pinion and the tomescu have special orders. If the battle is clearly lost and one of them gets a chance, they order the remaining pirates onto the air boat, as if readying a retreat. Then they order the unju to flee and the hopping puppeteer to undo all the stitches on the gasbag so their air boat crashes. This crash kills all the cultists and probably the puppeteer, setting the air boat wreckage on fire. Bloodstained Pinion flies away, if she can. The tomescu takes its chances in the crash. Creation's heroes have 20 ticks in which to try to grab cultists from their falling air boat.

Optional: Instead of resolving the fight between the Haslanti archers and the pirates blow-by-blow, it can be resolved as mass combat. Bloodstained Pinion acts as commander for the pirates, while a player's Exalt (or a mercenary Exalt) commands the Haslanti. (In an "Infernalized" version, Bloodstained Pinion—now a God-Blood with appropriate Charms—commands the Haslanti, while a player's character commands the pirates.) The box nearby holds the two groups' mass combat traits. Demons and aerial combatants are treated as special equipment.

LESSONS LEARNED

What Creation's defenders can gain from this battle depends on how much they manage to collect from it and on their own perspicacity.

Any attempt to interrogate the pirates goes against a Motivation to serve and protect the cult, and a Conviction of 4. Nevertheless, Exalted Charms might force the truth from them. The cultists know the general location of their base, the Valley of the Wind's Promise, but lack the navigational skills to pinpoint it. That doesn't matter. Wind Fleet officers feel sure that if they can get within 50 miles of the valley, they can spot it from the air.

The air boat itself has points of interest. Although it follows the Haslanti design exactly, it doesn't use Haslanti materials. Instead of rasp spider silk, the gasbag is made of some form of silk none of the engineers have seen before. The parts that would be made of feather-steel are instead made of bronze bamboo: metallic, but lightweight and with a woody texture. Anyone who knows much about Malfeas knows that Hell's vegetation is generally metallic.

THE HIDDEN FORTRESS

Once they have a solid lead on the pirates' base, the Oligarchs strike back. Knowing that the pirates

SLEUTHING

Characters who want to help the Ears of the North might find that the pirates do have an informant or two in the Wind Fleet. These informants pass air boat schedules and flight paths to an akuma sorcerer. The sorcerer then uses Infallible Messenger to report to superiors in the Valley of the Wind's Promise. He also has a tomescu guard... who tries to kill him if he seems likely to fall into enemy hands. The sorcerer does not know the location of the hidden valley, but he might be forced to reveal the sky pirates' strategies.

have spies in the League, the Oligarchs order the Wind Fleet's commanders to tell as few people as possible about the plan. Officially, the air boats are a convoy to carry supplies to Diamond Hearth. Only after takeoff do the crews learn their true destination. Naturally, the Oligarchs want the players' characters on board to battle the pirates' potent leaders and demons.

Run from the other side, the pirates' Exalted leaders face a vicious assault from the Wind Fleet. They've learned the Haslanti now field Exalted or God-Blooded champions against them. Their challenge is to defeat the massed forces of one of the North's mightiest nations.

THE VALLEY OF THE WIND'S PROMISE

The pirates operate from a small greenfield about 100 miles north of the White Sea, midway between Diamond Hearth and Crystal. Not only does the valley's geomancy prevent it from filling with snow and ice, but it holds a demesne. A bit of geomantic engineering and clever manse design shifted the demesne's aspect from Air to Adorjani.

The valley is five miles long, three miles wide and shaped a bit like a crumpled kite. At the southern end, the surrounding granite cliffs end in bluffs 20 yards high. Crenellated battlements now surmount those bluffs. Beyond them, the greenfield floor drops in a 15-yard cliff to an icefield. Around the greenfield stretch miles of ice and rugged granite hills. At the northern end, the steep valley walls curve to surround a large granite tor. This freestanding granite mass is the demesne's heart. The valley walls channel winds around it in a perpetual vortex. The pirates' manse, the Wordless Chantry, now surmounts the granite knob.

Centuries of neglect resulted in the greenfield's soil blowing away. The pirates bring in new soil stolen from Haslanti emeralds. It's still too cold for farming, but sedge grass and dwarf willows grow as forage for goats and reindeer. As of yet, a locust spawning pit still provides much of the inhabitants' food. More importantly, perhaps, the pirates manage to raise the metallic Malfean bamboo they use in building air boats.

The pirate attacks do more than weaken the Haslanti League: They are practice. The pirates take turns shipping out on their limited number of air boats while they build more. Already, they supply air boats to cult groups throughout the North, and they will soon have a fleet large enough to assault the smaller city-states.

Most of the pirates and cultists live in dozens of stone cottages near the five acres of grazing land they have built so far. Half a dozen hangars of stone, wood and canvas form a neat row just South of this area. Several long, low stone buildings with slate roofs hug the greenfield walls—storehouses, workshops and the like. Mines and quarries scar the cliffs in places.

THE WORDLESS CHANTRY (AIR MANSE ●●●)

Manse Creation Points: Manse 3 (6 points), Uncomfortable Habitability (1 point), Weekly Maintenance (2 points); total 9 points.

Manse Powers: Mela's Sweet Whisper (2 points; only to suppress sounds), Outside Fate (4 points), Temple Manse (3 points); total 9 points.

Hearthstone: *The Stone of Silent Passage.* The bearer of this transparent, pale blue gem makes no sound unless she chooses to. This silence extends to any object in physical contact with the bearer and her panoply. Her armor does not clatter, her blade meets an enemy's without clash or clang, and a clinched foe's cries for help are silenced. The bearer may extend this unnatural quiet across a radius of (her Essence x 3) yards at a cost of one mote per tick.

The manse looks like an irregular clump of domes and minarets that cling atop the granite knob. A long spiral staircase descends a shaft inside the tor to a gateway three yards wide at the rock's base. The windows have no glass, but sturdy steel grills prevent entry by anything more than four inches across. Locking double-doors of steel bars block the entrance. The grills and gate are as sturdy as the manse's walls.

Wind blows constantly through channels drilled through the manse's walls and fitted with Zsofika's flutes, creating an ever-changing, discordant piping within the structure. Aeolian harps strung with strands

from Gumela and wind chimes of Malfean metal supply a whispering, tinkling counterpoint. The chantry magically suppresses other sounds: Hearing any other noise requires a successful (Perception + Awareness) roll at a difficulty of the source's distance in yards. The cultists communicate using sign language—the same gestures used by Realm commandos. Characters recognize the gestures with a successful (Perception + War) roll: difficulty 1 for characters with Realm military experience, at least 3 otherwise.

The structure geomantically resonates to Adorjan. First and Second Circle demons derived from Adorjan can be summoned to the site at any time, as the temple manse fulfills all the ritual ingredients and conditions for thaumaturgical beckoning. Summoning Procedures take the normal length of time.

The temple-manse exists outside fate, so Sidereal Charms and the Loom of Fate cannot find any information about it.

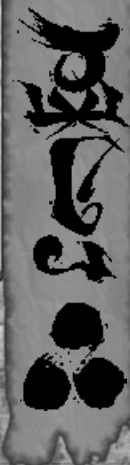
Geomantic study reveals that, while the manse is technically Air-aspected, it warps and poisons the Essence of the underlying demesne. The demonic taint is already detected with ease. Only a geomancer who also knew her demonology could tell that the manse is specifically converting the demesne to the aspect of Adorjan (though anyone who learns anything about the cult could guess as much).

OTHER BUILDINGS

Each of the six hangars holds an air boat second class (unless characters destroyed one of them), and they are all identical to the one the characters fought. Readyng an air boat for takeoff takes about an hour. Once its gasbag is full of hot air, the ground crew draws open the big plank doors of the hangar and hauls the air boat out with ropes. Finally, the crew releases heavy sandbags from the gondola, and the air boat bobs up into the sky.

Two of the long, low buildings are aviaries for the cult's unju. The cult has 25 of the demonic bird-steeds (minus any slain in the battle) and as many cultists who know how to ride them.

Another two buildings hold 10 anuhles each. These bloated spider demons do little but eat and spin webbing. Cultists gather the webbing daily and wind it onto reels for transfer. A smaller building between the two silk farms holds the looms that weave the silk into cloth for gasbags. Because these anuhles were bred chiefly for silk production, their Dexterity is just 2. They do not want to fight, but will if they must.





One many-chimneyed building holds forges and tools for producing the gears, drive chains and other metal parts for the air boats. A side building holds a comfortable apartment for four demjen. These demons extract and refine metal from the nascent mines in the greenfield walls. The cultists merely dig in search of ore deposits. The demjen also do not regard themselves as fighters, but they will do battle to save themselves.

In the largest outbuilding, cultists stitch gasbags and assemble gondolas and other parts for air boats. When they have completed all the major parts, the cult gives one of its air boats to an affiliated group (such as the bandits from Act One) and assembles a new air boat in the empty hangar.

The battlements atop the two bluffs each hold a pair of heavy ballistae. They are normally kept in stone sheds at the rear of the battlements, but can be wheeled out in a minute or two. Underground storerooms hold stacks of bolts for the ballistae. Five cultists man each post at all times. Four casements hewn in the cliffs each hold a light ballista, with a crew of two to operate them.

THE CULT OF THE SILENT WIND

The pirates all worship Adorjan, and they understand her about as well as any mortal could. They worship her because weeks spent eating demon locusts leave them convinced that Creation's originators must return and reclaim their rule, no matter what the consequences for humanity. Many of them imagine that Adorjan will reward them in some way, after she cleanses the North of the infidels who reject her glory. They receive visits from several of Adorjan's Second Circle emanations, but take pride in worshipping the Yozi herself rather than some mere facet of the Silent Wind.

Of the 300 or so cultists living in the valley, 200 merely build air boats, tend the animals, supply blood for the anuhles and perform other labors. They can defend themselves, though (treat as regular soldiers). About 100 cultists are true sky pirates, and they hold higher rank in the cult. Another dozen minor akuma thaumaturges, Demon-Bloods and apheliotropes supply the cult's cadre of military and religious officers.

The cult's leadership council consists of a Green Sun Prince (Captain Gyr Falcon, from pp. 142–143 of *Scroll of Exalts*, would do well) and two renegade Dynasts. These two Dragon-Blooded are not yet akuma.

Razor Simoom is a "lost egg" and former Immaculate monk converted to Yozi worship. (Use Peleps Deled, from pp. 102–103 of *Scroll of Exalts*, but replace his Wa-

ter Dragon Style Charms with Air Dragon Style Charms and equip him with an infinite jade chakram).

Ledaal Makota is an Earth Aspect, a talonlord and a Realm patriot. Her Empress wants her to serve the Yozi, and so she obeys. (Use Cathak Meladus from pp. 82–83 of *Scroll of Exalts*, but change his aspect, raise his War to 4 and give him a First War Excellency.) While Makota is a decent combatant, she prefers to direct a squad of demons or cultists. She uses her War Excellency to coordinate gangs of attackers against players' characters, increasing their chance to hit and whittle characters down. Optionally, she commands a special fang of elite soldiers armed with sledges or other Overwhelming weapons. All cultists and demons know to let Makota coordinate their attacks.

In addition to the aforementioned demons, the cult has five hopping puppeteers for miscellaneous labor (when they aren't on air boats), five tomescu (ditto) and five teodozjia as temple-manse guardians and liaisons to other cults throughout the North.

THE HASLANTI ATTACK PLAN

The Wind Fleet sends 10 air boats first class, each armed with two heavy ballistae. For troops, each boat carries 30 elite archers, five glider pilots, five artilleryists and 30 soldiers from the League's army, the Fyrd. (These soldiers are regular troops.)

The plan starts with the 50 glider pilots launching about a mile from the Valley of the Wind's Promise. Each glider is fitted with a pair of new repeating crossbows that a pilot can operate without taking his hands from the glider controls. (These are identical to normal crossbows, with a magazine of 10 bolts. They take as long as a normal crossbow to reload and fire, though a pilot can reload both at once.) The pilots also carry racks of five firepots to drop on buildings (preferably air boat hangars) or clusters of enemy troops. The gliders engage any cultists riding demon birds, while causing damage and confusion on the ground with their firepots.

Once the air boats crest the valley wall, the Fyrd troops descend on long ropes. They engage the cultists on the ground. The soldiers initially act as 10 scales, but the goal is to merge into a single 300-man wing. Archers shoot preferentially at any airborne cultists—at least five archers per target. Otherwise, each boat's scale of archers shoots at any armed cultist visible on the ground. If the cultists have an air boat aloft, the artilleryists shoot at them. Otherwise, the artilleryists aim at buildings on the ground. They especially want

to shoot anyone emerging from the front door of the Wordless Chantry.

Players' characters set their own plan, but the Haslanti expect them to engage the cult's leaders.


The task force launches from Windcreche. No one on the air boat crews knows their mission is anything but a supply convoy until five minutes before launch. The crates of supplies are whisked off, the soldiers march on, and the task force's admiral reveals the true objective. As the air boats head North, a small snow god materializes to give the admiral precise directions to the pirates' greenfield. Only now does the admiral divulge a final secret: The Haslanti priests appealed to

the Ennead for aid, and the god Master Winter sent dozens of spirits to scour the Great Ice for the enemy's exact location.

BATTLE OF THE VALLEY

The battle itself is largely plotless and up to the characters to resolve. Storytellers should adjust the special characters among the opposition to match the players' characters, perhaps with larger or smaller numbers of less powerful opponents. For instance, the number of teodozjia in the temple could be reduced for a weaker group of characters on the Haslanti side, or the cultists could have a pack of Demon-Blooded ice





weasels to increase the opposition to a character group of greater power. There could even be a Second Circle demon in residence—perhaps Zsofika wants a rematch or revenge for the destruction of her cult in Act One. Conversely, a powerful coven of Infernal characters could be opposed by a pack of Lunars recruited by Gerd, a group of Immaculate monks fleeing the corrupted Realm, a circle of Solar do-gooders or even gods sent by the Haslanti Ennead.

Once again, the Storyteller can resolve the fighting between the cultists and the Haslanti forces using mass combat. (Just raise the Magnitude of the cultist and Haslanti units given earlier.) To increase the drama (and reduce the Storyteller's workload), a player can assume the role of the Haslanti admiral. Alternatively, the Storyteller can leave the battle in the background and say that victory depends on which side wins the scrum between the player's characters and their special opponents.

LOOSE ENDS

As usual, the Storyteller can use loose ends in the scenario as hooks for further adventures or to add material to expand the scenario.

- Most obviously, who else receives the air boats built in the Valley? Records at the Wordless Chantry suggest the Cult of the Silent Wind built at least a dozen more than they have at present. Even if Creation's defenders find some of the recipient cults, bandit gangs and evil warlords, plenty more will appear in Act Three.

- Neither human nor demonic hands built the Wordless Chantry. It flows out of the rock as if it grew—conjured using Raise the Puissant Sanctum, a Celestial Circle spell (see p. 79 of **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. II—The White Treatise**). The sorcerer's identity—Green Sun Prince, akuma or Second Circle demon—does not matter for the scenario, but it may be developed further. Perhaps the cult makes a push to claim and raise similar Infernally tainted manses throughout the North.

- The cult can have a number of Demon-Blooded animals, even if they do not significantly add to the cult's combat capability. For instance, demonic ice weasels or snow lions could patrol the frozen wastes around the Valley, making sure nobody sneaks close on the ground. The intelligent demon-beasts know they were bred and raised in a different hidden fortress, one devoted to that purpose as the Valley of the Wind's Promise is devoted to building air boats. Some of the cultists also know that other hidden fortresses pursue their own goals. Only the teodozjia know what goes on at them all, thanks

to their shared mind... but the teodozjia would rather kill themselves than reveal their secrets.

- Ledaal Makota believes that, in serving the cult, she serves the Empress. Backtracking her movements could lead to other Dynastic demon servants, besides revealing the Empress's role at the heart of the Reclamation.

- On the Infernal Exalted side, spirits who join the assault on the Valley show that the Haslanti Ennead now opposes the Reclamation. The Ennead is a powerful spirit court with extensive influence among other Terrestrial gods. Hell's champions might want to put an end to them.

SUDDEN DEATH

In striving to meet Adorjan's demand for a depopulated North, the Empress and the Green Sun Princes know of one easy target: the subterranean city of Gethamane. This assessment would surprise most people, for no enemy has ever penetrated the City Under the Mountain. Except, of course, the monsters from the dark tunnels beneath the city.

The Yozis know something that gods and mortals do not: the reason why Gethamane's founders discovered an intact but empty First Age city beneath a Northern mountain. During the Usurpation, a hekatonkhire, or ghost-behemoth, called Vodak swept through the city and devoured everyone, leaving neither bodies nor ghosts. While Vodak engaged in its genocidal feast, savants of the Mountain Folk wrought mighty enchantments to prevent the monster from departing once it was done. Vodak still lurks in the deepest caverns beneath Gethamane. Someone merely needs to rouse Vodak for it to annihilate the city once more.

As a bonus, the Yozis also know that a hidden layer of Gethamane holds a set of reality engines. Normally, these potent devices stabilize a section of Creation against the Wyld. The 25 reality engines at Gethamane were meant to create a substitute Elemental Pole of Earth in case some cataclysm overwhelmed the Blessed Isle. The Yozis have somewhat different plans for them.

First, what if a new (albeit weaker) Elemental Pole of Earth competes with the original to be center of Creation? The Ebon Dragon believes that this competition would metaphysically weaken Creation enough for the Empress to turn the Realm Defense Grid against the Imperial Mountain. In that moment, the Shadow of All Things can slip through, kill Pasiap and turn the Elemental Pole of Earth into the Elemental Pole of Darkness.

THE OTHER SIDE

Only powerful, experienced Green Sun Princes or Exalted akuma have any chance of surviving the rise of Vodak. By the time they know Vodak is coming, it's likely too late to flee. In fact, Green Sun Princes might be assigned the mission as punishment for past screw-ups or defiance—a suicide mission to free their Exaltations to seek new hosts. In their briefing, the coven is told to run for the hidden chambers that hold the reality engines, as the only place where they can hide from the hekatonkhire. Only if the Infernals are intended to survive do they receive the means and knowledge to open the doors to this refuge.

The Yozis believe that a Solar's blood would provide the best lure to call Vodak out of the deeps. If the Infernals can capture a Lawgiver and bring him into Gethamane, good for them. They might even manage to force the Solar to open the reality engine chambers for them. The methods, however, are left to the Infernals' ingenuity.

Failing that, the Yozis suspect that enough Terrestrial blood might suffice. After all, Vodak ate more than 10,000 Dragon-Blooded when it destroyed the city before. Maybe it acquired a taste for them. Assuming no one proposes a plan for bringing a Lawgiver into Gethamane, the Empress might arrange for several expendable Dynasts to visit Gethamane when the coven makes its move.

For her Terrestrial Exalted sacrifices, the Empress chooses a sworn brotherhood that resists her Dynastic Charms and other attempts at subversion from the top. A senior Dynast whom the characters trust gives them an important mission that requires visiting Gethamane. The mission is a fake and a trap. Capturing the Terrestrials or maneuvering them into position for the sacrifice, though, might still challenge the skills of an Infernal coven.

Even if the players' characters are Creation's defenders, the Storyteller should work out what obstacles the Infernals face. Remember that the creatures of the underways—including Vodak—are just as hostile to Infernals as to anyone else, potentially creating a three-way battle.

CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT

This is one of the most important and dangerous missions the Empress can assign to the Infernals. It is just as important, and dangerous, for other Exalted to try to stop it.

Celestial Exalted or outcaste Terrestrials can get involved in various ways:

- By an amazing coincidence, they happen to be in Gethamane when the Infernal coven tries to rouse Vodak. Perhaps the Maiden of Secrets, who helped hide the reality engines long ago, decides that Creation's defenders now need these potent devices and sends a group of Exalts to take control of them.

- Someone with spies close to the Empress or to Hell-minions gets word that a group of Infernals is going to try something big at Gethamane.

- The Infernals lay false clues as a lure to draw Exalted victims to the City Under the Mountain. They likely intend to capture one or two Exalted of little experience, but find a larger group of greater power showing up.

- The Infernals complete their plot, and other Exalted come to Gethamane only when merchants find that Gethamane has closed its doors... and the Bureau of Destiny notices that once again, everyone in the City Under the Mountain has inexplicably vanished without any clue the Loom of Fate can detect. Whether Bronze Faction, Gold or independent, the Sidereals mobilize their Exalted contacts to investigate, and might even join the mission themselves.

THE HORROR FROM BELOW

Gethamane has not suffered any attack from the Realm or anyone else since the Empress's return, though trade has fallen off. The Exalted can enter Gethamane if they seem to have some plausible business in the city—anything from shopping to treasure-hunting in the underways.

The Gethamanians do not take in refugees or distribute food. Nevertheless, shantytowns of refugees have grown outside the city gates. The refugees sometimes become a bit aggressive in begging travelers for food, but they are merely mortal.

The Guild finds that sufficiently hungry refugees will sell their children into slavery in return for food, so it opens a booth for this purpose. Wicked merchants offer a child's weight in grain. They do not demand proof that a client really is a child's parent, nor do they bat an eye when children are bound and gagged. It makes them easier to weigh.





CALLING VODAK

The heroes of Hell are largely left to their own devices in rousing Vodak. If they do not supply their own Exalted victim, they know of a few Dynasts in town, none of them very powerful. Their only challenges are to capture their victims and carry them down into the first layer of the underways. There, the Infernals merely bleed their captives slowly, giving plenty of time for Vodak to sense the Essence-charged blood seeping into the ground.

If they like, the Infernals can leave their bound and bleeding victims while they search for an entrance to the reality engines. Of course, victims left alone have a chance to escape their bonds. As an added complication, travelers in the underways might encounter the savage monsters called cthritae, the eldritch underfolk, the loathsome leech gods or other strange and deadly creatures. (See **Dreams of the First Age: Book Two—Lords of Creation**, p. 121, for the underfolk and **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. IV—The Roll of Glorious Divinity I**, pp. 69–70, for the leech gods.) These creatures don't usually haunt the top layer of underways, but you never know.

Meanwhile, Creation's heroes might notice odd doings in Gethamane. The city's enigmatic gods might send dreams warning them of hellish infiltrators. Unfortunately, the three gods are more or less insane and cannot deliver clear, precise or definite messages. The kidnap of Dragon-Blooded visitors is not likely to proceed without a ruckus. The Infernals are even less likely to carry unconscious Dynasts past the guards on the underways without an alarm. Green Sun Princes or

Exalted akuma are far more powerful than the mortal guards, but the guards *expect* attack by stealthy and powerful foes. Some guards consider alerting the city (whether by beating a special drum or just screaming) more important than staying alive. Once raised, the alarm is spread through the city in about a minute by drum relays.

If a player's character is herself the target of the kidnapping, the other characters' response depends on their vigilance, the cunning of the Infernals and perhaps a bit of dumb luck. Once again, though, the Infernals probably cannot carry their victim into the underways without raising an alarm that every Gethamian knows means trouble from the underways. Anyone who follows the running guards comes to the proper underway—and in that crowded, watchful city, someone definitely saw the fracas and will tell what happened. After that, rescuing their friend is a test of the characters' tracking ability, stealth, strategic cunning and combat prowess. Unless they are *very* quick and *very* careful, though, Exalted blood spills, one way or another... and Vodak comes.

FACING VODAK

Only a circle of quite powerful Exalted has any chance of surviving an encounter with Vodak. The hekatonkhire views all Exalts (including Abyssals) as tasty treats. If characters show they can hold out against Vodak and maybe inflict a little harm in return, though, the hekatonkhire does not stay to fight. Instead, it recreates some of the most powerful entities it has ever eaten—two for every opponent—and has them fight the characters while it rises to devour the city. The first time Vodak slaughtered the City Under the Mountain, it ate more than 10,000 experienced Terrestrial Exalted, so Storytellers can take that as a minimum for what Vodak can produce.

THE CINCTURE OF CREATION

The hidden layer of Gethamane that holds the reality engines is called the Cincture. Yozis tell their Chosen that the Cincture can be entered only through doors hidden somewhere in the passages between Gethamane's bottom layer and the underways. They cannot be more definite. Bound in Hell, even they have difficulty finding what the Maiden of Secrets concealed.

They do know the access portals open only to a Solar anima. For this reason, the circle carries one of the mice of the sun in a soulsteel cage. The tiny emissary of the Unconquered Sun knows it's held by creatures of darkness and radiates a Zenith aura,

instinctively trying to banish its deathly prison. (This emanation is none too pleasant for the Infernal who holds the cage, but it does not actually inflict harm.) There are actually four entrances, hidden in small chambers offside tunnels. When a Solar anima touches the wall at an entrance, a symbol glows golden on the wall—the eight-point star of the Unconquered Sun, twined with the circled cross of Gaia. A warning in Old Realm also appears, saying that intrusion by unauthorized personnel carries the death penalty, by order of the Solar Deliberative. The rock of the wall then fades like mist.

SCARAB GUARDPOSTS


This portal leads to a spirit sanctum. In this space, nothing can be dematerialized. Three yards in, the five-foot-wide, plain stone passage ends in a jade-steel alloy door (15L/26B soak, 20/30 health levels) with a pair of keyholes. Only Essence-enhanced skill can overcome these locks, with at least 10 successes on the roll being required to overcome a lock's enchantment. Magic to bypass the doors without opening them, such as Door-Evading Technique, automatically fail. While opening the door requires only supernatural skill, one must actually *open* the door to pass it.

Beyond the door lies a cylindrical passage five yards in diameter and 10 yards long, with another jade-steel door at the far end and many palm-sized holes in the curving walls. From the holes swarm hundreds of big, shiny black beetles. The beetles coalesce into a 10-foot-tall humanoid—a scarab guardian (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. IV—The Roll of Glorious Divinity I**, pp. 46–47) with Essence 4, 75 motes and Athletics 5—who demands a password no one else has known for over 15 centuries.

The scarab guardian accepts no excuses and rejects all pleas. It knows nothing of what lies beyond its sanctum, only that it must let no unauthorized creature pass. If the guardian receives its password (or is made to think this happened), the beetles scurry back into the holes and work the 500 tiny switches that unlock the doors. Otherwise, intruders must defeat the guardian and then pick the locks or break the door. As soon as a fight begins, the guardian activates a mechanism that sets the tunnel spinning at high speed: this terrain has an instability rating of 5 (see **Exalted**, pp. 154–155). The cylinder automatically stops spinning once the far door opens. This door leads from the spirit sanctum back to the material world.

Note that the scarab guardians' orders are to let anyone *leave* the Cincture. Going back, one merely





OR JUST USE THE KEYS

Long ago, treasure-hunters found several of the keys to the Cincture's outer doors. Past Masters of Gethamane kept three of them, and a few leading families in the city kept one each without telling anyone. They didn't know what the solid jade keys unlocked, but it had to be valuable. No one has thought of them in centuries, though, since no one ever found the Cincture doors.

needs to knock at the inner door and ask the scarab guardian to open the outer door.

THE HABITATION RING

The scarab guardposts open on a six-yard-wide street that curves in a ring two miles in diameter. It's just like the main streets of Gethamane, including the light crystals. Along this and subsidiary streets are found 700 subterranean villas equipped with Essence lighting, running water and other luxuries of the Old Realm—emergency quarters for the Celestial Exalted. Other areas hold apartments for the Chosen's Terrestrial entourages, workshops, magical gardens like those that feed Gethamane, offices, auditoriums for Deliberative meetings and other facilities. Near the guardposts are barracks for the hundred or so Dragon-Blooded who maintained this part of the Cincture, looking as if the residents had just left... with all the weapons in the armories. They never came back.

The four Deliberative auditoriums, evenly space at 45 degrees to the cardinal points, include a set of starmetal-alloy doors (identical to those in the Cincture entrances), unlocked by pressing the right five symbols in a ring of 25 that represent the astrological colleges. Deducing the correct five, and their order, calls for a successful (Intelligence + Occult) roll, difficulty 5, and specialties in Astrology apply. Passages two yards wide descend 100 yards down and inward to another set of doors with a different combination (same difficulty to find the combination).

A mesh of starmetal, moonsilver, orichalcum and jade-steel lines the descending passages, with symbols of all the Incarnae worked in the filigree. These holy passages inflict environmental damage (Damage 6A/action, Trauma 5) on creatures of darkness. Creatures of darkness resist it with (Stamina + Integrity).

COMMAND CENTER RING

The four passages lead to identical, cathedral-like command centers adorned with consoles, paired niches lined with moonsilver-glazed mirrors and a massive jade map of Creation as it existed in the High First Age. Trickle of light across the map show Creation's dragon lines of Essence. Here the Exalted could monitor all of Creation for existential disruptions and, if necessary, activate the reality engines. Any one of the centers can activate the Cincture.

The mirror-niches are communication devices. A person who stands in one can have her image projected to a niche in the Imperial Manse, Luthe or a few other special facilities in Creation or Yu-Shan. The other person's image appears in the facing niche. The niches are Repair 5 (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 6–7) but only difficulty 2 to figure out their use (see **Exalted**, pp. 136–137). When (if) the Infernals reach this point, they use the niches to contact the Empress in the Imperial Manse and let her know they are ready to activate the reality engines.

Although the Cincture is well guarded, the Deliberative designed it to use quickly and easily in an emergency, with precautions only against accidental activation. The instructions are even written in Old Realm on the central console. Each central console includes a big orichalcum button beneath an adamant lid, and two large keyholes a yard away on opposite sides. The orichalcum keys hang on fine chains. To activate the reality engines, insert the keys and turn them at the same time as someone presses the button. It's as simple as that.

A ring-shaped passage connects the four command centers. This five-yard-wide avenue is holy and baneful to creatures of darkness, just like the entrance passages. Twelve workshops arranged around the ring collectively form a Shogunate-era factory-cathedral, with all the equipment needed to service reality engines (and other magitech) but not the raw materials to make one of these astounding devices.

Antechambers at the cardinal points of the holy ring hold paired doors of orichalcum-steel. They are opened by placing both hands in palm-prints in the door, attuning to them with a commitment of one mote and saying passwords that were supposed to be known only to the long-dead maintenance technicians. Giving the wrong password results in 10 levels of aggravated damage that the attuned character cannot resist.

Penetrating these doors by magic requires 13 successes. Beyond them, the long passage inward is tiled

entirely in white jade. Five times, at different places along each passage, the tiling changes slightly. Anyone who treads on these five-foot sections triggers a storm of Essence that inflicts 20 dice of piercing aggravated damage. Beings slain thus are turned to stone. Spotting these traps calls for a successful (Perception + [Awareness or Larceny]) roll at difficulty 5. The passages end in another set of doors, with different passwords. (No one was supposed to know both passwords.)

THE REALITY ENGINE RING

The inner set of doors opens on a final ring passage, three yards wide and a mile in diameter. The outer wall is tiled in white jade held by a mesh of moonsilver and soulsteel. It acts as a geomantic focus and insulator, concentrating the titanic energies while shielding the rest of Creation from their effects. It drains free Essence from any creature that enters the ring, at a rate of five motes per miscellaneous action. It also slowly disintegrates any nonliving matter aside from hearthstones or the magical materials, at a rate of one level of damage per miscellaneous action. While this acts as a final security feature, it also protects the reality generators from disruptive usage of free Essence.

At the cross-quarter points of the ring is a short, doorless passage that leads inward to a second, identical ring. This ring in turn has short passages at the cardinal points, leading to a third ring—at least a three-quarter mile journey through the Essence-draining passages. The inmost passage has no less than 20 archways evenly spaced about it. Each archway opens on a carefully faceted chamber that holds a reality engine.

The reality engines look like crystalline cubes six feet on a side, with orichalcum edges and complex internal structures of the magical materials. They balance on their points and slowly spin. See **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The Wyld**, pages 28–29 for a complete description of operating, servicing and repairing reality engines.

Twenty further passages head inward from each reality engine chamber. Plain white jade lines these passages, and the passages themselves are harmless. They converge on a hemispherical chamber 50 yards across. Four more reality engines spin around the central point, and a fifth hovers above it. The very center holds a little ball that glows like nothing any character has ever seen before.

The tangerine-sized globe of swirling, luminous... *somethingness* is a protoshinmaic vortex, one of the most potent and lunatic inventions of the Old Realm: a globe of Pure Chaos compressed into a sphere and

used as a power source. Such orbs are deeply unstable without a powerful containment device—such as five active reality generators. Disturbing the orb in any way would be *amazingly* bad (as described in **Dreams of the First Age: Book Two—Lords of Creation**, p. 95).

USING THE CINCTURE

When someone activates the Cincture, the reality-stabilizing power of the outer 20 generators converges on the central chamber to define the infinite, unshaped power of the protoshinmaic vortex as a new Elemental Pole of Earth. The 25th reality generator burns out as it drives the forming elemental pole deeply into Creation.

The reality generators take five minutes (a miscellaneous action in long ticks) to reach their full power and discharge. If the true Pole of Earth were gone, the new Pole of Earth would stabilize and connect to Creation's geomancy over the next few days. After a year, the reality generators could be shut down.

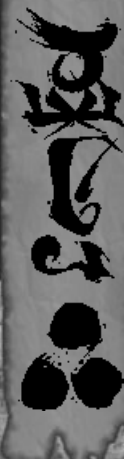
As a final benefit, the nascent Pole of Earth destroys Vodak, wherever it is in Gethamane or below. The hekatonkhire is mighty, but Gethamane abruptly becomes too real and fixed for such a blasphemy to exist.

Activating the system while there's still a true Elemental Pole of Earth places great strain on Creation's geomancy. Within five minutes of the new pole's formation, geomantic feedback destroys it and inflicts five levels of damage to each of the remaining inner reality engines. The Cincture cannot be used again until this damage is repaired, a 25th generator installed and a new core found. In the Age of Sorrows, protoshinmaic vortices are in short supply. One might substitute a source of comparable power, however, such as the condensed Essence of a greater god or elemental... or, to create an Infernal Pole, a Third Circle demon.

LOOSE ENDS

This scenario has many possible outcomes and, therefore, many possible further actions or retaliations from interested parties.

- If Vodak exterminates Gethamane, Reclamation forces occupy the city and turn it into their command center for the North. (Even if the Infernals die, other Hell minions wait to complete the job.) Full Infernal victory requires activating the Cincture, though, enabling the Empress to place the Ebon Dragon at Creation's heart (see pp. 198–200 for more information on this). If the first Infernal team failed to do this, Creation's defenders have a chance to enter Gethamane and prevent the Infernals from using the Cincture.





• Can the Cincture be re-used? Adorjan would readily sacrifice one of her souls to join the Ebon Dragon as one of the geomantic principles of Creation. She sends her minions throughout Creation in search of the materials she needs for this project. She also needs to render one of her Third Circle demons into azoth, to replace the protoshinmaic vortex as the Cincture's core. Yet, the Ebon Dragon would not want Adorjan to make such a bid for freedom and power in Creation. A new "Elemental Pole of Adorjan" would do more than free the Yozi to roam through the North. It would also disrupt Essence flows throughout Creation. Dragon lines and demesnes would shift. Every manse in Creation might suffer geomantic damage, with possible reduction in power. If Adorjan sets this plan in motion, it's war between her followers and those of the Ebon Dragon.

• Even if Creation's defenders don't know of Adorjan's plan, they might make the retaking of Gethamane a high priority. Apart from expelling Infernal forces from the North's most secure command post, knowledge of the Cincture suggests ways to counter the Ebon Dragon's grip on Creation's geomancy. (Given such a crisis, Jupiter unveils everything about the Cincture, forcing Heaven and the Exalted to acknowledge the power of secrets revealed.) For instance, disrupting Creation's geomancy might harm the now-Cursed Isle more than the Threshold. What's more, it might even be possible to replace Pasiap by placing a potent elemental dragon at the core of the Cincture.

Any attempt to wrest Gethamane from Infernal forces will be quite difficult. After all, the city is buried within a mountain, with tremendously strong gates and immune to siege. The Empress also garrisons the city with powerful Exalted, hordes of demons and a legion or two. Nevertheless, Hell's minions can no more shut off the underways than the Gethamanians could. The underways extend throughout Creation... and the Mountain Folk of the North know the routes from their cities to Gethamane. The loss of their greatest city beneath the Imperial Mountain would also motivate them to strike against the Empress and the Yozi's any way they can.

• What if Creation's defenders foil the Infernals? They could stop the calling of Vodak, defeat the Infernals before they reach and activate the reality engines or even break the system. (Trying to activate the Cincture with even a single damaged reality engine results in a Wyld explosion that destroys the entire mountain and leaves a huge pocket of Deep Wyld in

its place. Adorjan counts the silencing of a minor city as a passable victory. Hitting the protoshinmaic vortex merely destroys the Cincture and leaves a Wyld core below the city. The Silent Wind decides the city can be destroyed later. It's already a quiet place.)

• If Creation's heroes save Gethamane from Vodak, the city remains valuable to both sides as a strategic strongpoint whether or not the Cincture was used. Infernal and Exalted survivors of Vodak and the Cincture mission—if any—can then battle each other through the labyrinthine city. Whoever wins, the other side will try again to take the City Under the Mountain.

For instance, suppose Creation's defenders can save Gethamane and persuade the grateful Gethamanians to join the fight against the Reclamation. (No small challenge in itself. Gethamane has always found its safety in isolation.) Gethamane could become a mustering point and command post for wars in the North. To keep it, though, Creation's defenders will need to fight at least one battle against a combined force of an Imperial legion, demons and Infernals.

Yet, Creation's defenders might find unexpected allies below the city. Vodak's destruction could persuade the Mountain Folk to renew their ancient ties to the city. Infernal forces would find an army of vengeful Jadeborn a nasty surprise at Gethamane.

ACT THREE: THE WINTER OF MORTAL HOPES

The Empress's campaign has gone well. Creation's defenders have balked the minions of Hell on several fronts, but they could not be everywhere or win every battle. Several of the lesser Northern states have fallen... and while the Empress kept the North busy fighting her proxies, she has corrupted most of the Scarlet Dynasty into Hell's service. Moreover, the refugees drawn to her Northern satrapies now serve her and the Yozi's without question. Desperate gratitude for her charity opened the refugees to Infernal persuasion, and Green Sun Princes and corrupted Dynasts have used Training Charms to raise mighty armies from the refugees. The Empress now has the military force to meet the rest of the North in open battle.

Hell's champions do not rely exclusively on mortal arms, though—even when backed by the Scarlet Dynasty and summoned demons. They seek mighty relics of the past with which they can crush all opposition. Creation's defenders must do the same, or the North's destiny is an icy grave.

THE DESTRUCTION OF WHITEWALL

The Empress begins her assault at the one place most Northerners believe can resist any foe: the fortress-city of Whitewall. After all, the city's famous walls and its divine rulers, the Syndics, have held out against barbarians, the ghosts of Marama's Fell and the vicious Winter Folk for seven centuries. On top of this, two Whitewallers Exalted as Lawgivers

The assault takes place at the dark of the moon. The Empress marches three legions up the Traveler's Road from Wallport, but they are just for mopping up. The Empress's plan is that shortly after the legions arrive, Whitewall citizens bribed, blackmailed or bamboozled by Realm agents invite in half a dozen Second Circle demons that came with the legions. As the demons battle the Syndics, a thousand-forged dragon flies over the city. It begins by destroying the central temple-manse to the Unconquered Sun. If necessary, the Realm commander has the dread war-machine destroy itself and most of the city in a Geomantic Singularity. The Empress believes that between the thousand-forged dragon, the demons, an Infernal coven and several


Dynastic sworn brotherhoods, Whitewall will fall in a single day of death and terror...

...unless some very powerful Exalted do something about it. The Syndics of Whitewall are powerful, intelligent and well-informed Celestial gods. They have watched the Reclamation. They know that Whitewall's two Lawgivers, Guardian officer Macha Pethisdottir and diplomat Rune, cannot repel a combined blitzkrieg by the Realm and Malfeas. Whitewall's elite Guardians are likewise formidable by mortals standards (and include many small gods, God-Blooded and enlightened mortals, and a few Terrestrial Exalted), but they are too few to battle entire wings of demons.

The Syndics realize that Whitewall needs at least a full circle of experienced Celestial Exalted. Solar, Lunar, Sideral... They'll even accept Abyssal Exalted.

In turn, these Exalted champions might need to recruit troops mighty enough to fight demons. Alliance with the Winter Folk or the dead of Marama's Fell would be difficult to arrange: They have harassed Whitewall for centuries. Only the Exalted could have the superhuman diplomatic skill to make such a treaty. Yet, Whitewall is still the sacred city of the Unconquered Sun. If the legions of Heaven will not intervene here,





then where? Only a Solar Exalt, however, has the right under Heaven's law to take command of the Aerial Legion of Yu-Shan and call a storm of vengeance upon the besiegers of Whitewall.

BEYOND THE NORTH WIND

The champions of Hell and Creation both learn of a potent weapon lost since the Usurpation: Opal Spire, once an outpost against the Wyld and now lodged between the Deep Wyld and the Elemental Pole of Air. Apart from the central tower's power to fly, the spire that gives the city its name holds potent reality engines—though not equal to those in Gethamane. The Cincture was meant to stabilize all reality in a crisis, while Opal Spire merely created new provinces from the Wyld. Infernals could use those engines to turn swaths of Creation into copies of Malfeas. Creation's defenders could use the engines to reverse such corruption.

The Solar Deliberative built Opal Spire as a base from which to wrest new land from the Wyld, moving it north to follow the receding Elemental Pole of Air. Once, tens of thousands lived in Opal Spire's square grid of mighty towers. In the Usurpation, however, the Solar sorcerer Oa-Té called up that which he could not put down. The Dragon-Blooded and Sidereals who came for the sorcerer died, but so did Oa-Té. The city was abandoned and forgotten. Balor's Crusade left the city stranded deep in the Wyld, to be drawn to the nearest other point of reality—the Elemental Pole of Air itself.

It doesn't matter who learns Opal Spire's location first, or how. Such details are left to the Storyteller's discretion. Both sides in the war now have spies in the other's ranks that can learn and pass on this important intelligence. If Opal Spire's value isn't immediately obvious to the players' characters, their allies request them to secure this asset... or take steps to deny it to the enemy. Knowing that their foes also seek Opal Spire, they must race to reach the pole first.

TRAVEL NORTH

Obviously, both sides want to use the fastest and most powerful vehicles available. Haslanti air boats can carry travelers part of the way, but they are slower than artifact vehicles and a bit fragile for the rigors of Northern Wyld weather. (One chakram storm, and it's all over.) The Infernals can call on the Realm's stash of First Age craft. The Empress gives them a *Manta*-class transport (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 43-44). Creation's defenders

might lack such sources of artifact vehicles. Given the importance of the mission, though, Lookshy's Seventh Legion, the Bureau of Destiny or other groups do not hesitate to donate skycraft to the cause.

Spells are another option. Swift Spirit of Winged transportation provides the fastest and surest transport (in addition to the option of bringing an entire ship or other structure along, in case the characters want to bring along a small army or bring back reality engines if they cannot seize and repair Opal Spire itself). *Cirrus Skiff*, *Conjuring the Azure Chariot* and *Cloud Trapeze* also supply rapid transportation, though each has disadvantages as well. (See **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. II—The White Treatise**, pp. 40, 41 and 70 for these spells.) *Stormwind Rider* (see **Exalted**, p. 254) is a much worse option, due to the sorcerer's limited capacity to carry passengers.

Yu-Shan gateways could provide a shortcut part-way into the Great Ice. The Greater Sign of Mercury (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Sidereals**, p. 211) can move characters to Opal Spire instantly, but it could be difficult to find a Sidereal who meets the requirements for its use and is willing to make the personal sacrifice of personal power. Fair Folk can move waypoints great distances through the Wyld, offering another potential shortcut. Storytellers should encourage characters to seek creative ways to speed their travel... and assume that their adversaries do too.

ALONG THE WAY

The race would be simple to resolve if nothing mattered except when the competing groups left and how fast they could travel. Travel through the Wyld, however, is rarely simple. The Wyld holds many dangers. Distance itself becomes malleable, as Lunar or Fair Folk characters know well. Neither sorcery nor First Age technology can assure a swift, safe passage. The following encounters can endanger characters or speed them on their way. Storytellers can also review Chapter Three of **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The Wyld** for additional hazards and encounters.

BORDERMARCHES: WINTERSLEEP VILLAGE

The characters fly into a driving snowstorm. They emerge over a quaint little village surrounded by dark pine forest. Snow covers the ground and decks the peaked roofs, and smoke curls from red brick chimneys. It looks peaceful and comfortable.

The characters also cannot leave. About a mile outside the village, space curves so it's not possible to



travel directly away from town. At best, one travels in a circle centered on the town. Fat snowflakes drift through the sky if anyone persistently tries to leave... and the flakes grow and grow into flocks of carnivorous moths (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The Wyld**, pp. 156–157, 159). The Wyld-spawned terrors attack anyone they can or fruitlessly batter at the characters' skyship with their wings. They do not follow anyone into the village.

The villagers seem friendly and hospitable, though surprised by any travelers (let alone Exalted ones in flying vessels). While they insist that people can come and go, no one remembers anyone having done so in the last several years. They call their village Wintersleep after their most important custom, that of hibernating through the worst of the winter. The villagers intend to begin the hibernation now (never mind the season in the rest of Creation) and insist the characters join them. After all, they can't have visitors eating all the food they store for springtime, and if the characters can't leave... well, they're in a pickle.

While the adults talk about these important matters, the two dozen or so children of the village run around laughing, sledding, throwing snowballs and playing. Only if characters consciously pay attention to the children do they notice that the children's play doesn't make sense. The children throw snowballs any which way, and every child seems to have a different notion of what their game is. It's like someone heard descriptions of childish winter-play and tried to imitate it without really understanding it.

And that's exactly what's going on. Wintersleep is a raksha freehold (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The Wyld**, pp. 29–32, for rules about these Fair Folk enclaves). The freehold's master, Darling Jenessa, who takes the form of a cherubic little girl, saw the characters flying toward her freehold and took them in. The adults of Wintersleep are prisoners farmed for their dreams, and the raksha take the role of their children. The Fair Folk hope to trap the characters in turn and devour the potent, passionate dreams of the Exalted.

The portal to and from Wintersleep is well hidden by glamour. Without magical senses, the only way to discover the exit is to find a snow globe model of the village, hidden among other knickknacks in the home of Darling Jenessa and break it. This home also holds the freehold's bonfire, disguised as the ordinary-looking fire crackling quietly on the hearth. A hound drowsing by the fire turns into a powerful Northern beast called

a great-terror to protect it. Or the characters could just battle two dozen raksha. Treat Darling Jenessa as a Fair Folk diplomat, with one cataphract per player's character (see **Exalted**, pp. 284–285). The rest of the children are hobgoblins (see **Exalted**, p. 286). Darling Jenessa also calls in carnivorous moths at a rate of one every (1d10 + 10) ticks. If the fight happens indoors, Darling Jenessa takes a miscellaneous action to make one wall of the house peel open so the other raksha and moths can enter and attack.

Storytellers can decide if Wintersleep offers any prize other than escape. It's a good place to plant hooks for future adventures. Most notably, the characters enmesh themselves in the obscure politics of the Fair Folk. Darling Jenessa's enemies in the Northern households might look favorably on the Exalted who defeated her. Clever characters might parlay that favor into an alliance with at least some Fair Folk nobles.

Note that Wintersleep is hundreds of miles north of the White Sea. The captive mortals cannot possibly survive a trek back to civilization. If characters want to save them, they must extort an oath from the raksha to deliver them safely to a human settlement (Diamond Hearth is nearest)... or do it themselves and lose precious time in their journey.

MIDDLEMARCHES: THE MIRROR TYPHOON

This scene comes in three parts. First, the characters fly into a waypoint of the Wyld where flight doesn't work. Whether traveling by spell, skyship or other means, they must land and leave the waypoint on foot. Pulling a skyship out is left as a challenge to the characters' ingenuity. This far into the Wyld, barren ice and snow give way to mad mishmashes of Creation's forms and substances. The characters crashed onto a driftland, or sky island, several miles across. Its surface features fir trees with candycane trunks that bleed and scream when cut, snow that comes out of the ground or other surfaces and sifts gently up into the air, and birds made of ice that sing *treason, treason*. This is a good place for characters to attempt treasure-questing (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The Wyld**, p. 141) to find or make the materials or tools they need to move their vehicle.

As the characters approach the edge of the driftland, they encounter a man-sized eagle made of ice, partly sunk into the frozen ground, with broken wings and a beautiful, androgynous raksha face. This is Varocher, a onetime Margrave in the Jet Court (he/she says), deposed and imprisoned thus by the malice of an unshaped raksha. He cannot leave this spot. Varocher asks



the characters to find the unshaped raksha and force it to release him. Since the characters probably have no interest in such a side quest, he makes another offer. In return for two weeks of one character's memories, Varocher will direct them to a waypoint that can greatly speed them to their goal.

Anyone who accepts Varocher's deal permits the raksha to ravage him twice (as described on p. 284 of **Exalted**; Varocher picks the character's two highest Virtues, reducing the target's Willpower). The character loses one week of her memories—including powerful and treasured memories linked to a ravaged Virtue. The second week will come in the future. Afterward, Varocher gives directions to the Mirror Typhoon, a waypoint in the form of a hurricane. Those who travel along its eye can go hundreds of miles (more precisely, dozens of waypoints) toward a destination in the Northern Wyld. The raksha warns that anyone who passes through the Mirror Typhoon faces attack—but he has also heard that these attackers are more dangerous if you see them coming.

Sure enough, a short journey through the Wyld's madness brings the characters to a glittering hurricane of silver clouds. Up and down are iffy this deep in the Wyld, so whether the characters fly up the storm's eye, down or along a horizontal tunnel of wind and cloud is just a matter of which perspective they prefer. Large beasts seem to flap and flutter in and out of the silver cloud walls of the storm's eye.

The moment characters start flying along the hurricane's half-mile-wide eye, a copy of them and their transportation method flies toward them from the opposite end, about four miles away. Midway through the tunnel of storm, they meet... and the duplicate skyship (or whatever) attacks. Duplicates have all the physical traits and weapons of the characters and their form of transportation, but no Charms. As a result, the copy is likely easy to defeat. But... the other end of the storm's eye still looks four miles away. Two copies of the characters and their vehicles speed toward them from the far end... Those defeated, next come three copies... four... and so on. No matter how far or how fast the characters travel, the far end keeps receding while the end where they began never looks more than two miles away.

Characters *can* get through the Mirror Typhoon after flying 500 miles and fighting up to 20 copies of themselves at a time. The waypoint becomes a shortcut only if characters don't look where they're going or what might come to attack them (having

one's eyes shut works well). A duplicate appears, meets the characters and attacks, but its attack is a phantom with no more substance than the image in a mirror. As the characters emerge from the Mirror Typhoon, they have traveled roughly 500 miles toward Opal Spire in the time it normally would take them to travel four miles.

OPAL SPIRE FOUND

Approaching an elemental pole from the Deep Wyld, one passes through thin shells of Middlemarch and Bordermarch. So it is that the last solid land on the borders of the Elemental Pole of Air holds the towers of a First Age city that inscriptions name as Opal Spire. Half the city remains pristine—and buried in 700 feet of ice. Only the highest turrets rise into the pole-storm, chipped and scarred but still intact despite winds that could carry off elephants, lightning strikes that could shatter mighty redwoods and omnipresent blizzards of razor-edged ice. Half the city extends into the Bordermarches of the elemental pole. The Wyld has had its way with this half, turning walls into hedges of diamond flowers or hovering ice crystals that sing of a person's greatest shame. Nothing in this half of the city provides any reliable information about the First Age.

The skycraft are all gone from Opal Spire's ice-shrouded aerodromes. Ice fills the light wells of the remaining 36 towers. Over the centuries, ice filled many interior spaces too, though some rooms and corridors show barely a trace of frost. Thousands of bodies, including those of the slain Exalted, still lie where their killer ripped them apart. As the abandoned city shut down, the bodies froze before they could rot. Opal Spire is just as cold as the rest of the Pole of Air.

Beneath the ice, however, most of Opal Spire is still intact. The Shogunate never purged and rewrote its libraries of military, magitech, historical and Wyld-shaping lore. Its reality engines, climate-shaping machines, Essence-screen projectors and other wonders still function, if only someone would supply hearthstones to power them. (The Wyld took the demesnes that once powered the city.) Opal Spire is, beyond doubt, one of the greatest troves of Old Realm treasures left in Creation, matched only by Denandsor and perhaps a few other relic cities.

Yet, the ice also shrouds the creature that killed Opal Spire. Vorvin-Derlin, Slayer of Armies, now looks like nothing more than a net of verdigrised brass wire wrapped around a frozen, eyeless corpse. It is not dead, though. Vorvin-Derlin cannot die. It merely sleeps,

waiting for a chance to kill again. See pages 155–156 of **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. V—The North** for a description of this terror.

HUNTERS AND KILLERS

If the players' characters successfully used the Mirror Typhoon or other shortcuts, they arrive first in Opal Spire and have several hours to poke around. Otherwise, they arrive a few hours after their rivals. The other group of Exalted lost members to the Wyld's dangers but still number as many Celestial or Infernal Exalted as the players' characters, with an equal number of Dragon-Blooded and heroic mortal sidekicks and assistants.

Entering Opal Spire likely involves breaking or melting a hole through the icy coat of a tower and then into the tower itself. Other approaching people can see this, and any vehicle that was too big to bring into the tower. Thus, later arrivals know their enemies made it first and can try to sneak in. The first group might not know when their enemies arrive if they do not think to post a watch. If the rivals of the players' character reach Opal Spire first, they definitely post sentries, including one hidden sentry who can slip away while the newcomers deal with the other guards.

Once the rival group knows the players' characters are in the city, they stalk and try to kill the characters and any supporters, one by one. Yet, someone finds Vorvin-Derlin... and the demonic behemoth suddenly wraps around its new host, gouges out his eyes and sets out to kill everyone in Opal Spire. It does not spare Green Sun Princes or akuma. Vorvin-Derlin exists only to kill. Infernals and Creation's Exalts soon realize that something in Opal Spire hunts both sides, and it is likely more dangerous than either of them.

THE PRIZE

Before anyone can claim any prize in Opal Spire, they first must survive Vorvin-Derlin. The creature cannot truly die, but it can be damaged so much that it remains inactive for a long time. Throwing it out into the storm of the elemental pole also removes it as a threat, at least for several hours. (In the best unstoppable-mad-slasher manner, though, the Slayer of Armies might reappear once



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characters think they've seen the last of it and let down their guard.)

The greatest prize is the central spire that gives the city its name. It is not so much a reality engine as a prodigious amplifier for Wyld-Shaping Technique and its successor Charms. It magnifies their area of effect tenfold by itself, and even more when used along with an array of reality engines mounted in skyships. Also, double the successes rolled to determine what the Wyld-shaper could create. The spire could fly, drawing Essence from the powerful demesne beneath the city. The demesne is gone, but the manse now draws power from the Elemental Pole of Air.

Infernals could use Opal Spire to augment their analogous Charm, Constructive Convergence of Principles (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, p. 136). The most effective use might be to create a region of Malfean reality in the Wyld as beachheads from which demon armies can invade Creation. The North also contains many Wyld pockets, however, and Opal Spire could transform them into Malfean enclaves. Such is the power of Opal Spire that it can also purge the otherworldly taint from shadowlands and other zones of frayed or altered reality, though only to restore them fully to Creation. The user cannot create new things. Every such application calls for its own (Intelligence + Craft [Magitech]) roll at difficulty 10 to adjust the machines, and a character needs both Occult 5 and Lore 5 to understand the unearthly realities she intends to create from the Wyld or restore to Creation.

The flying spire incidentally carries a panoply of Essence weapons. (The Fair Folk frequently attacked Opal Spire as it ripped their homes away from them.) The spire's tip holds a storm hammer, while bays in the sides hold eight heavy implosion bows. (Each requires a separate operator, and the necessary hearthstones are long gone.) The spire can also generate an Essence battlement around itself, with 25 bashing and lethal soak and Hardness. (See **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 130, 133 and 135.) The city's trove of lore, workshops and miscellaneous First Age artifacts form a third prize, though full exploration would take years. Storytellers can place whatever devices, perils or hooks for further adventures would suit their series.

DENYING THE PRIZE

If the players' characters survive but fail to secure Opal Spire for their side, they can still deny its use to their enemies. Beneath the ice in the city's heart is a level-5 manse built of jade-steel alloy and similar materials (26L/35B external soak, 15L/26B internal

soak). It has no provisions for human habitation. It is purely a machine to collect and channel Essence. For all the strength of its construction, though, the manse visibly crackles and shudders with the power it draws from the Elemental Pole of Air. Inflicting five levels of damage sends the manse into power failure, and since the elemental pole is effectively an N/A demesne, the manse takes just five minutes to reach detonation. And it *will*, definitely, explode to deal 25 dice of aggravated damage to everyone and everything within five miles. Opal Spire will be ruined, and the pole's storms blow away what's left. Inflicting the damage might not be easy, though... because this would be a great time for a "destroyed" or "blown away" Vorvin-Derlin to return. Even if the characters saw the Slayer of Armies reduced to powder, its creator Isidoros can restore it at will—and does.

THE BLACK BOAR'S OFFER

The Yozi Isidoros does not oppose the Reclamation, but he does not intend to make it easier for anyone. The Black Boar that Twists the Skies esteems heroic will—the raw drive to force a new destiny on the world, no matter what the opposition, the cost or the damage. He notices the reactivation of Vorvin-Derlin and decides to test both sides in the Opal Spire confrontation, to see who most wants to win.

If Isidoros sees characters prepare to destroy Opal Spire (and perhaps themselves if they can't escape quickly enough), the Yozi might speak to them through the mouth of Vorvin-Derlin's host body, though he doesn't say much. The Yozi merely lays out his position, of seeing whether Creation's inhabitants or his fellow Yozis want Creation more. He asks the characters, "How far will you go to win?"

If given a response such as, "I'd do anything," the Black Boar challenges characters to prove it. He offers them Vorvin-Derlin... at a price. One character must pledge his life and soul to Isidoros, becoming an akuma (if he isn't one already). In return, the character may wear Vorvin-Derlin for one battle. The Yozi asks for nothing except that the character uses the Slayer of Armies to utterly destroy everyone and everything that opposes him. At the end of the battle, Vorvin-Derlin carries its host back to Hell and a fate unknown.

FROZEN SHADOWS

If Whitewall, Gethamane and the Bull of the North's nascent empire fall, only the Haslanti League remains to stand against the Realm. Distance delays the



assault, but not by much. In high summer, enough of the White Sea thaws for the Imperial Navy to attack by sea. In time, Realm legions can march through the forest and tundra of the North. Until then, the Realm's artifact skycraft can raid the League's cities in concert with sky pirates flying locally built air boats. (Maybe not so many of the latter if Creation's defenders did well in Act Two, but enough to cause problems for the League.)

Haslanti leaders realize their air boats cannot defeat artifact skycraft, much less thousand-forged dragons. Gerd has promised Lunar aid in the coming battle, but the Oligarchs want artifact weapons of their own. While scavengers have salvaged artifacts from several ruined First Age cities, Haslanti leaders know the greatest potential trove lies in the ruined city of Tzatli, near Diamond Hearth. Once, that city flew. It was one of the great marvels of the Old Realm. Surely, it held equally wondrous defenses. The Oligarchs send an Exalted team to Tzatli in search of weapons that can win the war... or at least make the Realm's victory cost it dearly.

THE OTHER SIDE

This scenario assumes the characters defend Creation and already have ties to the Haslanti League. The Empress's champions could also scavenge Tzatli and encounter its eldritch guardians, but they cannot win the greatest prize. At most, they can wrest a potent single-use artifact from its current owner.

THE FALLEN CITY

The League spares an air boat to take characters to Tzatli, if the characters lack transportation of their own. The League has abandoned Diamond Hearth (though victory against Act Two's sky pirates made this an orderly evacuation by air boat and iceship instead of leaving a population starving in the depths of the Great Ice). The characters have maps of all the city-state's mines and the explored parts of Tzatli.

The Haslanti had not explored more than a third of Tzatli. Most of the threat came from shifting, unstable wreckage, though scavengers also encountered zones of toxic Essence from damaged First Age devices. The Oligarchs need Exalted heroes to explore the rest of the city in a short time.

In particular, they need Exalted savants to recognize weapons whose nature might not be obvious and to repair damaged machines.

HAZARDS


The Haslanti are right: Crawling through the crushed remains of Tzatli is deeply dangerous. Typical hazards include unplanned versions of the stake trap, leg trap and dropfall (see **Scroll of Kings**, pp. 154–156): There are all manner of sharp things that a person could slip and step on or that the slightest motion could dislodge. Dropfalls can cut or crush. Storytellers can pre-select damage for dropfalls located near significant locations or roll randomly. Roll 1d10 and assign that many dice of lethal damage for jagged masses of falling metal or (1d10 + 10) dice of bashing damage for heavy, falling slabs, columns or rubble. (This damage is also piercing and overwhelming, with a minimum of one die per five dice of base damage.)

Sections of the wreckage also contain large pools of ice-cold water, precariously stoppered by ice or rubble. Disturbance of the wreckage could spill a flood of this water onto an entire group of scavengers. The force is relatively minor (though a cruel Storyteller could combine this with a dropfall)—but drenching with icy water can subject characters to hypothermia. No matter how warm their clothing, each character suffers the environmental effect of numbing cold (see **Exalted**, p. 131) until she can change clothes and become warm and dry. As a trap, ice water has traits of detection 2, and attack 7 to see whether characters manage to avoid releasing the water. Then again, characters might find they need to wade through a large pool of ice water to reach an objective.

Toxic Essence taints some areas of wreckage. These hazards are difficulty 5 to detect, or 1 for characters with forms of Essence perception, but have no attack value. (Characters either enter the dangerous Essence, or they don't.) Some pools or auras act like literal poisons, such as coral snake venom works well. Others act like environmental effects, ranging from numbing cold to an acid bath. Still others might mutate characters in the same way as Wyld exposure. For instance, five minutes in the toxic Essence might equal a month in the Bordermarches—see **Exalted**, p. 283.

PRIZES

Tzatli's ruins contain vast quantities of Old Realm magitech, but most of it is wrecked beyond repair. The easiest way to handle such a scavenging expedition



may be to roll (Intelligence + [Craft (Magitech) or Lore]), difficulty 3, for each hour of searching. Success means the character searches intelligently and without mishap, but finds something useful only with four or more threshold successes. Failure means encountering a trap in the broken, shifting wreckage, while a botch means toxic Essence or a trap that affects the entire group at once. Characters can gain a limited teamwork bonus for the search. When the players accumulate 10 successes on the rolls, their characters find a weapon, vehicle or other device that could be repaired and used in the coming battle.

Tzatli does indeed hold a number of Essence artillery pieces, personal weaponry and suits of power armor (select from Chapters Four or Six of **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**). Personal mobility devices (from Chapter Two of that book) found there could enable characters to confront the Realm's artifact vehicles, flying demons or thousand-forged dragons in personal combat.

THE FROZEN DEAD

Although the Haslanti abandoned Diamond Hearth, the characters are not alone. The ghosts of Tzatli still haunt its wreckage. They were slow to notice mortal scavengers in their ruined city, but bloodshed or Essence use by the Exalted attracts their attention.

Small shadowlands formed in derelict mineshafts and ice caves where the Haslanti dumped the bodies of slave laborers they worked to death. At night, a platoon of ghosts enters Creation through one of these shadowlands. The ghosts of Tzatli are 15 centuries old and powerful. Every ghost has at least Essence 3, knows at least a dozen Charms and likely possesses an artifact weapon. Three ghosts come for every character, and they attack while most characters are asleep. They seek to capture the characters rather than killing them, however, and very probably succeed. If not, at least the characters know that Tzatli is haunted and the ghosts likely have a shadowland nearby.

When characters enter the Underworld, they find a darkly gleaming city—Tzatli as it was, but wrought in ice-coated black metal and on the ground. Thousands of frost-blasted ghosts tread slowly about Tzatli, silent and stiff as automatons, working to tend the city and its machines. The city is numbingly cold for the living.

Captives are taken before the ruler of the necropolis, who calls himself Shogun Widowmaker. (See pp.

143–144 of **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. IV—The Underworld** for more information on the Shogun.) Characters who make their own way to the ghost city find the inhabitants coldly hostile but entirely willing to take them to their leader.

SHOGUN WIDOWMAKER

Characters face a choice: Battle a city of powerful ghosts, or negotiate with Shogun Widowmaker. They soon find that Tzatli's regent has no pity, mercy, generosity or sense of humor. He has, indeed, only three passions: to maintain his city, to preserve his rule and to take such a revenge on the usurping Terrestrial Exalted that it will awe and terrify the living and the dead forever more.

Dragon-Blooded characters have very little chance of getting anything from Shogun Widowmaker. At most, they can persuade him to enslave them and use them ruthlessly against the Scarlet Dynasty—and even that involves going against his Motivation. Celestial Exalted find that in social combat, they merely act against an Intimacy to ignore everything except power, the city and revenge. If characters can offer the Shogun a way to take horrible revenge on the Scarlet Dynasty, though, they might turn him into an ally of convenience.

Negotiators can also exploit an Intimacy the Shogun forgot long ago, if they can prove to him that the Haslanti people are the heirs of Tzatli. That the Haslanti found the ruined city by following clues in legends about their ancestral home is merely suggestive. Proof comes if a ghost of Tzatli tries using the Charms of Honored Ancestor Ways on a Haslan. Shogun Widowmaker takes cold pleasure in learning that his descendants have built an aeronautical empire that he can turn against the Dragon-Blooded.

THREE GREAT PRIZES

The Tzatli necropolis offers three assets the Exalted could bring to the League's defense. The ghosts of Tzatli are the first. Shogun Widowmaker can lead an entire legion of ghosts to join the battle against the Realm. His subjects can also guide characters in finding nearly intact weapons in the ruins of Tzatli.

The second prize is a trove of *intact* artifacts from Tzatli that the ghosts brought into the Underworld. These artifacts include enough daiklaves, Essence cannons, power armor and the like to give each character a power-up. Greatest of all, Shogun Widowmaker owns a soulbreaker orb (see p. 135 of **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**). His queen, the Twilight Caste artificer



Bright Shattered Ice, built one of these weapons just to prove that she could. After the city fell, Shogun Widowmaker took special care to secure the weapon that could annihilate him and all his subjects.

The final and greatest prize is the Tzatli necropolis. It exists as a freakishly extreme example of the Underworld's peculiarly malleable reality. Many aspects of the Underworld that imitate Creation—such as seasons and plant growth—exist only because ghosts ritualistically go through the motions of the activities they did in life. The Tzatlians spent much of their lives maintaining the machines of their city. In death, they imitated these actions as rituals to remind them of life. Century by century, a phantom copy of Tzatli appeared, precise in every detail.

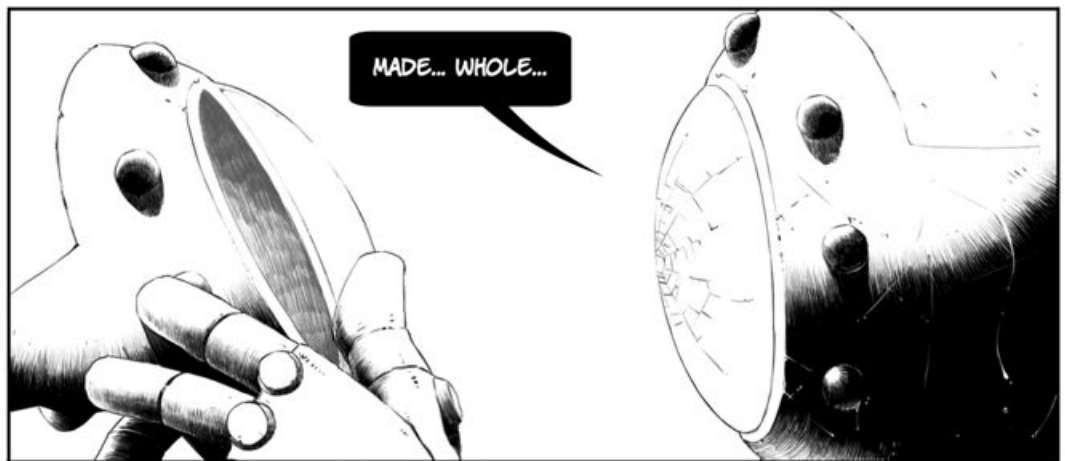
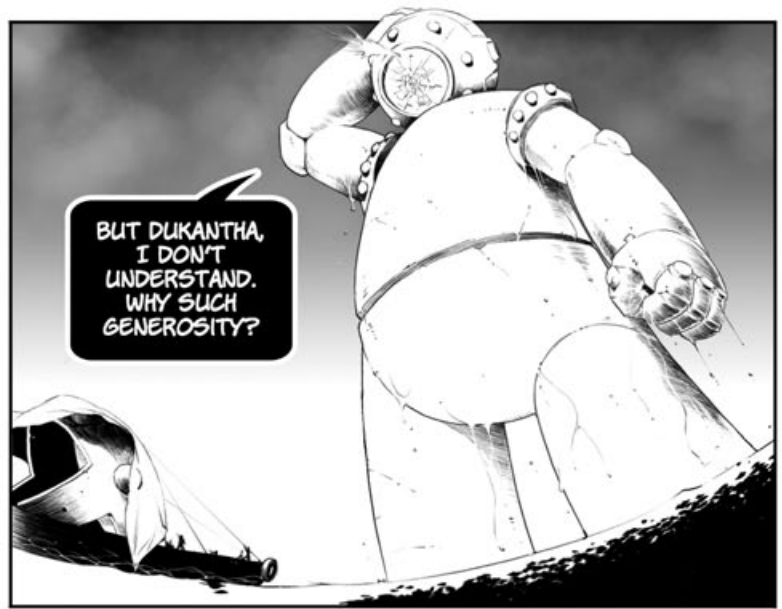
The ghost-Tzatli only needs a sufficient power source to set it flying and make all its imitation machines work again—including an arsenal built by a First Age Solar at the height of her power. The prayers of the Haslanti nation can supply that power.

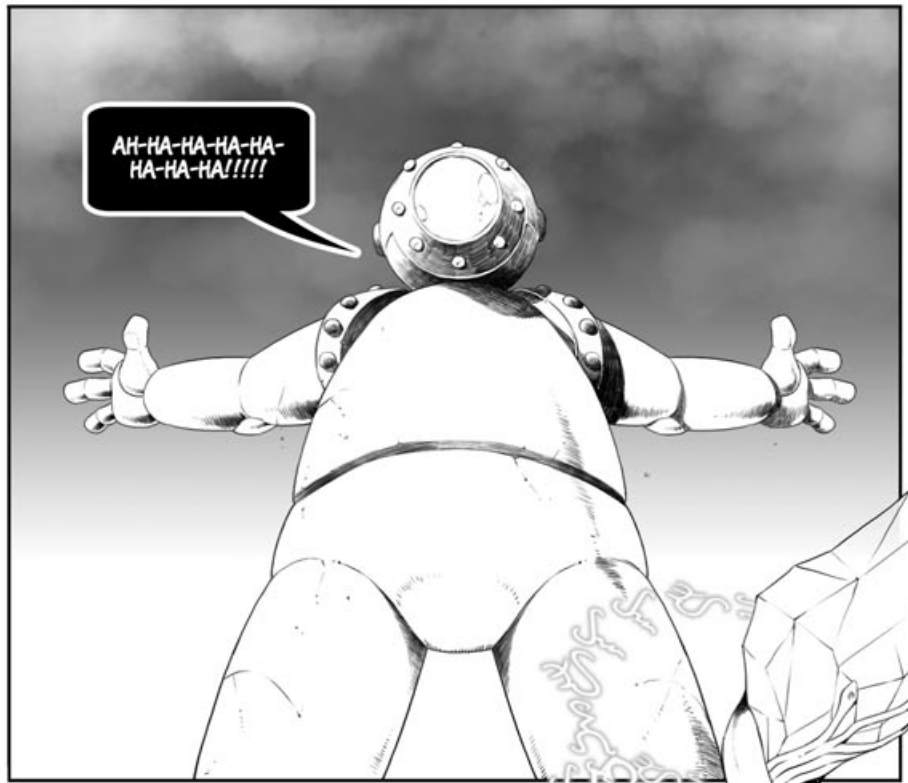
Claiming this prize presents three challenges to characters. Convincing hundreds of thousands of Haslanti to pray to their Tzatlian ancestors, and in a very short time, is likely the easiest.

Next, they need a shadowland large enough to let the flying city enter Creation. No shadowland in the League is large enough, and immense shadowlands such as Marama's Fell are too far away. All known methods for expanding shadowlands involve killing lots and lots of people. Characters with sufficiently high Conviction (or Abyssals) might manage it.

Finally, they must persuade Shogun Widowmaker to sacrifice his city for the sake of his descendants. Tzatli is essentially a grave goods version of the original city. The first touch of sunlight dissolves it forever, and the battle for the League might take more than one night. Magic that could prevent this is likely available only to Deathlords... but that's another adventure, for Storytellers to craft on their own.

If characters can meet these three challenges, though, they can hand the Empress an epic defeat in the North—and convince the Haslanti they can fight the Realm back to the shores of the Inland Sea, or to the gates of Malfeas if need be. The Dynasts might call themselves Princes of the Earth, but the Haslanti rule an Empire of the Air.







CHAPTER FOUR

THE WESTERN FRONT

The West has been claimed by She Who Lives in Her Name. As the most sparsely populated portion of Creation, it is in many ways the easiest to conquer. There are only two major obstacles to the Western Reclamation effort, the ancient Lunar called Leviathan and, more importantly, the Western Deathlord known as the Silver Prince. The Reclamation alliance understands that any Deathlord can pose a serious obstacle to their conquest. What they do not know, however, is that the Silver Prince has created a secret fleet based on a hidden island. This fleet could not merely defeat the Reclamation alliance, but could possibly even allow him to conquer the West and transform it into a single vast shadowland. (See **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, pp. 76–77.) Yet, the remainder of the West, from the shores of An-Teng to the fiercely independent islands of the Coral Archipelago are trivially easy for the Realm's armies to

conquer, especially when backed by demons, several Green Sun Princes, a larger number of Dragon-Blooded akuma and the dread Lintha pirates.

THE GOALS OF THE WESTERN CONFLICT

During Act One of the battle for the West, the Scarlet Empress moves her forces into An-Teng and recruits the dread Lintha Family into the Reclamation alliance. She also sends the Realm's Water Fleet to the Wavecrest Archipelago, initially to ensure their loyalty and later to conquer them. At the end of the first phase of her conquest, unless she is stopped, the Scarlet Empress possesses an alliance with the Lintha pirates, is firmly in control of An-Teng and rules Wavecrest, although the Realm's control of these islands is somewhat less solid.



In accordance with the desires of She Who Lives in Her Name, the Scarlet Empress plans to conquer the West and to unify it under a single rigid and all-powerful government. While the Scarlet Empress is more than willing to slay all who take up arms against her, She Who Lives in Her Name ultimately prefers to conquer rather than to destroy the West. The only exception is Skullstone, where both of them consider the Silver Prince and his armies of the dead to be an abomination worthy only of absolute annihilation.


The Scarlet Empress's plan to accomplish the conquest of the West is simple. The first step is to expand into An-Teng, using its ports as recruitment centers and supply depots for the Realm's Water Fleet. An-Teng is populous enough that the Imperial Navy can conscript thousands of mortals both to crew the ships it requisitioned from An-Teng's merchant fleet and to replace sailors killed in battle.

While An-Teng is being secured, the Scarlet Empress makes a secret alliance with the Lintha pirates. This alliance is one of the keys to making the conquest of the West swift and easy. Working together, but keeping all evidence of their alliance a secret, the Lintha pirates raid first the Wavecrest Archipelago and then the Neck. Both

of these island nations are officially allied to the Realm, but would also attempt to defend their independence against any attempt by the Realm to annex them.

Acting on the Scarlet Empress's orders, the Lintha attack the Realm's reluctant allies, weakening their defenses and causing their populace to abandon the smaller islands for the larger and safer ones. Eventually, the nations' leaders will be forced to beg the Realm's mighty Water Fleet for aid. Then, one at a time, the Realm establishes large garrisons on the larger islands and annexes their ports, all in the name of protecting the islands from future attacks by the Lintha. Of course, since the Lintha are working with the Realm, this strategy works perfectly. The Lintha go on to attack other targets not yet fully under the Realm's control. Once firmly in control of both Wavecrest and the Neck, the Realm's forces pause briefly to regroup.

Act Two of the Western conquest begins with both groups of islands being placed under the firm guidance of specially appointed Realm governors. The top administrators are all Dragon Blooded akuma and Green Sun Princes loyal to the Reclamation. The populations of these islands are conscripted, allegedly to fight the Lintha and their supposed allies in both the Skullstone and Coral Archipelagos.



The Lintha then begin attacking Coral's outlying islands and ships. Knowing that Coral will not ask for the Realm's aid, the Realm's Water Fleet, augmented by the conscripted navies of Wavecrest and the Neck, assembles to conquer it. This conquest will mark the last time the Realm conceals its alliances with Malfeas and the Lintha. Yet, even without it being known that the Realm is working alongside the foul armies of Malfeas and the Lintha pirates, the aftermath of this swift and terrible battle will help gather the remaining Western powers together for a last stand.

Act Three consists of a huge final battle that the Scarlet Empress knows will determine the fate of the West. The Realm's Water Fleet, working openly with the horrific Lintha fleet and all of its demonic allies, gathers to attack the Skullstone Archipelago and hunt down and kill the ancient Lunar known as Leviathan. The Scarlet Empress and the Yozis working with her understand that the Deathlord known as the Silver Prince and the Lunar Leviathan are the two most formidable beings in all of the West and that truly conquering the West requires both beings to be conquered and, almost certainly, destroyed. Even if the Realm and the Reclamation alliance are defeated, the West lies in ruins and is now easy prey for the Silver Prince's deadly black fleet. Unless the Realm succeeds, the final chapter of the Western conquest will be an attempt to defeat the Silver Prince.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAILURE

The Scarlet Empress considers the West to be the easiest portion of Creation to conquer. It is by far the least populous region, and the presence and power of the demon-worshipping Lintha pirates provides her with a wealth of powerful allies. Her confidence only increases once she discovers the secret Seven-Stranded Vine cult that worships She Who Lives in Her Name in An-Teng. At this point, the Scarlet Empress believes that the West will fall quite easily. The Empress and all of her advisors are convinced that the only real obstacle to a swift conquest of the West is the Bodhisattva Anointed by Dark Water and his armies of the dead. Because none of her advisors or allies know the secret of the dreaded Island Five and the huge fleet it holds, however, the Empress and her forces greatly underestimate the threat Skullstone poses. Similarly, while the Yozis and the Scarlet Empress are aware of the presence of the ancient Lunar known as Leviathan, they all assume that he is lost in madness and cares nothing for actions on the surface. That, or he is now

little more than a powerful but half-mindless monster to be hunted and slain.

The Reclamation's best chance to successfully conquer the West is a swift and relentless attack, aided by the Lintha and the demon worshipers in An-Teng. Also, the best way to perform these attacks is by keeping the Realm's demonic ties a closely guarded secret. An alliance of the Realm, the Lintha and the demonic hordes of Hell is a threat that is far more likely to unify the West, than simply the threat posed by the Realm alone. The Scarlet Empress's greatest advantage in the West is the fact that the direction is so sparsely populated, but she is capable of supplementing her forces with thousands more Dragon-Blooded warriors and monks, as well as her Sidereal allies in the Bronze Faction and a dozen or more Infernal Exalted.

An equally swift and relentless defense, combined with learning the true nature of the Realm's allies is the best way for the West's defenders to defeat the Reclamation alliance. Given time and opportunity, the Realm can bring a truly vast array of forces to bear on the West, and even the Silver Prince's large First Age fleet might eventually succumb to the combined might of the Imperial Navy and the navies of all of Realm's allies and conquered subjects. Yet, striking a sufficiently decisive blow against the Realm's forces will cause the Scarlet Empress to pause and re-evaluate her conquest of the West, allowing the defenders to solidify their positions.

ALTERNATIVES

Given the limited number of major Western powers and the generally small population of the West, some Storytellers might consider the conquest of this quadrant of Creation to be too straightforward as it is set out here. Therefore, at various points throughout this scenario a few drastically different alternatives are described. Of the two most significant, the first is a serious break between She Who Lives in Her Name and the alliance of the Ebon Dragon and the Scarlet Empress. The second has the final battle occurring in Act Two if the West's defenders learn the truth about the true nature of the force they are facing. These alternatives are purely optional, but they can make the Western war effort considerably more complex.

GOALS OF VARIOUS INTERESTED PARTIES SOLAR EXALTED

Lawgivers can be on any side. While some Lawgivers might doubt the wisdom of working with pirates, pirate captains Kalonice Stormwind and Ocean Pearl

are obvious rallying points for Lawgivers wishing to oppose the Scarlet Empress. Yet, Moray Darktide (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. IV—The Underworld**, pp. 130–131) is a Sword of Heaven who follows the Silver Prince, and others might choose to join him. Some might instead ally themselves with the ancient Lunar Leviathan, but few non-akuma Solars would choose to follow the Scarlet Empress.

LUNAR EXALTED

Many Western Stewards are defined by their relationship to the most ancient and powerful of their number, the inhuman Leviathan (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, pp. 141–144). Although he never takes human form and is obsessed with the sunken city of Luthe, Leviathan is one of the two most powerful beings in the West. Most Lunars will attempt to convince Leviathan to aid them in their defense of the West, or they will make a similar alliance with the Western Lawgivers. Few would forsake their principles and allies and join forces with the Scarlet Empress.

SIDEREAL EXALTED

As the leadership of both the Bronze and Gold Factions remain lost in false prophecies and irrelevant beliefs, Western Sidereals must choose between following their superiors and making their own choices. Fortunately, Righteous Tsunami (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Sidereals**, p. 43) holds the Western Chair, and more than a year ago, she declared a local truce between the Bronze and Gold Factions (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Sidereals**, p. 80). Tsunami has worked out several secret plans for defeating the Lintha pirates. Her aid would prove invaluable in defeating the Reclamation alliance if she can be convinced that the Realm truly represents a threat and that reports of demonic alliances are more than just Gold Faction propaganda. (One need also secure her support before the Lotus Massacre.)

DRAGON-BLOODED

As is true across Creation, Dynasts stationed in the West are faced with the choice of aiding the Scarlet Empress, possibly in the face of learning the truth of the Scarlet Empress's alliances, or turning traitor and fighting alongside beings and peoples they have previous considered to be either savages or monsters.

ABYSSAL EXALTED

The West's only known Deathlord is the Silver Prince, absolute ruler of the Skullstone Archipelago

(see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Abyssals**, pp. 56–59, and **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. IV—The Underworld**, pp. 127–128). Western deathknights are almost certainly either his servants or rebels who defy his rule, possibly because they learned the horrific secrets of Island Five and the fact that the religion preached by the Silver Prince is nothing more than a self-serving lie.

Any Abyssals loyal to the Silver Prince will fight to the death to oppose the Scarlet Empress's forces, especially once they learn that she is backed by the Yozi. Abyssals who oppose the Silver Prince are in a much more complex situation. Continuing to oppose the Silver Prince means that they are effectively supporting the Scarlet Empress, since the Bodhisattva Anointed by Dark Water is one of only two beings in the West with a chance of successfully opposing the combined armies of the Realm and Malfeas. Opposing the Scarlet Empress, however, almost certainly means working with, or at least alongside, the Silver Prince's forces.

INFERNAL EXALTED

Initially, all Western akuma and almost all of the direction's Green Sun Princes will be working with the Scarlet Empress as part of the Reclamation. Yet, it is worth considering what events might cause a Green Sun Prince to change alliances.

ACT ONE: FROM AN-TENG WITH HATE

The conquest of the West begins in An-Teng. Here, She Who Lives in Her Name has numerous followers in the Yozi-worshipping cult known as the Seven-Stranded Vine. In addition, the few remaining members of An-Teng's original royal family also worship her and are now her Yozi-Kin followers. Both the members of the Seven-Stranded Vine and the one-time rulers of An-Teng desire freedom for their land, and they have allied themselves with She Who Lives in Her Name in order to liberate it from the Realm.

The way in which this desire interacts with the Reclamation effort determines much about how the Western Front of the Reclamation effort will develop. The default outcome is that the Scarlet Empress helps place members of An-Teng's ancient ruling family on the throne and that they rule this nation on behalf of She Who Lives in Her Name, while also working closely with the Realm. Yet, other outcomes are possible (see pp. 113–115).





WARNINGS FROM AN-TENG

The events in An-Teng serve primarily to alert the rest of the West to the dangers it is about to face. Unless the Storyteller decides to use one of the alternatives described on pages 113–115, the players' characters cannot affect the conquest of An-Teng, because it will have largely already occurred by the time they learn something is wrong. The Scarlet Empress and She Who Lives in Her Name work together with the descendents of An-Teng's ancient royal family, establishing them as the rulers of An-Teng. One of the first parts of this effort is An-Teng's former royal family announcing its presence and the Realm publicly supporting it and granting An-Teng greater autonomy. In return, these rulers provide greater aid and assistance to the Realm's Water Fleet and its marines.

The cult of the Seven-Stranded Vine and the rulers of An-Teng also communicate with their contacts in the Lintha Family and attempt to broker an alliance between the Lintha and the Realm. The basic assumption for this version of the conquest of An-Teng is that She Who Lives in Her Name doesn't trust the Ebon Dragon, but she is willing to cooperate and is determined not to allow the Reclamation to be brought down by internal conflict.

Characters who serve the Scarlet Empress or the Reclamation alliance need not worry about the Realm's conquest of An-Teng. It happens without requiring any effort by the characters. The surviving members of An-Teng's royal family reveal themselves to An-Teng's populace and are initially aided and backed by the members of the Seven-Stranded Vine. Then, the Scarlet Empress announces her unqualified support for these new rulers and grants far greater autonomy to An-Teng in return for a combined effort by An-Teng and the Realm to conquer the remainder of the West.

EVENTS IN AN-TENG

The first hint of what is to come occurs just before the Realm's forces begin moving into An-Teng. The members of An-Teng's original royal family reveal themselves to the populace, calling on the people to overthrow the existing government. Aided by the Seven-Stranded Vine and their own powers, the royal family travels around the nation using sorcery, and its members put on demonstrations of their power before a fearful but adoring populace. In less than a month, most of An-Teng supports them and begins worshiping in temples consecrated by the royal family to the Queen of Divine Order (in actuality She Who Lives in Her

THE SEVEN-STRANDED VINE AND AN-TENG'S TRUE ROYAL FAMILY

These individuals are the primary agents of She Who Lives in Her Name within An-Teng. The leaders of the Seven-Stranded Vine are a mixture of mortals and Dragon-Blooded akuma, and all members of An-Teng's true royal family are Demon-Blooded Yozi-Kin (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, p. 58, for details). Currently, the Seven-Stranded Vine has many thousands of members, with individual vines within each of An-Teng's cities, as well as an isolated mountain monastery where members can contemplate the demonic majesty of their Yozi patron and study both sorcery and supernatural martial arts up to the Celestial level.

Name). The royal family and members of the Seven-Stranded Vine use a mixture of generous bribes and dire threats to quiet the protestations of the worshipers of the Golden Lord and the Pale Mistress.

As the weeks go on, An-Teng gradually transforms, with social classes becoming slightly more separate, laws being enforced somewhat more rigidly and the entire nation becoming very slightly more hierarchical. In time, An-Teng visibly becomes a reflection of the will and desires of She Who Lives in Her Name. Yet, this process will only just have started once the invasion of the remainder of the West begins, and it will not be complete until after the fate of the direction has already been decided.

Some changes, however, are visible soon after the original ruling family takes charge. The player of any character who takes the time to carefully examine the banners decorating the newly consecrated temples or who observes the new worship ceremonies can attempt a difficulty 5 (Intelligence + Occult) roll for her character to notice that the symbolism and ceremonies contain elements of pre-First Age worship of the Primordials as well as evidence of what might be demonic worship. Until the conquest of the entire West is nearly complete, however, the rulers of An-Teng and the members of the Seven-Stranded Vine keep their Yozi worship secret, attempting to lead the populace in these rituals without revealing exactly who or what the populace is actually worshiping.

LOOSE ENDS

Possible complications for this story include all of the following:

- One of the members of An-Teng's old royal family reveals herself to the populace but calls upon both the people of An-Teng and the Queen of Divine Order to resist the Scarlet Empress. The characters can either help this ruler spread her message or attempt to stop her.

- A popular leader in An-Teng starts speaking out against demons and demon worshipers both within An-Teng and among the Realm's armies. Regardless of which side of the conflict they support the players' characters likely wish to discover what the leader actually knows and how the leader came upon this information. If this leader is allowed to continue, an increasing number of the inhabitants of An-Teng avoid the new religious services, and fears of demon worship begin to spread. If the characters play up these fears, they could possibly fuel a popular uprising. If the characters support the Scarlet Empress, powerful members of other factions fuel this uprising, and the characters will be tasked with restoring peace and harmony in An-Teng.

- The inhabitants of the Dwelling of the Serpents Who Walk Like Men rise up against the rest of An-


Teng, denouncing the Tengese as being in the thrall of demons. The inhabitants of this land are doing so because they have received warnings from one of the Lunar Exalted who still keep track of their activities. An army of snakemen from the jungles to the south of An-Teng masses to invade that nation and root out the demon worship, led by several Lunar Exalted.

- As the legions of the Realm march into An-Teng, some inhabitants resist, and bands of guerillas form in the jungle. The guerillas send agents to secretly approach the ancient rulers of An-Teng and beg for aid in holding off the oppressors of their land. The royal family of An-Teng is sympathetic to these arguments, since its members too have hated having their land under the Realm's heel. The actions of the characters can determine if they follow their loyalty to their subjects or to their Yozi patron.

ALTERNATIVES FOR AN-TENG

These alternatives rely upon the fact that An-Teng is a nation of interest to She Who Lives in Her Name. The first of these two options plays up the tensions between She Who Lives in Her Name and the Ebon Dragon, as well as the fact that She Who Lives in Her Name does not trust the Scarlet Empress's role in the Reclamation effort. The Yozi objects to the Scarlet





Empress using the Realm's armies to subjugate and conscript An-Teng's population to aid in the Western conquest. This resentment sets the stage for major conflict between She Who Lives in Her Name and the Empress, and ultimately a confrontation between She Who Lives in Her Name and the Ebon Dragon.

The other option assumes that the conquest and assimilation of An-Teng proceeds smoothly until some disruption, perhaps instigated by the players' characters, has the potential to cause serious strife between She Who Lives in Her Name and the Scarlet Empress, precipitating events similar to the first alternative.

ANTAGONISM

The second option is almost the exact opposite of the default scenario for An-Teng. In this option, once they gain some knowledge of the Reclamation effort, An-Teng's Yozi-Kin ruling family asks She Who Lives in Her Name to help its nation become free from the Realm's domination. In return, the family offers to make her the patron of the nation and raise dozens of temples to her. Although She Who Lives in Her Name is committed to the Reclamation, she does not trust the Scarlet Empress and is not willing to allow her to conquer and dominate An-Teng. Also, She Who Lives in Her Name is suspicious of the Ebon Dragon's offers to help her conquer and administer the West.

This situation can lead either to conflict or compromise, and the choice should depend upon the players' characters' actions. Characters can either attempt to further increase distrust between An-Teng and the Realm, or attempt to smooth over these disagreements. The first course of action can be accomplished in many ways. The characters can organize popular resistance to occupation by the Realm's legions, asking the members of An-Teng's secret ruling dynasty to reveal themselves and support both She Who Lives in Her Name and resistance to the Realm. Alternatively, the characters can attempt to inflame the distrust of either She Who Lives in Her Name or the Scarlet Empress against the other.

If the characters are sufficiently clever and deceitful, they might be able to persuade the Empress to march her legions into An-Teng and demand the cooperation of An-Teng's rulers and She Who Lives in Her Name. This sort of high-handed behavior, combined with the existing level of tension between the Ebon Dragon and his allies in the Realm and She Who Lives in Her Name and her supporters in An-Teng could swiftly lead to open resistance to the Realm by An-Teng's populace. This resistance will

also swiftly gain support from both the Seven-Stranded Vine and An-Teng's true royal family. At this point, a mixture of entreaties by her followers, and possibly other entreaties by the characters, could help turn She Who Lives in Her Name at least partially against the Reclamation. While she might still support it in the rest of Creation, at minimum she will insist on ruling the West without interference. She will also make certain that An-Teng remains free from the Realm's control.

Characters who are working with the Scarlet Empress and honestly share her goals can attempt to find ways to work out compromises with She Who Lives in Her Name and An-Teng's rulers, as can characters who work for She Who Lives in Her Name and believe in the Reclamation. Reducing tensions can involve everything from careful diplomacy to convincing She Who Lives in Her Name of the wisdom of sharing power in the West, while simultaneously convincing the Scarlet Empress to relax the Realm's grip on An-Teng, since she now knows that it is being ruled by one of the other founders of the Reclamation.

Other groups in the West will rise up against both An-Teng and the Realm once their expansionist ambitions become known, and everyone from Exalts to rogue gods will attack the Reclamation alliance. Characters who work for the Scarlet Empress and who learn of a threat to She Who Lives in Her Name or her important subjects and agents could do much to impress this Yozi and her followers if they kill or capture dangerous enemies of An-Teng. Similarly, agents of She Who Lives in Her Name who stop a major threat to the Scarlet Empress's conquest could help convince the Scarlet Empress to grant An-Teng greater autonomy.

In this version of the conquest of the West, increasing tensions between She Who Lives in Her Name and the Ebon Dragon is relatively easy. Characters within either organization could easily ratchet up such tensions by secretly leaking information to the enemies of one side or the other, hiring assassins or leading secret raids against the other side. They could even attack their own side while making certain that the attack looked like it came from the other. Thus, characters who are loyal to She Who Lives in Her Name might stage or fund attacks on the Seven-Stranded Vine while making it look like the attack comes from forces that serve the Scarlet Empress.

If the characters succeed in increasing tensions between An-Teng and the Realm, the entire fate of

the Reclamation is threatened. At this point, She Who Lives in Her Name supports the efforts of An-Teng's true rulers to throw off the Realm's domination and attempts to conquer the West herself, without the aid of the Scarlet Empress or the Realm. Choosing this option radically changes the dynamics of the entire Western campaign, both by significantly weakening the Reclamation alliance and by putting the Realm and An-Teng directly at odds with one another. Neither She Who Lives in Her Name nor the Scarlet Empress will ally with the Silver Prince against the other. The raksha of the Pearl Court (see p. 129) would not willingly aid either. If the situation became desperate enough, however, both the Ebon Dragon and She Who Lives in Her Name would be willing to consider an alliance with any of the other major powers, including any Western Solar Exalted and perhaps even Leviathan. The latter is a particularly dangerous alliance, though, since Leviathan would only work with one of these Yozis until the other was defeated. Once this occurred, Leviathan would then turn on his ally, attempting to cleanse the West of all Yozi influence.

THE POSSIBILITY OF CONFLICT

The other option for dealing with An-Teng is the most open ended. This option assumes that relations between She Who Lives in Her Name and the Scarlet Empress are initially good and it appears to both that the Realm's occupation of An-Teng is only the first step in the upcoming conquest of the West. This option, however, leaves open the possibility that the characters or their enemies might sabotage this cooperation by finding some way to turn this cooperation into distrust or even open enmity.

Storytellers who wish to actually run the occupation of An-Teng rather than dealing with it as a prelude have ample opportunity to present possible sources of tension. Initially, the members of the Seven-Stranded Vine and the members of An-Teng's true royal family are devoted to the idea of freeing their land from the Realm's domination and will beg She Who Lives in Her Name to free An-Teng. In the standard scenario, they are convinced that the Scarlet Empress is nothing more than a pawn and that the Reclamation alliance will bring their nation freedom and glory. Yet, characters who wish to inflame tensions between An-Teng and the Realm could use any of the methods described thus far to disrupt this initially fragile agreement and set off a wave of revolution against the Realm. While She Who Lives in Her Name cares little for the opinions of mortals, she does listen at least slightly to her akuma

and Demon-Blooded servants in the Seven-Stranded Vine and the old royal family. More importantly, if their entreaties are in any way backed up by any hint of high-handed behavior or disrespect of her authority by either the Scarlet Empress or the Ebon Dragon, she will listen to her followers and begin plotting against entities she now considers to be potential enemies. Any evidence of plotting against her or her agents by the Realm, the Scarlet Empress or the Ebon Dragon will also shift her opinion. In turn, if her followers ask too many questions about the Scarlet Empress's reliability and demand their freedom too loudly, these entreaties could easily anger the Scarlet Empress and wound the Ebon Dragon's pride, turning them both against She Who Lives in Her Name.


Orchestrating an effort to turn She Who Lives in Her Name and the Ebon Dragon against one another would require characters who were already involved in the Reclamation effort or who learned about the Reclamation alliance without their spying being detected and who excel at espionage, deception and social manipulation. Regardless of the characters' allegiance, this effort could form the basis for an entire series that culminates in the Realm and An-Teng being used as proxies in a demonic war between the Ebon Dragon and She Who Lives in Her Name. If this happens, the remainder of the West can either choose sides or watch a proxy war of Yozis in horrified fascination.

Storytellers who choose this option should then consider what the Silver Prince will do when confronted with the aftermath of such a battle, where both An-Teng and the Realm's Western legions and Water Fleet are all greatly weakened. This outcome represents an ideal opportunity for him to launch his Western conquest. See pages 131–133 for more information on the Silver Prince and his capabilities and plans.

RECRUITING THE LINTHA FAMILY

The first act in the Scarlet Empress's conquest of the various Western islands is to recruit the Lintha pirates to her cause. The Lintha are bitter enemies of the Realm, but this enmity swiftly transforms into devoted loyalty once the Lintha Family's leaders become aware of the alliance the Scarlet Empress made with the Ebon Dragon and then learn that Kimberly supports the Reclamation effort. To recruit the Lintha, the Scarlet Empress arranges for a Green Sun Prince to make contact with them. This Green Sun Prince travels with a small retinue of either Dragon-Blooded or Dragon-Blooded akuma who are fiercely loyal to the Scarlet Empress.





THE RECEPTION OF THE ENVOYS

How envoys from the Scarlet Empress are received depends upon relations between An-Teng and the Realm. If relations are cordial, the Seven-Stranded Vine sends messages vouching for the envoys, and while individuals from the Realm will still face significant distrust, they are treated as honored guests and potential allies. If relations between the Realm and An-Teng are poor or inimical, though, the envoys lack any such introductions and are treated as captives who might have useful information for the Lintha leaders.

In the first case, the envoys are taken directly to Bluehaven and housed in barbaric splendor, but they are also carefully watched and their movements limited, since the Lintha do not trust even the most well-recommended outsiders. Also, when they are taken to Bluehaven, the characters are blindfolded and kept below deck, since the Lintha do not reveal the way into Bluehaven to even the most trusted outsiders. The envoys live as well-cared-for captives who must wait several days for Dukantha, the akuma leader of the Lintha Family to visit them (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, pp. 144–147). When he finally appears, he publicly agrees to the secret alliance, and the envoys are treated as honored guests, which includes being invited to a horrific cannibal feast.

In the second case, the characters are taken to an isolated and uninhabited island relatively near Bluehaven, where the Lintha keep captives they are planning on either ransoming or interrogating extensively. Because the envoys are all Exalted, their guards will all be some of the more powerful Lintha. If the characters are the envoys, the Storyteller should emphasize that the several dozen Demon-Blooded and Dragon-Blooded Lintha who guard them outmatch even a group of Dragon-Blooded and a Green Sun Prince. Periodic screams of torment from some of the less fortunate captives on this island also help to drive home just how precarious the characters' position actually is.

The characters are not harmed, however, and after several days on this island, they have the chance to state their case to an assembled council of senior members of the Lintha Family. If they impress this council, then the characters are transferred to Bluehaven and will be dealt with in an identical fashion to envoys who have been recommended by the Seven-Stranded Vine. Unfortunately, impressing a council of senior Lintha

is far from easy and requires more than talk. Having the Green Sun Prince demonstrate her power before the Lintha will help, as would having a Second Circle demon speak for the characters.

ROLEPLAYING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHARACTERS

Unique roleplaying opportunities exist for characters on both sides of the Western conflict. A sworn brotherhood of loyal Dragon-Blooded accompanies the Green Sun Prince who is sent as an ambassador to the Lintha. This arrangement represents a complex roleplaying opportunity for the characters. They might begin play as the loyal followers of the Scarlet Empress, but they are sent in the company of a Yozi-twisted Infernal Exalt to make an alliance with the most repugnant denizens of the West. Unless these Dragon-Bloods are demon worshipers or akuma, more than one of them might wonder if they are acting in an honorable manner or fighting for the correct side.

As they are part of a relatively small and highly secret mission to the Lintha pirates, these Dragon-Bloods are in a unique position to hinder the Scarlet Empress's designs on the West, if they wish to oppose their sovereign. Revealing the truth of the proposed alliance to various Western leaders would seriously impair the Scarlet Empress's plans. Killing the Green Sun Prince they are accompanying, then attacking the Lintha in the Scarlet Empress's name could, if done with great care, turn the Lintha against the Scarlet Empress, either temporarily or perhaps for the entire duration of the Western Reclamation campaign. If combined with secret information about the Scarlet Empress's proposed alliance to various Western leaders who oppose the Realm, a single sworn brotherhood of Terrestrial Exalts could radically shift the entire balance of power in the West.

Alternatively, Exalts of any sort who oppose the Scarlet Empress could attempt the same task from the outside. The simplest approach would be to kill the envoys and either reveal their intentions or attempt to impersonate them and convince the Lintha that the Scarlet Empress wishes them ill. Celestial Exalts who learn of this secret diplomatic mission have another even more difficult and daring option—capturing the envoys, including the Green Sun Prince, then interrogating them and using powerful Charms to change their loyalties, or at least to change how they approach the Lintha. One excellent way to begin a Western game would be for the characters to hear rumors of a secret diplomatic mission from the Realm and then learn that this envoy is to the Lintha pirates.

Regardless of whether the characters initially work for the Scarlet Empress or not, proof of a secret alliance between the Realm and the Lintha would cause widespread resistance to the Realm in Wavecrest, the Neck and the Coral Archipelago. This resistance would greatly hamper the conquests of all three areas. The greatest impact, however, would be on the actions of both Leviathan and the Silver Prince. Both beings would swiftly realize that the Empress's being willing to make deals with demon-worshipping cannibals means that she almost certainly has other demonic allies. Both mighty beings would stir into action earlier than they would if they thought that they were merely facing an overly ambitious Scarlet Empress. Also, the Silver Prince would spread knowledge of this alliance throughout Skullstone, inflaming his populace into a mixture of fear and hatred.

USING THE LINTHA FAMILY IN THE WESTERN CAMPAIGN


The Lintha pirates constitute the only large group in the West that *every* other nation hates and fears. From Wavecrest to Coral, and all points in between, if presented with the unappealing choice of conquest by the Silver Prince and conquest by the Lintha, both the populace and the rulers of the all other Western nations would universally choose conquest by the Deathlord. The Lintha are cannibalistic, demon-worshipping pirates who are the scourge of all Western

shipping, and the terror of the inhabitants of various small islands. Most Westerners clearly understand that dying in battle against the Lintha is far preferable to the horrific fate that awaits almost all of their captives. The widespread, and completely justified, terror of the Lintha is both a great advantage and a terrible risk to the Scarlet Empress's plan.

The advantages of a secret alliance with the Lintha Family are great. Upon the Scarlet Empress's orders, the Lintha fleet can attack any island or series of islands, producing terror and weakening the island's defenses. She can then send her fleet in to "drive off" the Lintha pirates, seemingly saving the islanders from either further battles or capture by the Lintha. At this point, any rumors about the Scarlet Empress's horrific alliances count for almost nothing compared to the islanders' fear of the Lintha and offers by the Scarlet Empress to establish garrisons on their islands in order to continue to protect them. Once the islands succumb to the Realm's offer, the Lintha fleet simply moves north, where they attack their next target. The entire process repeats itself until the entirety of Wavecrest, the Neck and all of the islands between belong to the Realm.

In addition, the Lintha fleet can also be used to solidify alliances and ultimately to transform an allied nation into a subject of the Realm. Widespread attacks by the Lintha fleet on Wavecrest's outlying islands panic the populace. Although the Feathered One is exceedingly reluctant to grant the Realm either more





garrisons or the authority to conscript his people, he has little choice in the matter when faced with regular Lintha attacks. If no one discovers the secret alliance between the Lintha and the Scarlet Empress, Lintha attacks allow the Realm's forces to easily take control of the entirety of Wavecrest and the Neck.

Yet, while the Lintha's efforts greatly benefit the Realm, the fact of the secret alliance is also a serious vulnerability. If the Scarlet Empress or the Realm's Water Fleet were discovered to be working with the Lintha Family, then most of the West would turn against the Realm. The populace of both Wavecrest and the Neck would be in no better position than before they learned this secret. Instead of most of the inhabitants agreeing to the Realm's terms in return for protection from the Lintha, however, there would be widespread and open dissent against the Realm. Many of the people would do their best to go along with Realm directives as little as possible, while simultaneously working in secret to sabotage the Realm's war effort.

In the aftermath of such a revelation, the small number of actual volunteers for the Imperial Navy among the inhabitants of both Wavecrest and the Neck, vanishes. When confronted with the possibility of serving the allies of the Lintha or working alongside the cannibal pirates themselves, young men and Tya who are in good health do everything in their power to avoid conscription, no longer stoically accepting it or making only reasonable efforts to avoid it. Also, morale plummets among those who are conscripted.

Acts of petty sabotage abound. Assassinations and other acts of terrorism against both the Realm garrisons and anyone who freely works with them severely hamper the Realm's efforts to secure Wavecrest and the Neck and to ready their forces to attack Coral and Skullstone. Characters who uncover the alliance between the Realm and the Lintha can drastically affect the course of the Western Reclamation campaign. Having this revelation come out is one of the ways that the final battle could occur during the conquest of Coral rather than the attack on Skullstone (see pp. 133–134).

The reaction the Realm's enemies have to such a revelation is also important. The Silver Prince suddenly understands that, instead of simply being a potential threat to his plans and perhaps even his rule, the Scarlet Empress is now a deadly enemy who must be eradicated at any cost. Even more importantly, while the ancient Lunar known as Leviathan has loathed the Realm since the days of the Usurpation, he has also largely lost interest in anything beyond the reach

of his deep-ocean projects, such as the city of Luthé. Yet, he loathes the Lintha pirates almost as much as the rest of the inhabitants of the West do and adamantly opposes any effort by the Yozis to conquer the West, via proxy or no.

Within a few days of receiving the news, both the entirety of Skullstone and Leviathan and his army of beastmen will be arrayed against the Scarlet Empress, and both groups will be prepared to wage total war. More importantly, although Leviathan and the Bodhisattva Anointed by Dark Water continue to hate one another, they both recognize that they face a greater threat. Their forces refuse to work together, but the two leaders will call a temporary truce until the Scarlet Empress and her navy has been defeated.

THE LINTHA ATTACK ON HALCYON

Lintha attacks on Wavecrest begin as soon as the Realm has forged an alliance with the pirates. Most are brief raids on the smaller islands, designed to sow terror among the populace and make the inhabitants of Wavecrest ready, perhaps even eager, to submit to the Realm's yoke. Yet, the Lintha also stage a few larger raids with important objectives. One of the first is an attack on Halcyon. The smallest of Wavecrest's three islands, it is where many of Wavecrest's most renowned naval captains own lavish private villas. This attack's purpose is to kill or badly injure as many of these naval captains as possible. It's also designed to make certain to kill Buruku, the most revered and respected of these captains, who is also the God-Blooded son of the volcano god Hamoji and the Feathered One's personal advisor on naval affairs. (See **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, pp. 140–141.) In addition to dealing a huge blow to Wavecrest's morale, the admiral of the Water Fleet also hopes that Buruku's death will cause Hamoji to ignore Wavecrest's appeals for aid or perhaps even cause volcanic eruptions. Such a cataclysm would further hurt morale and might even lead to the Feathered One being forced to sacrifice himself to the god.

The attack is scheduled for the Festival of Comrades, which is ostensibly an occasion honoring newly promoted naval captains but is actually the single most debauched party Wavecrest's naval officers hold. The party is being held in the Halcyon port town of Rockhaven, known for its easygoing mayor and pleasant climate. The harbor is protected by a single bireme of the Wavecrest Homeshore Guard (see **Scroll of Kings**, p. 52, and use the superior ratings for units stationed close to the coast). The attack is being carried out by a single

Lintha Infernal Raider ship (see **Scroll of Kings**, p. 55) crewed by full-blooded Lintha. To make certain that the mission's goals are accomplished, a single Water-aspected Dynast akuma accompanies the Lintha. Alternatively, if the characters serve the Scarlet Empress, they can accompany the Lintha.

If the characters are the attackers, then assume a sufficient number of God-Blooded and outcaste Dragon-Blooded are present to challenge the characters. These God-Blooded and Dragon-Blooded, either naval officers or expatriate Dynasts who have villas on Halcyon, are present for the Festival of Comrades and will assist in the defense. If the characters are the defenders and are Celestial Exalted, then in addition to the akuma and 50 Lintha, there are also a sufficient number of Dragon-Blooded Lintha to make the fight challenging. Alternatively, a Green Sun Prince could replace the akuma. Regardless of the nature of the raiders, all attackers who are not Lintha are carefully disguised as Lintha.

In addition to the Homeshore Guard, there are approximately 80 of Wavecrest's naval officers, who all count as elite soldiers, as well as the God-Blooded Buruku. All of the officers start off inside a large wood-and-thatch hall, approximately 50 yards long and 30 yards wide. This building is both the naval festival hall and the local naval armory, so it holds weapons and armor for all of the officers. When the Lintha first attack, however, the officers are unarmed and not wearing armor, or in some cases clothes, as they drink and dally with a wide variety of dancers and other entertainers. Because the hall has many large, open windows, most of the naval personnel hear the battle between the Homeshore Guard and the Lintha as soon as it begins. Although most are somewhat drunk, the various officers will rush to the weapons stores and grab various arms before pouring out of the hall and running down to the beach.

In this scenario, the attackers must kill Buruku and as many other naval officers as possible, then still escape. The Lintha will also attempt to set fire to the town. Among the raiders, only the Lintha captain and the Dragon-Blooded akuma know that the Lintha are working with the Scarlet Empress and the Realm. If either of these individuals is captured and cannot escape or commit suicide, then the Lintha alliance with the Scarlet Empress could be revealed, drastically changing the nature of the Western conflict. The Lintha raiders have been ordered to protect their captain and the akuma with their lives but to kill them both if capture is inevitable. Defenders must naturally protect Buruku

and the naval captains. If the defenders are lucky and skilled, however, they might also manage to capture the Lintha captain or the akuma and then successfully interrogate him.

THE CONQUEST OF WAVECREST

As the Lintha execute their raids on Wavecrest, they make a special effort to assault small and relatively isolated settlements, terrorizing the populace and destroying most of the property they can't steal. The goal of these attacks is twofold. In addition to increasing fear, the attacks also leave a large refugee population whose boats and villages have been destroyed. Continued Lintha raids cause many of these refugees to flee to the larger islands of Abalone and Pearl, where they either work as laborers of various sorts, join the navy or go to the cities to become beggars.

Slightly more than a month after the attacks begin, the Realm's Water Fleet sails into the Wavecrest Archipelago. The flagship docks at Abalone, and Fleet Admiral Ledaal Calin meets with the Feathered One and informs him that the Realm will maintain a larger presence in Wavecrest to protect its valuable ally from the increased threat of the Lintha pirates.

As the Water Fleet expands its presence in Wavecrest, the fleet admiral also asks for recruits to help the Realm defeat the Lintha raiders and protect Wavecrest. The large population of refugees from the small islands is an obvious source of "recruits," most of whom are simply conscripted. For the next several months, the Realm's presence in Abalone and on the main islands of Wavecrest increases, while attacks by the Lintha pirates continue on the outermost islands. Representatives of the Realm reassure the inhabitants of Wavecrest that they can protect all of the larger islands of the archipelago, a claim supported by the fact that Lintha vessels never attack these islands and only rarely go after the ships moving to or from them. As a result, more islanders abandon the smaller and more isolated Wavecrest islands.

While many of these islands remain abandoned or are taken over by the Lintha, some are "recaptured" by the Imperial Navy. Realm sorcerers then work with akuma and both First and Second Circle demons to construct the equivalent of a Shogunate-era workshops on some of these small islands, the first on the island of Palm Rest. Refugees and other displaced residents of Wavecrest who have not joined the navy are recruited, first to help construct these workshops and then to work in them, laboring to create artifact weapons and vessels to reinforce the Realm's navy.



Outsiders, including other residents of Wavecrest, are kept away from these workshop islands for security reasons. The real reason is that the sorcerer-technicians running these workshops do not wish to risk anyone seeing the Second Circle demons who work there. Although the First Circle demons work openly and some are actually in charge of gangs of mortal workers, the Second Circle demons are mostly isolated from the mortal Wavecrest laborers. The akuma who manage these workshops fear that outsiders who have a chance to carefully examine them will discover the presence of the Second Circle demons and note the deference with which they are treated.

Back in Abalone and the other large, well-populated islands, specially trained Immaculate monks bring the latest teaching from the Realm to the increasingly desperate populace. Although the Immaculate monks previously left Wavecrest alone, these particular monks preach a version of the Immaculate Philosophy that has been blended with infernalism, in particular the worship of She Who Lives in Her Name. As a result, those who are willing to listen are gradually being led into Yozi worship. The changes in Immaculate ritual are sufficiently subtle that the few people who are skilled enough to

suspect the nature of the changes in doctrine and ritual can be dismissed as fools or troublemakers. The player of any character who is a follower of the Immaculate faith and who takes time to carefully listen to the new liturgies can make a difficulty 5 (Intelligence + Occult) roll for his character to notice that the symbolism and ceremony is heretical and hints at a sinister purpose. If the character has trained as an Immaculate monk, reduce the difficulty of this roll to 3.

THE ATTACK ON THE FACTORY ISLAND

The Shogunate workshop built on the small and previously abandoned island of Palm Rest is now complete and has begun producing weapons and spare parts for the Realm. More than 1,200 residents of Wavecrest are treated like slaves on this island and are forced to work with and under various demons. Unfortunately for the Realm, several workers manage to escape, and at least one fled Wavecrest for the nearby, still-neutral islands to the north.

If the characters oppose the Scarlet Empress, then the worker makes his way to the island or ship that they are on. If the characters are working with the Reclamation alliance, then they hear rumors of the escape



and that at least one worker is now telling his tales on islands not currently ruled by the Realm. Regardless of the allegiances of the characters, the factory island is a crucial resource for the Realm, and its destruction would seriously impair the war effort. A raid on this island is imminent. The attack is either led by the characters or by the Solar Exalted Kalonice Stormwind, leading a force of well-armed Tya warriors. If Kalonice Stormwind attacks, use the traits for a Coral Ship of the Line (see **Scroll of Kings**, p. 46), except that Kalonice Stormwind is in command. She and her warriors arrive in the equivalent of an imperial trireme (see **Scroll of Kings**, p. 147) that Kalonice Stormwind commands using powerful Sail Charms.

PALM REST'S DEFENSES

The island is defended by a single *Swift Midday Brilliance*-class light warship (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 39–40), armed with a pair of light implosion bows and carrying a talon of the Realm's finest medium infantry.

If the characters are working for the Realm, they either provide the defenses themselves or serve onboard this vessel. If the characters are the attackers, the ship

might also carry a junior officer sworn brotherhood (see **Scroll of Kings**, p. 124).

The island once known as Palm Rest has been hideously transformed. Instead of shores lined with huts, palm trees and sturdy catamarans, the island now has barren shores guarded by seven erymanthoi and, if needed for a challenge, another talon of the Realm's medium marines. The half-mile-wide freshwater lake that used to be the gem of the island's interior is now gray and foul, and on its shore squats a huge and ugly stone-and-wood structure that belches smoke. The glow of fires and sparks can be seen from within at night.

This is a Shogunate workshop that produces suits of yoroi rapid-response armor, light implosion bows and lightning ballistae (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 82–83, 130 and 132). Ships come from the fleet every two weeks to pick up the latest weapons and armor produced here, so the factory normally has between one and three of each of these three items around at any time. Inside the factory is a single Second Circle demon, Alveua, Keeper of the Forge of Night (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**, pp. 55–57). If the characters are attacking rather

IMPERIAL MARINE COMPANY

Description: This talon is known as the Mast-Hacking Marines of the Realm's Water Fleet.

Commanding Officer: Either Talonlord Nellens Feyen or perhaps one of the players' characters

Armor Color: Sea green with black trim

Motto: "Drown your enemies"

General Makeup: 125 mortal marines armed with slashing swords and javelins, and wearing lamellar armor and pot helms.

Overall Quality: Excellent

Magnitude: 3

Drill: 3

Close Combat Attack: 3

Close Combat Damage: 3

Ranged Attack: 3 **Ranged Damage:** 2

Endurance: 6 **Might:** 0 **Armor:** 2 (-2 mobility)

Morale: 3

Formation: The talon consists of five scales, each of which is commanded by one member of a Dragon-Blooded sworn brotherhood. Nellens Feyen and the four Dragon-Blooded scale commanders act as heroes. When possible, the unit operates in Close formation, but aboard ship, it typically operates in Skirmish formation.



than defending and are Celestial Exalted, then Alveua is joined by Octavian, the Living Tower, who helps guard the island.

Inside the factory, 1,200 oppressed slaves work alongside 26 First Circle demons, including six heranhal and 20 baidak, five of whom are "promoted"—a fers baidak, three kyosha baidak and a sang baidak (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas**, pp. 139-141 and 146-147 for information on these demons). These demons are horrific taskmasters. If the factory is attacked by a powerful force, the human slaves revolt, attempting desperately to either escape or to slay the First Circle demons who have been tormenting them for many weeks. Amidst this chaos, characters who oppose the Realm must attempt to destroy this horror, rescue the workers (who can attest to the evils of the Realm) and perhaps steal the treasures found there, and they must do so swiftly. Slightly less than an hour after they land on the island, they will also face a single Green Sun Prince. (Storytellers should use the traits for the Orchid-Consuming Guardian from **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas**, pp. 158-159, but replace his Slave-Spawn Summons spell with

Conjuring the Azure Chariot.) If needed, a trio of Immaculate monks also arrive via the Conjuring the Azure Chariot spell and help defend the island.

LOOSE ENDS

Possible complications for this story include all of the following:

- A group of sailors from Wavecrest has heard rumors of the time and location of the next big attack by the Lintha pirates, which will occur in a few days on the southernmost islands of the archipelago. The fleet admiral of the Realm and the senior Lintha raiders both believe that, if this raid is successful, it will cause the remaining inhabitants of more than half a dozen islands to flee to Abalone and the other two large islands. Depending upon their allegiance, characters can attempt to drive off or possibly capture and interrogate the pirates, or they can make certain that nothing interrupts this raid.

- One of the younger Lunar Exalts who serves Leviathan has been working to secretly destabilize the Realm's influence over Wavecrest in an effort to win the ancient Lunar's approval. The young Lunar and the Wyld barbarian cultists who worship her have begun a

campaign of terrorism and recruitment in Wavecrest. They attack Realm vessels and storehouses and factories used by the Realm, while making certain never to harm citizens of Wavecrest who are not working with the Realm. The Lunar's followers have also been secretly preaching Leviathan's divinity and providing aid and occasional thaumaturgical talismans to many of Wavecrest's refugees. The poorest of Wavecrest's youth are already joining Leviathan's cult, and the young Lunar is getting ready for a major attack on one of the carefully guarded factory islands or on the fleet and garrisons in Abalone.

- A team of Dynasts working with the Lintha Family have been seen, and one of their number was badly injured in a fight. He is currently hiding from a group of Wavecrest warriors consisting of God-Bloods and Dragon-Blooded outcastes. The players' characters soon hear about an injured Lintha of significant power who is currently eluding capture on one of Wavecrest's smaller islands. If captured and interrogated, this Dynast could imperil the entire Reclamation effort in Wavecrest.

- The number of and membership in cults of ancestor worship in Wavecrest are growing. In part, this is due to deaths caused by the Lintha raiders. Yet, rumors circulate of ghosts and perhaps even deathknights stalking the archipelago's small shadowlands. Worse, some of the Lintha attacks have produced other shadowlands. The Dynasts in the fleet don't know if the increase in ancestor worship and ghostly activity is a troublesome local issue or a sign that the Silver Prince has begun to interfere with their conquest of Wavecrest.

ACT TWO: ON HER IMPERIAL MAJESTY'S SECRET SERVICE

Within months of conquering An-Teng and recruiting the Lintha Family, the Realm will have largely subdued Wavecrest. During this same time, Lintha raids on the Neck will have been used as a pretense for the Water Fleet having a larger presence there and eventually taking control of this relatively helpless region. At this point, the Realm is ready for its big push. Instead of consolidating nations that were already at least partly under its sway, it sets out to conquer new lands. This conquest is an epic venture and will make use of both the Realm's existing fleets and the ships and sailors who have been recruited or conscripted from An-Teng and Wavecrest. The result is the largest fleet seen in the Western Ocean since the end of the First Age.

The invasion of the Coral Archipelago is couched in terms of protecting this nation from attacks by Skullstone and the Lintha. Naturally, the Coral Archipelago resists the Realm's incursions. As a result, Ledaal Calin, the fleet admiral of the Realm's Water Fleet, accuses Coral's Sea Lord of harboring pirates and terrorists, a charge that is perfectly true. Admiral Ledaal then demands the Sea Lord allow him and his fleet come in to the clean out these pirate nests and restore order. When the Sea Lord refuses this demand, the Realm attacks.

THE BATTLE FOR AZURE

The key battle in the conquest of the Coral Archipelago is the battle for Azure, that nation's capital. This is also the first major battle of the conquest of the West. The battles in Wavecrest or the Neck are either guerilla actions or, at best, raids by the Realm's enemies. The Coral Archipelago, however, has been an enemy of the Realm for centuries, and its people can see the fate awaiting them if the Realm prevails. Ignoring the smaller islands, the Realm masses its fleet southeast of the island of Azure. Coral's fleet naturally positions itself between the Water Fleet and Azure.

On its own, Coral has no chance against the might of the Realm. Yet, it has many allies, including various Western pirates, such as the Wyld-crazed buccaneers and explorers Eos and Ossissa (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Dragon-Blooded**, pp. 85-86). The Silver Prince of Skullstone also offers aid to Coral's Sea Lord. Although the Sea Lord is loath to accept this aid, he is also vividly aware that he is in no position to turn down even this distasteful ally. In desperation, the Sea Lord makes an alliance with the Deathlord, hoping that he will be willing to lend his magics and deathknights to help defeat the Realm's Water Fleet. Instead, the Silver Prince merely fields a small fleet, which attacks from the southwest. The Denzik merchant fleet also fears the Realm's Western ambitions and lends some of its ships and crew to the Sea Lord's aid. While the Guild is also worried about the Realm's advances, it is not yet ready to attack the Realm, so it remains neutral.

The admiral of the Water Fleet expects victory, but he also understands he might not be fully aware of the full range of Coral's allies. He expects Coral will enjoy support from the Denzik fleet and perhaps the Guild. Unless players' characters have sought out information about Coral's defensive plans and alliances, however, the admiral does not expect Coral to be aided by Skullstone.

THE DEFENDERS—SKULLSTONE AND CORAL

As his first major action in the battle for the West, the Silver Prince is not about to reveal all of his strengths or his secrets. Instead, he wants to test the Realm's strength, since he knows that the next battle is almost certain to take place between Skullstone and the Realm. The Deathlord sends out 40 ships of his 48-ship conventional fleet of Second Age sailing ships manned with zombie marines (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, p. 84). It consists of 13 triremes, 17 biremes and 10 fast couriers (see **Scroll of Kings**, pp. 145 and 147), all under the command of the Bronze Tiger known across the West as Moray Darktide. Backing up these vessels are 32 undead sea monsters: 12 great squids, 10 sea dragons and 10 siaka (see **Exalted**, p. 349, and **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, pp. 159-160), all controlled by three-dot defiler eels (see **Scroll of Kings**, p. 50). In addition, five of the triremes, including the one captained by Moray Darktide, have been equipped with aft-mounted light onagers (see **Scroll of Kings**, p. 138) capable of firing the amulets carrying the 150 war ghosts of the Black Fleet Spectre Commandos (see **Scroll of Kings**, p. 49). All of these spectres have been specially trained to be able to fight effectively in Creation. Fifty of the spectres know the Weighted with the Anchor of Flesh Charm (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**, pp. 144-145) to allow them to materialize in Creation. Another 50 know Puppeteer's Masterful Hand (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**, p. 148) to allow them to possess living targets. The last 50 know Nemissary's Ride (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**, pp. 148-149), which allows them to possess corpses.

The 71 First Age ships of the Silver Prince's Black Fleet remains a devastatingly powerful secret. The Silver Prince's conventional fleet is quite small, but it's also exceedingly deadly due to the presence of Moray Darktide and hundreds of war ghosts and other powerful creatures, supported by various necromantic artifact weapons and several dozen ghosts and Ghost-Blooded who are trained in necromancy. Also, as a secret backup (and unknown to Moray Darktide), the Silver Prince has also deployed his single *Riptide*-class submersible marauder (see **Scroll of Kings**, pp. 49-50), piloted by his loyal deathknight, Ebon Siaka (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. IV—The Underworld**, pp. 129-130). Ebon Siaka is under orders to discreetly

attack the Realm's largest First Age ships and to report about the Realm's tactics and also any unusual weapons or allies. The Deathlord has heard rumors of an alliance between the Lintha and the Realm, as well as other, darker rumors, but he is not willing to show his true strength until he understands more about what he is facing.

The Silver Prince's goal in this battle is to learn more about the Realm's forces and to seriously weaken them. He does not expect his forces to win this battle, and he assumes (and hopes) that Moray Darktide will die in it after doing much to weaken the Realm's fleet. Then, a few weeks after what the Silver Prince hopes will be a Pyrrhic victory for the Realm, he plans to send out his Black Fleet, under the command of Ebon Siaka, to engage the remainder of the Water Fleet.

The Silver Prince's forces are joined by the combined might of Coral's fleet, the ships of pirate crews willing to lend their aid and more than 50 Denzik ships. Since some have been lost due to increased attacks by Lintha raiders, the total is 1,600 ships. (For more information on Coral's fleet, see **Scroll of Kings**, p. 45.)

THE REALM'S FLEET

Shortly after the Scarlet Empress's return, she reinforces the Realm's Water Fleet (see **Scroll of Kings**, pp. 125-127) so that it once again contains 26 First Age vessels, including its flagship—a single *Dawning Star Indomitable*-class heavy battle cruiser (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, p. 46) armed with two lightning ballistae (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, p. 132). The Realm's 1,300 ships' crews include 200 Dragon-Blooded and 10 Dragon-Blooded akuma. Four of these akuma know Celestial Circle sorcery and use their magic to aid in the battle. All four know Sapphire Circle Countermagic and Mercury's Deliverance, while one of the akuma knows Cantata of Empty Voices and another knows Summoning the Heart of Darkness. The latter two akuma sorcerers wear transcendent phoenix pinions (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, p. 53), which they use to fly to the center of Coral's huge fleet and cast Cantata of Empty Voices, followed by Summoning the Heart of Darkness. Unless these akuma are stopped or the spells are disrupted by one of the players' characters, they utterly devastate the fleet.

The Realm's tactics are brutally simple. Since Coral's and Skullstone's fleets have mostly been kept separate from one another, the Water Fleet and its

akuma swiftly annihilate Coral's fleet using a mixture of Sapphire Circle sorcery and First Age weapons. Once this fleet has been routed, the real battle begins. A thousand of the conventional ships of the Water Fleet continue on in their effort to capture or destroy the surviving vessels of Coral's navy. (They capture as many as they can, in order to make these ships part of the Water Fleet.) Meanwhile, the remainder of the conventional ships and all of the First Age vessels of the Water Fleet face the Silver Prince's fleet. A battle between several hundred conventional ships and 26 First Age warships versus fewer than 50 conventional ships would normally be little more than a brief but somewhat dull combat exercise for the Realm. Yet, the presence of war ghosts, necromancers, undead sea monsters, Moray Darktide and the submarine piloted by Ebon Siaka all combine to make this battle both difficult and costly. Without impressive amounts of aid by the players' characters, however, the conclusion of this battle is a forgone one.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

In the absence of significant efforts by the players' characters, the Realm triumphs. At the end of the battle, more than half of Coral's fleet lies at the bottom of the sea, and almost all of the rest have been captured by the Realm. Skullstone's fleet is also destroyed, and Moray Darktide dies heroically. Ebon Siaka remains both undetected and unharmed, however, and she pilots her submarine back to Skullstone. The deathknight noticed the presence of akuma in the Realm's fleet, and her information helps the Silver Prince prepare for his attack on the Realm. Yet, although Coral was easily defeated, the Deathlord's tactics worked superbly. Ebon Siaka's submarine targeted the Realm's First Age vessels, and when combined with the efforts of Moray Darktide and the Black Fleet Spectre Commandos, seven of the Realm's 26 First Age vessels are destroyed in the attack. This loss significantly weakens the Water Fleet, especially considering the Silver Prince's still-secret armada. Also, 400 of the Realm's conventional vessels were sunk or crippled.

In the aftermath of this attack, Coral is helpless, and the Water Fleet sails triumphantly into the harbor of Azure. The Sea Lord is executed, and within a few days, the entire Coral Archipelago is a conquered nation under the increasingly brutal yoke of the Realm. Because of its proximity to the Skullstone Archipelago, Coral also becomes the staging area for the Reclamation alliance's final Western conquest, Skullstone.

ROLEPLAYING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHARACTERS

Characters who are opponents of the Realm are essentially the only hope for preventing this battle from becoming a swift, though costly, victory for the Realm. Characters who oppose the Realm would have to be exceptionally successful to transform this attack into a victory for Coral, but a circle of sufficiently skilled and clever Celestial Exalted might be able to manage this. Nevertheless, accomplishing this feat requires a mixture of exceptionally planning, great skill and at least an equal amount of luck.

Unless the characters are able to both stop the akuma sorcerers and destroy more than a dozen First Age battleships on their own, and do the second during the first portion of the engagement, there is little chance of the Realm losing this battle. More likely, the characters could accomplish lesser goals, which could include anything from saving the life of Moray Darktide to destroying more of the Realm's First Age vessels and laying waste to the Realm's conventional fleet. Transforming the Water Fleet's victory into a Pyrrhic one will change the course of the entire Western campaign.

Regardless of which side the characters are on, one of the most important feats characters on either side could accomplish is to discover Ebon Siaka's submarine and either capture or follow her. Both the Abyssal and her submarine could provide valuable clues as to the size and nature of the Silver Prince's secret fleet. If the Imperial Navy obtains such information, it will send raiders (including the players' characters, naturally, if they work for the Realm) to Island Five to secretly destroy the Black Fleet. Success in this venture would essentially guarantee the success of the Realm's attack on the Skullstone Archipelago. Characters who oppose the Realm but are not servants of the Silver Prince might not want to prevent Ebon Siaka's attacks, but they could either capture her after the battle or follow her back to Island Five, either of which could reveal the existence of the Silver Prince's Black Fleet.

Alternatively, the Realm could discover and capture Ebon Siaka and her submarine, but characters who oppose the Realm might learn of this turn of events. If the characters are deathknights working for the Silver Prince, they can help him defend Island Five and the Black Fleet from an attack by Green Sun Princes and Dragon-Blooded akuma. If the characters are opponents of the Realm who do not work for the Silver Prince, they might discover the existence of the Black Fleet





when the Realm does and realize that they might need to help defend it to prevent the Realm from becoming the undisputed ruler of the West. Characters who learn about the existence of the Black Fleet and help defend Island Five might also be able to use this knowledge when they and the rest of the West are fighting the Silver Prince and his own plans for Western conquest.

WHERE IS THE OTHER MAJOR PLAYER?

This is the first really large battle in the West, and while the Silver Prince is involved, Leviathan is not, unless the characters bring him into the conflict. Unfortunately, accomplishing this feat will not be easy. Any who know of the sunken city of Luthe know that he can be found there. Yet, he has no interest in helping outsiders. He will certainly join the battle against the Realm once Coral is defeated, because his spies and agents will report to him about both the full might of the Realm and about its possible connections to Malfeas. Before this battle, however, he considers the Realm to be little different than it always has been (see “Leviathan and Sunken Luthe” on the following page for further information).

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

This scenario is predicated on the idea that the Realm has managed to keep its alliances with both Malfeas and the Lintha secret. If the Silver Prince and the other major Western powers, such as Leviathan, know the truth about the Reclamation and the Realm’s alliance with the Lintha before the battle for Azure, then this battle will take on a completely different tone. If the Silver Prince and Leviathan know the truth about the Realm’s conquest, then both of them will make the Battle of Azure their final stand. Rather than testing the Realm’s power, the Silver Prince sends out the ships described previously, as well as 66 of his 71 First Age vessels—three of the remaining five guard the island of Onyx and the remaining two will guard Island Five. Skullstone’s small

conventional fleet is still led by Moray Darktide, but it is relegated to the secondary role of supporting Coral's fleet, while the First Age ships, including Ebon Siaka's *Riptide*-class submersible marauder, all attack the Realm's First Age vessels.

Similarly, Leviathan shows up for the battle and brings his beastman army and their First Age weapons from Luthe. If this happens, then the Battle of Azure will be the final battle in the Western campaign rather than the place where the Realm proves its power before (likely) going down in defeat. If this option occurs, then the Storyteller should read "The Battle on the Edge of Death" (starting on p. 133) and incorporate all of the suggestions there into the Battle for Azure. In addition, immediately after this battle ends, the Silver Prince uses sorcery to transport himself to the deck of the battleship commanding his First Age fleet. At this point, he takes personal command of his Black Fleet and leads it in a war of conquest and obliteration against the remainder of the West.

Whether or not the Realm discovers that the Silver Prince and other important Western leaders have learned its secret determines much about how this battle goes. If the Western leaders manage to keep their knowledge of the Realm's alliance with the Yozis a secret, then the Water Fleet sails into the battle unaware of the sort of opposition it faces and still determined not to reveal its true nature until its planned attack on Skullstone. This secrecy means that the Realm is not accompanied by the Lintha fleet and that the Green Sun Princes initially stay in the background. As a result, the battle between the Realm's fleet and the combined might of Coral, Luthe and Skullstone, as well as whatever other allies the characters can find, is drastically one-sided. The Realm loses very badly, and the Silver Prince ends the battle in a terrifyingly excellent position to begin his campaign of Western conquest and destruction. In this version of events, the defeat of the Realm becomes little more than a prelude to an exceedingly hard-fought battle against the Silver Prince. Characters who previously helped defeat the Realm might even end up in the difficult position of having to make an alliance with the remnants of the Realm, the Lintha pirates and possibly even the representatives of She Who Lives in Her Name in order to defeat the Silver Prince.

If the Silver Prince, Leviathan and the other Western leaders openly reveal the Realm's alliances to help motivate their own populace or to promote rebellion in Wavecrest and the Neck, the Realm will be accompanied

by the Lintha, the Green Sun Princes and all the might that the Yozis can bring to Creation. The resulting battle is very similar to the "The Battle on the Edge of Death" (see p. 133–134). Since the Realm's enemies discover the Reclamation alliance only if the player's characters reveal it, they should ultimately be the ones who decide whether the Sea Lord and the Silver Prince keep the truth about the Realm secret.

RECRUITING NEW ALLIES

Part of the aftermath of the Battle for Azure is the realization of the Realm's raw power. Characters who are unaware of the full extent of the Silver Prince's power will clearly be worried about defeating the Realm's fleet and will need allies. Also, characters who suspect the Silver Prince's true power might also wish to find new allies, in part to make certain that the Silver Prince does not end up in control of the West once the Realm has been defeated. The following is a selection of both the possible allies the players' characters might encounter and suggestions for how they might recruit those allies.


LEVIATHAN AND SUNKEN LUTHE

Like Skullstone's Island Five, the sunken city of Luthe (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, pp. 106–124) is the other unknown threat and opportunity in the West. Unlike Island Five, however, Luthe is largely waiting for some external force to take possession of its wealth of First Age artifacts. Although many of these weapons and devices require repair, the majority require only routine maintenance or minor fixes, and a small number of highly skilled characters could get many of the artifacts working within a week.

Unfortunately, Luthe is not a treasure that is simply waiting for someone to discover it. It is under the protection of the mighty ancient Lunar known as Leviathan, aided by his vast legions of shark and octopus beastmen and Wyld mutants. Although defeating Leviathan and his beastmen is one possible way to gain control of Luthe, doing so both risks destroying the city and would be exceptionally costly. Yet, anyone who could convince Leviathan of the need for even a temporary alliance gains not just a wealth of First Age weapons and vehicles, but also the aid of one of the most powerful Lunar Exalted in Creation and an army of several thousand aquatic beastmen.

There are only three ways to convince Leviathan to aid the players' characters. Characters of any sort who can provide proof of the Realm's alliance with





the forces of Malfeas will swiftly earn an audience and his aid. Unfortunately, obtaining clear proof of the Reclamation alliance is naturally far from easy. Alternatively, any Solar or Lunar Exalt whose former incarnation knew him well during the First Age will at least be able to gain a hearing. Any Abyssal Exalt or Green Sun Prince who possessed such an Exaltation could possibly also gain a hearing, but would need to approach Leviathan completely unarmed and would be slain if she acted in any remotely threatening way. Lunar Exalted who present themselves to him as honorable supplicants and who have earned the respect of their elders will be allowed to address Leviathan. Anyone else will either be driven off by his beastmen or slain by Leviathan himself. Dragon-Blooded will be captured or killed. Yet, any Dragon-Bloods who can sneak inside will be sheltered by the human traitor-spawn if they discover what the characters are. The traitorspawn promise to help the characters loot the city's technology in return for help freeing them or simply help killing as many of the city's other residents as possible.

Once they gain an audience with Leviathan, supplicants must convince him why he should interfere in the affairs of the surface world. Fortunately, proof that the Realm is working with the forces of Malfeas or that She Who Lives in Her Name is attempting to conquer the West is sufficient to gain Leviathan's aid. If the characters cannot come up with a good reason as to why Leviathan should aid the alliance against the Realm, their only chance lies in either offering him some prize or finding some way to entertain or impress him. Offering to introduce him to the Lawgiver who now bears the Exaltation of the First Age Solar Queen Amyana would be such a prize, as would any N/A artifact useful under the sea or a functional reality engine. Little else interests the Lunar.

Characters can entertain and impress Leviathan by challenging him to combat, either alone or as a group. Such a combat would be to first blood, and if the characters either score the first wound or at least manage a reasonable effort against him, he would inclined to help them, if they also make a good case for their cause. Alternatively, he might send them into the Middlemarches to slay a behemoth or to bring him the crown of Judge Nehemeth, ruler of the raksha Pearl Court. Regardless of whether they convince him to help fight the Realm, characters who behave honorably but do not sufficiently impress or sway Leviathan will be allowed to depart. Any who threaten

him or act in any way cowardly or dishonorably will be slain—possibly eaten.

If the players' characters convince Leviathan to work with them, he leads an army of 2,000 beastmen and pelagothropes, consisting of 60 units of Luthe Militia Patrol (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, p. 118). His forces also include 10 units that are identical except that the soldiers are deep sages (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, p. 153) and another 10 that are pelagothropes (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, pp. 152–153). Reduce the Might of the pelagothrope units to 2. In addition, if the characters deeply impress Leviathan or provide evidence that they are actually fighting both Malfeas and the Realm, he gives them access to the flight deck submersible pens, providing characters capable of repairing First Age magitechnology with one *Manta*-class troop transport (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 43–44), five *Resplendent Dolphin*-class undersea couriers (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 37–8) and a dozen *Barracuda*-class undersea fighters (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, p. 120).

Eight of these undersea fighters are five-dot artifacts equipped with light implosion bows. All 17 submersibles merely require routine maintenance and for the city to be lifted so that the undersea doors can be opened. The *Manta*-class troop transport requires one week of hard work to repair. Also, although it would be a mighty undertaking, a circle of experienced Solar Exalted who had several months to work, could possibly even repair the city of Luthe itself, allowing it to be deployed as a mobile military platform, if they could also persuade Leviathan to permit this effort. In moderate repair, Luthe would easily be the equal of the Silver Prince's fleet.

WARRIORS FROM THE WYLD

During the various battles between the Realm and its enemies, the players' characters, regardless of which side they are on, hear stories of deadly and utterly fearless aquatic raiders who appear from the edges of the Wyld and vanish back into the Bordermarches as swiftly as they appeared. These raiders are the pirates of Jalarin (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The Wyld**, pp. 93–94), an ancient group of the people of the sea who have become pirates. Like many mortals who dwell too long in the Wyld, they have become archetypal beings who now lack mercy

and fear. Caring nothing for politics or the threat posed by the Scarlet Empress and the Reclamation, the Jalarin pirates seek only glory, battle, treasure and captives, all of which the recent conflicts have given them in abundance. They have been waiting on the fringes of many battles between ships of the Neck and Coral and those of the Realm, picking off survivors. They have also attacked Realm convoys and Lintha battle groups, but have largely left conquered peoples along, since there is no challenge or glory to be found in attacking those who have already been beaten.

So far, the Jalarin pirates have made many raids, but have not committed any major attacks. Characters who hear rumors of the pirates' prowess, however, might seek their aid. Doing so can provide the characters with four major benefits. First, although the Jalarin number only 1,000, they are all deadly and fearless and could provide valuable aid to any attack on the forces of the Realm. Second, in addition to being without fear, all of the Jalarin are people of the sea, who breathe water, swim as easily and swiftly as they can run on land and pilot vessels designed to sail with hulls that are almost entirely submerged. Jalarin vessels are all exceedingly difficult to notice until they are within a few dozen yards. Third, the Jalarin also have huge stores of treasure, including many powerful artifacts that they do not understand, but that can provide great benefit to Exalts and other Essence users if the characters can convince the pirates to share their booty. Fourth and finally, the most important benefit of recruiting the Jalarin is the least obvious—their allies. The Jalarin pirates pay tribute to and have an alliance of mutual defense with the Pearl Court, (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The Wyld**, pp. 96–98) a raksha court renowned for its rigid hierarchy, complex laws and the hatred that its leader, Judge Nehemeth holds for the Primordials.

Recently, the tribute the Jalarin pirates have been giving to the Pearl Court has included an artifact that was clearly forged in Malfeas, a fact that has drawn the interest of Judge Nehemeth. She has sent several of her cataphractoi to fight alongside the Jalarin pirates and report back what they see. Characters who appear before the Jalarin bearing tales of the Scarlet Empress working with the Yozis or of her making an alliance with the Lintha pirates spurs these cataphractoi to report to Judge Nehemeth.

Yet, before the Jalarin will agree either to work with the players' characters or to allow them to visit the Pearl Court, they must demonstrate their bravery

and ferocity. The Jalarin do not tolerate their allies' dealing with cowards or the weak. Dragon-Blooded who come before the Jalarin pirates will need to have their best warrior fight half a dozen or more pirates in a contest to first blood. All of the Jalarin pirates count as heroic mortals and elite warriors. Celestial Exalted are sufficiently mighty that they should be able to convince the Jalarin pirates to follow them simply by their presence.

The Pearl Court is far more difficult to convince. Proof that the Realm is allied with the Yozis or the Lintha is the only way to convince Judge Nehemeth and her subjects to fight the Realm. Getting the Pearl Court to fight alongside mortals and Exalts in any sort of remotely organized battle plan is an even more difficult task, however. To convince the Pearl Court to work with the West's other defenders, the characters must fulfill Judge Nehemeth's request that they travel to the island of the Weeping Maiden and bring back a cup of her tears.

To do so, the players' characters must best or evade her guardian, the behemoth Iwau Tamotsu. Characters who manage this feat will be acclaimed as worthy heroes by the Jalarin pirates and acknowledged as useful allies by the Pearl Court. In return for accomplishing this task, the characters can call upon the allegiance of the Jalarin Pirate Company (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The Wyld**, p. 94), and two companies of Pearl Court Raiders (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The Wyld**, pp. 97–98). Characters who are especially skilled might even manage to gain the blessing of the Weeping Maiden.

LOOSE ENDS

Possible complications for this story include all of the following:

- While the characters are visiting Luthe, the human traitorspawn rebel. As a test of the characters' loyalty, Leviathan asks them to help put down the rebellion.
- One of the traitorspawn has learned to summon demons and asks for demonic aid in freeing her people. Characters who work for the Reclamation might be asked to provide such aid. Other characters find out about this effort. If characters who oppose the Reclamation alliance confront the demon summoner, they are treated to an impassioned diatribe on the horrors her people suffer and their desire for freedom.
- Gavrane Tomazri, one of the traitorspawn, drew the second breath in Luthe. He became a Water



Aspect without being discovered and slain. He sneaks to the surface and finds the players' characters. He pleads for his people, offering the treasures of Luthe to any who aid him. He neglects to mention Leviathan, however, unless the characters already know about this ancient Lunar.

- The Lunar called Sage of the Depths approaches the players' characters, seeking their aid in improving his position, at the expense of Leviathan's power. If the characters seem at all interested, he offers access to the city's weapon stores that serve as reserve stores for the militia: 2,000 shock pikes not in use by the militia, 2,000 suits of perfect reinforced buff jackets enchanted by the Ritual of Elemental Empowerment (soak +7B/+10B, no mobility penalty or fatigue) and 20 light implosion bows. Among other proposals, Sage of the Depths suggests making certain that Leviathan is in the front line of battle and having the characters make certain to keep any of their allies from aiding him if appears to be outmatched.

- One of the raksha of the Pearl Court claims to own a magical wine that allows anyone who drinks a glass when entering the Mirror Maze to swiftly and automatically find a large bubble depicting any scene they might wish to see. Asking to see the Silver Prince's secret weapon would show a clear view of Island Five and the Black Fleet, just as asking to see the Scarlet Empress's secret allies would show an image of both the Lintha and the Yozis of the Reclamation alliance. The character who drank the wine can also hear what is occurring in the location pictured and can observe the scene for at least several hours. In return, the raksha wishes a high price, perhaps help overthrowing Judge Nehemeth or for the players' characters to assassinate a rival or help the raksha win the love of one of her fellows.

- The players' characters hear rumors of a wondrous treasure in the center of the Waterdrop Ocean. In the central reef is a crystal orb the size of a human head filled with a glowing opalescent fluid. If the orb is broken in Creation, it temporarily allows a circle nine miles in diameter to be subject to shaping combat and oneiromantic spells (see **Graceful Wicked Masks—The Fair Folk**, pp. 113–138) as if this region were in the Middlemarches. The effect persists for one scene. This item would allow the raksha of the Pearl Court to decimate their enemies, but first, the characters must find it. The quest for the item should require many sessions, but the results of using it would be devastating, assuming that the Pearl Court agrees to help.

ACT THREE: THE WEST IS NOT ENOUGH

Having conquered most of the West, the Reclamation alliance reveals itself in all its terribly glory. The Water Fleet, aided by the Lintha and all of its Malfean allies, prepares to attack the Skullstone Archipelago. The forces of the Reclamation are certain that the Silver Prince has some sort of deadly surprise prepared for them, but unless the players have managed to reveal its existence, the alliance is completely unaware of Island Five and the Silver Prince's Black Fleet. In the absence of actions by the characters, the Silver Prince wins the battle and proceeds to attempt to conquer the West himself.

SKULLSTONE GOES TO WAR

Whenever the Silver Prince decides that the Scarlet Empress is a serious threat to his sovereignty and plans, he reveals his secret fleet, but he still attempts to keep the existence and location of Island Five a secret. His First Age fleet leaves Island Five under cover of darkness, while the Silver Prince is back on Darkmist Isle, performing powerful acts of necromancy. He does so in an effort to prepare for war and to use sufficient amounts of Essence to attempt to disguise the presence of the First Age fleet from any distant spies.

Even if Moray Darktide is still alive, the Silver Prince refuses to give him command of any of these vessels. The Silver Prince finds Darktide exceptionally useful, but ultimately does not trust him. Instead, the Silver Prince leaves the Black Fleet in command of one of his most loyal deathknights or retains command himself. If the Silver Prince is otherwise occupied, he is most likely to give Ebon Siaka command of the fleet. Also, although the Silver Prince possesses 71 ships, he won't send them all out unless there is absolutely no other choice. Instead, he will keep back at least five: two to guard Island Five and three others to guard the remainder the Skullstone Archipelago.

THE DESIGNS OF THE SILVER PRINCE

The Deathlord of the Skullstone Archipelago is the most powerful being active in the West. More importantly, the vast majority of his power is a carefully kept secret. The docks of the mysterious Island Five (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, pp. 76–77) contain 71 First Age warships built in the island's massive factory-cathedral. Originally, the Bodhisattva Anointed by Dark Water was biding his time, until the tireless dead laboring

THE SILVER PRINCE'S FLEET


The Black Fleet consists of one *Riptide*-class submersible marauder, 14 *Glorious Dragonfly*-class patrol boats, 55 *Swift Middy* *Brilliance*-class light warships (fitted with full weaponry, including the necromantic equivalents of three light implosion bows and two lightning ballistae), and his flagship, a single *Dawning Sun Indomitable*-class heavy battlecruiser. (See **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, pp. 39–40, 41–42 and 46.) This last terrible wonder is also fully equipped, and only a Deathlord or deathknight can activate this vessel's drives and weapons. All of these vessels only superficially resemble their First Age equivalents, however, since they are all menacing and terrible constructs of soulsteel, crewed by ghosts and the walking dead.

on Island Five could build a massive fleet of 100 fully armed First Age vessels. When the invasion of the West begins, however, the Silver Prince fights back. Either when the full power of the Realm's forces are turned against Skullstone or the nature of the Scarlet Empress's demonic allies becomes clear, the Silver Prince puts aside his plans for future conquest and his secrecy, attacking the Cursed Isle's fleets in full force.

THE SILVER PRINCE'S VULNERABILITIES

Island Five is both the secret heart of the Bodhisattva Anointed by Dark Water's strength and the weakest link in his plans. Capturing Island Five would seriously impair the Deathlord's war efforts, and if the Realm discovered the island and launched a covert strike against it, the Water Fleet could utterly cripple Skullstone in one swift blow. The Silver Prince's factory-cathedral and the Foundry of Souls are both located here, and capturing them cuts off the nation's entire supply of soulsteel and the vast majority of its capacity to manufacture artifacts. Also, until the fleet is mobilized, all 71 of its ships are docked here. A sufficiently powerful attack could destroy both this fleet and Skullstone's ability to create more such vessels, rendering the nation effectively helpless.

Yet, the threat of such massive attacks represents only one of the problems the Silver Prince faces if any



of his enemies gains access to Island Five. Clever and daring enemies could use Island Five to destroy the Silver Prince's nation and ultimately the Deathlord himself. Revealing the secret of the Hungry Stone and the fact that Skullstone's religion is a lie would incite much of the archipelago's population into open rebellion. If an enemy force revealed this fact and then actively sought recruits and aided rebels, more than a quarter of the living and ghost population of the archipelago would join their force, and many of the rest would offer these rebels aid and support.

The greatest danger to the Silver Prince, however, comes from the Hungry Stone itself. If forged into a weapon, that weapon literally becomes the nemesis of the Silver Prince and of any ghost or other undead who has passed through its clutches, meaning every single zombie, ghost and other undead thing from the entire Skullstone Archipelago.

FINDING AND USING ISLAND FIVE

Island Five is a secret known only to the Silver Prince and his deathknights. Even if he learns of the Reclamation alliance and is working closely with Leviathan and the other Western powers, he will not reveal the existence of Island Five or the Black Fleet. Instead, all the Deathlord says is that he can provide substantial help for defeating the Realm's Water Fleet and its allies. Nothing will cause the Silver Prince to provide more information, though there are ways to discover it. Capturing and interrogating Ebon Siaka is one way, as is secretly trailing her submarine back to Island Five.

Also, Fallen Wolf of the Cutting Sea (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Abyssals**, pp. 43–44, and **Scroll of Exalts**, pp. 116–117) is an Abyssal Exalt who fled the Silver Prince. The Silver Prince still holds Fallen Wolf's Monstrance of Celestial Portion, so while Fallen Wolf refuses to work for the Deathlord, he is also unwilling

USING THE HUNGRY STONE

Although it's no larger than a walnut, this shimmering nugget of blackness is both the source of much of the Bodhisattva Anointed by Dark Water's power and his greatest weakness. If incorporated into an artifact weapon, then this weapon instantly slays any undead who was created in Skullstone. These attacks ignore all armor, so if the attack gets past the undead's defenses, any blow instantly turns the undead to dust. Naturally, the Silver Prince is immune to this particular effect, but the power of the stone, which is ultimately the power of his Neverborn master, the Perfected Principle of Consumption, is also his bane. If he's struck with a weapon that incorporates the Hungry Stone, halve the soak (round down) of the Silver Prince's armor. Also, all damage done with this weapon is automatically aggravated.

Because of its unique nature, the Hungry Stone is frighteningly easy to craft into a weapon. Incorporating the Hungry Stone into a weapon requires a successful difficulty 5 (Intelligence + Craft [Fire]) roll and 30 hours of work. Charms such as Craftsman Needs No Tools reduce this time by the appropriate amount. When the Hungry Stone is incorporated into a weapon, that weapon functions as if it were made of soulsteel, and characters who are not Abyssal Exalted must either force attunement or forgo any bonuses from the magical materials. The Hungry Stone's special abilities are not considered magical material bonuses.

The Hungry Stone can also be used in a far more direct fashion. The link between the Perfected Principle of Consumption and the Bodhisattva Anointed by Dark Water is such that destroying the Hungry Stone, which is a fragment of the Neverborn's tomb, brings a serious backlash down upon the Silver Prince. The instant the stone is destroyed, the Silver Prince suffers three automatic and unsoakable levels of aggravated damage, as well as being briefly dazed for five ticks (one miscellaneous action). During this time, the Silver Prince can take no actions, and his DV is reduced to 0.

For all its great power, the Hungry Stone is surprisingly vulnerable. It can be damaged only by an artifact weapon or natural weapons empowered by Martial Arts Charms and capable of dealing lethal damage. Yet, three levels of lethal damage by any such means destroys it if it has not been incorporated into an artifact weapon.

to openly betray him. Although Fallen Wolf knows the full truth about Island Five, his fear of the Bodhisattva Anointed by Dark Water's retribution has held his tongue thus far. If characters on either side of this battle for the West learn or at least strongly suspect that the Silver Prince has some type of secret fleet or some other potent weapon, they might be able to get Fallen Wolf to reveal the existence and truth about Island Five. Doing so requires the characters to convince him that the fate of the West rests on learning the Deathlord's secret. Alternatively, rescuing his Monstrance from the Silver Prince earns the characters Fallen Wolf's eternal gratitude, and he tells the characters responsible anything they wish to know about the Silver Prince, while also offering to fight alongside them. Since he was originally tortured into becoming one of the Abyssal Exalted, capturing Fallen Wolf of the Cutting Sea and torturing him will accomplish nothing. He is more than willing to die to keep his secrets and considers anyone who would torture him for information to be no better than the Silver Prince.

Another possible source of information is Moray Darktide, the Dawn Caste who works for the Silver Prince. He's loyal to the Deathlord and to Skullstone, and he knows nothing of Island Five. Yet, he does have suspicions about it and would instantly renounce his loyalty to the Silver Prince if he learned the truth. If anyone could provide him with the slightest evidence of the island's existence, he could help the characters find it. Without proof, he will not personally betray the Silver Prince, but he is willing to distract the Deathlord and all of his deathknights for a day to allow the characters to attempt to find the truth without interference. To accomplish this distraction, Moray Darktide presents a plan for the defense of Skullstone and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the Realm's Water Fleet to the Silver Prince and all of his Abyssal Exalts. During this time, the characters will be relatively free to search for Island Five, but they will need to be the ones to find it.

If told of its existence and true nature, Moray Darktide does everything in his power to convince the populace of Skullstone—living and dead alike—of its existence. At this point, Skullstone will be engulfed in a civil war. A revolution might not destroy the Silver Prince, but at least one of his Abyssals is likely to join the rebellion. As a result, his kingdom would swiftly transform itself from an efficient and prosperous nation with a well-supplied military, to a war-torn land where the entire populace is overwhelmed and distracted by internal concerns. Unfortunately, such a rebellion makes victory by the Reclamation alliance extremely likely.

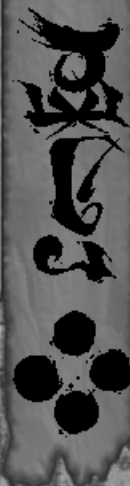
THE BATTLE ON THE EDGE OF DEATH

This section is largely about the players' characters seeing their efforts come to fruition (or perhaps disaster) and allowing them to take an active role in the vast event they have helped set in motion. If the characters have succeeded in their previous challenges, then the victory of their side is a foregone conclusion, but this does not guarantee that any individual, including the players' characters or their closest allies, will live or die. When preparing this story, bear a key factor in mind. While the structure of the battle is determined by the players' characters' success or failure in the preceding scenarios, the characters should have a chance to demonstrate their martial prowess, to keep their allies safe and to slay (or capture) their most dangerous enemies.

This battle is fought within the Skullstone Archipelago, inside a shadowland controlled by the ruthless Silver Prince. After the battle between the Reclamation alliance and its foes ends, if the Reclamation alliance is defeated, the Silver Prince plans to use his remaining First Age fleet to scour the West of life and transform it into a huge shadowland. Therefore, the end of the first battle is only the beginning of the second.

For characters who oppose the Reclamation alliance, defeating the Scarlet Empress and the forces of She Who Lives in Her Name is only the first step to victory. If the players' characters are allies of the Silver Prince, then they must then defeat Leviathan and Creation's other defenders. If the characters are Celestial or Terrestrial Exalts who wish to keep Creation free from the clutches of both Malfeas and the Underworld, then they must fight two terrific battles to save the West.

The first battle is truly vast and marks the first appearance of the Silver Prince's Black Fleet. Characters who have worked closely with the Silver Prince or who have spied on his preparations for war with sufficient care and skill will already be aware of these ships. Otherwise, the fleet will be a great surprise to the Deathlord's enemies and allies alike. If combined with the might of the raksha's Pearl Court, Leviathan and his forces from Luthe, and the characters, the massed alliance will soundly defeat the Reclamation alliance. Yet, the battle will not be swift or easy. Here, soulsteel galleys crewed by the undead fight alongside a Lunar the size of a cachalot as they both battle Second Circle demons, akuma of various types and at least half a dozen Green Sun Princes. This battle is a climactic one in every sense of the word.





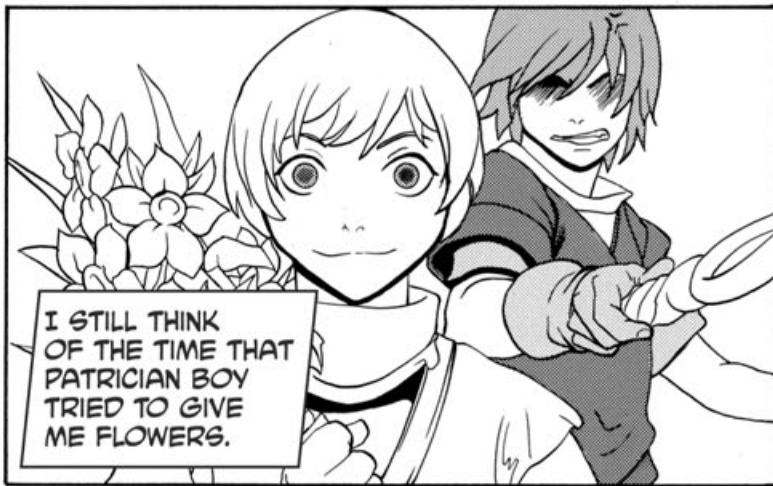
Unless they have destroyed it in a previous encounter, the characters should face the demon vessel *Kimberly's Dawn* (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, pp. 147–149), captained by Dukantha of the Lintha. A circle of Celestial Exalts of any sort should be up to battling this vessel and its captain on their own, and in fact, one or two Green Sun Princes might accompany Dukantha if the players' characters are a circle of sufficient power. If the characters are Terrestrial Exalted, however, they should be accompanied by at least one Celestial ally who can deal with the vessel and its crew, while the characters battle Dukantha.

As the battle rages around them, the characters should also get the chance to see wonders such as Leviathan devouring an entire First Age vessel crewed by Dragon-Blooded akuma and demons, in the midst of a vast sea battle between the Black Fleet and the Water Fleet. Meanwhile, Lintha vessels and the monsters of the deep they summoned battle the Wyld forces of the Pearl Court.

If the Reclamation alliance loses, then the next battle begins less than an hour after the first one ends. As the last of the Realm's First Age ships and Exalted and demonic warriors are destroyed, two thirds of the Silver Prince's fleet disengages from the battle, sails to

Island Five and picks up a new cargo of undead horrors. These new necromantic artifacts include weapons of mephitic desolation, mothers of suffering, nemissaries in transcendent revenant vessels designed for war (use the Yoroï Ogre to represent these) and several hundred meat puppets (see **The Manual of Exalted Power —The Abyssals**, pp. 210–212).

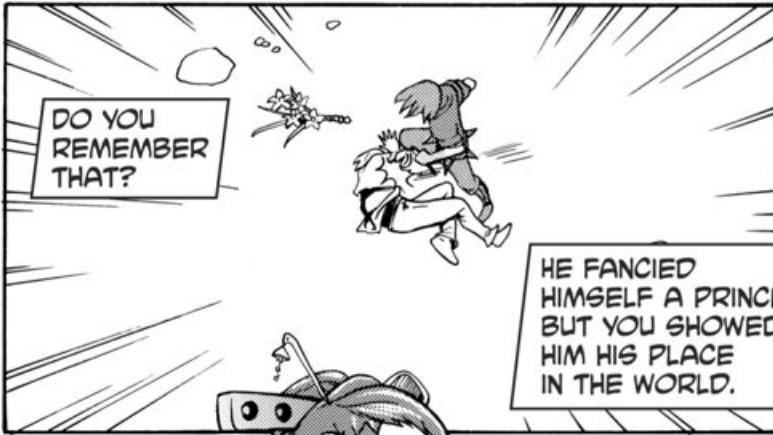
Loading these horrors on board is a swift process, after which this portion of the fleet sails for Coral. The remaining vessels guard Skullstone. The Silver Prince himself also remains behind. Depending upon how many allies the characters have collected and if they have attempted to make certain that the Black Fleet bears the brunt of the attack, the Silver Prince has between 25 and 50 First Age ships once the battle ends. After the battle, Coral's defenses consist of a small force of only 180 Second Age ships of the Water Fleet. The Silver Prince's Black Fleet will destroy them in minutes and then goes on to use a mixture of Essence weaponry against settlements near the shore and the release of various terrible undead constructs to kill as many of the populace as they can further inland. If the characters cannot stop the attack on Coral, then the fleet sets sail for the Neck next and then Wavecrest, where similarly small and easily defeated fleets guard the islands.



I STILL THINK
OF THE TIME THAT
PATRICIAN BOY
TRIED TO GIVE
ME FLOWERS.



I ALWAYS ADMIRER
YOUR CLARITY OF
MIND. EVEN IF I
DIDN'T SHOW IT.



DO YOU
REMEMBER
THAT?

HE FANCIERD
HIMSELF A PRINCE,
BUT YOU SHOWED
HIM HIS PLACE
IN THE WORLD.

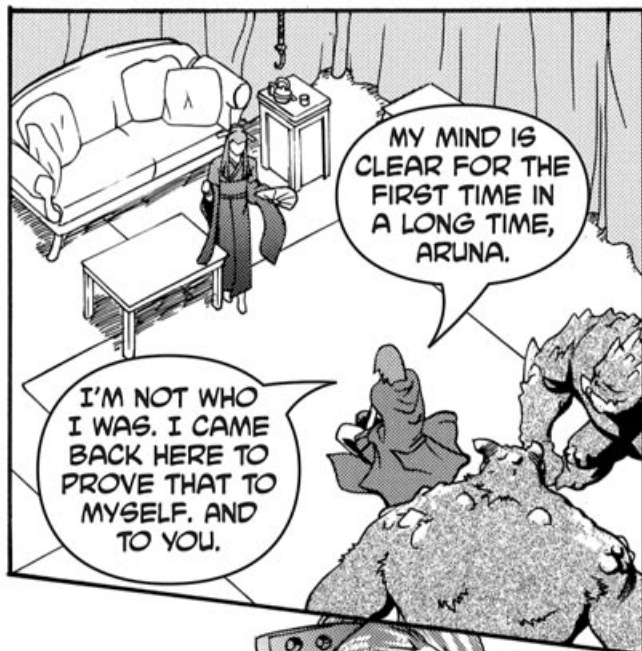


WHAT
HAPPENED
TO YOU,
DROGATH?

HOW DID YOU
END UP ON THE
WRONG SIDE OF
THIS CONFLICT?



WHERE
HAS YOUR
CLARITY
GONE?



MY MIND IS
CLEAR FOR THE
FIRST TIME IN
A LONG TIME,
ARUNA.

I'M NOT WHO
I WAS. I CAME
BACK HERE TO
PROVE THAT TO
MYSELF. AND
TO YOU.



DID YOU?
BECAUSE I SEE THE
SAME IMPETUOUS
FOOL.

FOR INSTANCE,
WHAT DID YOU HOPE
TO GAIN SNEAKING
INTO MY ARMY'S
CAMP?



NOTHING. I JUST
DIDN'T WANT YOU TO
BE ALONE WHEN THE
SHRIKE GETS HERE.

THE
SHRIKE? YOU
DON'T MEAN...



WHAT
HAVE YOU
DONE?

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SOUTHERN FRONT

The Yozi Cecelyne, the Endless Desert, chooses the South as the part of Creation she finds the most convivial. The Southern interior is desert wasteland already, albeit thinly scattered with wadis and oases. The lush coast would seem to oppose her nature and limit her expansion into Creation, but Cecelyne encompasses spiritual desolation as well. The South is a land of absolute and often arbitrary monarchs such as the Despot of Gem. Tribal custom can impose its own destructive tyranny, as with the constant, habitual raiding between the villages of Harborhead. The Guild's caravans cross the South to supply the region's insatiable demand for slaves. Although fields burst with grain and dates, the Endless Desert blows her winds through the souls of callous overseers, greedy merchants, envious brigands and cruel kings alike.

The Scarlet Empress also enjoys a head start in delivering the South to the Yozis, in that five of the six largest states in the South are already satrapies of the Realm. She and her Infernal cronies plot to parlay that influence into dictatorial power. As a Primordial, Cecelyne invented the concept of law; as a Yozi, she perverts law into tyranny. When everyone toils under the threat of the lash and owes each day's water, food and breath to a cruel and capricious master, the Endless Desert can fill the South from the Elemental Pole of Fire to the Inland Sea.

THE GOALS OF THE SOUTHERN CONFLICT

The Empress and Green Sun Princes can achieve most of their goals in the South without war... as long

IMPORTANT REFERENCE

This chapter assumes that Storytellers already know the South of Creation in some detail. It refers many times to information in **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV—The South**. Storytellers who want to bring their series into the South are encouraged to review that supplement.

as no one figures out their master plan. In Act One, the Empress begins with a low-key purge of satraps, their assistants and other Realm officials in the South. Some, she can replace by fiat. Others, she must disgrace or assassinate due to their potent family connections. The Empress does not risk turning the Great Houses of her descendents against her, as she is not yet sure of the grip of her Dynastic Charms.

The Empress's loyal agents then work to subvert Southern nations—weakening those less deferential to the Realm and maneuvering them into greater dependence. Her conspirators manufacture scandals,

coups and panics, bribe local and national leaders, and transfer the organs of government, commerce and war to Realm hands.

The scenarios in Act One are developed in greater detail than the ones that follow, in order to give Storytellers fuller examples of how to create scenes and structure plots based on deception and misdirection.

In Act Two, war begins—but war against the barbarians of the deep desert, whom other servants of Hell have roused against the civilized coast. This and other emergencies give satraps their excuses to consolidate the Realm's grip on the South. Realm spies now work willingly with demon cults to bring down any remaining leaders who defy the Realm.

Yet, the Empress's plan goes wrong. The South holds its own cunning masterminds. They see the hidden plan behind events, launch their own counterplots and seek allies for the struggle to come.

In Act Three, the servants of Hell move openly to make the South a desolate wasteland fit for Cecelyne. Entire cities become concentration camps, vast armies mobilize to crush anyone who resisted subversion, and tyranny reigns supreme. Unless Creation's defenders can hand the Realm and its puppets a stinging defeat,



hope is lost, and Cecelyne is free in Creation. Can this be done, however, without submitting to powers as dark and dreadful as the Yozis themselves?

STATUS OF FORCES

Here is where the Realm stands in the six great nations of the South, and the Empress's evaluation of what must be done:

Gem offers only token submission to the Realm, but it is too far away to become a center of resistance. It is also a place of physical and spiritual desolation—surrounded by desert and volcanic wastes, wracked with greed and ruled by an arbitrary Despot. It needs only a nudge to fall to Cecelyne.

The Lap is already under the Realm's total control. The Empress needs only to force its three co-satraps to stop sabotaging each other and do what they're told. Her main challenge is to find a way to rouse the immense powers of the Penitent and place them at Hell's disposal.

Paragon is a tough nut to crack. The people are absolutely loyal and obedient to their laws and their ruler. To control Paragon, Hell's minions must control the Perfect (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV—The South**, pp. 153–154). That is easier said than done, however, even for the Infernal Exalted.

Chiaroscuro must be brought to heel. Only now does the Empress realize just how cunningly and completely the Delzahn have avoided the Realm's control. The Empress tries to subvert the South's trade hub but soon finds that she has bitten off more than she can chew.

Varangia is strong, but brittle. Its submission to the Realm means little because of its isolationism and its stubborn adherence to its odd astrological customs. The right attack, however, could turn its law-abiding people to the laws of Cecelyne.

Harborhead is a mess, but exploitable. Its people hate the Realm and fervently cling to the worship of Ahlat, but they are utterly disorganized. The native government already relies on the Realm garrison just to function. The Empress needs the wealth of Harborhead's jade to finance her campaign of subversion. The challenge is to keep Harborhead from exploding until the rest of the South is won. Then the Endless Desert can quench its Peoples' rebellious and warlike ways.

ACT ONE:

A GRIP AS SOFT AS SAND

At first, the Empress avoids open displays of power in the South. Her campaign emphasizes espionage

and political subversion. Her satraps place greater pressure on native governments and do not hesitate to use Social Charms on local authorities. The All-Seeing Eye weakens opposition through blackmail, assassination and other dirty tricks, and jade from the Bent Creek mines in Harborhead (now firmly held by an Imperial garrison) provides limitless wealth to buy native collaborators.

Meanwhile, the South's Green Sun Princes, akuma and other servants of Hell provide a ready haven for people who hate the Realm. The South holds a number of well-established demon cults already—most notably the Cult of the Darkness' Unseeing Eye, belonging to the Second Circle demon Sondok. Hell's agents set up additional cults to attract the angry and disaffected, from poor and hungry slum dwellers to nobles upset at their loss of influence.


In this phase of the Southern Reclamation effort, scenarios should emphasize political intrigue, social combat, mystery and deception. Open battles are usually against fall guys propped up as distractions or enemies whom the infernal conspirators want destroyed. Hell's minions particularly want to make sure that Southern mortals do not turn to the region's Deathlords, Fair Folk, Celestial Exalted or other beings of power.

Creation's defenders can fight Creation's true enemies only if they seek the hidden hands that manipulate events. Conversely, Green Sun Prince and akuma characters face the challenge of masterminding the various local conspiracies: finding the right people to bribe, deceive, threaten or murder, plotting their own double-crosses and covering their tracks.

THE SALMALIN DECEPTION

Fear provides one of the swiftest and surest routes to tyranny and misrule—especially when it bends hatred, greed and other passions to its service. The servants of Hell know that fear can destroy the existing social order and replace it with something more pleasing to Cecelyne.

No one could accuse the sprawling, multi-tribal kingdom of Harborhead of being well governed. For centuries, though, Harborheadites have resisted the Realm's attempts to change their customs and culture. They reject the Immaculate Order for the martial faith of Ahlat, they reject professional bureaucracy for clan elders and tradition, and they fight each other *constantly*. A coven of Hell's minions, though, believes it can crack Harborhead's stubborn resistance through fear: a witch hunt that destroys faith in traditional leaders and enables the Realm to take over Harborhead's government.



Chief among the conspirators is the powerful akuma called the Blood Queen (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, pp. 55–56). This former Bride of Ahlat feels a special hatred for her onetime sisters, knows her nation inside and out, and has become a leader in the powerful, far-flung demon cult called the Salmalin. She is well placed to use the Salmalin as the terror that drives the Harborheadites to accept the Realm... and the Yozi.

The chief officers of the Realm's garrison in Harborhead, the satrap Cathak Voper and Imperial general Cathak Lazera, are *not* part of the conspiracy. At all times, these two Exalted believe they act for the good of their House, the Realm and even the Harborheadites—taking up the Dynast's burden to civilize the savages. The powerful but subtle influence of the Scarlet Empress twists their thinking, however, so they always make the choice that advances the Reclamation plan. Other members of the Realm garrison know about the plot. Either they are zealous, ambitious or greedy enough to work with Yozi cultists, or they serve the Yozi already.

CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT

The players' characters need to be in Kirighast. They also need some reason to care about assassinations by crazed demon cultists. Exalted who already hunt demons and demon worshipers can obviously dive right into the scenario. (For instance, the Bureau of Destiny might send Sidereal agents at the first hint of demonic activity.) The same goes for Harborheadite characters, who have good reason to care about systematic attacks on their nation. If none of these positions apply to the players' characters, they might need some other reason to hunt the Salmalin terrorists.

- The Salmalin attack a government official, merchant, priest or other prominent Harborheadite whom the characters regard as an ally, or at least a potential ally. For instance, they could be Solars who rescued a war aurochs of Ahlat might be guests at the Fane of the Upswept Horns when the Salmalin try to murder a much-revered priest. Alternatively, they might make up a sworn brotherhood of outcaste Terrestrials seeking government recognition of their rights to a small jade mine they wrested from mountain barbarians and their Lunar warlord.

- A mentor to one or more of the players' characters sends them into Kirighast for some other reason, and they must deal with the Salmalin as part of their original mission. For instance, the Silver Pact might

send Lunars to scout Harborhead for a Thousand Streams River program of social engineering, or Abysals might be in the nation to set up an ancestor cult their Deathlord master can exploit.

- Combining these two approaches, someone in the Harborhead government (or the country's Realm garrison) might have hired the characters for some special task. For instance, the rabble-rousing Shayanti leader Yasurbo (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV—The South**, p. 155) might hire a group with "unusual abilities" to sabotage his political rivals—and then, cultists murder Yasurbo.

These story hooks assume the players' characters are Exalted and want to stop the killings. A Storyteller could also run the scenario from the other side, with the characters as Infernals or other Yozi servants who oversee the plan at the behest of their dread masters. They must cope with interference from pesky Celestial Exalted or from Dragon-Blooded who aren't in on the plan or subject to the Empress's hidden dynastic influence.

THE SALMALIN

Only a few genuine Salmalin cultists are at work in Kirighast. They do their best to stay behind the scenes, though cunning and determined Exalted can track them down. The cultists who attack Harborheadite leaders are mere dupes: local people whom the real Salmalin (and perhaps some Green Sun Prince or akuma allies) brainwashed into becoming assassins. The killers believe they joined the real Salmalin cult, but their masters expect to send them all to their deaths.

Cult assassins are mortal extras. Treat them as regular troops (see **Exalted**, p. 279) but with Conviction of 5. In addition to knives, they wear harnesses strung with standard firedust grenades. They can detonate all the grenades at once by pulling a string, and the blast equals that of a petard. (See **Scroll of Kings**, p. 135, for both types of incendiary device.) Pulling the string is only a Speed 4 action, though. Cultists try to get as close to their victims as possible before detonating a vest, in hopes of inflicting the full damage, but two or three cultists blowing up at once stand a very good chance of killing a mortal. The cultists automatically take full damage, rendering them quite dead... which is why their leaders don't just hand them a petard to throw. Dead men can't be captured and interrogated, and mere bomb throwers don't inspire as much panic as fanatics willing to blow themselves up.

LIGHT THE FIRE

The Storyteller should arrange for at least one player's character to be present at the first assassination. The scene should be public, such as a marketplace or law court, with lots of people around. It should be difficult, however, for more than one player's character to respond immediately to the attack. Suddenly, three Harborheadites draw tiger claws from their sashes or under their cloaks and lunge at their target. At the same time, archers pop up on the roofs of nearby buildings or from around corners to shoot any bodyguards the target might have. Then, they run. Play out the scene with full dice rolls for unexpected attacks, possible damage and the reactions of the target character, any bodyguards and the player's character. Everyone can see that the killers wear some sort of flasks or bottles on a chest harness.

Enough people are in the way that the character cannot reach all the assassins, even with a flurry. Three mortals are no match for one Exalt, though, and the fight will be short. The last assassin standing screams, "Death for the glory of Sondok! Salmalin supreme!" and pulls the string on his suicide vest. Any fallen assassins are in the area, and the blast of fire sets off their suicide vests as well. Exalted characters likely come out singed but conscious, but several mortals die in the blast. Whether the assassins' target survived likely depends on whether the player's character thought it was more important to defeat the cultists or to move the target to safety.

AFTERMATH

The players' characters soon learn that two other assassinations happened in Kirighast that day. At one, the assassins got away cleanly; at the other, two got away and one blew herself up to kill her target. Both groups proclaimed themselves Salmalin.

Characters who examine the seared bodies of the assassins find that the suicide harnesses were made of dark red leather. Each assassin wore an item of red or black silk and a necklace of dried tree roots and a wolf's ear. Their mouths held dried red mushrooms—possibly the toxic mushroom supposedly left by Sondok's footsteps in Creation. If they hadn't died otherwise, the assassins might have swallowed the mushrooms to kill themselves. Just having the mushrooms in their mouths likely put the assassins in a semi-delirious state in which they knew no pain or fear. All in all, the killers certainly look like Sondok worshipers.

Only supernatural means of detection have any chance to trace the killers' identities. The trail leads

to Kirighast's immense shantytown slum. The assassins were day laborers and petty criminals who dropped out of sight from their families and associates more than a month ago.

All of Kirighast talks about the attacks, and the tales grow wilder through retelling. All the characteristic symbols of Sondok-worship—red and black leather and silk, jewelry of gold and garnets, dried tree roots and wolf ears, the red mushrooms and a scruffy or bedraggled small brown dog—are widely repeated. At the Fane of the Upswept Horns, priests remind the Harborheadites that Sondok is a vile and lying demon and that their hope and strength comes from Ahlat. By popular demand, the bodies of the killers are exorcised and burned at the Fane, and the ashes are scattered with many curses from the priests. Someone in the crowd hurls a petard at the officiating priests. It misses, but many priests and Brides of Ahlat suffer severe burns. The crowd riots. Dozens of people die in the scrum—including the cultist presumed to have thrown the bomb. The Harborheadites tear him apart with their bare hands.

BURNING BEYOND CONTROL

In the days and weeks that follow, crazed Salmalin assassins commit additional murders. Half of them target obvious community leaders, as well as Capital Army patrol groups and their barracks. The other attacks seem completely senseless, targeting shops, bazaar stalls, shrines of minor local gods or simply clusters of people in the street.

Fear and anger rip through the city, and swiftly find outlets. An old woman has a small brown dog as a pet, and someone thinks they see tree roots in her hut: A crowd burns the hut, with her inside it. Reddish mushrooms grow in the dung heap behind a stable: The hostler and his family must flee for their lives.

Harborhead's monarch, the Leopard Seat, notes any known Exalted in Kirighast and invites them to the palace. (Tactfully, Celestial Exalted are invited on different days than Dragon-Blooded.) The Leopard, Oshom Kurgaz, is as frightened as anyone (though palace residents can point out that this is a perpetual condition long predating the current crisis). He asks any Terrestrial Exalted to assist the Realm garrison and the Brides of Ahlat, as needed, in rooting out the Salmalin. As free agents, the characters might also try to prevent the garrison and the Brides from battling each other instead of the cultists. Regardless, their highly visible and officially sanctioned presence will lend credibility to the government action, calming

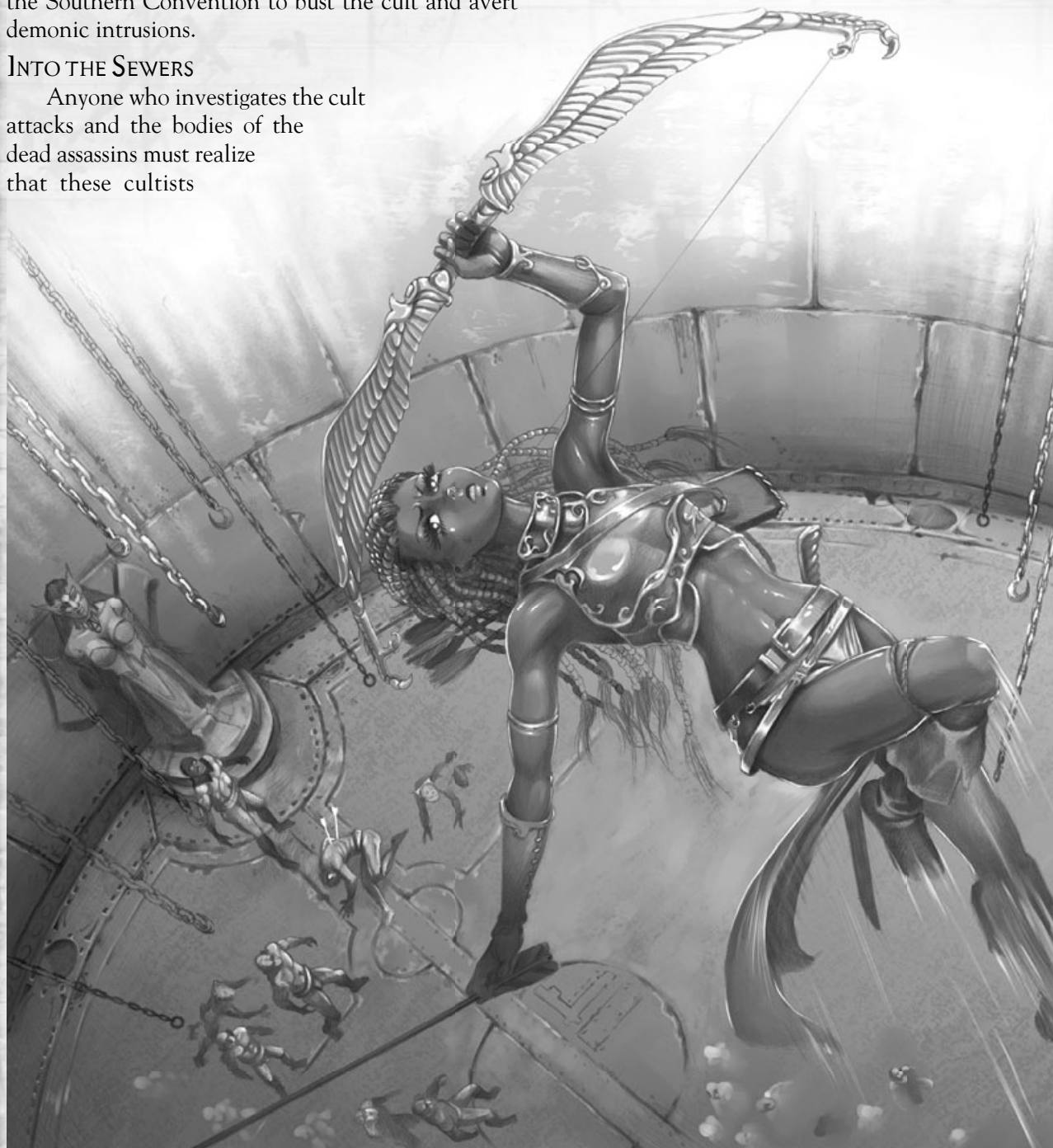
the populace. The king's chamberlain, Lakwena Oson, similarly asks Celestial Exalted to act as the Leopard Seat's agents—but undercover, to avoid provoking the Realm through open dealings with Anathema. Any Exalted heroes, however, are promised rich rewards and the friendship of the Leopard Seat.

Characters who hide their Exalted nature receive no such invitation, but the murder of people close to them should provide motivation enough to hunt the cult. Sidereal Exalted receive a direct command from the Southern Convention to bust the cult and avert demonic intrusions.

INTO THE SEWERS

Anyone who investigates the cult attacks and the bodies of the dead assassins must realize that these cultists

are throwaway mooks, drugged and brainwashed. To bust the Salmalin, the characters must find its leaders. For Exalted with any Charms dealing with investigation or influencing minds, this effort is almost trivial. The characters just need to take a few cultists alive. Exalted who can work openly with the Capital Army don't even need to capture the cultists themselves. The army's patrols tend to kill any assassin who doesn't escape or swallow his toxic mushroom, but each day's training and Essence-enhanced motivational



speaking results in another squad that knows to take cultists alive. Alternatively, characters who are good at sneaking can follow escaping cultists after an attack and find their headquarters. Storytellers should encourage players to devise their own plan. (Sidereals, of course, can simply use their Charms to pull information from the Loom of Fate.)

One way or another, characters can learn about a Salmalin shrine in the ancient First Age sewers beneath Kirighast's Old City. Here, interrogated cultists say, they were drugged, harangued and otherwise forcefully converted to the worship of Sondok.

Finding their way through the ancient tunnels is, again, no challenge for Exalted. They encounter a few trifling traps as they approach the shrine—dropfalls of firedust grenades or blades poisoned with coral snake venom (see **Scroll of Kings**, pp. 135 and 156).

The shrine itself is a round chamber about 15 yards high and 10 yards wide (likely a cistern in the First Age). The tunnel enters near the top of the chamber. A ladder leads down, with a block and tackle nearby to lower unconscious people scheduled for brainwashing. Another tunnel leaves the bottom of the chamber.

A large, painted wood statue of Sondok dominates the room. Bowls of fire leave the room hot, smoky and stifling. Two burly men in loincloths toy with their whips as they watch a dozen naked men and women prostrate themselves before the statue and chant, "Kill for the glory of Sondok, Salmalin supreme," over and over. If anyone breaks the chant, an overseer whips him.

Any disturbance brings a Salmalin priest from the lower tunnel, along with two bisclavarets (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas**, p. 141–143). The players' characters should have no trouble realizing the newcomer is a demon priest because he wears a black silk hooded cape and a red leather bondage-mask, as well as a fancy gold and garnet belt and a red and black loincloth. He carries a scepter that looks like a brass-plated tree root set with more garnets, as well as a nasty curving knife smeared with red paste. Naturally, he orders the demons to kill the intruders for the glory of Sondok—Salmalin supreme! The demons attack, as do the two overseers. (Treat them as elite soldiers, as per **Exalted**, p. 280. They carry chopping swords as well as whips.)

The priest also joins the fray if he can. He is merely a thaumaturge (see **Exalted**, pp. 280–281) with a few rituals from the Art of Demon Summoning, none of which he can use in these circumstances. He channels Willpower through his Conviction of 4 with every at-

tack, though, and his knife is smeared with Sondok's mushroom poison (Damage 9L/action, Toxicity 5, Tolerance —/—, Penalty -5). His tree-root scepter has no power except as a token of authority over the cult's servant demons.

Whether the characters take the priest alive or not, they can identify him afterward as Kodo Fajoor—one of the Lesser Drums (lower-tier members of Harborhead's government) and the nephew of an actual Drum (royal advisor). Checking his home turns up more Salmalin paraphernalia. His favorite wife is also a cultist.

WITCH HUNT


Unless characters are careful, the news that a government minister was a Salmalin cult leader hits Kirighast like a petard. Several assassinations now make sense as attacks on enemies of Fajoor or his uncle. Another Drum challenges the uncle to a duel and kills him. Within days, accusations of Salmalin allegiance fly between rival tribal leaders, government officials, merchants and army officers. When a rioting mob (no one's sure how it began) storms into a merchant's home and finds tree roots, red silk and a dried mushroom, her protests of innocence are in vain and the mob kills her. Soon, no one is above suspicion. For their part in exposing Kodo Fajoor, the characters receive many requests from highly placed Harborheadites to find other highly placed Harborheadites guilty of Salmalin involvement. Only the Leopard genuinely seems to want to learn who is innocent and trustworthy.

Almost as quickly, men and women appear who claim to be witch finders—thaumaturges who can detect demon worshipers. Some say they can smell the infernal taint. Others use various divination techniques such as casting bones, watching the movements of a beetle in a glass jar or interpreting the dreams of local children. Needless to say, they are all frauds.

Shrewd characters who investigate these witch finders easily discover that some of them are genuine Salmalin agents. These witch finders simply accuse people and use sleight of hand to produce evidence, such as pulling a small garnet or a tuft of dog hair from a victim's clothing. The cultist witch finders don't make it easy by keeping Sondok icons or cult daggers hidden in their homes. Once a week, though, little message-demons visit them with lists of people to condemn. (The other witch finders are just unscrupulous people who figured out they could make money by accusing people of demon worship.)

Even the Brides of Ahlat are not immune to the hysteria. A witch finder publicly accuses one Bride in





a street patrol of being Salmalin. He points out that she wears Sondok's colors, red and black. (Never mind that those are Ahlat's colors too.) He points to a garnet adorning a brooch. Enraged, the Bride screams and tries to kill the witch finder with her spear. Mistaking her reaction for guilt, her sisters turn on her. She escapes after killing two of them. In the week to come, other Brides of Ahlat attack their sisters or the priests of their god. Harborhead's most sacred institution stands revealed as compromised.

AN INCIDENT OF GREAT IMPORTANCE

Characters who scrutinize the Bride of Ahlat incident and apply Charms such as Evidence-Discerning Method have a chance to jump straight to the heart of the Infernal plot—because the testimony of the witnesses doesn't add up. First, there's no way a cheapjack charlatan witch finder could *not* be killed by an angry Bride of Ahlat. Second, a determined attempt to trace the movements of the traitor Bride over the last few days reveals her corpse, hidden beneath a garbage heap in Kirighast's slum. The Bride who confronted the witch hunter was an imposter.

In fact, the various renegade Brides are all actually the Blood Queen, disguising herself with a magical mask (see *Exalted*, p. 381). She kills lone Brides and takes their place—an easy impersonation, since the Blood Queen was once a Bride of Ahlat herself, though she is now one of the Salmalin's top leaders.

The witch finder, one Mattan Othieno, is the other prime mover of the plot. He is, in fact, an Infernal Exalt, one of Cecelyne's Malefactors. Othieno's become both famous and feared for the Harborheadites he's exposed as Salmalin. The Blood Queen is difficult to find, but everyone knows where Othieno lives since he's installed himself in the villa of a merchant he condemned to death.

THE SALMALIN SEMINARY

The Salmalin priests lure, brainwash and train Kirighast's poor folk as suicide attackers, but who recruits and trains the priests? Any attempt to trace their past with the cult runs into the priests' Motivation to

serve Sondok and the cult—which includes keeping the cult's secrets. Nevertheless, investigative Charms and liberal use of unnatural mental influence can force the truth from them.

The decoy priests joined the cult for many reasons, ranging from revenge on enemies to help with financial problems. Once they were hooked, they were taken to a villa several miles from Kirighast. There, Salmalin trainers turned them into skilled fanatics. (The priests recount liberal use of supernaturally enhanced charisma as well as the sort of brainwashing techniques the priests use on their own recruits.) Along with fearful reverence for Sondok, they learned to hate the Realm and renounced Ahlat. (Harborhead's divine patron clearly wasn't willing or able to drive out the Realm, but Sondok was.) All the Salmalin trainers answered to a masked Harborheadite woman who seemed nearly as glorious and terrible as Sondok herself.

The priests' tales guide characters to a derelict villa in the remains of a village that the 47th Legion destroyed during Harborhead's last rebellion. They find the cult seminary abandoned, though... except for a single erymanthus who lurks as an immaterial sentry. While the characters poke about, confirming that this was indeed the place, the demon materializes and triggers hidden mechanisms that collapse the entire building on them. The falling beams, tiles and masonry deal an Accuracy 10, Damage 12B attack on everyone inside the villa.

The characters do learn one thing from the wrecked seminary. The Salmalin did not invest much in this training camp. While they slew more than a dozen people as offerings to Sondok, they summoned their demon patron only a few times, at most. The villa does not have the deep stain of corruption that characterizes the Essence of an established demonic temple.

THE SALMALIN STRIKE BACK!

The Salmalin do not leave the characters idle while the witch hunt rips through Kirighast. The cult counterattacks in apparent revenge for the loss of Fajoor.

- The characters most likely rent a house in Kirighast or stay with a friend (and not in the royal palace or the Realm's garrison district). Cultists burn it down while the characters sleep. The smoke and noise will rouse at least one of them—roll (Perception + Awareness), difficulty 3, for sleepers—so nobody dies, but it certainly gives the hunt a personal edge.

- Salmalin archers lurk on rooftops in areas the characters frequent, hoping to snipe at them with poisoned arrows.

- A small pack of demons attacks the characters. The Salmalin prefer the stealthy bisclavarets or the strong but unsubtle erymanthoi.

- When all this doesn't work, cultists kidnap people close to the characters and send an ultimatum: Show up at a certain time and place, alone, to surrender their artifacts to the cult or the hostages die. ("P.S., this is a trap," remains unstated.) The cult fields one demon, two cultist assassins with suicide harnesses and one archer-sniper for every character, led by another thaumaturge-priest similar to Fajoor.

All this activity is quite incidental to the Salmalin's plan. The Blood Queen and the Green Sun Prince just want to keep the characters busy chasing murderous, nihilistic, throwaway cultists instead of paying attention to the systematic destruction of Kirighast society. The characters can even break up a few more shrines (one in the slums, one in a moderately prominent Harborheadite's home). It's all distraction.

A MISSION FROM GOD

It might not seem like it, but Ahlat pays close attention to events in Harborhead. After all, the nation gives him much of his worship. He objects, deeply, to demon cultists murdering his Brides and soiling their reputation. Ahlat does not intervene through a theophany, though, because he suspects the whole plan might be meant to draw him into a trap. Ahlat played an important role in the conspiracy to overthrow the Primordials, and he suspects the Yozis want to visit a special revenge upon him. (And he could be right. At the Storyteller's option, there might be whole hordes of demons and real Salmalin assassins just waiting for the Southern God of War and Cattle to show himself.)

So Ahlat works through operatives. He appears to characters in their dreams to demand their help (though with suitably godlike rewards for success) and take their reports. He might even join the characters in a scheme to expose any plot against him. Perhaps one of Ahlat's war aurochs (see *The Compass of Terrestrial Directions*, Vol. IV—The South, pp. 147–148) poses as Ahlat himself to draw infernal assassins out of hiding—and then the characters, other war aurochs and Ahlat himself spring a counter-ambush to destroy them.

THE SATRAP TAKES COMMAND

The Salmalin witch hunt mostly bypasses the Realm's garrison compound. Excited Harborheadites sometimes accuse Realm expatriates of being Salmalin, but nothing comes of this. The witch finders leave the garrison alone.


As accusations mount against government officials and the army that patrols Kirighast, Oshom Kurgaz finds he cannot keep order in his own capital. He turns to the Realm garrison. Within short order, legionnaires take command of street patrols. The Capital Army becomes indeed a mere auxiliary to the 47th Legion. No Harborheadite soldier acts without a Realm soldier to command him. Equally without protest, Realm bureaucrats from the garrison assume leadership of Harborhead's rudimentary civil service, displacing the Lesser Drums. Satrap Voper makes a Charm-enhanced speech before the royal palace. His pledge to restore order and root out the Salmalin once and for all does much to reassure the populace. He and General Lazera quickly devise a plan to search the entire city for Salmalin shrines and cultists, starting with the Capital Amy and government, and working down to the slums. Oshom Kurgaz and his council praise the new emergency measures and order a day of celebration and thanks to Harborhead's good and powerful friend, the Scarlet Empire.

This is the point when Harborhead—or at least its capital—falls to the Infernal conspirators, unless someone can discover the truth. While the characters fought demons, the Salmalin covertly engaged in social mass combat (see *Exalted*, p. 175). The witch hunt has drained the Leopard Seat, the Capital Army and other social units of their Loyalty and effective Magnitude until desperate leaders turned to the Realm garrison for help. Cathak Voper and Cathak Lazera then start building new Intimacies favorable to the Realm and changing the Policies of local institutions.

THE HIDDEN HANDS

The Blood Queen and the Malefactor using the name Mattan Othieno are powerful and cunning, but characters can find them and stop them.

Othieno is the easier of the two to find, as he made himself a public figure during the witch hunt. Represent him using Bitter Copal (see *Scroll of Exalts*, pp. 140–141), with Larceny 4, Occult 3 and a two-dot Performance specialty in Social Mass Combat. In addition to his own Charms and twin short daiklaves envenomed with Sondok's mushrooms, he knows Emerald Circle Infernal Sorcery, with the spells Death of Brass Wasps (a tainted version of Death of



Obsidian Butterflies), Slave-Spawn Summons, Emerald Countermagic and Infallible Messenger (which sends a demonic imp rather than a cherub). Othieno wears a perronele as armor (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**, pp. 85–86). The malleable demon normally hides beneath Othieno's robe when it isn't needed for defense. Three tinsiana (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas**, pp. 150–151) follow him around immaterially, while another trio guards his villa.

The incident with the treacherous Bride of Ahlat is only one clue that could arouse suspicion against Othieno. Investigations keep leading to the false thaumaturge. Othieno gave the accusation that spread the witch hunt to the Capital Army. Othieno spoke to the merchant who first leveled a false accusation against a personal enemy. Othieno gave a government official the idea of confiscating the property of Salmalin (with a kickback to the witch hunter), making sure that every accusation leads to immediate condemnation. The witch hunter covers his tracks well and leaves his pawns thinking their actions were their own ideas. Finding Othieno's influence is always difficulty 5 on rolls for interrogation or investigation, and truth-forcing Charms don't help unless they jog memory too. Nevertheless, determined inquiry finds Othieno throughout the hysteria, pushing it to greater heights.

The simplest way to expose Othieno is to confront him in public and force him to fight for his life. His tinsiana bodyguards manifest, the perronele covers him and the jig is up. Othieno's villa also contains paraphernalia for summoning demons and a trio of demons, though no Salmalin gear. Characters need additional trusted witnesses for a villa raid to destroy Othieno's reputation.

The Blood Queen is more difficult, as she disguises herself with magic and can operate virtually anywhere in Kirighast. Clever characters might deduce her overwhelming hatred of the Brides of Ahlat, though, and that she can best attack the organization by hiding in the middle of it. Once the Blood Queen suspects that Creation's defenders seek her among the Brides, she murders and replaces one of the three Bride commandants. From this position, she easily sets up the characters to seem to commit some blasphemy or insult that justifies ordering hundreds of Brides to attack them. While the characters fight for their lives, the Blood Queen goes after the other two commandants. If the characters cannot fight their way free and catch

up to her in time, she goes on to kill Ahlat's high priest as well. The Blood Queen sets fire to the Fane of the Upswept Horns. As shocked Harborheadites rush to the chief temple of their god, the Blood Queen shows herself on the Fane's roof—still disguised as the commandant—and throws down the severed heads of her victims. She shrieks her renunciation of Ahlat for the glory of Sondok and Malfeas, before an agata swoops in to carry her away. Public faith in the Brides of Ahlat suffers a grievous blow... and perhaps worse, the Brides of Ahlat lose faith in their own leadership and devotion.

The Blood Queen is a truly powerful akuma. You can represent her using the traits of Kajeha Lef (see **Scroll of Exalts**, pp. 40–41). Instead of Lunar Charms, though, she has a selection of spirit Charms and Infernal Charms from her Yozi patron, Malfeas.

AVERTING HARBORHEAD'S FALL

Characters can derail the infernal plot against Harborhead by exposing Mattan Othieno and the Blood Queen before they damage the capital's society too badly. The Realm's garrison still asserts itself in helping the monarchy restore order, but it does not gain nearly as much influence.

The cult of Ahlat likely gains even more strength from the damage to civil society. This is especially true if characters work with Ahlat to lure the akuma and the Green Sun Prince from hiding. (Even if there is no infernal plot against Ahlat himself, the Blood Queen cannot resist a chance to attack the god she feels betrayed her.) Once Ahlat and the characters crush the two conspirators and whatever demon horde they brought to the fight, the God of War and Cattle leads his retinue of war aurochs in a sweep through Kirighast, destroying every cult stronghold in a messy, terrifying display of divine wrath.

If the conspiracy succeeds and the Realm's garrison takes complete control of Harborhead's government, characters can break the Empress's grip only by taking over Harborhead themselves. They must certainly battle the 47th Legion and more than a dozen Dragon-Blooded of varying experience, including the formidable Cathak Lazera (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV—The South**, pp. 151–152). They must also engage in Charm-enhanced social combat and mass combat to bend Harborhead's remaining leaders and institutions to their will. Solars and Lunars likely can do this with greater ease, but Dragon-Blooded, Sidereals and even Abyssals can likely manage the task. All but the Abyssals might even manage to gain the backing of Ahlat.

All the pulling back and forth, however, completely wrecks Harborhead society. For years to come, the characters can hold Harborhead together only through main force, Charms and their own cult of personality. They can turn the warlike nation into an awesome fighting force to wield against the Realm... but only at the cost of increasing the Harborheadites' dependency upon them.

THE AKUMA WHO LOVED ME

As the servants of Hell tighten their grip on the South, they want to keep an eye on Creation's defenders. If they can dupe heroes into quashing other potential foes of the Reclamation, so much the better. A few of Hell's minions, therefore, are assigned to get close to Exalted heroes and exploit them. Even if these champions cannot be recruited, they can at least be steered away from genuine Reclamation activities. The Empress and her cadre would also like a better idea of their opponents' capabilities, and maybe a chance to plant a little disinformation.

CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT

This scenario assumes the players' characters are Exalted defenders of Creation who encounter an akuma. Storytellers can tweak the scenario for different characters, though. For instance, the akuma could be an Infernal Exalt instead. (She could even be a player's character.) Going in another direction, the akuma could try to manipulate Abyssals, Fair Folk or other powerful characters that might not love Creation but would still not like to see the Yozis released. The scenario also works for heroic mortal characters: Just dial down the akuma's power accordingly.

The scenario also assumes a female akuma who targets a male character as her special victim. It works for other gender combinations, as long as the characters are sexually compatible. Just adjust the pronouns accordingly. The femme fatale is a classic trope, but so is the gorgeous hunk who turns out to be an utter cad.

The akuma's first challenge is to attach herself to the players' characters in a way that doesn't arouse too much suspicion. Being rescued is one way. For instance, the players' characters encounter a beautiful woman being chased by demons, the characters kill the demons, and the akuma then tells her story. Or she can provide the rescue. Demons, bandits, Immaculate monks or other foes beset the characters, and the akuma charges in to help them. Many variations are possible. It's okay if the scene is obviously contrived to push the characters together. As Storyteller, try to make it look like *you*, rather than the akuma herself, contrived the scene.



THE AKUMA

She calls herself Raia (or Raios, for a male akuma), and she is both Dragon-Blooded and akuma, though she admits only to the first part. Raia claims that she comes from Rawar, the port town that services the Lap. She Exalted at age 13. People who said they were from the Realm took her from her parents, but rather than the Blessed Isle, they delivered her to an island held by a sinister cult, the Calligraphers of Falling Dew. The cult trained her in battle, Charm use and worship of the demon Iyutha, the Vitriolic Dragon (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas**, pp. 128–129).

Raia describes a training regimen that included bathing in seawater tainted with strange salts, vinegar and bile, and she even bears the symbol of Iyutha burned into her back with powerful acid. After she pledged herself to Iyutha and its Yozi progenitor, Kimberly, her anima changed, and she learned new Charms that shaped Essence in different ways. Raia served the cult until its leaders demanded that she kill her own parents as an ultimate and irreversible pledge of fealty to Iyutha. She tried to save her parents but failed and fled for her life. Since then, she has hunted demons and been hunted by the Calligraphers of Falling Dew. She has met Dynasts, but they reviled and attacked her. Raia pleads with the characters to let her prove that she has reformed by leading them to the Calligraphers' island stronghold to destroy the evil cult!

Part of Raia's story is true. She really is a lost egg, born and Exalted in Port Rawar. There really are Calligraphers of Falling Dew who worship the Vitriolic Dragon. That cult, however, did not train Raia. When she encountered the Second Circle demon Lucien (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**, pp. 64–65), she bought her life at the cost of her soul and became akuma. Raia believes her story, though, because Lucien's progenitor, Cecelyne, commands it. At the proper time, Cecelyne will permit Raia to remember the truth and turn against the ones she seduces.

And seduce she does. Raia insists that her contact with Iyutha has cursed her with urges to do evil things that degrade her and harm others. She can resist this curse for a time, but eventually, it overpowers her with a bestial compulsion to rut... and mere mortals seldom survive the experience, even if her anima doesn't flare in the heat of passion. Sex relieves the curse's building tension, but only for a little while. Admitting this shames Raia, so she propositions a

man who seems both empathetic and hardy. (That is, she seeks someone possessing high Compassion and high Stamina, with high Appearance a bonus. Raia also prefers a low Temperance or low Conviction.) A character who takes Raia as a lover is in for lots of rough, brain-melting marathon sex.

Physically, Raia is a beautiful young woman with coffee-and-cream skin, blue-highlighted straight black hair worn in a short ponytail, and sky-blue eyes in an oval face. She owns a reinforced buff jacket and slashing sword, but no artifacts. She is also an Air Aspect whose anima is a whirlwind of silver-white grains (of Cecelyne's sands, though she says they are salt crystals). Risa, from pages 108–109 of **Scroll of Exalts**, can adequately represent her, with suitable change to her aspect, Charm set and weapon. Raia also knows the following Cecelynian Charms, from pages 118–123 of **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**: Hellscry Chakra, Ephemeral Abrasion Curse, Transcendent Desert Creature and Sands Through Fingers Defense. She also has Manipulation 5, Appearance 4, Investigation 4, Presence 4 and Socialize 4.

Raia tries to convince characters that there are degrees of akuma-hood and that with struggle, akuma can fight their condition. She is a true akuma, though, with only as much free will as Lucien and Cecelyne permit. She seems to have a Motivation of "Purge Creation of demons." In actuality, though, she has only an Urge, which is, "Live my assigned role, to the service of Cecelyne." Her current assigned role involves deluding the Exalted into working Cecelyne's will.

PILLOW TALK

Raia seems to fall in love with the character who satisfies her sexual needs, and she tries to make him fall in love with her. Through social combat, Raia tries to impose an Intimacy to her. By attacking shortly after coupling, she both tries to make her attack unexpected and to then to reestablish surprise (i.e., her lover doesn't realize the attack has taken place). Her seduction attacks use (Manipulation + Presence). She waits a while before attempting to build the Intimacy, though, hoping to give her lover a chance to develop the Intimacy on his own.

Once Raia believes her target has developed an Intimacy, she tries to find out anything she suspects the characters are keeping from her. (This is a case of compelling behavior.) She also tries to erode Intimacies that get in the way of accepting the Yozis in general and Cecelyne in particular, such as loyalties and codes

of honor. Certainly, she tries to broaden, intensify and kinky her lover's sexual tastes.

(All of this leads to an out-of-game criterion for which character Raia picks as her target. The target's player must be mature enough to accept his character's having a torrid sexual affair and—just as importantly—mature enough to roleplay a *character* who doesn't know he's being sexually manipulated, even though the *player* is fully aware of this.)

CULT BUSTERS

Raia isn't lying about the Calligraphers of the Falling Dew. This cult of the Vitriolic Dragon is active in a moderately extensive section of the Southern coast. With a successful (Intelligence + Occult) roll, difficulty 3, made by their players, characters have heard of it, though very little is known by people outside the cult. In brief, the Calligraphers worship a demon of wrath and corrosion who gives them power to kill their enemies.

The Yozi Kimberly gave necessary aid in making the Reclamation possible, but she has not wholly committed herself to the plan. Therefore, some of her emanations refuse to cooperate. The Vitriolic Dragon is one such. Cecelyne wants the cult destroyed—made an example of, really—and chose Raia as her means to do so.

Perhaps the characters do not want to head straight for the cult's island. After all, an admittedly cursed and demon-tainted Terrestrial Exalt is not the most trust-inspiring guide. With Raia's help, the characters can find a small coven of Calligraphers in a coastal town, confirm that they worship demons and kill people. Having done so, the characters can smite them a bit. These cultists are vicious and fairly cunning murderers who know a little thaumaturgy and can summon an eristrufa (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II—The West**, pp. 132–133). On to the island!

THE CALLIGRAPHERS OF FALLING DEW

Most Calligraphers are merely vicious mortals who want to get away with killing people. They are not akuma. They lack enlightened Essence. They know only enough thaumaturgy to participate in cult rituals. The deacons that lead cult cells have enlightened Essence and learn the Art of Demon Summoning (Initiate Degree, with one or two higher-Degree Procedures). A few priests are true Yozi-Kin akuma, though, with spirit and Kimberly Charms as well as thaumaturgy.

The cult's thaumaturgy all comes from the Art of Demon Summoning. Cultists know how to summon a

few First Circle demon species, create wards, perceive immaterial demons and perform a few other Procedures. Only the priests know how to beckon Iyutha into Creation. When they join the Calligraphers, cultists have Iyutha's sigil burned into their skin using acid. Mastery of greater rites, such as demon summoning, likewise involves drawing on a cult member's skin using acid. As their knowledge grows, Calligraphers develop horrible scars over more and more of their bodies. For demon minions, Calligraphers favor the eristrufa, radeken (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas**, pp. 149–150) and metody (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**, pp. 83–84).

Dew of Retribution (3, Intelligence, 4, one hour): The Calligraphers' favorite Procedure involves drawing certain sigils on the recipient's in actual Malfean vitriol (available from a summoned metody). The recipient must be willing. At some later time, the recipient invokes the magic through Iyutha's name, and a rain of acid falls in an area three yards wide for 15 ticks, with the effects of an acid bath (see **Exalted**, p. 131). The recipient can target this acid rain at any point he can see, up to (recipient's Essence x 50) yards away.

The Dew of Retribution carries a price, for it draws its power from the Vitriolic Dragon. Each time a character becomes the recipient of this Procedure, he gains *either* one level of the Obsession Derangement, to inflict pain on anyone perceived as an enemy, *or* one mutation point that goes toward some demonic feature such as small horns, claws or fur or scales on part of the recipient's body. (See **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II—The Wyld**, pp. 144 and 150, for mutation points and Derangements.) The character also must discharge the Dew of Retribution before a full month passes, lest the impatient Iyutha discharge it on the recipient.

THE DEMON CULT'S ISLE

The Calligraphers keep their headquarters on a small, rocky island a few miles off the Southern coast. (Storytellers can place the island anyplace that suits the needs of their series.) Two radeken and two eristrufa patrol about a mile out all around the island, preventing anyone but the cultists from coming or going. No one lives nearby, as the cult slew or drove away anyone who might see its activities.

Twenty cultists live there in huts of driftwood and tanned human skin. Fifteen are rank-and-file cultists (treat as green troops; see **Exalted**, p. 279), while five are deacons (regular troops, but with Intelligence 3,

Occult 3 and a Dew of Retribution enchantment on each of them).

The cult's shrine is a large cave accessible by tunnels from the sea and from the cultist village. Any patrol demons who clashed with the characters but survived go there to warn the three cult priests and to join the climactic battle. Treat the three akuma as God-Bloods (see **Exalted**, p. 281) with Adept Degrees in the Art of Demon Summoning. They also know the Five-Dragon Style of Terrestrial martial arts up to its Form-type Charm (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Dragon-Blooded**, pp. 189-191) and wield daiklaves of infernal brass.

Decades of worship and sacrifice have saturated the cave with Iyutha's Essence. The Vitriolic Dragon has a spirit sanctum accessible through a large vat of acid sunk into the floor before a large idol made of corroded bone fragments glued together. The priests can beckon Iyutha at any time, though the process takes from sunset to midnight. They will do so if they have the time and know the cult is under attack.

The cultists all fight to the death (likely theirs). They are all sadistic, vindictive psychopaths. While they might own a few useful or valuable items, they care about little besides glorifying the Vitriolic Dragon and painfully murdering any non-cultists who cross them. The characters can rescue a few captives whom the cultists intended to sacrifice. (These people might provide a hook to some further scenario, at the Storyteller's option.)

Raia fights the cultists fiercely. She tries to make sure that the cultists all die and urges the immediate execution of any captured cultists. Deep down, Raia knows that none of the cultists ever saw her before, and she doesn't want that coming out. It requires considerable effort (or Charms) to make the cultists say anything intelligible, though, instead of screaming about the terrible vengeance of Iyutha.

ONE OF US?

Unless the players' characters probed Raia's story with great care, or were sufficiently suspicious and cunning to recognize the manipulation attempts in her pillow talk, they probably think Raia sincerely wants to fight demons and redeem herself. She's part of the group—and a group of Celestial Exalted, at least, can gain a lot from a Terrestrial associate. (For one thing, she can declare herself as Dragon-Blooded and just let people assume her comrades are Dragon-Blooded as well.)

Now and then, Raia turns up leads to evil shenanigans involving demons, Fair Folk, the dead or other

dark forces. Storytellers must create these scenarios for themselves. Raia loyally helps fight these threats to Creation... all while gathering information about the characters. In fact, she tries to exacerbate conflicts. She'd rather have Creation's heroes fighting the First and Forsaken Lion, and vice-versa, than have either side paying attention to her true masters. When possible, Raia steers characters away from Reclamation activities or helps them crush minor plots whose loss does not interfere with the master plan. Subtly, she tries to corrupt her lover.

Raia's usefulness eventually runs out. Perhaps the characters realize that she is manipulating them. Perhaps she cannot keep them away from an important part of the Reclamation. Perhaps she realizes that she cannot possibly turn any of them from the valiant defense of Creation. Whatever the reason, Raia turns coat at a moment of grave peril for the characters. She might lead them into a trap set by an Infernal coven. She might abandon them in the midst of battle against a squad of bonestriders or actually lead a Wyld Hunt to them. Her top priority, though, is to make her escape with all that she knows about the characters.

If Raia can escape, the characters will certainly see her again. She has proven her worth to Cecelyne, and the Yozi finds other roles for her to play and other deceptions for her to carry out. The akuma can become an ongoing nemesis, particularly to her former lover.

ACT TWO: DESERTIFICATION

Within a year or two of the Empress's return, she has much of the South in her grip. Many of the smaller countries barely pretend to rule themselves, so slavishly do local collaborators obey envoys from the Realm. As in Harborhead, their native militaries now have Realm officers and Dragon-Blooded commanders. The puppet rulers impose curfews and loyalty oaths. The native informants are, if anything, even more assiduous than the All-Seeing Eye in seeking out rebels and traitors. It helps that they receive bounties for every dissident they expose (and the torturers always produce a confession).

In the name of efficiency, local rulers take over small family farms and combine them into vast plantations. Harvests increase, aided by agricultural experts from the Lap, but so much food goes in tribute to the Realm that more Southerners go hungry than ever before. People forced off their land swell the slums of Southern cities, live off doles of food from the Empress and join Realm-sponsored make-work projects... or the ever-expanding Imperial legions.

The Lap becomes the Realm's command post for the South, and its docile people readily offer their sons and daughters as recruits for new legions. After a swift purge of non-Dynastic monks, the Lap's Immaculate temple blesses all that is done in the Empress's name. Demon attendants become a mark of status for the Realm's dignitaries in residence.

The pandits who rule Varangia now think and speak only as the Empress wills. Dynasts, Green Sun Princes and akuma have used Charms to brainwash them one by one. No longer do the artisans of Varangia produce their famous sextants, clocks and astrolabes. They have become foremen in immense new factories that churn out swords and firewands, bullet-bows and armor. The country's supreme council, the Wizarat, announces that the stars decree an imminent war against the enemies of Varangia and the Realm.

Some nations resist subversion, though. The subtlest plans of Dynast and Infernal fail to seduce or deceive the high-spirited and fractious Delzahn of Chiaroscuro into submission, while in Paragon, the servants of Hell still cannot break the people from their oaths to the Perfect. Where subversion fails, though, Hell's minions prepare for war. Out in the desert, dire forces prepare to crush the last resistance to the Realm and the Reclamation.

DEATH FROM THE DESERT

While the Empress uses her legions to consolidate her grip on subverted Southern nations, her Infernal allies raise a second military force in the depths of the Great Southern Desert. The Green Sun Prince called Sulumor is key to the plan. (See p. 138–139 of **Scroll of Exalts** for Sulumor's description, though Storytellers can spend up to 100 experience points to upgrade her for this scenario.) The Defiler comes from the dune people and can treat with them as no one else can. She travels from band to band, awing them with Charms and sorcery and promising them an endless feast on the flesh of the soft coastal folk.

All the dune people in Creation, though, could not form an army large enough to challenge nations such as Paragon or Chiaroscuro. Sulumor and her partners use the dune people to draw other desert tribes into the growing horde. The desert folk hate and fear the eerie, albino cannibals but have never faced an army of them. Tribe after tribe wakes in the night to find the dune people holding knives to their throats. Each tribe receives the same ultimatum: Renounce the gods, swear fealty to Cecelyne, and show their obedience through a meal of human flesh. If they don't submit,

they and their children become the meal. In every tribe, some people choose death, and some try to fight, but enough submit that the horde steadily grows, its new recruits bound by common shame. The new recruits call Sulumor the Shrouded Prophet.

The dune people teach their recruits how to fight in darkness as they do, and to rest beneath the sand by day. Firmin colonies summoned into Creation supply the growing horde with weapons. Raiding parties strike out of the deep desert to attack outlying towns. The cannibal horde also attacks sand ships, helping to isolate desert communities. Wherever they go, they burn fields and foul wells and oases as blasphemies against the desert.

The Realm's satraps use the attacks to justify further taxes, curfews and restrictive security measures "for the duration of the emergency." Informers denounce people as collaborators with the raiders. Dynasts use their Charms to intensify the fear and the conviction that only complete obedience to the Realm can bring safety. And desolation of the spirit spreads.

THE PARAGON SANCTION

The Scarlet Empress and her Yozi backers find Paragon a lot harder to subvert than they expect. At first, the Perfect continues his long-established policy of careful non-confrontation, granting small concessions to preserve his city-state's sovereignty. As the Empress's demands grow, however, the Perfect suspects the old diplomatic game has changed. His spies on the Blessed Isle report on the changes to the imperial government... and the personality changes in prominent Dynasts. After the Empress uses the Realm Defense Grid, the Perfect no longer objects to her demand that Paragon finally accept a satrap.

The Perfect, however, remembers the old saying about keeping one's friends close and enemies closer. He recognizes the collaboration between demons and the Realm before most people do. When his spies find strong evidence that the Empress can no longer use the Realm Defense Grid, his most powerful warriors mount a replay of the Usurpation, writ small. While only a few outcaste Dragon-Blooded serve the Perfect, he commands many enlightened mortals equipped with artifacts, talismans, alchemical poisons, supernatural martial arts and sorcery. The Realm's garrison dies swiftly, and few, if any, escape the surprise attack.

Since the Empress could overpower his small nation without the Realm Defense Grid, the Perfect sends her a dark and terrible promise. If she conquers Paragon, he vows, he'll command the inhabitants to



kill themselves... and to rise again as ghosts. Instead of a mortal city, she will have a hostile shadowland with which to contend. The Perfect does not know if he can truly fulfill this threat, but he figures the Empress cannot know either.

Over the coming months, the Perfect drives his people in a crash program of fortification. Every wall and tower soon carries wards against demons. Yet, he knows this is not enough. He sends his propaganda minister, the Eclipse Caste called Scarlet Whisper (see *The Compass of Terrestrial Directions*, Vol. IV—*The South*, pp. 148–149), to recruit other beings of power. He would prefer Celestial or outcaste Terrestrial Exalted, but he also accepts God-Bloods and other half-breeds (though not Demon-Blooded), spirits, ghosts and even Fair Folk. Humans and half-humans must take an oath to defend Paragon, but the Perfect does not impose further conditions. He does not even demand loyalty to his person. Characters can refuse to swear the oath on the Perfect's scepter, but the Perfect keeps such characters at a distance, tells them as little as possible about his plans and regards them as expendable.

The Empress does not wait long, however, before she moves against the Perfect. Assassination attempts

occur monthly. The Perfect has dealt with such before, and his new allies increase his protection. (For instance, several patriotic Paragonese volunteer to wear disguises of sorcery or fae glamour, as body doubles.) The Perfect also sends his new allies on expeditions to recover artifacts, to sabotage Realm garrisons in other states and, generally, to strengthen Paragon's position and weaken the Realm's. They cannot be everywhere, though, to counter every move by Hell's minions.

CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT

Players' characters can most easily become involved in this scenario if they work for (or at least with) the Perfect. Otherwise, they could encounter the horde growing in the desert wastes, learn that Paragon is its target and figure they should prevent another nation from falling to infernal forces. This resolution could lead them to ally with Paragon.

Storytellers could also run the scenario in reverse for Infernal characters. Such characters would face the challenge of mastering the dune people and using them to terrify the other desert tribes into joining the horde. Finally, they would lead the horde against Paragon, pitting it against the city-state's huge army and whatever supernatural champions the Perfect has recruited.

THE COMING OF THE HORDE

The Empress chooses Paragon as the first major target for the Night Desert Horde. Not only is Paragon smaller than Chiaroscuro or other states that might have resisted her, but also the Empress finds his rebellion a personal insult. The desert tribes near Paragon also hate and fear the Perfect enough to accept almost any alliance for the sake of destroying the city-state—more allies for the Horde.

DIRE WONDERS

The Yozis themselves notice this campaign and give Sulumor special aid. Word rapidly spreads through the South that the Shrouded Prophet who leads the horde travels with an artifact of great power: a dark crystal orb held in nested metal rings. At the Shrouded Prophet's command, storm clouds fill the desert sky and the earth shakes, while blood, frogs and stranger things rain from the sky. She has even reduced desert manses to pools of lava.

Across the South, savants tremble in fear at the rumors. Can the Shrouded Prophet have found the Eye of Autochthon? The legendary artifact was last seen in the South 180 years ago (as recounted on p. 14 of **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV—The South**). If the eye has returned, then truly no one is safe.

This is *not* the Eye of Autochthon, though it is something almost as dangerous: a soulbreaker orb (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, p. 135), crafted by Ligier himself at Cecelyne's request. The assorted wonders that follow the orb are produced by demons: teodozjia to evoke clouds (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**, pp. 87–89), radeken to produce omen weather and so on. The Second Circle demon Stanewald shakes the earth and destroys manses using her efficacious dances (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas**, pp. 136–138). The orb is a trap. The demons hope to catch the Perfect and neutralize the Scepter of Peace and Order. They would settle for annihilating an Exalted savant, though.

WHY NOT NUKE THE CITY?

One may fairly ask why the Empress bothers with such a complicated plan. If she has a soulbreaker orb (and *only* one; these aren't easy to make, even for Ligier), why not just send an agata to drop it on Paragon?

First, the Empress isn't sure when the Perfect is in Paragon or when he's in some hidden bunker outside the city. The magically enforced loyalty of Paragon's citizens makes it impossible to recruit spies.

Just as importantly, the Empress is not the woman she was. Before, she was a ruthlessly pragmatic head of state. Now, she's the vessel in Creation for the Yozis' hatred—particularly that of the Ebon Dragon. Malfeas, say, would just smash Paragon and be done with it. The Ebon Dragon has to do it in a sneaky, cheating, underhanded way. It's his nature.

THE NIGHT DESERT HORDE

Description: This is not the entire Night Desert Horde. The Infernals have split the Horde into three armies and sent one to attack Paragon.

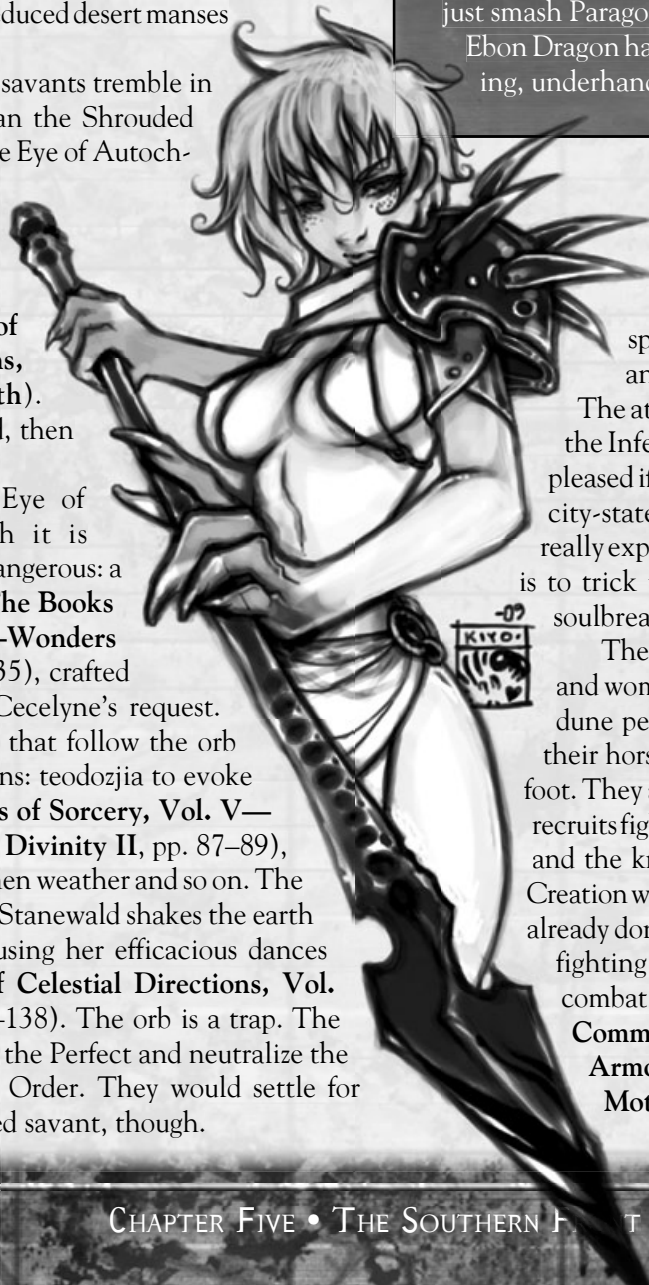
The attack is not completely a feint—the Infernals and the Empress would be pleased if the cannibals could destroy the city-state—but the conspirators do not really expect it to succeed. Its true purpose is to trick the Perfect into capturing the soulbreaker orb.


The horde consists of 10,000 men and women. Only about 200 of them are dune people, though. They have eaten their horses and camels, and so travel on foot. They are all tired and hungry. Yet, the recruits fight with the ferocity of self-hatred and the knowledge that everyone else in Creation would slay them for what they have already done. Because they are now used to fighting at night, they do not suffer any combat penalties for doing so.

Commanding Officer: Cynis Elisa

Armor Color: Varies

Motto: "Devour for the Desert!"





General Makeup: 10,000 men and women armed with black resin chopping swords, axes and short spears; half of them wear buff jackets or chain shirts, and the rest wear only rags.

Overall Quality: Poor

Magnitude: 9

Drill: 1

Close Combat Attack: 2

Close Combat Damage: 3

Ranged Attack: — **Ranged Damage:** —

Endurance: 4 **Might:** 0 **Armor:** 0 (-0 mobility)

Morale: 4

Formation: Although the people in the Night Desert Horde are tough desert dwellers, they are nevertheless extras and untrained at fighting in large numbers. Their commander, however, is a Dynastic senior officer (use Cathak Lazera, from pp. 151–152 of *The Compass of Terrestrial Directions*, Vol. IV—The South, or some comparable character). The Horde has nine mortal relays that convey signals through weird, howling blasts on trumpets made from human bones. Five Dynasts act as heroes, and four Demon-Bloods serve as sorcerers. These last are literal sorcerers, casting Emerald Circle spells such as Flying Guillotine or Death of Obsidian Butterflies.

OTHER COMBAT UNITS

A number of smaller combat units accompany the basic horde. Tribesmen who kept their riding beasts can function as a light cavalry auxiliary; represent them with Mansef Jaghun (see *Scroll of Kings*, p. 24). The Dragon-Blooded heroes can act as a sworn brotherhood (see *Scroll of Kings*, p. 124). A dozen tinsiana demons stay in the vanguard of the horde, ready to engage Exalted heroes and try to keep them out of the mass combat. Stanewald lurks in the area. Finally, Sulumor travels in the rear, in a wagon-borne pavilion of tattered silk and human bone. She carries the soulbreaker orb. A troop of gilmyne forms her honor guard (use the traits for the Six from *The Compass of Celestial Directions*, Vol. V—Malfeas, pp. 61–62), while three agatae lurk nearby to provide her getaway.

BATTLE OF THE DESERT GATE

The Night Desert Horde marches straight for Paragon, making no attempt to hide its intent. On the way, the cannibals overrun and eat a few villages that lie just outside the Perfect's rule. Warned by his spies, however, the Perfect's army can meet the opposition before it gets very far into Paragon's territory. The confrontation happens at a wall the Paragonese built between two ridges at the edge of the city-state's

fertile land, with a single fortified gate in the middle. Strategically, it's about the best place to stop the Horde's advance before they reach the city itself.

The horde simply sweeps forward, trying to overwhelm the Paragonese army through sheer manpower. (The Dragon-Blooded commander makes full use of War Excellencies, though, so it's a well-executed human wave.) Its goal is to push close enough to the gate for one of the sorcerers to cast Emerald Countermagic (to remove the thaumaturgical wards) and then Violent Opening of Closed Portals. The Dragon-Blooded heroes challenge the Perfect's champions to a duel but have no intention of fighting honorably. Sorcerers and demons prepare to backstab characters in the middle of their combat.

As the battle gets underway, Sulumor uses a minor artifact to create huge Essence displays (essentially a super-sized anima banner), while radeken flying high over the battle create omen weather. It looks very much like the Shrouded Prophet is about to do something apocalyptically bad. Only a deliberate attempt to analyze the phenomena using Essence-based perception—and a successful (Perception + Occult) roll—shows that the various manifestations have nothing to do with each other and are, in fact, harmless.

The Perfect comes to oversee the battle, though he stays inside the fortress. (He doesn't want to risk anyone else snatching the Eye of Autochthon from him. He has a personal flight artifact for a fast getaway, though.) If Sulumor finds out that the Perfect is present, she abandons the ruse with the soulbreaker orb. The Malefactor simply activates the orb, sets it on a five-minute delay and flees the battle. She and her masters consider the destruction of the Night Desert Horde a small price to pay for removing Paragon as an enemy. Minutes after the soulbreaker orb detonates, Sulumor swoops back to the scene to search for the Perfect's scepter.

What if the ruse carries through and the Perfect captures the soulbreaker orb? The orb actually does match descriptions of the Eye of Autochthon. Attempts to analyze its magic (using All-Encompassing Sorcerer's Sight or the like) are at difficulty 5, because it's a Yozi-made fraud and no mortal knows what the Eye's Essence-patterns should look like. The orb is pre-charged with 49 motes of Essence, though, and committing even a single additional mote initiates the detonation sequence. The Perfect is as skilled a sorcerer-engineer as a mortal can be, but the soulbreaker orb is likely to fool him. Only an Exalted savant has much chance to detect the fraud and so prevent Paragon's destruction.

Of course... if Creation's defenders *do* spot the fraud, have the Yozis handed them one of the most potent weapons ever invented? Not necessarily. Ligier built the orb with a "back door" by which any Second or Third Circle demon that sees the orb can shut it down. Removing this hidden flaw is as difficult as changing the time delay on an activated soulbreaker orb.

THE TAMAS KHAN AFFAIR

Only after her passage to Malfeas did the Scarlet Empress learn how thoroughly she had failed to dominate the nascent Delzahn nation. She thought the Immaculate Order had forestalled a dangerous Lunar plot to raise a barbarian empire in the South, by slaying its warlord Tamas Khan. (For details, see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Lunars**, pp. 72–78.) The Ebon Dragon revealed how the Lunar elder Tamuz (see **Scroll of Exalts**, pp. 50–51) had manipulated her, the Immaculate Order and the Realm to establish the Delzahn, with himself—to the Empress's way of thinking—as the Delzahn's secret master. Once, the Empress might have grudgingly admired the Lunar's skill and sought an accommodation of powers with him, as she did with Chejop Kejak. The returned Empress, however, wants revenge for being played.

Her plan is basically simple. A Lunar akuma takes the form of the legendary hero Tamas Khan and announces that he has returned from Heaven to resume his rule over the Delzahn. The Empress does not expect the entire Delzahn Horde to fall neatly into line behind the Yozis' imposter. No, she expects Tamuz to mount his own long-planned return and denounce the pretender—and for the Delzahn to fall into civil war. What's more, the Empress hopes that by drawing Tamuz from hiding, the Infernals can find a chance to ambush and kill him.

The first stage of the plan works. Cultist agents spread rumors of wonders and prophecies about Tamas Khan's imminent return. Then the Lunar akuma rides out of the desert wearing Tamas Khan's form and duplicating his legendary feats. He rallies the nomadic Delzahn to his banner by condemning the urban Delzahn as having grown soft and abandoned tradition (a schism long growing in Delzahn culture).

Yet, the Empress underestimates Tamuz. The Silver Pack's greatest political strategist takes about five seconds to see through the plot to destroy the Delzahn through civil war, the underlying plot to ambush him and two or three levels of hidden plot behind *that*. He smiles, anticipating the chance to take these Infernal amateurs to task.

CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT

Tamuz is the Silver Pack's master of the cutout and the proxy. Naturally, he has no intention of declaring himself until he is ready. He finds *another* Lunar to play the role of Tamas Khan, setting pretender against pretender. Indeed, any Stewards active in the central South receive invitations to become his agents, for even the mighty Tamuz cannot be everywhere.

Other Exalted likely do not learn they have become Tamuz's pawns until he is sure of their loyalty to Creation and their skill at opposing Reclamation plans. Tamuz recruits any beings of power that he can, however—Solars, Sidereals, Terrestrials, even deathknights and Fair Folk—through a variety of false identities. He prefers to let them think they're embarking on some other mission that leads them into the situation he wants rectified or to the people Tamuz wants drawn from hiding. Who is the imposter Tamas Khan? What hidden reserves does the imposter possess? What other agents have the Empress and the Infernals already placed in Chiaroscuro and among the Delzahn?

NIGHT OF SILVER BLADES

Sooner or later, Tamuz decides to crush the Empress's false Tamas Khan and smack down the imposter's backers. As bait for his counter-trap, Tamuz steps into the role of Tamas Khan, replacing his own Lunar stand-in. He challenges the pretender to meet him in single combat. Naturally, the pretender wants the fight to happen in a place where lots of other powerful combatants can suddenly appear and attack the old Lunar. Naturally, Tamuz wants a place where he controls the ground instead... but after a bit of haggling, he pretends to let himself be fooled.

Many of the obvious places in and around Chiaroscuro, such as the Golden Plain and the Plaza, are proposed and rejected before Tamuz and the pretender agree to fight at a meadow near the outskirts of Chiaroscuro, where the shantytown and remains of shattered glass towers give way to farmland. A long-sealed storm drain runs under one edge of the field, and demons could quickly cut tunnels from the drain into the basements of ruined towers. Sorcerous combatants might simply teleport to the battle using the spell *Travel Without Distance*.

Tamuz sends his most competent and powerful agents to assassinate everyone he's found in the plot to ambush him. Exalted and mortal akuma, Second Circle demons, Infernals, Dynastic sworn brotherhoods—he intends to see them all die the night before the duel. Characters face the challenge of sneaking into a



THE PRETENDER

The false Tamas Khan is still a potent Child of Luna. The character sheet for Gerd Marrow-Eater (see *The Compass of Terrestrial Directions*, Vol. V—*The North*, pp. 144–146) makes a good model, but replace about half the Social Attribute Charms with Cecelynian Charms and infernal sorcery spells.

variety of well-guarded or well-hidden locations to fight powerful foes—preferably without letting anyone else know about the assassinations, so the Infernal conspirators do not have time to change their plans.

Then, the characters must hurry back to the dueling field. Tamuz has already planted a variety of death traps in the storm drain, the ruined cellars and nearby hovels. For instance, he expects that some enemies (say, a sworn brotherhood) will disguise themselves as slum dwellers. So, he has some of his agents disguise themselves as well and watch for the infiltrators, ready to cut their throats or do battle as needed.

If the characters can fulfill their missions, the ambush is a debacle. The force intended to overpower a 2,000-year-old Lunar is much weaker than the conspirators expect. Tamuz takes the pretender's head and those of several other attackers, and his allies find their own chances for glory.

THE MALFEAN CANDIDATES

The pretender's death doesn't end the Empress's campaign against Chiaroscuro. She and her Infernal allies have spent the last few years planting akuma and recruiting spies and traitors in the city, both Delzahn and otherwise.

Some of the akuma don't know what they are. As with Raia (back in "The Akuma Who Loved Me"), their Yozi masters gave them false personalities. At the right trigger or command from another servant of Hell, they remember their true identities,

missions and powers. Other people might turn out to be different sorts of imposters—possessed by demons or replaced by people altered by magic.

Finally, Tamuz and the Reclamation are not the only hidden hands at work in Chiaroscuro. The city holds the secret headquarters for Sidereal operations in the South. If the Southern Chair, Nazri, survived the Infernal assault on the Five-Score Fellowship, he will certainly run his own schemes in this hub of the South. (For one thing, he needs to find and protect newborn Viziers.) Then there's the secret surveillance headquarters for the Court of the Orderly Flame, run by the powerful God-Blood Ulito Swan (see **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV—The South**, pp. 140–142). Add in a few resident Abyssal servants of various Deathlords, unaligned Solars, outcaste Terrestrials, ghosts, ancestor cultists and the potent goddess Grandmother Bright, and you have a real mess. The fighting between Tamuz and the Reclamation drives all these powerful people to protect their holdings, launch strikes at anyone they see as a threat and seek allies.

The result is a political slam dance, as mortal and supernatural factions form and dissolve weekly. Anyone might switch sides without warning, either because they are akuma, imposters or deep-cover agents, or just because they see a greater advantage at the moment.

Tamuz glories in the chaos—confusion to the enemy! He takes action only when the various powers and principalities seem likely to massacre Chiaroscurans or otherwise threaten the city's survival. In person or through his false identities, though, he encourages his agents to seek their own allies among the powerful folk pushed into the open. Chiaroscuro can never be the same, but Tamuz expects he can turn it all to his advantage... assuming Creation survives the next few years.

ACT THREE: THE DESOLATION OF ABOMINATION

The Scarlet Empire now shows its infernal character openly in the South. Every legion and government ministry has a blue-clad priest of Cecelyne as its political officer and loyalty inspector. Her Second Circle emanations walk through the labor camps that once were cities and demand worship from the enslaved populations.

And the desert advances. In the Southwest, the winter rains did not come; streams dry and harvests

fail. Only the Lap remains fertile, promising food to those willing to become slaves.

Nevertheless, a few flickers of hope remain. Tamuz flits through the South like a wraith, scattering guerilla movements in his path. Those Brides of Ahlat who have kept the faith often lead such partisans, and their god sends whatever aid Heaven allows. The God of War and Cattle sometimes visits Creation himself to crush Second Circle demons and Realm garrisons. Other guerillas join with the Cult of the Illuminated, led now by its few surviving Sidereals and every Solar and Lunar they can recruit. Kether Rock still stands despite fierce assaults by demons and Infernals.

But hope cannot survive long without victory. Creation's remaining defenders must strike a telling blow against the Infernal Empire—defeat Hell's minions where they seem strongest, wrest some power as great as the Empress's thousand-forged dragons. At a council of war, leaders of the Resistance pool their knowledge and select their target.

OPERATION: PENITENT

As the Empress's legions herd more and more people into prison camps, the few who can resist her rule see that, to have any hope of stopping her, they must do something about her command center in the Lap. In the last few months, strange auroras of Essence have played about the head of the mountain-sized statue that carries the city, and geomancers can tell that the immense statue is the source of geomantic curses that blight farmland up to 2,000 miles away. Worse, the Penitent seems to be the source of gale-force sandstorms, earth tremors and bursts of fire along the dragon lines. This wonder of the lost age is apparently a geomantic weapon comparable to the Realm Defense Grid. Its operators do not seem to understand its capabilities, but they are learning. Once mastered, the Penitent could be refitted much as the Sword of Creation to spread infernal corruption throughout the South (see pp. 43–45 for details).

Any campaign against the Lap is fraught with danger, however. No army can hope to besiege it without aerial support or potent Essence weaponry. Five entire legions—one from the Realm and four trained up from Laplanders—garrison the land around the Penitent, and an aerodrome on the mountain-statue's folded arms holds a task force of artifact skycraft from the Realm. Dozens of Dragon-Blooded live in the area, and they seem comfortable working with an unknown but large number of demons. Nevertheless, someone must prevent the imperial forces from mastering the

Penitent's power, or they will be able lay waste to half the South without leaving the Lap.

A small team of powerful Exalted operatives might succeed where an army would fail... though armies might be useful as a feint.

CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT

By now, the players' characters probably have at least one ally with significant military and magical resources, such as Tamuz, the Bureau of Destiny, the Court of the Orderly Flame or the Perfect of Paragon. If so, the characters are briefed on the threat. If not, the characters encounter a spirit or a skilled mortal geomancer who informs them of the Penitent's baleful power. Everyone knows the Empress turned the Lap into the Realm's command center for the South, and the Essence discharges from the active Penitent are visible for hundreds of miles. Characters who lack a backer begin the scenario with fewer resources, however.

LACK OF A LAWGIVER

Unless the group makes up a Solar circle, or at least includes a Solar character, they need to find one. Tamuz and the Bureau of Destiny know this because they remember the Penitent from the Old Realm. The Perfect knows this because he has spies in the Lap and he's awfully smart. The Court of the Orderly Flame also has spies, smart people with some First Age knowledge, and Essence-surveillance magitech that monitors the Penitent's activities. Any of these backers can supply a Solar backup character. The Perfect assigns his Eclipse Caste propaganda minister, Scarlet Whisper, while the Sidereal Gold Faction has its Cult of the Illuminated Lawgivers. Tamuz or the Court of the Orderly Flame can find a Solar in Chiaroscuro. All the potential backers realize the Empress must have a renegade Lawgiver working for her in the Lap, since no one but a Lawgiver can control the Penitent's power.

ANOTHER OFFER

At some point as the players' characters muck about in the Lap, the Deathlord called the First and Forsaken Lion contacts them through a necromantically controlled ghost. He says he knows their mission (he too is very smart and has a lot of spies), and he offers them a way to deactivate the Penitent without the need for a Solar to access the control chamber. The Lion says the group can poison the Essence flows within the Penitent by planting a powerful charge of necrotic Essence in one of the statue's chakra chambers. He trusts the group can find an elemental or Dragon-

Blood to open the chakra for them, even if the group does not include a Terrestrial Exalt member.

The Deathlord's Essence mine is a fist-sized soul-fire crystal (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Abyssals**, p. 215) charged with 25 motes of Essence drawn straight from the tombs of the Neverborn. Characters need merely to pitch the crystal into the roiling elemental power of a chakra-chamber. The chamber's energies will break the crystal and release the necrotic Essence. The crystal's contents should then be enough to burn out the statue's internal geomancy.

The Lion does not tell the characters how severe the statue's reaction to this poisoning might be or how much time they have to flee the chakra chamber. He does not know and, indeed, does not care. All Exalted other than his own Abyssals are expendable pawns. To a group of deathknights who set out to destroy the Penitent, he says merely to leave the chakra chamber as quickly as possible, or he and/or the other Deathlords will need to train new Abyssals.

If the players' characters agree to the Lion's offer, one of his minions brings them a coffer of ironbound black ash wood that contains the crystal. The minion warns them not to open the box until they enter the chakra chamber, as the slightest touch of sunlight or a Lawgiver's anima would destroy the crystal.

If characters use the crystal, the surging Essence within a chakra chamber breaks it in five ticks. This results in an Essence explosion dealing 30 dice of lethal piercing damage at that point, minus one die per yard from the crystal.

The disrupted Essence flows in the statue detonate the remaining chakras over the next minute. The mountain-sized statue shakes, and Essence lightning crackles around its form, especially its head. Finally, the top of the Penitent's head blows off in a gigantic explosion that rains rubble over a mile radius. Everyone in that area who is not under cover sufficiently strong to ignore the damage suffers an Accuracy 8 attack dealing 10B damage from the hurtling stones. The Lap is severely damaged, with hundreds killed or injured.

CONDITIONS IN THE LAP

The Scarlet Dynasty has had plenty of time to propagandize the Laplanders, including the use of Charms. Most Laplanders are fully loyal to the Realm and don't think too hard about the increasing presence of demons. Those who *do* rethink their traditional subservience know to keep silent, since informers are everywhere, ready to denounce their neighbors for

disloyalty. Traitors are punished by throwing them out of the city—a 2,000-foot drop. Exalted visitors who let slip their nature and goals soon receive a visit from Lap sepoys, who now meet the standards of Realm legionnaires. Exalted can easily deal with the platoon... but entities of far greater power will take notice. The city can field a full Wyld Hunt of Immaculate monks who firmly believe the Immaculate Dragons endorse the Realm's turn to the Yozis.

CLIMBING TO GLORY

There are six ways into the Penitent's bulk: five entrances to its elemental chakras and one into the control center. Each presents certain challenges.

- The entrance to the Earth chakra is at the base of the Penitent's spine, 10 feet underground. The Realm excavated the entry point, but surrounded it with a stone bunker. Three former Immaculate monks, all Earth Aspects and skilled in the Earth Dragon Style, occupy the bunker, along with 20 elite heavy infantry soldiers trained to coordinate with one another.

- The Wood chakra occupies the pelvis of the mighty statue. The entrance is in the basement of the palace of the Golden Triumvirate, the Lap's three co-satrap. Characters must get through about 100 elite guards, plus the three Dragon-Blooded satraps, three Wood Aspect monks and six tinsiana (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas**, pp. 150–151) assigned as special guards in order to enter.

- The Water chakra, located at the statue's navel, is entered from the cliff-like side of the miles-high statue. Three Water Aspect monks camp nearby, their tent pitched in a fold of the statue's carved stone robes.

- The Fire chakra occupies the Penitent's heart. The entrance lies just above the figure's pressed-together thumbs. Around it spreads the Realm's aerodrome, with 20 Dragon-Blooded, at least 200 mortal guards and technicians and the barracks-hive for a resident demonic air force, the Sting of Defeat Descending in Glory (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas**, p. 61). At least 20 of the unit's agatae and their 20 firmin riders are on the base at any time, while the rest patrol the heights of the Penitent.

The Dragon-Blooded garrison includes three Fire Aspect former monks and three Air Aspect monks. The Air Aspects each possesses a blue jade *Windblade*-class personal transport (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, p. 35). Wooden hangars hold 10 warbirds and four *Manta*-class transports (ibid., pp. 41, 43–44) plus five Haslanti-style second

class air boats under construction (see **Scroll of Kings**, pp. 151–152). Hopping puppeteer demons and mortal laborers work on additional hangars and barracks planned for an expanded demonic air force.

- The Air chakra's entrance is located on the sheer cliff of the statue's throat, at the larynx. Characters must either fly or climb to the entrance. Climbing calls for a (Dexterity + Athletics) roll, difficulty 2. Failure means falling about 30 yards to the base of the statue's throat and the hem of its stone robe. Five pairs of agatae and firmin buzz around this site at all times, so characters have no chance of reaching the entrance unobserved unless they employ magical stealth. The agatae immediately signal the aerodrome to have more agatae and the Air Aspect monks fly up to attack.

- The entrance to the command center is located on the statue's brow, where an Exalt's caste mark would be. Another five pairs of agatae and firmin patrol this area.

All six locations are entered by committing Essence of the proper aspect—elemental for the chakras, or Solar for the command center—to the access point. A tunnel opens, analogous to a spirit door, leading into the chakra chamber. As described on page 61 of **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV—The South**, the elemental chakras can be very dangerous. The portals also stay open for just 15 ticks before characters must donate additional Essence to re-open them.

THE CONTROL CHAMBER

No demons are allowed in the control chamber, lest they disrupt the potent Essence flows or activate some unknown, automated defense protocol. Yet, the chamber has occupants: the Twilight Caste akuma Fehim and five Dragon-Blooded guards. Fehim knows his value and suggests to attackers that as the only person who can operate the Last Suppliant of Endless Power, he is more useful alive than dead. Of course, he cooperates with captors only until he finds a chance to escape, signal his demonic minders or wreak some horrible devastation on the South. The five Dragon-Blooded are not akuma, but they are fanatically loyal to the Empress. They would willingly give their lives in Fehim's defense. All five have a panoply of artifact weapons and armor.

Characters might think that, once they take over the control chamber and kill or restrain Fehim, the Empress's garrison cannot reach them. They would be wrong. The Golden Triumvirate has an Essence battery charged with 25 motes of Solar Essence—

just enough to open the control chamber's portal once so a Dragon-Blooded strike force can enter and then open it again to leave. The garrison takes an hour to gather such a strike force, retrieve the hidden and well-guarded Essence battery and ferry everyone up to the Penitent's brow.

FEHIM

Fehim comes from the Varang City-States. As the bastard child of a forbidden liaison between Varang castes, he was abandoned to the streets at an early age, where the criminal Three Devils Gang found and adopted him. Fehim's high intelligence and quick wits enabled him to become the gang's security chief, finding traitors within the gang and recruiting informants and collaborators among legitimate Varangian society. He also learned how to scribe and enchant minor talismans.

Five years ago, the Varangian authorities finally destroyed the Three Devils Gang in a vicious raid led by a Dynast. Fehim escaped the slaughter though he lost an eye. Even as he fled, Fehim realized that a traitor must have helped the Varangian guards evade the gang's sentries and defenses. As he staggered into a shabby old temple and begged for sanctuary, Fehim vowed to find the truth and avenge the only people who had shown him kindness. And there, in a shrine of the Unconquered Sun, he Exalted as a Twilight Caste.

The few old priests of the temple revered Fehim and gladly shared secrets of magic retained from the First Age, but this was not enough for him. He sought further aid from the greatest and most secret asset of the Three Devils Gang: a demon long trapped in a hidden vault. Fehim bought the demon's help through the sacrifice of a Dragon-Blood's heart... but he had to keep paying. The demon, and others Fehim summoned, played upon the Twilight's need for knowledge, power and

revenge. In time, they seduced Fehim to the cause of Hell, and he turned akuma.

Fehim is a slender, wiry man of middle height with brown skin. Shock-white dreadlocks frame his narrow face. He wears a yellow silken wrap—formerly embroidered with glyphs and scriptures of the Unconquered Sun, now glorifying Cecelyne and her emanations. Bracers of delicate green and gold metal adorn his shins and forearms. Becoming akuma did not change Fehim's personality much. Demons had already persuaded him that all Creation was corrupt and had betrayed him. The coldly arrogant sorcerer burns to see Creation, its people and its gods punished when their rightful masters return.

Until the Empress's return, Fehim's masters pushed him as fast as they could to master Solar Circle sorcery, so he could call Third Circle demons into Creation. The Reclamation effort turned control of the Penitent into a higher priority. The

Yozis imbued Fehim with rare geomantic mastery (at cost of some earlier gifts).

Fehim is almost ready to achieve ultimate sorcerous power, though. If he does not die at the Lap, he will raise his Essence to 5, complete his dire ascension and take his place as one of the Empress's champions in the final battle.

Limit Break: Deliberate Cruelty

Urge: Punish Creation

Caste: Twilight

Anima Banner: Harsh emerald beams shine through golden clouds, infecting them with their own hue.

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

Virtues: Compassion 1, Conviction 3, Temperance 3, Valor 2

Abilities: Awareness 4, Bureaucracy 2 (Demons +1), Craft (Air) 2, Craft (Magitech) 2 (Operate the Last Suppliant +3), Dodge 5, Investigation 3, Larceny 3, Linguistics (Native: Flametongue; Others: Old Realm) 1, Lore 4 (Operate the Last Suppliant +3), Martial Arts 1, Medicine 2 (Exotic Poisons +1), Melee 4, Occult 5 (Operate the Last Suppliant +3), Presence 2, Resistance 2, Stealth 1, Thrown 1



Backgrounds: Allies (Realm) 3, Artifact (Prosthetic of Clockwork Elegance) 2, Artifact (Discreet Essence Armor) 2, Backing (Cecelyne) 4, Demonic Inheritance 5, Demonic Patron (Jacint) 5, Manse 3, Savant 3

Charms: Body-Mending Meditation, Dread Panoply of the Silent Wind, First Adorjan Excellency (x4), First Investigation Excellency, First Melee Excellency, Hungry Tiger Technique, Judge's Ear Technique, Ox-Body Technique (x2), Reflex Sidestep Technique, Sacred Kammilla's Inhalation, Second Dodge Excellency, Sorcerous Enlightenment of Adorjan (x2), Spirit-Cutting Attack, Spirit-Detecting Glance, Thousandfold Typhoon Hand, Wind-Born Stride

Combos:

Three Devils Blade (First Melee Excellency, Thousandfold Typhoon Hand, Reflex Sidestep Technique, Second Dodge Excellency)

Spells:

Celestial Circle Sorcery: Fiend-Vassal Conscription, Insidious Tendrils of Hate, Sapphire Countermagic, Shadows of the Ancient Past, Summoning the Heart of Darkness

Terrestrial Circle Sorcery: Assassin's Fatal Touch, Corrupted Words, Emerald Circle Banishment, Empathic Wind, Flight of Separation, Private Plaza of Downcast Eyes, Slave-Spawn Summons

Thaumaturgy:

Art of Enchantment: Initiate Degree

Art of Geomancy: Master Degree

Join Battle: 8

Attacks:

Punch: Speed 5, Accuracy 6, Damage 3B, Parry DV 4, Rate 3, Tags N

Kick: Speed 5, Accuracy 5, Damage 6B, Parry DV 2, Rate 2, Tags N

Clinch: Speed 6, Accuracy 5, Damage 3B, Parry DV —, Rate 1, Tags C, N, P

Exceptional Short Sword: Speed 4, Accuracy 11, Damage 7L*, Parry DV 5, Rate 3

Fine Knife: Speed 5, Accuracy 10, Damage 5L*, Parry DV 4, Rate 3, Tags T

* Yozi Venom: Damage 10A/minute, Toxicity 5L, Tolerance —/—, Penalty -5

Soak: 7L/8B (Discreet Essence armor, +5L/5B, Hardness: 2L/2B)

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

Dodge DV: 7 **Willpower:** 6

Essence: 4

Personal Essence: 18 **Peripheral Essence:** 35 (43)

Committed Essence: 8

Other Notes: Fehim hides three fine knives and his exceptional short sword Elsewhere via Dread Panoply of the Silent Wind. The knives are products of Malfean craftsmanship and can hold a reservoir of venom that jets into a wound on impact. His masters gave Fehim a supply of Yozi venom for these blades. Fehim tries to take enemies by surprise with summoned blades enhanced with Thousandfold Typhoon Hand, then flee (possibly using Flight of Separation). He trusts that if the magical toxin doesn't kill his foes, his Dragon-Blooded allies will finish the job. His Malfean short sword is similarly envenomed.

The Yozi replaced Fehim's lost eye with a Malfean-made prosthetic eye. This two-dot prosthetic of clockwork elegance (see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I—Wonders of the Lost Age**, p. 71) gives him Essence sight at a cost of one mote per minute. His bracers and greaves are Malfean analogs to discreet Essence armor (*ibid.*, p. 80). The left bracer bears a freedom stone (see **Exalted**, p. 383).

THREE COMPLICATIONS

In addition to the basic challenge of accessing the Penitent in the face of the Realm's strongest garrison in the South, the Lap holds three hidden factors of great importance. Storytellers can bring them in at any time.

THE INCARNAE SEALS

The Fire chakra chamber used to be the sanctum of Swan Dragon, the most respected Censor the Southern spirit courts ever had. Such was his prestige in Heaven that the Incarnae rewarded him with a set of special seals whose mark prompts the most assiduous obedience from any spirit. (See **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV—The South**, p. 62, for details.) When the Empress's forces opened the chakra chambers and activated the Penitent, they found the eight jade seals. The coffer containing the seals now stays with the triumvirs.

The Empress and her deputies plan to use forged directives from the Incarnae to obtain some enormous service from the Southern spirit courts. This hoax can work only once or twice before the Bureau of Heaven catches wise and takes action, but Hell's minions could set spirit courts at war with Creation's defenders, make them hand over powerful artifacts and manses without a fight, or feed disinformation to the highest levels of the Celestial Bureaucracy. Misuse of the seals is a capital offense against Heaven, but what do the Empress or the Yozi care?

Conversely, Creation's defenders could use the seals to mobilize every spirit court in the South to battle the Realm or send petitions to the Incarnae themselves. Again, presenting one's own directives as coming from the Incarnae is a capital offense, but Creation's defenders

might feel the sacrifice is worth it. And the Incarnae just might decide to endorse a decree after the fact if it saves Creation from the Yozis.

THE LOST CENSOR

Unbeknownst to everyone, the lawful owner of the Incarnae Seals still lives in the Lap. Swan Dragon wanders the city streets as a mad and amnesiac beggar (as described on pp. 142–144 of **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV—The South**). Through his madness, though, Swan Dragon can feel that someone is misusing the Last Suppliant of Endless Power in very bad ways. Fate or instinct might lead him to any of Creation's Exalted defenders working undercover in the Lap. If anyone can figure out that the distressed lunatic is more than he seems and restore Swan Dragon to awareness of his true identity, he is a powerful ally. Quite apart from being a lesser elemental dragon of fire, spirit courts throughout the South revere his memory. He also knows how to deactivate the Penitent. The Realm could reactivate the mighty statue again, but it would take time.

THE GUARDIAN OF SLEEP

The Second Circle demon Lucien, an emanation of Cecelyne (described on pp. 64–65 of **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**), stays in the Lap as the Yozi's political officer. Lucien hunts all rebels against higher authority and has spent centuries opposing the Dragon-Blooded for their usurpation of the Solar Deliberative. As the Empress bends the Realm to the service of the Yozis, the Guardian of Sleep makes sure that Dynasts stay loyal.

As soon as Lucien realizes that someone opposes the Realm's efforts in the Lap, he stalks the characters who interfere with the return of Creation's former masters. Lucien is an excellent spy and a supernatural hunter, so he is sure to find the characters. The demon assassin can appear as anyone or nearly anything, follow characters immaterially if he likes, and attack when characters are off guard or beset by other foes. If the players' characters are not constantly vigilant (indeed, paranoid), Lucien will kill them one by one.

TAKING THE LAP

Characters can deactivate the Penitent, by means ranging from Essence-blocking codes imparted by Swan Dragon to blowing up the mountain using the First and Forsaken Lion's soulfire crystal. Yet, that leaves the Realm controlling the most impregnable fortress-city in the South, with a large Dragon-Blooded garrison and a growing air force of artifact vehicles, demons and (in another month or so) air boats.

A QUESTION OF FAIRNESS

Such are Lucien's capabilities that, if played as a perfect tactician, he could murder an entire group of characters before they realize they are in danger. As such, Storytellers should give characters one, *and only one*, warning of Lucien's presence. For instance, they might arrive in the Lap to find that the entire network of Cult of the Illuminated informants they hoped to contact was killed the night before—their throats cut in their sleep, sometimes in locked rooms. Charm-enhanced forensic examination of bodies might show the deed was done with an ivory blade, such as Lucien wields.

After that, Storytellers should evaluate every action the characters take for whether it could tip off Lucien to their presence and leave some clue by which he can follow them using his Tracking Charm. Once that happens, Storytellers should not give the characters an inch of slack. For instance, Lucien can materialize, cut a sleeper's throat and dematerialize again in 14 seconds.

A merciful Storyteller might punish a 14-second lap in vigilance with nothing worse than the murder of a supporting cast member who was vital to the characters' plans, such as the Dragon-Blooded ally that a Solar circle counted on to get them into a chakra chamber. After that, play Lucien as what he is: a ruthless genius, utterly devoted to the characters' extermination. Do not cheat in Lucien's favor—just as with players' characters, a bad dice roll can ruin Lucien's best attempt to kill someone—but don't hold back from killing characters. They knew what the stakes were, and they knew they were in danger.

As such, Creation's defenders might want to conquer the city. This is no easy task. Review the descriptions of the Lap in Chapter Four of **The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV—The South** and Chapter One of **Scroll of Kings** to see why. The characters need an army equipped with aerial vehicles or powerful Essence capabilities. Paragon and the Court of the Orderly Flame come closest to meeting these requirements, particularly if they work together.



OH, I THINK YOU'LL
LIKE IT. IS ABOUT A
PRINCESS WITH A
WICKED STEPPFATHER.

HE KEEPS HER
PRISONER IN HIS
DUNGEON, FEEDING
HER POISON
EVERY DAY.

SLOWLY, THE POISON
BEGINS TO TURN THE
PRINCESS INTO A
MONSTER HERSELF.

BUT THIS IS
JUST WHAT HER
MOTHER—

STOP IT! STOP
IT! SHUT UP!

WHAT? IS
TOO SCARY?

AI, LITTLE ONE,
BE CALM. YOU
INTERRUPTED THE
BEST PART OF
THE STORY.

HUH?

I KNOW WHAT
YOU'RE DOING!
YOU'RE BEING
MEAN!

YOU'RE TRYING
TO MAKE ME TOO
SAD TO EVEN HATE
THIS PLACE.

WELL IT WON'T
WORK! I HATE IT!
I WILL FOREVER!

YOU SEE, THE
PRINCESS'S REAL
FATHER DOESN'T
FORGET ABOUT HER.

HE FINDS OUT WHERE
SHE IS, AND HE VOWS
TO GET HER BACK, NO
MATTER WHAT.

IS A BETTER
STORY THAN YOU
THOUGHT, YES?

CHAPTER SIX

OTHER REALMS OF EXISTENCE

The disappearance of the Scarlet Empress five years ago hurled Creation into chaos and disorder, marking the return of the Solar Exalted, the resurgence of the Lunars, the resumption of Sidereal factional conflict and the crumbling of the Realm. But Creation was not the only realm rocked to its foundation by that disappearance. It also signaled the rise of the Deathlords, new hope for the Yozis, chaos in the Celestial Bureaucracy, the stirring of the raksha toward a new crusade to wipe away the blasphemy of shape and the return of the missing Primordial Autochthon.

Much as the great powers of the other realms would like to deny it, Yu-Shan, Malfeas, the Underworld and other such strange places are all ultimately dependent upon Creation, and the Empress's return will send shock waves through those realms as great as did her disappearance. Will these dominions weather the storm and

perhaps even turn the tide, or are they doomed to be cast down by the forces of the Reclamation?

MALFEAS

The wedding is over. The ceremony, all agree, was a beautiful thing, decorated by the greatest aesthetes and architects of the demon realm, and the skill of those inhuman craftsmen produced a day of splendor the likes of which are rarely seen by either Heaven or Hell. The way the anuhle-silk bunting hung and trembled in the small breeze of the day perfectly accentuated the tears on the Scarlet Bride's cheeks, first of terror, and then after "I do," of joy. The gathered exhalation of the demons in attendance had lifted that bunting momentarily, causing it to flutter in such a way that it clearly communicated awe at the Ebon Dragon's triumph. The catering service managed to attend to the palates of

blood-ape, fulope, chrysogona, teodozjia, well-known personages of the Second Circle, and the refined tastes of the unquestionable. It was all artfully arranged so that any repast that would give offense was cleverly hidden from view when standing near the preferred delicacies of those with such fragile sensibilities. And the music, oh, the music of the demon realm...

But these are all details, bright tedium to be recorded by the history scorpions in their nests of paper and quartz. The day of the wedding is past, and the day of the Reclamation draws nigh.

Hell is abuzz, bustling with the preparations of its warlords, both officially sanctioned and self-appointed. Armored erymanthus sergeants lope through the tea houses and scummy dives of the Demon City, using curses and clubs to press any demon of martial aptitude into the armies of their masters. Citizens engage in the (likely hopeless) effort of attempting to teach serfs to march and countermarch. The armories of Hell churn out arms and armor of every bizarre sort. Chalcanth flows in veritable rivers through the more respected or ambitious manufactories, each hoping to produce some malignant wonder to capture the attention of a Green Sun Prince or one of the unquestionable, the better to bring prestige, business and good fortune to their establishment—and maybe, just maybe, to secure a place in history.

"I forged the blade that cut out Luna's heart." Some lucky demon might be able to stand up and say that with pride, some day soon.

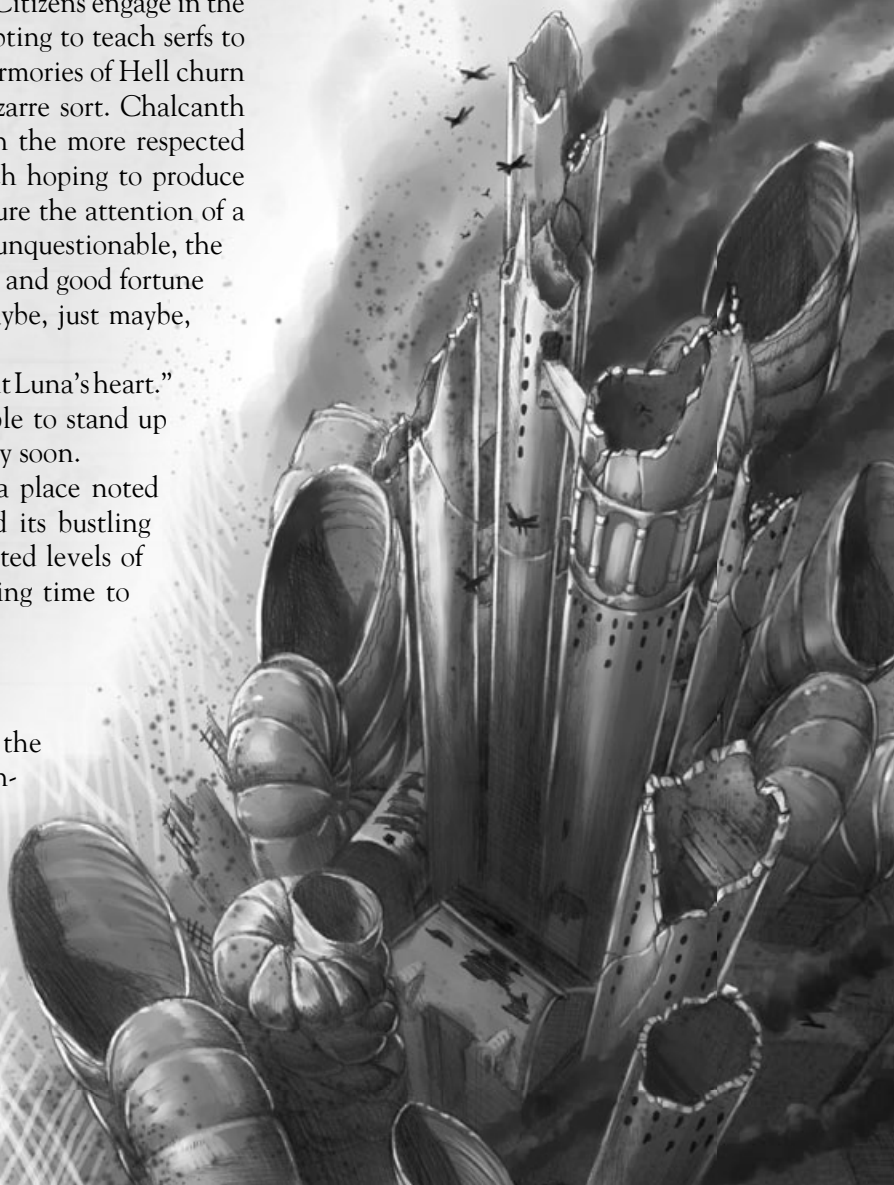
And so, the Demon City, a place noted for its cacophonous clamor and its bustling confusion, surges at unprecedented levels of noise and activity. It's an exciting time to be a demon.

For one reason or another.

MEET THE NEW BOSS

Picture this: Chiaroscuro, the city skyline jutting into a green-
ing sky like broken teeth. The light of Ligier shines down on the fabulous glass buildings, striking off their alchemically treated surfaces in a spectrum of unhealthy shades. Firmin make their nests atop shattered tenements, and the nautilus-horn towers of the neomah rise alongside some of the less damaged

and more desirable structures. Erymanthoi and marottes cavort in the broken stumps of buildings that have been completely destroyed in the fighting. The Tri-Khan's palace is splashed with blood and stained with soot. Faint screams still issue from the interior, where victorious demons slake their lust on Delzahn princes. It is a scene of triumph. The Reclamation has succeeded! The demon realm has opened itself up and disgorged its occupants into an unprepared Creation, where they now reign supreme, to rule until the end of



time. The demons celebrate, they cheer, they dance, they revel in their freedom.

Adorjan, enjoying the simple pleasures of her own release, whirls across the city. Everything in Chiaroscuro falls down dead.

The basic idea of the Reclamation is that by turning Creation into a direct extension of the demon realm, the Yozis will be able to step out of their prison. This will be possible because, at that point, Creation will be metaphysically indistinguishable from Hell. For the Yozis, this represents a return to their Primordial birthright, the world they created, and an opportunity to vent their rage upon the gods and mortals who brought them low and humiliated them. They will once more have access to the depths of the Wyld and the Games of Divinity. They will be free.

The average demon does not actually stand to gain much, or anything, from the Reclamation. The oppressive and arbitrary laws of Cecelyne will still hold dominion over them. They will still die by the thousands for the amusement of demonic citizens or the unquestionable, or to appease the natures of the Yozis. They will prey on one another. Creation will be the demon realm. The Reclamation, for the average serf, is simply a matter of picking up stakes and relocating before resuming the pitiful rounds of brutality, victimization, obsession and attempting not to be crushed beneath the uncaring tread of the mighty that defines their lives in Malfeas. Most have not realized this yet, caught up as they are in the general wave of euphoria sweeping the Demon City.

Some few of the most canny Second Circle demons have reached the same conclusion. Octavian broods, when he is not summoned to do the bidding of sorcerers. As the Quarter Prince, he is one of the mightiest warlords in Malfeas. He does look forward to the thought of new realms to conquer, but the truth is, he has presently encompassed roughly the limits of what he can dominate and firmly hold. All the Reclamation will do is set the real estate value of the quarter-layer he currently rules to *nil* and *nothing*, forcing him to start over. Some conservative element of the Living Tower's personality, probably tracing back to She Who Lives in Her Name, regards this notion with a sullen lack of enthusiasm.

WHAT IF— CHAOS ON THE HOME FRONT

The Reclamation and the returned Empress focus their efforts on Creation. By default, Malfeas is simply

the resource center of the infernal war effort, a place for Green Sun Princes to rest between missions, confer, scrounge supplies and engage in ruthless politics to wring advantage during the Reclamation and in its aftermath. **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V—Malfeas** provides an invaluable resource for running scenes of this sort.

Of course, this possibility for roleplaying in the Demon City is not the only one during the time of the Empress's return and the Ebon Dragon's masterstroke. The prison-realm of the Yozis is many things, but *stable* is not and has not ever been one of them. The Reclamation is a time of chaos, horror and woe for Creation, true, but nothing exempts Malfeas from its own fair share of misfortune and disaster.

FOULEST BETRAYAL

Many are the Yozis who have declined to join the Reclamation. The five prime conspirators have conjectured various reasons for such reticence—apathy, madness and stupidity are the three suspected leading causes. As the Empress works her will upon Creation, however, even those Yozis who have spurned the Ebon Dragon's latest scheme thus far find themselves watching with a kind of helpless fascination, feeling hope welling up beneath their deep and genuine bitterness. The Ebon Dragon is wary of these uncommitted Yozis, well aware that they are the variable most likely to suddenly intervene to knock his plan askew.


He is not so careful to police the ranks of his own forces. Isidoros and Szoreny, despite initial disinterest in the Green Sun Prince initiative, eventually threw in at least halfhearted support for the project. Those who knew of Szoreny's legendary patience were surprised but eventually assumed the Silver Forest was simply hedging his bets.

He is not. Szoreny has been waiting for something like the Green Sun Princes to come along since shortly after his imprisonment began, and also for something like the Empress. He intends to use them to liberate himself from the Demon Realm, but not in the same manner as the Reclamation conspirators.

SZORENY'S PLAN

The Silver Forest's idea is shocking in its simplicity. He wants to be paroled from Malfeas and believes he has the perfect bargaining chip at long last.

For the last 5,000 years, the Silver Forest has watched the Yozis plot and execute a steady succession of futile and doomed escape plans. He has been waiting for three elements to present themselves.



The first element necessary for Szoreny's plan is some manner of Infernal Exalted. As early as Thrice-Damned Gorol, the Silver Forest realized that Exalts would be the key to escaping from the demon realm. He believes this not necessarily because he thinks Infernal Exalted, akuma or otherwise, can break the Yozis out, but because he believes the gods regard the Exalted with nearly as much fear and awe as the once-Primordials they deposed do. The Exalted impressed Szoreny in a singular fashion, as no other opponent ever has. For Heaven to take the powers of Hell seriously, Szoreny reckoned Hell would need its own Exalted.

The second element was someone *else's* master escape plan, presumably that of the Ebon Dragon. This plan would need to have a single conspicuous point of potential failure, which the Ebon Dragon has obligingly provided in the form of the Scarlet Bride. The Reclamation *might* conceivably succeed without her, but not at its current, radically accelerated pace.

Third, and finally, he needed an escape plan to actually proceed to the point of threatening Creation, though not necessarily toppling it. In this case, Szoreny believes that the Empress and the mere 50 Green Sun Princes will not be sufficient to overcome the forces of Heaven plus the Solar Exalted and their Lunar mates, especially with strange aberrations such as the Abyssals in the mix. Nevertheless, he believes they will be enough to scare the gods into believing that the Yozis *might* win.

And so, he supports the Reclamation, bides his time and, like all conspirators, retains access to the Conventicle Malfeasant.

TREACHERY

Szoreny waits until the Reclamation is well underway. If possible, he will wait until the forests of Halta have been destroyed, as he thinks he would make a fine replacement for them. In idle daydreams, he imagines the surviving Haltans living among his sky-grasping roots, offering fevered worship to himself and Isidoros...

Escape first, leisure later. Szoreny has two assets in his scheme: He has converted a pair of Green Sun Princes to his side, and he's claimed a single Dragon-Blooded akuma for himself. Once it becomes clear that something is badly, badly wrong in the world, these Exalts openly approach other Chosen and the highest-ranking gods they are able to find. They have information... and a proposal.

The information is simple, its audacity breathtaking. They spill the plans for the Reclamation. All of them—the creation of the Green Sun Princes, the

corruption of the Empress, the point of the Infernals' hellscaping efforts, everything. Szoreny's agents will do whatever is necessary to get themselves and their story carried up the chain of earthly and divine command as high as they can go. Ultimately, they want access to Heaven. Solars or Sidereals can get them in, as can sufficiently mighty gods. Exalts are probably more likely to risk the resulting political fallout and so are targeted preferentially, but some gods might believe the payoff is worth the risk.

The proposal is for the Incarnae themselves, or at the very least, appointed representatives empowered to speak for them. The Conventicle Malfeasant is impregnable, its warded gates turning away even the Yozis themselves, unless they are authorized participants in the Reclamation. Certainly, "impregnable" is a relative term once the efforts of the Exalted are applied to the task of breaching the structure, but surely Creation does not have the years or decades required for a method of sufficiently clever bypass to be devised. Szoreny can get a crack team of Celestial Exalts into the Conventicle and provide an escape route from Hell if they are able to capture Lillun and flee with her. This act, coupled with knowledge of the Empress's Infernal nature, will cut the legs from beneath the Reclamation.

In return, Szoreny wants a pardon for himself and possibly for Isidoros as well. (He has neglected to actually explain his plan to the Black Boar. It is possible his cherished companion will join him wholeheartedly in escape but equally likely he will attempt to destroy the Silver Forest for selling his siblings out as hated Autochthon once did.) He wants the Unconquered Sun to summon him up from Hell, and he wants an Eclipse- or Fiend-sanctified oath guaranteeing that he will be allowed to remain peacefully in Creation. In return, Heaven will have its best possible chance at thwarting the Reclamation and even claiming ownership of and control over the Infernal Exalted—surely the greatest possible insult to the Yozis left to rot in Malfeas.

If this chain of improbabilities actually plays out—an Infernal audience with the Unconquered Sun, a joint Infernal-Celestial strike team descending into Hell to raid the Conventicle Malfeasant, a successful escape, the duly-promised reward for Szoreny—then, having obtained freedom, this will bring the Silver Forest one step closer to his plan to actually enact revenge on the gods and their Chosen.

As all of Malfeas knows, Szoreny is patient.



TWO SUNS SHINING IN HELL

At the end of the Primordial War, many Solars were less than thrilled to see the Crown of Thunders placed on Queen Merela's brow. Despite her own Charm-backed future propaganda, she was far from the undisputed greatest on the First Age battlefields. Many Celestial generals rivaled her for skill, tactics or simple ferocity, and some held higher titles during the War itself at various points. There was vigorous debate and dispute during the Ochre Fountain Era over why the Unconquered Sun had personally bequeathed the Mandate of Heaven to Merela and not to say, Aofe. Aofe, after all, single-handedly engaged an army of 50,000 demons in order to leave open a gap for his Dragon-Blooded troops to escape from an ambush. Or why not the Sun Dragon, who personally carried the Unconquered Sun's sword of authority into battle? Crystal Hybrid would have made a good choice. She composed a letter informing She Who Lives in Her Name of the first Primordial casualty of the War and fired it into the Principle of Hierarchy's camp attached to an arrow.

(So sorrowful was the structure of the message that the Pyrian Queen fell into despair and abstained from fighting for fully half a century.)

At any rate, not all of the Solars were content to fall into debate or simmer with resentment. At least one Dawn Caste warrior despaired of the end of the War. The time of peace, reconstruction and consolidation of Solar dominance over Creation would be an empty and unsatisfying retirement for a man who had been hailed by at least one directional war god as "the mightiest being who ever hefted a daiklave." He threw himself into the conquest of Creation with excessive zeal, but it failed to satisfy. In the end, he vanished shortly after the Solar capital was removed to Meru.

THE ETERNAL WAR

That Solar soon appeared on the streets of Malfeas, bereft of the protections of Eclipse diplomatic immunity. He wanted no such safeguards in any case—he was spoiling for a fight, and a fight he got. Against all odds, not only did the rogue Solar survive late into the High First Age, but he amassed a great army of demons who followed him as he rampaged happily across the vast layers of Hell. His infernal allies kept an eye and an ear open when they were summoned to Creation, and



NEW SOLAR CHARM: GOD-KING MANDATE

Cost: — ; **Mins:** Integrity 5, Essence 4; **Type:** Permanent

Keywords: Obvious

Duration: Permanent

Prerequisite Charms: Sun King Radiance

The greatness of the Lawgivers is such that even the natural orders of Heaven and Hell must pause to bow before their magnificence. This Charm enhances its prerequisite so that any spirit who would qualify for the benefit of Sun King Radiance becomes immune to the magically compelling commands of its superiors (see **Exalted**, p. 295), though standard forms of mental influence, Charm-backed or otherwise, still apply. Additionally, loyal demons become immune to Yozi possession. Should such spirits act to betray the Lawgiver, the penalty inflicted by Sun King Radiance upon their actions becomes external rather than internal.

NEW SOLAR CHARM: KING STRIDES UNSEEN

Cost: 10m; **Mins:** Stealth 5, Essence 3; **Type:** Simple

Keywords: Combo-OK

Duration: Indefinite

Prerequisite Charms: Easily Overlooked Presence Method

It is not enough to have a brief moment's anonymity. The wisest Lawgivers must sometimes abandon their thrones to walk among the people, unnoticed and unsuspected, in order to truly understand what ills must be overcome in forging a better world. A Solar using this Charm wraps himself in a cloak of perfect obfuscation as long as he adheres to the basic customs of the land in which he resides (dressing appropriately, speaking the local language, observing native rituals and so forth). Attempts to track and locate the Solar within the city or nation he moves through automatically fail. (If another Charm contests this effect, add [Essence] automatic successes to the Solar's roll.)

This Charm helps hide the Solar only from efforts to locate him within a large area or populace. It will not actually assist personal attempts at stealth, so a guard can plainly see a Solar attempting to walk into a restricted area (though as long as the Charm holds, the guard will recognize him only as "an intruder"). The Charm automatically deactivates itself and will not reactivate for the rest of the scene if the Solar joins battle or flares his anima banner above the one- to three-mote level of expenditure.

In the case of beings who are *also* large areas containing a population, such as Autochthon or many Yozis, this Charm provides full protection from the being the Solar hides within, despite that Malfeas is technically always "present" in every street and building of the Demon City. Due to differences in scale of existence, the Solar is able to hide within his vastness the way a flea might hide in a human's hair.

the Warlord of Hell occasionally returned to Creation to throw his weight in behind some important bit of legislation that seemed germane to his preferred mode of retirement. But for the most part, he lived for battle, for his never-ending and unlimited war.

The Solar Deliberative issued an official condemnation of his crusade at one point, essentially declaring that he was owed no help by the governments of Creation. If the Yozis saw fit to dispose of the Solar plaguing them, and were capable of doing so, they were welcome to it. Even at the height of their power and hubris, it seemed clear to the Lawgivers that to throw in behind their renegade

comrade would be to declare war on Malfeas, to the advantage of no one.

Finally, in the end, the Warlord of Hell's luck ran out. Probably. He disappeared during the latter half of the High First Age. No body was ever found. Nine demons claim to have personally taken his head, but none have ever offered conclusive proof.

The Solar's infernal followers dispersed, each hurrying to hide and to disavow any association with the golden warrior. Many were caught and subjected to excruciation and death, but most escaped. What demon with a position of real authority takes notice of individual serfs, after all?

But a myth began circulating through the bordellos and back alleys of the Demon City shortly thereafter, stating that at the time of the Warlord's disappearance, Sacheverell had turned over in his sleep and mumbled, "He will return." Lucien denies that the slumbering Yozi ever talks in his sleep and asserts that the legend is ridiculous on account of Sacheverell only ever seeing the present in his dreams besides, but the tale endures.

WAR IN HELL

A Solar who managed to steal his way into the demon realm, armed with the right Charms and sufficient strength, could easily exploit the old legend. Some of the wiser demons of Malfeas are not content with the Reclamation. Many wish to retain what they have now, rather than moving to a new world where they are unlikely to be able to repeat the few lucky meager successes they have managed to capitalize on over the years.

A fifth column suddenly appearing in the ranks of Hell would significantly disrupt the timetable for the Ebon Dragon's plans, as key assets must be re-deployed to search out and destroy the new would-be Warlord. The Yozis have a vast fear of the Solar Exalted, probably unjustified in direct proportion to a single infiltrating Exalt. Then again, during the War, at least one Primordial was actually slain in single combat with a Lawgiver, and Oramus was routed (though not killed) in a duel with a Solar who had only drawn the Second Breath four years before. Additionally, the Reclamation keeps all of its most vital and delicate elements in Malfeas, including Lillun, roost of the Infernal Exaltations. Perhaps the Yozis have reason to worry.

THE UNDERWORLD

The return of the Scarlet Empress is initially met with mixed reactions throughout the Underworld. On one hand, many of the most ancient dead still view her as a ridiculous and unlikely usurper, propping up a hateful state religion that chokes off the flow of prayer across the world. Even many ghosts who were her subjects in their living days are unhappy with the prospect of her return, believing it will signal an Immaculate crackdown on satrapies that have benefited from the ancestor cult. On the other hand, ghosts are creatures of deep, deep habit, and many others among the dead breathe a quiet sigh of relief. The Empress has ruled the world since their long-ago breathing days, and it seems only right to these hidebound spirits that she continue to guide the Realm forever.

The Reclamation is another thing altogether. Despite their own status as creatures of darkness and

unliving phantoms, the average ghost carries most of his unexamined prejudices fully intact from his mortal days, and most mortals are terrified of demons and the forces of Malfeas. So it is with the dead. Most ghosts wish for their living descendants to remain happy and prosperous and to righteously propitiate and honor their ancestors. This would be difficult, at best, if Creation becomes a kind of hell on earth. Not that the average ghost understands the Reclamation in any way, of course, but things such as the burning of the Haltan forests, Lintha fleets sweeping the West and entire populations having all loyalty to anything other than dread Infernal Exalts burned from their minds are all terribly disruptive to the ancestor cult. The common dead are terrified.

The Deathlords are little happier. While the more social among their ranks attempt the usual gambits involving short-term alliances of convenience, it is clear that the Chosen of the Yozis and the Chosen of the Neverborn are pursuing mutually contradictory goals and will not work together. The Yozis wish to escape and rule over Creation, while the Neverborn would consign it (and, ultimately, their living cousins) to Oblivion. Even worse, while some few of the Reclamation's more clumsy or careless atrocities produce new shadowlands, the Green Sun Princes are largely careful to use their most destructive horrors to help transform Creation into a place synonymous with the demon realm rather than the Underworld.

The Deathlords are uniquely positioned to realize what is going on earlier than almost any other group. They are aware of the 50 Exaltations tithed to the Yozis, and their domains see a sudden influx of ghosts babbling of Anathema shining with terrible green radiance and wielding bizarre, grotesque magics. What they are *not* is unified enough to marshal a common response to the threat. The Neverborn are of little help. They are, after all, dead, asleep and mad besides, able only to transmit their hateful apocalyptic dreams most of the time. Most Deathlords ultimately shrug, dispatch their Abyssals, and nudge forward the timetable of their master plans.

THE DRAGON'S IRE

The one unquestioned tactical assumption of all of the Deathlords and their Abyssal servants is their absolute superiority within the realm of the dead. Mighty as the Abyssal Exalted are, Creation is a foreign realm to them, where the sun causes their flesh to itch and crawl, and the living Essence around them feels dry and empty and fails to sustain them.



But in the Underworld, they easily respire deathly Essence that provides scant comfort to any other, and the materials for their powerful necromancy are found there in abundance.

The deathknights are forced to learn about the Fiend Caste and Ultimate Darkness Internalization (see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, p. 150) the hard way. The Ebon Dragon, understanding that the Chosen of the Neverborn are at least as much of a threat to the Reclamation as any of Creation's Exalted, dispatches a small group of his Infernals to wreak as much havoc as possible. These Exalts strike deep into the Underworld, impersonating unknown Abyssals

(surely in the employ of some other Deathlord!) and causing as much destruction as possible before quickly disappearing into the ranks of the teeming dead. Should any of these servants possess Black Mirror Shintai, the potential for setting the lords of the Underworld at one another's throats is almost unlimited. This, the Ebon Dragon believes, will minimize the influence of the mighty Deathlords during the crucial retaking of the Blessed Isle and claiming of the Threshold.

WHAT IF—DEATH OF THE EMPRESS

The Ebon Dragon's bid to escape from Hell and reclaim Creation is fraught with peril, most of all for his new bride and primary cat's-paw. It is entirely possible that divine misfortune (most probably in the form of a hero's mighty daiklave) will intervene and end the Scarlet Empress's legend.

But while death is the end of life, it is rarely the end of ambition in Creation.

THE SCARLET PHOENIX ASTRIDE THE WORLD

Seven hundred and sixty eight years ago, a young Dragon-Blooded officer stood deep within the mighty Palace of the Anathema, listening to the dying screams of her last friend stretch on (and on, and *on*—in some dark recesses of the manse, the sound yet echoes). Determined, she laid her hands on engines never designed for one such as herself and commanded them to save the world.

But worlds are more easily saved than preserved. That Exalt has spent centuries ruthlessly holding power... to protect Creation, to hold the center, to keep out the Fair Folk, the dead, the demons. So she would maintain under any questioning, and she would be telling the truth—protecting Creation never ceased to be a priority. But it is undeniable that the Empress developed a taste for power and never hesitated to indulge it. It is also true that the Empress learned to love power for power's sake.

Arriving in the Underworld, free of the Ebon Dragon's shackles but also stripped of her Exalted power, the mightiest woman in the world is left cold, horrified and feeling empty.

The Scarlet Empress was a mere Terrestrial Exalt. In the First Age, she would have been considered fit only as a lieutenant, regional administrator or Solar's concubine. But during her life, she acted as the singular ruler of a larger mass of land than any other human in history and held Creation for longer than any other. Even the Solars at the height of their world-spanning glory ruled as a Deliberative. In the

IT CAN'T BE THAT EASY

The Deathlords are some of the most ancient and powerful geniuses in the world of **Exalted**. Most of them are past masters of espionage, plotting, double-dealing and backstabbing. Surely a simple game of masks and assassinations would be insufficient to set them against one another?

While the Deathlords are indeed brilliant beyond mortal comprehension, they are also paranoid, dead (moreover: dead *by betrayal*) and insane. The madness of the Deathlords is not pointless, cackling, foaming lunacy, but a cultivated irrationality that is common among most ghosts and vastly amplified in the lords of Oblivion. As ghosts, they draw power from calculated and overwrought passion plays, reinforcing and reaffirming their own existence. They are all aware of this, but helpless to resist it. It is their nature. More to the point, they are aware that their contemporaries are *also* slaves to their passions, and so, they have come to expect extravagant and melodramatic betrayals from one another. The sabotage of the Fiends falls neatly into the expected pattern.

Moreover, the Fiends are *new*. The Deathlords have no reason to believe there are any other agents in the cosmos capable of operating freely deep inside of the Underworld, and until one of the Infernals slips up, the possibility simply will not seem likely enough to warrant consideration.

scope and length of her personal rule, she embarrasses even the Deathlords.

This accomplishment has not gone unnoticed, and the Neverborn have never shared the social prejudices common among the Exalted of the First Age. Shortly after the bereft Empress's arrival in the Underworld, whispers rush up to swirl about her from cracks in the earth, offering a bargain. Battered, exhausted, freshly slain and desperate to reclaim her power, she accepts.

THE 14TH DEATHLORD?

The inconvenient truth is that the Neverborn do not have an inexhaustible supply of shattered soul-scrapes with which to bestow power on every deceased elder Exalt who falls into the Underworld. Pooling their resources, the deceased Primordials discover that their remaining stockpile of dead soul-husks is insufficient to the investiture.

This is not a problem. This has been planned for.

The Neverborn called He Who Holds in Thrall summons Princess Magnificent With Lips of Coral and Robes of Black Feathers to Stygia. The call is unexpected and, by the Princess, welcome. The First and Forsaken Lion makes ready to accompany her but is ordered to remain at the Thousand. Believing her long period of exile and shame to be at an end, the Black Heron assembles the finest retinue she is able and marches proudly to her doom.

Upon descending to the floating tombs of the Neverborn, the Princess Magnificent finds another woman already waiting for her, standing at the balcony edge of one of those great black sepulchers and staring down into Oblivion itself. The Scarlet Empress speaks her name, unheard and unknown for many long centuries, and watches as it falls into the void forever. A moment later, great obsidian hooks erupt from the darkness, piercing the Black Heron's corpus and Essence and rending her apart. The soul-fragments that empowered her are torn asunder. Much of the Deathlord's power is wasted and ruined, but enough is reclaimed to complete the investiture of the former Empress. Unimaginable power floods through her, and laughing, she ascends from the Mouth of the Void on vast wings of pyre flame.

FATE OF THE BLACK HERON

While the First and Forsaken Lion obediently remains behind at the Thousand, he does take the liberty of sending his Deathknight Meticulous Owl (see **Scroll of Exalts**, pp. 130–131) to follow the Princess Magnificent and report back on what the Neverborn wanted from her. Hidden in the shadow of annihilation, the Abyssal watches as the mighty Deathlord is riven apart,

her power granted to a mysterious red-haired woman. In accordance with the standard perversity of his nature, Meticulous Owl ignores the new Deathlord, instead focusing on the ruined remains of the Princess. Now forgotten and ignored by the Neverborn, her purpose served, she crawls painfully into the Labyrinth, little more than a hollowed husk of plasm, guided by sheer instinct and the will to endure. It seems plain to the deathknight that she will soon use up the last of her strength and succumb to Oblivion. Utilizing a trinket in his possession designed to trap and transport ghosts, he quickly captures her, almost surprised at how easily the artifact works upon the former Deathlord.

QUEEN OF THE DEAD

Reconsecrated as the Scarlet Phoenix Astride the World, the former Empress is granted the full necromantic power of a Deathlord, as well as access to most of her former Dragon-Blooded Charms... although her Dynasty effects no longer function. Her Charms now manifest the ghostly elements of the Underworld rather than those of Creation, and this deathly Essence substitutes her old Breeding score, allowing Purity-keyword Charms to continue functioning. In addition, she begins with a new suite of Abyssal-style Excellencies and several other basic-but-useful Abyssal Charms carried over in the ruins of Princess Magnificent's power. Her goals are manifold: to claim Abyssal Exalted for herself, to open up more shadowlands upon the Blessed Isle, to claim the city of Stygia as well as the Isle, to reclaim her throne in the world of the living and to have her revenge upon the Ebon Dragon. All of Creation and most of the Underworld will stand arrayed against her, of course, but the Empress has faced worse odds in her time. Enterprising traitors willing to abandon their current masters to ride under her banner stand to gain much.

THE RIGHTEOUS DEAD

It is possible that there is a force even stronger than the Empress's lust for power—her desire to command her own destiny.

The Empress arrives in the land of the dead shaken, defeated, but ultimately free of the influence of Hell. Her lavish Sijanese tomb (commissioned long ago in flagrant disregard of Immaculate tenets) provides her with a mighty panoply and royal guard of 10,000 jade effigies. Many peasants who illegally worshiped her in life have been burning incense and chanting prayers in assumption that she is dead for years. Since it is now true, they shrug and resume their practice, granting her an additional influx of power. As ghosts measure things, she is a power with which to be reckoned.



THE FIRST AND FORSAKEN LION

The master of the Legion Sanguinary has always been difficult to predict. It is possible that he would take the news of the Black Heron's destruction in stride, transferring his obsession to the Scarlet Phoenix without a hitch. She is, after all, the inheritor of the Princess's power and perhaps some measure of her soul as well. If the new Deathlord can play the Lion's emotions adeptly, she could earn herself an invaluable ally. The trick would be to entice without allowing the Lion's possessiveness to poison the alliance.

Alternatively, and just as likely, the Lion could develop an immediate loathing for the usurper of the power of his beloved. When Meticulous Owl returns bearing the dissolving remnants of the Black Heron in a ghostly prism, the Lion has it incorporated into his armor, so that he can always feel his lost love's pain coursing through him.

It is not long before the Ebon Dragon sends a Fiend to the Thousand with an offer. If the Lion is willing to throw in his support behind the Yozis, the Dragon might know of a way to restore the Princess to wholeness and perhaps also to liberate the great warlord from his prison of armor...

It is not enough. She knows it is not enough. Still, the Empress sees before her another world on the brink of ruin, dominated by her enemies.

Lacking power to match her heroic ambition did not stop her 768 years ago, and she vows that it will not stop her now. If she is out of the running for the battle for Creation, she will win the battle for the Underworld.

GATHERING ALLIES

It's long, slow going at first. The simple fact of the matter is that citizens of the Realm are usually given Immaculate burials, which makes them less likely to become (or remain) ghosts than citizens of "heretical" Threshold kingdoms are. As a result, there is no Realm hegemony in the Underworld, and ghosts who hated the Realm while alive are free to give voice to their rancor in the land of the dead. Still, the Empress is one of history's most powerful and capable figures. Those who rally to her banner early and serve her cause best

suspect they will earn honored positions in her growing alliance, if it survives.

Ultimately, she plans to rally the dead into an army too vast for even the enormous necromantic power of the Deathlords and their Abyssals to rend asunder. She is aware of the enormous power of necromancy over the dead and that the power disparity between an Abyssal Exalt and a ghost is nigh-unimaginable. Sheer numbers, she believes, are her only hope. Even if the Deathlords and their minions can slay any ghost utterly with only a mote's worth of exertion, the Underworld must surely contain more ghosts than the accumulated Essence of the servants of Oblivion.

That's the idea, anyway. Unfortunately, even with centuries of political acumen and a will forged and hardened in the harshest possible conditions, recruiting terrified ghosts to be cannon fodder is difficult. The assistance of renegade Abyssals at this stage could prove invaluable.

HOW DO THINGS GET THIS FAR?

Any of the Deathlords could have summoned the ghostly Empress using necromancy and destroyed her in short order. All of them evaluated this option and ultimately decided to hold off, for much the same reason. It will be much more effective to let her build whatever sad, ragtag coalition she can. *Then* they can summon its leadership and systematically destroy it from the top down until the rebels scatter, not a single battle yet fought, their collective will utterly broken in the face of the unassailable power of Oblivion.

THE GOLDEN DEAD

In time, the Empress makes contact with the Repentant Architect, guardian of Ydrossos (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. IV—The Underworld**, p. 106). Her reception is chilly at first, but over the course of weeks of negotiation, the ancient Solar ghost comes to realize that, despite her towering hubris and practiced cruelty, the Empress is entirely serious about stirring up a coup to overthrow the Deathlords. (She might set her sights on the Dual Monarchy afterward, but that seems of little concern compared to the looming threat of the lords of Oblivion.) If the Underworld is to have a hope of fighting back, the Architect reckons, this is it.

Assenting to join her coalition, the Repentant Architect puts the Empress in contact with a few other equally ancient and equally repentant Solar ghosts. It takes time, keen bargaining, impassioned speeches and a few dangerous trips through the Labyrinth to reduce travel times, but within a year, the Empress has rolled the handful of surviving First Age Solar ghosts into her coalition. The Solars meet at Ydrossos during Calibration, gathering for the first time since the fall of the High First Age, and commemorate their reunion with a group prayer to the Unconquered Sun.

It is not the first such prayer, of course. Each has repented of his monstrosity on innumerable occasions in the past, and the words have fluttered to Heaven unheard and unheeded. But now, the Unconquered Sun is listening.

NEW MUTATION: RIGHTEOUS DEAD

This abomination attaches at no cost to any ghost who possess a positive Intimacy toward the Empress's coalition, and it vanishes if that Intimacy disappears. It has the following five effects:

First, the ghost is immune to all unnatural mental influence that would remove positive Intimacies toward the coalition and thus remove the mutation. Her own petty desires or natural mental influence might cause her to betray the righteous struggle to save the Underworld, but the magic of others cannot. Second, any Underworld relic the ghost owns becomes immune to destruction in sunlight as long as it remains on her person. Third, the ghost is no longer considered a creature of darkness. Fourth, the ghost becomes immune to any sorcerous or necromantic spell that would summon, command or automatically annihilate her. Finally, the ghost gains access to a special Excellency (which carries the same experience cost as any other ghostly Charm) which can be applied to any action that directly furthers the goal of overthrowing the forces of Oblivion. The Excellency may only add dice, at a cost of one mote per die, and only up to a limit of (Essence) dice. Damage inflicted by attacks enhanced by the Charm is considered Holy and becomes aggravated against servants of Oblivion.



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HOPE AND ASHES

The ever-present clouds of the Underworld briefly roll away, shining true sunlight down on the camp of the Empress's army. Their ghostly relics are not destroyed. A mighty voice speaks in the minds of the assembled Solar ghosts. "Once, you squandered my gifts and falsely claimed my counsel, and were cast down. In my anger, I turned my face from the world of men, but I shall do so no longer. You were my Chosen once, and after an Age's penance, I bestow my forgiveness. Go and walk one final time the path of righteousness, as you did in days long past. Take light into darkness, and know you act with my blessing."

When the clouds roll back in, a transformation has been worked upon the Empress's army, and the Deathlords discover they have something with which to reckon after all.

YU-SHAN

The towers, villas, estates, gardens and luxury apartments of Heaven spread out as far as the eye can see, its rudest hovels fit for any of Creation's kings. The gods who dwell in the Celestial City remain absorbed in their personal schemes and entertainments, idling away eternity in games of status and politics, each attempting to climb higher up the ladder of divine authority. By doing so, they will receive greater responsibilities (which they can delegate or ignore) and greater status as exemplars of the Celestial Bureaucracy (which will allow them to ignore the laws of Heaven with greater impunity). Ultimately, they will ascend from wealth and opulence humans can't imagine to wealth and opulence even gods themselves can't imagine.

These distractions help the gods to forget that they live in the stolen palaces of the Primordials.

HEAVEN STANDS UNITED

The Celestial Bureaucracy does not function. The little gods are corrupt, selfish, short-sighted and leaderless, and those few among their number who are truly virtuous must spend all their time fending off the schemes and machinations of the great majority who are not. Indeed, there are plenty of gods stupid or greedy enough to sell out their comrades to advance themselves. As one might expect, the Yozis have subverted a number of deities throughout the long centuries of their imprisonment.

But for all of that, the number of compromised divinities is negligible. Most gods are ancient beyond even the reckoning of the Exalted. The majority of Yu-Shan's inhabitants personally witnessed the Pri-

mordial War. Although their recollections are hazy due to the effects of time-dilating weaponry and the Three Spheres Cataclysm, many are able to recall the prehistoric Age before the creation of the Exalted, when they were bent to unceasing and thankless toil. Few of these gods are foolish enough to believe that She Who Lives in Her Name will permit the existence of divine trustees if she is set free in Creation once again. The return of the Yozis means, at *best*, the confiscation of all divine estates and luxuries and the chaining of the gods to never-ending toil and torment. Just as likely, each will be annihilated by the rage of Malfeas, and a new order of more biddable custodians will be installed to oversee the basic functions of Creation.

If nothing else, Yu-Shan stands united in opposition to the Yozis. Consequently, any hint of a jailbreak from Hell would produce an immediate, vigorous, effective reaction from the forces of Heaven.

Or so most gods would say.

THE WRATH OF HEAVEN, IMPEDED

Most of the Celestial Bureaucracy's corruption is enabled by a lack of strong, active leadership. The resulting endemic inefficiency is sure to cripple any response it attempts to mount to the Reclamation, and Infernal efforts to seal as many divine gateways as possible are sure to complicate matters even more.

The Aerial Legion is Yu-Shan's foremost strike force, a vast armada of wondrous flying fortresses and martially inclined elementals. It is a subdivision of the Bureau of Seasons, and its deployment is authorized and overseen by the lesser elemental dragon Ghataru. In the event of a true, legitimate emergency (such as the blighting of the Blessed Isle and Infernal Exalted rapidly destroying the Threshold), Ghataru will find that the authority that has resided with him, unquestioned and unquestionable for centuries, is quickly brought into dispute. Ghataru technically commands the Aerial Legion at the pleasure of the Unconquered Sun. When it seems clear that the Legion must be deployed, high-ranking gods of the Bureau of Heaven will attempt to establish pretexts to hijack command of the legion "by the authority of the Unconquered Sun," hoping to win the glory of saving Creation for themselves or advance some personal scheme. The result of such wrangling is that deployment of the Legion is delayed by days or weeks, and when it finally does roll out, it does so at only a fraction of its total force, the full deployment still being in dispute.

Ghataru would willingly turn over field command of the Legion to a Solar Exalt who could effectively direct



and command it, but no such Exalt has yet come to his attention, and the Bronze Faction actively lobbies to have control of the Legion passed into its hands.

Ghataru will refuse to deploy the second big gun in Heaven's arsenal, martial weather, *at all* until it is far too late for fear of doing the Infernals' work for them. He trusts only experienced Solar Exalted to wisely deploy the wrath of the elements.

With its main battle force crippled by politics and red tape, the rest of Yu-Shan does what it does best. That is, the little gods take cover, pull strings and hope that trouble from Creation will not spill over into their palaces and parlors. Only the Bureau of Destiny takes vigorous action... and as a result, it is quickly acted *upon*.

THE LOTUS MASSACRE

According to the main arc of action described in Chapter One, the Empress climaxes her reclamation of the Blessed Isle by orchestrating a massacre at the Most Perfect Lotus of Heavenly Design. The total number of Sidereals slain in the attack should be calibrated to suit the story you want to tell in your series. Some possibilities for storytelling the fallout of the Lotus Massacre are discussed here, along a sliding scale of potential body count.

DECIMATION OF THE BRONZE FACTION

For a Bronze Faction game, the attack might wipe out the full senior leadership of the faction. This leaves the Bronze Faction in an uncomfortable position. A significant number of young and middle-aged Sidereals have defected to the Gold Faction since the return of the Solar Exalted, and the vast majority of those who Exalted in the last five years have also joined that group. With the oldest members of the Bronze Faction dead, only a scattering of middle-aged Viziers and a few hard-line youths, most from the Realm, are left to carry on Chejop Kejak's vision. To add insult to injury, some amount of this tiny remnant, witnessing the carnage the Empress has wrought within the very halls of the Bureau of Destiny, defects to the independents or to the Gold Faction.

Those left have a terrible task ahead of them. The Blessed Isle is compromised, and most avenues of easy access are slamming shut one after another. The Empress has scattered her legions to the Threshold. Making contact with individual dragonlords and strategoi will be time-consuming, laborious and ineffective, especially with the faction's manpower cut down to almost nothing.

The best bet, then, is to attempt to back some surviving rebel force outside the Isle. The Roseblack, assuming she is still alive and free, would make for an ideal candidate to unseat the Empress and replace her. Failing that, Mnemon's Righteous Orphan Rebellion might be acceptable. Any rebel force is inevitably outnumbered, outgunned and poorly positioned compared to the Empress, but battle strategies provided by Chosen of Mars and astrological blessings and curses laid on key personnel can help to even the odds.

Alternatively, if rebel forces have already resorted to alliance with Anathema, been eliminated or otherwise removed themselves from the table as options, then the last hope of the Bronze Faction to re-establish the true Realm is the Immaculate Order. Gaining access to the Palace Sublime now that the Empress controls the now-Cursed Isle will be difficult and dangerous, but the monks of the Immaculate Order compose the one force powerful enough to perhaps challenge the rule of the Queen of Hell on her own home ground.

ASSEMBLY OF YOUTH

Rather than simply eliminating the senior leadership of the Bronze Faction, the Infernal attack murders *all* of the living Sidereal elders, as well as the most influential middle-aged Viziers, including Ayesha Ura and other Gold Faction luminaries. The only surviving Sidereals are young or middle-aged but obscure, having avoided factional politics.

With both factions suddenly bereft of leadership, it falls to the remaining Viziers to establish some sort of policy for the Five-Score Fellowship. The Bronze Faction is reeling, devastated, its heart cut out, and the Gold Faction is left in little better shape. While its members have the strength of conviction and a tendency to be proactive in pursuing their faction's agenda, they are in danger of fracturing into nothing more than individual Sidereals pursuing catch-as-catch-can personal projects without strong leadership.

For a Sidereals series, this is a perfect opportunity for players' characters to step into the breach and attempt to rally their fellow Exalts behind their banner. If they can bring the Five-Score Fellowship together, they will have a chance not only to save Creation, but also to potentially heal the rift that has split the Sidereal Exalted down the middle since the First Age. They could even remain the guiding force among the Chosen of the Maidens in the wake of the Time of Tumult... if they, and Creation, survive. Of course, they are likely not the only ones harboring such ambitions.



LAST MEN STANDING

Capitalizing on the opportunity presented by a gathering of the entire Five-Score Fellowship, the Empress takes a serious gamble, committing the majority of her Green Sun Princes to the Lotus Massacre rather than a small strike force. When it's over, almost *all* of the Sidereals are wiped out. Most or all of the Infernals are also guaranteed to die in the purge, but their Exaltations will find new hosts in relatively short order. Since Sidereal Exaltations bond with their destined host at birth, it will be well over a decade before their next incarnations reach the moment of actual Exaltation. It's a risk, but one ultimately judged to be worth it since it buys a full mortal generation to work without the opposition of the Chosen of the Maidens.

The purge misses a few Viziers, however—namely, the players' characters. They're far too few to directly oppose the might of the Reclamation or to take up the full duties of the Bureau of Destiny. Nevertheless, it falls to this tiny handful of survivors to forge the other Exalted into a cohesive force capable of opposing the doom hurtling toward Creation and guide this coalition to victory. Young, hunted and very alone, the last Sidereals are still armed with the blessings of destiny and a full awareness of the scope and nature of what threatens the world. It will have to be enough. And they will have to act quickly. Even as they reel from the loss of their friends and mentors, new Green Sun Princes emerge from Chrysalises Grotesque.

ROUSING THE GODS

The Incarnae are silent throughout the crisis. They are informed of events as they progress, but caught in the irresistible snare of the Games of Divinity as they are, they are powerless to truly deal with the Reclamation. It seems reasonable to the highest of the gods to remain seated at the game board of the Primordials, discussing strategy and possible responses between moves. Between their distraction and the limited access they allow their servants to the Jade Pleasure Dome, the Incarnae take far too long to decide on the smallest of issues and then fail to communicate their decisions effectively.

Some part of the Unconquered Sun struggles through his lethargy and senses the true danger. One day soon, he fears, he will look up from his amusements to find the shadow of everything that has ever lived looming over him. Yet, even this prospect is not strong enough to force him to rise from the game board. In idle moments, while the Maidens confer on their next round of moves, he occasionally reaches out to the dreams of his Zenith Caste priests, warning them

that the hour of Creation's greatest danger is nigh and that the time for them to stand and fight has arrived. It seems to be all he can do.

OVERTURNING THE BOARD

Creation is becoming a literal hell on earth, and Heaven's responses are slow, sluggish, confused and largely inadequate. The Exalted are scattered to the four winds. The Dragon-Blooded have been taught to hunt and fear those who were intended to be their officers. The Lunars have become estranged from their mates. The Sidereals are unknown to those who were intended to trust them above all others, and massacred besides.

The Incarnae might be able to resolve all of these issues at a stroke, but only if they can be roused from the Games first. Even in the midst of the Reclamation, however, storming the Jade Pleasure Dome is no easy task. It is guarded by squads of powerful celestial lions (see **The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. III—Yu-Shan**, p. 129), and all points of entry are watched by unblinking magical systems capable of slaying most intruders instantly (*ibid.*, p. 90). Within, the mightiest spirits in the cosmos are completely absorbed in amusements of supernatural potency. Even if one of the Exalted were to make his way to the innermost chamber of the Dome, it is possible he might have his will utterly smashed and seized by the wonder of the Games if his eyes were to fall upon them. And even bypassing that difficulty, the Incarnae are not themselves while they play. A hero might sneak and fight his way to the center of the Jade Pleasure Dome, lay a hand upon Luna's shoulder, only to be struck dead by an enraged goddess who cares only in that moment that her move was just spoiled.

Still, for all that daring the innermost sanctum of the gods means almost certain death, some brave circle of Exalts might decide the reward is worth the price. Although they remain unable to directly assault the once-Primordials thanks to Cecelyne's Geas, the Incarnae, roused from the Games, could force order upon the fractious gods of the Celestial Bureaucracy. Working in tandem, Luna and the Unconquered Sun might be able to bring their Exalted back together, deploy the Aerial Legion and other heavenly armies effectively, and introduce their Chosen to the Sidereals who were intended to advise them. While Heaven cannot thwart the Reclamation alone, having a mobilized and effective Celestial Bureaucracy backing the efforts of the Exalted will bring the Chosen back up to something approximating the level of effectiveness they enjoyed

during the Primordial War. Only the Dragon-Blooded remain a problem, as they have always been very distant from their patrons, and by the time the Incarnae are roused, Gaia is likely to be in too much distress to significantly contribute to the war effort.

WEAPONS OF THE GODS

The Viziers have long circulated rumors that they were once mightier than they are now, capable of great feats of incredible astrology. They say the Maidens confiscated these techniques at the end of the Primordial War when they commissioned the pattern spiders and overhauled the Loom of Fate, fearful of the power of their Chosen.

These legends hold some measure of truth, and some measure of falsehood. The lost astrological arts *are* real, but the Sidereal Exalted have authorization to work the Loom of Fate encoded into their very Exaltations. The Maidens can no more confiscate a Sidereal's irrevocable right to perform any astrological ritual he has learned than they could demand the Exaltation leave his body.

What the Maidens can and *did* do, is alter the fundamental parameters of the Loom of Fate in the wake of the Primordial War. The most powerful astrological reactions of the Loom are "safety locked" and have been for almost 5,000 years. The Maidens' motives, as always, are debatable, but it is likely that the vast disruptions of the Loom caused by the Greater Arts were a major factor in their sealing.

With the end of the world looming, however, it is possible that the lost arts of the Sidereal Exalted will return to Creation, tipping the Time of Tumult back toward peace and stability... or deeper into ruin. Desperate Viziers, having witnessed the slaughter of their elders (and with them any notions of their own unassailability), might defy the authority of the Bureau to uncover the methods, signed and sealed by Jupiter herself, to release their lost arts. Alternatively, if the Incarnae are roused from the Games, the Maidens might willingly unlock the prehistoric arsenal of their Chosen, deeming the damage done to destiny *today* to be preferable to the eternal reign of the unbound Yozis should they escape *tomorrow*.

GREATER ARTS OF ASTROLOGY

When the seals on the Loom are broken, the Sidereal Exalted gain access to two new powers.

The first is an upgrade to the existing aptitudes of the Sidereal Exalted. While the function of the Greater Signs of the Maidens does not change, the permanent

Essence and Willpower spent to activate them now naturally replenishes itself at a rate of one dot per month. The price of invoking the Greater Signs also now includes an automatic five points of Paradox, as the pattern spiders are forced to work overtime throughout the following month to mend the frayed pattern of the Sidereal's destiny.

Second, the refined astrological Charms of the Primordial War become available once again.

Astrological Charms all share a number of rules in common. The "#p" in the cost of these Charms indicates the number of Paradox points the pattern spiders inflict on the Sidereal with each use, as they are forced to work overtime to compensate for the direct reality warping. Unlike other Charms, astrological Charms *never* require committed Essence for effects with a Duration longer than instant. They *do* count as Charm activations. They may never be placed in a Combo. They all have the Shaping and Fate keywords. They have no prerequisite Charms. Finally, each use of an astrological Charm globally imposes a cumulative -1 external penalty on all Craft (Fate) rolls by all characters in existence for a period of one week after invocation. Outside of an immediate, world-threatening crisis such as the return of the Empress, *any* use of astrological Charms could potentially provoke censure. Astrological Charms cannot be used by creatures of darkness under any circumstances.

Finally, the experience costs of certain Charms changes for Sidereals: Auspicious and Favored Sidereal Charms cost nine experience points, or 11 points otherwise, while non-Sidereal Martial Arts Charms cost only eight experience points, or 10 if Martial Arts is not Auspicious or Favored. Astrological Charms cost eight experience points for the Colleges corresponding to the Sidereal's caste, and 10 otherwise. The cost of Sidereal Martial Arts Charms does not change. Viziers are immediately reimbursed the experience point difference for already-purchased Charms, the better to quickly arm themselves with new astrological magic with which to face down the end of the Age.

The following are a brief selection of astrological Charms. Sidereals *are* capable of developing new Charms for the Greater Arts.

JOURNEYS

LEGITIMATE OWNERSHIP BENEFIT

Cost: 10m, 1p; **Mins:** The Captain 4, Essence 4;

Type: Simple

Keywords: Obvious, Fate, Shaping

Duration: Instant



This Charm allows the Sidereal, to make the Greater Sign of the Captain when passing through a Yu-Shan gateway from the Heavenly side, subverting the portal so that it opens on a different destination. Rather than letting the Sidereal out where it ought, the other side of the gateway connects to a door somewhere within a building (or building-sized vehicle, such as a ship) owned by the Sidereal. This Charm works only when leaving the Celestial City. It holds no power to transform doorways to allow access into Yu-Shan. Up to (Essence x 2) companions may be transported along with the Sidereal. Any others passing through at the same time end up at the normal terminus point of the gateway.

OAR-CRACKING EXERTION

Cost: 5m, 1p; **Mins:** The Ship's Wheel 2, Essence 4;
Type: Simple

Keywords: Obvious, Fate, Shaping

Duration: One scene

Although they have reaped the benefits of hidden mastery of the world for centuries, the Viziers were Exalted to give their all in war against the Primordials—and, should necessity demand it, even more than that. This Charm enables such sacrifice, allowing the character to spend one bashing health level to add three points of temporary Willpower.

Points in excess of the Sidereal's maximum Willpower are wasted.

SERENITY

BROTHER AND SISTER REVELATION

Cost: 8m, 3p; **Mins:** The Ewer 3, Essence 4;
Type: Simple

Keywords: Obvious, Fate, Shaping, Touch
Duration: Instant

Destiny trusts the Sidereals, as enlightened custodians of a fragile universe, to separate what is true from what is false. Simultaneously laying her hands upon two characters, the Sidereal is free to pronounce a reciprocal family relationship between them—siblings, mother and daughter, grandson and grandfather, uncle and niece. As far as the universe is concerned, this relationship is both permanent and true, regardless of its absurdity or even impossibility. For example, were Mnemon declared to be Ragara's mother, all descendants of Ragara would become valid targets for her Dynastic Charms. The Sidereal may include herself as one of the Charm's recipients. Beings outside fate may not be included in such familial bindings. Mortals declared descended from Essence 6+ spirits become Essence 3 subordinate spirits of the same type. Previously existing, contradictory family ties are nullified by the use of this Charm.

TYRANNOUS MAJORITY MIRROR

Cost: 15m, 1wp, 3p; **Mins:** The Musician 2, Essence 4; **Type:** Simple

Keywords: Emotion, Fate, Shaping

Duration: One day

As long as the Sidereal clearly identifies herself as a member of a group that is characterized by opposition to or oppression by a different, larger group (examples include the Righteous Orphan Rebellion or the Djala), those she meets are stirred to feel sympathy toward her clearly just struggle. This is an Emotion effect, costing three Willpower to resist, which extends to not only the Sidereal, but all members of the group in question within (Essence x 10) miles.

BATTLES

HEROIC EXPLOIT PROPAGATION

Cost: 5m, 1wp, 3p; **Mins:** The Banner 3, Essence 4; **Type:** Simple

Keywords: Fate, Shaping

Duration: Instant

By invoking this Charm, the Sidereal co-opts all the little gods in the area, forcing them to whisper a recitation of the events that play out during the scene to one another. These whispers spread to cover an area with a radius of (Sidereal's Essence x 50) miles. All beings who sleep within that radius during the next 25 hours dream a perfect reenactment of the scene in which the Charm was invoked, as a Shaping effect. Beings outside fate do not appear in the dream, instead appearing as a nullity in the narrative lacking identity.

AUSPICIOUS BLESSINGS OF THE STARS

Cost: 7m, 1p; **Mins:** The Quiver 2, Essence 4;

Type: Simple

Keywords: Fate, Shaping

Duration: One month

By setting her Essence in alignment with the emanations of the constellations, the Vizier tightens her grasp on destiny. The Sidereal is able to invoke any Fateful (Ability) Excellency as an innate power, which does not count as a Charm use.

SECRETS

BIRTHING THE MAIDEN OF WISDOM

Cost: 12m, 1p; **Mins:** The Mask 5, Essence 4;

Type: Simple

Keywords: Obvious, Fate, Shaping

Duration: One scene

The Sidereal makes the Greater Sign of the Mask. Her anima banner flares to full display, shifting through the colors of all five castes in a rainbow wave before

brightening to a glorious white halo, sparkling with prismatic highlights. While this Charm is in effect, the Sidereal is considered a member of all five castes and is under the active effects of all five anima powers, with the additional benefit that their effects are extended to all allies within one mile. If she meets the proper prerequisites, she may even choose to invoke any of the five Greater Signs of the Maidens at standard cost. Unlike the rest of the Greater Arts, this Charm does *not* penalize Craft (Fate) rolls. The pattern spiders look upon the display and object because they do not understand it.

FATE IS ALL THINGS

Cost: 5m, 2p; **Mins:** The Sorcerer 2, Essence 4;

Type: Simple

Keywords: Fate, Shaping

Duration: One day

It is unseemly for the Princes of the Earth to recognize any boundaries upon their power and folly to recognize the sovereignty of Princes of the Green Sun. Beings outside fate are not considered so for the purposes of all the Sidereal's astrological effects and Fate-keyword magic for the duration of this Charm.

ENDINGS

THE KING IS DEAD

Cost: 20m, 5p; **Mins:** The Rising Smoke 4, Essence 4; **Type:** Simple

Keywords: Obvious, Fate, Shaping, Touch

Duration: Instant

This Charm was one of the most solemn deployed in the Primordial War. Gods fell like wheat before the scythe in those days, and it fell upon the Chosen of the Maidens to appoint battlefield replacements from among the ranks of the Celestial Host. There was no need for it in the calmer, postwar days, so the Charm was sealed away against abuse.

After the death of a god, the Sidereal touches a spirit that held authority over that deity, as well as a prospective replacement, and activates this Charm. The replacement immediately becomes a god, if he was not already, has his Essence raised to the rating of the deceased deity (if his was lower) and inherits possession of the slain god's domain and panoply. The new god's Charm suite is adjusted to reflect his new station and power, according to Storyteller discretion. All gods, elementals, humans and Dragon Kings are valid targets for this Charm, though it may be used on an Exalt only with his consent, untainted by unnatural mental influence. If an Exalt is promoted to godhood, his Exaltation departs as his body dissolves and his

spirit is fused into a vessel for a purer sort of divinity. Alchemicals and Terrestrials lose all Exalted powers upon dissolution of their body.

In the unimaginable event that one of the Incarnae needed to be replaced, any of the other surviving Incarnae (or the Five Maidens standing together) would suffice as a “superior” to their deceased peer.

STUDENT AND SIFU UNITY

Cost: 10m, 1wp, 5p; **Mins:** The Sword 5, Essence 5;

Type: Simple

Keywords: Fate, Shaping

Duration: One scene

A sword in hand transforms a naked fist into a killing weapon. So does enlightenment arm those prepared to wield it. The Sidereal selects one Martial Arts style for which he knows at least one Charm and gains access to the full Charm tree of that style, though he must still meet the Ability and Essence minimums of its Charms to use them. This artificial enlightenment does not confer the sutra benefits of true mastery.

THE WYLD

News of the Scarlet Empress’s return is met with fury and despair, at least by the Wyld’s mightiest denizens.

Mortals dwelling on the shores of chaos largely don’t care. They lived beyond the effective reach of the Realm while the Empress was originally around, and if anything, life has only become more chaotic since her disappearance. Many communities of Wyld barbarians have not yet even heard the news that she departed. Why should they care if she has returned?

Of much greater concern is the fact that their “gods” grow surly. The plans of Lunar and raksha alike have been interrupted, and both lash out in much the same way. Favored slaves are killed in outbursts of misplaced rage. Carefully nurtured societies are left to fend for themselves for weeks or months as their patrons withdraw to confer and consider. But ultimately, it seems life will go on.

Then the Infernal Exalted arrive.

THE FAIR FOLK

Rakshastan explodes into simultaneous clamor and despair. The leaders of the various great courts and factions accuse one another of all manner of vile personal failings. Prince Japhthia is held in contempt for delaying the second Balorian Crusade for too long. He blames misleading auguries from the Church of Balor. High-ranking raksha of the Church cite a lack of faith

among distant courts that displease them philosophically. Around and around it goes.

The raksha tremble when the Realm Defense Grid speaks, wiping its chosen target from the face of Creation. Their fear is real, cutting through their façades to strike at the cold congealed patterns of Essence that serve as their souls. Only those who care nothing for their own continuance advocate taking up arms and marching into the face of that great, uncaring doom. In general, the raksha return to their surly pageantry, taking out their frustrations upon nearby mortal communities, almost daring the Realm to retaliate to their petty cruelties, though petty cruelties are all they dare. If nothing else, the Empress seems to have averted a second Balorian Crusade with her singular show of force.

THE LIBERATION OF SWAR

A small coven of Green Sun Princes operating in the North raids what mortals call the city of Old Crystal, looking for powerful First Age relics to aid the Reclamation. Instead, they find Swar, the City of Formlessness Constrained, an unshaped raksha who has been hiding beneath a glacier since the end of the Balorian Crusade. Swar has remained huddled in its icy bolt-hole because it believed—correctly—that the Realm Defense Grid still had a firing solution locked on its last known coordinates and that to step out from beneath its glacial refuge would invite certain and immediate destruction.

The ancient unshaped attempts to bend the Princes to its will and make them its slaves, as is its common practice with visitors. It fails. Although the raksha is mighty, the Infernals are able to discern its fear and use powerful sorcery to scour away the glacier above “Old Crystal,” exposing Swar to the killing fire of the Sword of Creation.

It never comes. Realizing that the Grid is somehow inoperable, the unshaped makes a mad dash back across the North, dodging from demesne to demesne, until it reaches the northern Bordermarches, scarred and half calcified by its journey but still barely alive. There it is captured by a hunting band of Winter Folk and attempts to trade the strange tale of its imprisonment and escape for its freedom.

If Swar’s story is believed, it will mean the Defense Grid is once more out of the picture and the Second Balorian Crusade may continue.

THE SECOND BALORIAN CRUSADE

Should the raksha be convinced that they can assail Creation without suffering the wrath of the Realm Defense Grid, the new invasion begins at once,

WE KILLED SWAR IN OUR GAME

Storytellers who are unable to use the foregoing explanation, or who wish for the tipping point of the Second Balorian Crusade to occur a bit closer to home in their series, should feel free to substitute a different event for the liberation of Swar. Perhaps the players' raksha lead a series of increasingly bold raids on the Threshold, eventually defeating a Realm legion and seizing control of a satrapy. Their boldness might well convince the rest of Rakshastan that the Empress is actually a paper tiger, unable to repeat her previous show of force.

without coordination or preparation. The Fair Folk cannot stand the thought of missing their opportunity to strike once again.

The Second Crusade smashes directly into the Reclamation, and the plans of Creation's enemies immediately tangle up and work at cross-purposes to one another. The Yozis wish Creation to be transformed into Hell, not a landscape of unraveling madness. As such, against all odds and all likelihood, the Green Sun Princes might be forced to fight alongside Solars, Lunars and outcaste mercenaries to *defend* the lands they wish to defile and despoil.

Those not involved in the fighting in the Threshold will soon realize that something is wrong on the Blessed Isle. The Realm Defense Grid remains silent, and if the Empress can no longer command it, perhaps Creation waits as the prize for the one who is able to take it from her.

The Second Balorian Crusade provides an opportunity to up the stakes late into the tale of the Empress's return, adding a very explicit race against time to an already volatile situation—for all factions. If the Realm Defense Grid is not reactivated, the Yozis might escape just in time to be swarmed by the numberless hordes of the Fair Folk. Alternatively, the invasion could provide a sudden opportunity for the forces of the Deathlords to finish the job they started so long ago, during the Great Contagion.

If the Realm Defense Grid is somehow taken out of the picture entirely, destroyed or rendered semi-permanently inoperable, then Creation could be doomed. Then again, maybe not. The first Crusade faced scattered Lunars, many of them deeply twisted

by the Wyld and the inadequate might of the Dragon-Blooded Host. The Fair Folk have never faced the unified might of the Celestial and Terrestrial Exalted on a field of unlimited battle. If that ancient alliance could be renewed, Creation might just stand a chance against the hordes of chaos.

OPPORTUNITIES MULTIPLY AS THEY ARE SEIZED

Enterprising Defilers might see the new Balorian Crusade as an opportunity rather than a hindrance. As the invading raksha stage breakthroughs, drawing the Wyld across hundreds of miles of Creation, Green Sun Princes who manage to get behind their lines will be presented with an opportunity to utilize Constructive Convergence of Principles to directly transform Bordermarches or Middlemarches into the landscape of Malfeas. Rather than being forced to conquer Creation from within, the Princes might follow behind the leading edge of the Fair Folk armies, claiming it for the Yozis in their wake. Malefactors who offer sanctuary to fleeing refugees in these isles of hellish stability will be able to use Locust Mana Plague to gain their trust and loyalty quickly. From there, Infernal Training Charms convert the rabble into bloodthirsty soldiers, and the Infernals are soon able to hit the Fair Folk from behind with armies drawn seemingly out of nowhere.

THE LUNAR EXALTED

The Lunars are the first ones at Creation's rim to hear of the Empress's return and also the first to discover the Reclamation. The Green Sun Princes are carrying out their hellish work in what the Lunars consider to be *their territory*. Paranoid elders among the Silver Pact do not believe that the simultaneous appearance of these Yozi-tainted Exalts coinciding with the return of the Scarlet Empress from who-knows-where is mere serendipity. Mindful of the prophecy of Ingosh Silverclaws, they quickly dispatch young Stewards to investigate the state of the Realm and the intentions of the Green Sun Princes.

FACTIONAL RESPONSE

The appearance of the Infernal Exalted simultaneously alarms, intrigues and enrages the Crossroads Society—especially once any Green Sun Princes demonstrate mastery of the Solar Circle of sorcery. Some bold young Lunars attempt to infiltrate the ranks of the Princes to determine their abilities and steal their secrets (and are horrified to feel bonds to their long-lost mates stirring in a few cases). Not all of these young heroes return, and a few of those who do return are... no longer themselves.



The Winding Path and the Wardens of Gaia find themselves thrown together as unlikely allies. The Reclamation puts both factions on the defensive as their personal projects and protectorates are suddenly subjected to defilement and outright, unexpected assault. While the Winding Path focuses on attempts to protect those cultures it considers its own, and perhaps those of close allies, the convictions of the Wardens run much deeper. They cannot and will not exist in the same world as the Reclamation; they throw themselves into fighting its agents with everything they have. Later, once the extent of the damage to the Blessed Isle and the corruption of the Queen of Hell become obvious, many Wardens of Gaia abandon the Threshold altogether, realizing that they have been fighting symptoms at the fringes while the true cancer seethed at the center. Many fall in among or make alliance with the Sun King Seneschals, if events have produced a Solar strike force preparing to make war upon the Realm. If not, individual heroes swim or fly onto the shores of the Blessed Isle alone or in small groups and put their own plans into motion.

The Swords of Luna remain focused on the new Fair Folk invasion they are sure is coming. In the event that they are correct, they stand braced against the first wave of the Second Balorian Crusade. While their might alone is unlikely to stem the numberless tides of the Fair Folk horde, it does slow them down enough for Creation to have a chance to respond before being overwhelmed. Surviving Swords harry the raksha advance every step of the way, whittling down the strength of the armies of madness and even winning key battles... although the advance continues, regardless. Without allies, the Swords of Luna are too few and too scattered to stop millions of invading raksha.

In the event that a grand Crusade *does not* materialize, the Swords are the most martially inclined of the Lunar societies. They alone could be enough to tip the scales against the forces of the Reclamation in the Threshold... *if* they can be convinced to abandon their posts at the edge of Creation and make the Green Sun Princes their new targets.

The Seneschals of the Sun Kings are active during the Reclamation, seeking out their lost mates—or, failing that, any Solars they can find. Reunited Solars and Lunars prove devastatingly effective at slowing or even thwarting the efforts of the Green Sun Princes, but in time, it grows clear that the Infernals in the





Threshold are part of some greater scheme. The Chosen of Sun and Moon are slowly drawn toward the Blessed Isle from all points of the compass.

Not all Seneschals are so lucky as to find the Lawgiver to which their Exaltation is bound. A small handful of Stewards instead feel their heart and soul cry out in delight, even as their eyes behold a monster. Any investigator into the Reclamation might discover that her mate is one of the Chosen of the Yozis, and while the initial reaction is always horror (mixed with a terrible, unasked-for sense of affection), responses beyond that point... vary. Some Seneschals seek out other Solars and attempt to convince them to bring down or capture their twisted and corrupted mates. Others simply launch attacks then and there, howling in outrage.

A few Lunars, however, heed their bond rather than their fury. They reveal themselves to the agents of the Reclamation, attempting to lure them away from the forces of Malfeas. Perhaps they even entertain notions of cleansing the Infernals of their hellish power and restoring them to the Solars they could have been. Although redemption of that sort is impossible while an Infernal lives, the keen First Age memories of the Green Sun Princes *do* respond to the presence of their Lunar mates. Depending on the particulars of a given Prince's former incarnation, the Exalt might find memories of love or heroism rising to counterbalance the Yozis' initiation of lies and malice. At least one Green Sun Prince, and possibly more, quietly abandon the Reclamation as a result of the efforts of the Sun King Seneschals.

AUTOCHTHONIA

The return of the Scarlet Empress, like so much else about Creation, is an event that provokes mostly confusion from the denizens of Autochthonia.

The Autochthonians were closed off from Creation very early in the First Age, while the Solar capital of Meru was still under heavy construction. Their legends of the World Before are fragmentary and jumbled by 5,000 years locked away from numerous key concepts necessary for the old tales to make sense. The notion of heroes empowered by "gods of the sky," for example, is difficult to grasp when one is born into a world that has no sky, raised by parents who likewise have never seen a sky, and so on.

To the extent that Autochthonians who have sifted through the most ancient archives, tales and legends are clear on anything, they understand that Creation contains a group known as the Solar Exalted, and that the Solar Exalted are incredible heroes without

peer and the ordained rulers of the world. (Although Autochthon was less than pleased with the Solars at the time of his departure, the Divine Ministers never considered it a priority to vilify the Lawgivers in the hearts and minds of the Autochthonians. Plus, the Solars were, at the time, still regarded as the shining champions who lifted mankind up from a lowly slave race to ruler of the world by the majority of mortals.) Most Autochthonians have difficulty conceptualizing non-Alchemical Exalted, but they are willing to take the old stories at face value.


The Creation they find is not the Creation they expected. Dragon-Blooded hegemony rubs most Autochthonians the wrong way by committing the simple sin of defying their expectations in a world that is already abundantly strange and frightening, but moreover, the practice of ruling in opulent splendor from the center while crushing the margins with grinding taxation seems wasteful and inefficient. The notion of a single centralized ruler with absolute power also runs against the grain of Autochthonian thoughts on government. By contrast, a vast Solar Deliberative seems... unwieldy... but at least closer to the government-by-committee model favored by the inhabitants of the Realm of Brass and Shadow.

In short, Autochthonia doesn't like what it sees of the Realm at first glance. Those who learn of the original intended role of the Dragon-Blooded as the army of the Celestial Exalted are horrified. The Autochthonians are comfortable with the notion of Exalted as champion-servants of the state, and an uprising by such Exalts is one of the greatest blasphemies imaginable. Yet, where are the Solars? Without a unified Solar government, dealing with the Lawgivers hardly seems a viable option.

WHAT THE YOZIS DON'T KNOW

To be clear: The Yozis have no inkling that there is any such thing as an Alchemical Exalt until one of their minions actually sets eyes on one. Wildfire rumors spread ahead of the Autochthonians, of course, but who can trust strange rumors in the Time of Tumult? A reliable firsthand description of an Alchemical in action, however, will shock the Yozis—the Champions are unmistakably Autochthon's handiwork.

The Ebon Dragon is ultimately a coward, and his first conclusion is likely to be completely erroneous, born of fear. He will believe the Alchemicals are something entirely new, representing some manner of upgraded super-Exalt. If Autochthon has returned, after all, why would he field warriors individually weaker



than his last round of masterpieces? Only over time will it become clear that Autochthon has not returned to fight alongside the gods and that the Alchemicals are not Yozi-slaying superweapons. That fear will cause the Ebon Dragon to at least initially hold his servants in reserve, to wait and observe and plot and plan. The initial period of misapprehension will serve to buy the Chosen of Autochthon time to establish a foothold in Creation and perhaps to find allies... but the Ebon Dragon is no fool and will eventually realize his mistake.

Even then, once the nature of the Autochthonian return to Creation and the general capabilities of the Alchemicals are known, the Yozis will still make one vital mistake. They will assume that, like all other known Celestial Exalted, there are only a scant handful of Alchemicals in existence. None will imagine that Autochthonia contains nearly 1,000 Champions.

STRANGE ALLIANCES

As newcomers to Creation, the Autochthonians have no emotional investment in the person or notion of the Scarlet Empress. The fact of her disappearance is merely one more datum in a sea of strange facts about the mysterious world of their genesis. When news of her return goes out, the importance of the event is likely to be missed... unless the Autochthonians have made alliances that give them reason to care.

SOLARS

Autochthonians who have forged an alliance with the Solar Exalted (or, more likely, with certain individual Solar Exalts) are most likely attempting to back a restoration of the Solar Deliberative that their histories indicate is the correct, divinely authorized governing model Creation ought to be utilizing (The fact that the nation in question would be a keystone of the new world government's re-establishment, and thus owed a great debt of gratitude, is merely a pleasant bonus). The return of the Scarlet Empress, then, is viewed as a dire threat, signaling reunification of the Realm and a terrible uphill struggle. In this case, it likely falls to the Green Sun Princes to harry the servants of hated Autochthon and their Solar allies while the Empress buys time to consolidate her forces. Celestial Exalts are no pushovers, though, and while a Solar-Alchemical alliance is more than matched by the unified might of the Yozis and the Realm, the resulting struggle could tip the Empress's hand in regard to her Infernal allies sooner than anticipated, drawing fresh allies into the conflict.

LUNARS

If Autochthonians have made common cause with the Lunar Exalted, it is most likely in order either to fight against the Fair Folk (who horrify the Autochthonians more than anything else they have ever encountered) or to assist Lunar society-building efforts by incorporating elements of Autochthonia's remarkably stable and efficient civilization into existing Thousand Streams River projects. Either way, their efforts at the rim of the Threshold keep them far from the Blessed Isle, and they are unlikely to grasp the full depth of their allies' despair when the Scarlet Empress returns.

They are, however, positioned directly in the thick of the Reclamation and are likely to be among the first targets of the Green Sun Princes, particularly if the Autochthonians are attempting to integrate into existing societies such as Halta or the Haslanti League. Dozens or hundreds of additional Celestial Exalts will throw a severe wrench into the plans of the Infernal Exalted, providing far stiffer resistance than the Yozis expected or accounted for. This resistance could force the Empress to provide direct military support from the Realm, straining her resources and perhaps even tipping her hand early.

SIDEREALS

As always, it comes down to faction. Bronze Faction Sidereals are likely to press the Autochthonians to support the return of the Empress as soon as she reappears, for the sake of Creation's stability. This would make them unwitting pawns of the Yozis, to the deep delight of the exiled Primordials, at least until the Empress's true nature becomes apparent. By that point, infiltrators have surely been dispatched and plans made to cripple the Autochthonians on their home ground, forcing them to rush home and remove themselves from the struggle during the most delicate phase of the Reclamation.

Gold Faction Sidereals who have made allies of the Autochthonians find themselves with a powerful fallback position after the Empress's betrayal, and an extremely powerful nucleus around which to form a Celestial coalition with which to attempt to save Creation.

OTHERS

Alliance with the Realm effectively means alliance with the Bronze Faction and plays out in much the same way. The Autochthonians are used to help secure the Blessed Isle and to hold it while the legions are dispatched to the Threshold, as they are less likely to realize how suspicious the Empress's behavior is until it's too late.

Alliance with Lookshy means that the Realm faces a rival and now equal superpower across the Inland Sea. The Reclamation's timetable is likely to be delayed as the Green Sun Princes are dispatched to focus on decimating the alliance of the Seventh Legion and whatever Autochthonian nation has joined itself to the Legion's banner.

Alliance with any of the Deathlords is extremely unlikely, as Alchemicals are easily able to recognize them as agents of the Void. Any Apostate who makes it into Creation would be happy, however, to work with either the Yozis or the Neverborn in order to hasten Autochthon's demise.

Strange and terrible as they are, some Green Sun Princes might be able to initially forge good relations with the Autochthonians, as they do not set off any particular alarms when exposed to Axiomatic magic. Of course, the swift and terrible punishment of their deserter brother is one of the top priorities of the Yozis, so any such alliance will be to the ultimate woe of the Autochthonians. That is, unless they happen to make contact with an Infernal who has decided to turn against his masters, either out of an impulse toward heroism or in an attempt to subvert the Reclamation for his own purposes. The Autochthonians represent a powerful advantage for such rogue Infernals—perhaps even powerful enough to derail the Ebon Dragon's escape plans.

WAR ON THE HOME FRONT

The most likely repercussion of the Empress's successful return to Creation for the Realm of Brass and Shadow is the addition of Autochthonia to the Yozis' "to do" list. Although the lords of Hell are somewhat reluctant to work with Apostates, as they fear contagion from exposure to the living avatars of the Great Maker's illness, individual Green Sun Prince infiltrators will find eager allies in the Void Lords of the Far Reaches. Rather than launching an invasion or investigation of Creation, Alchemical heroes will be forced to scour the depths of their own world to protect it from the Great Maker's ancient enemies.

That scenario is part and parcel to the Reclamation, however, and not particularly contingent on the return of the Scarlet Empress. The Queen of Hell's plans are not clouded by the towering, suffocating rage the Yozis feel toward their deserter sibling. While she understands that her husband demands Autochthon be punished for his ancient betrayal, she has a different plan in mind than simply choking the Machine God to death on precious Green Sun Princes.

The Empress begins with diplomacy.

PLEASED TO MEET YOU

The Empress's ambassadors compose a small mixed group of Green Sun Princes and Dragon-Blooded akuma, accompanied by an honor guard of elite mortal troops, each secretly a Yozi cultist. The Exalted among the diplomatic team have been briefed directly by one or more Third Circle demons, equipped with what knowledge the Yozis have of their brother Autochthon, though they feign some degree of ignorance when approaching the Autochthonians.


The Empress's goal is to lure the Autochthonians into a military alliance with the Realm. She is happy to supply them with food, mundane resources and even stockpiles of magical materials. Once they have done sufficient work to promote the rise of the Yozis, she intends to destroy them before they can make use of much of it. Such expenses are quite cheap compared to the advantage of fielding more Exalted warriors.

The ambassadors present themselves as representatives of the rightful ruler of Creation, seeking cordial relations and perhaps fortuitous alliance with the King of All Craftsmen, now that he has blessed Creation with his return. Outfitted and ready to engage in supernatural subterfuge with mighty machine spirits or Exalts, the Infernals are surprised and delighted to discover that Autochthonia is actually run by mortals.

The ambassadorial team's discovery of mortal rule leads to a quick change of plans. Rather than pressing for an immediate treaty of some sort, the ambassadors instead wrangle for a semi-permanent embassy within Autochthonia itself and are likely granted this. Once they have situated themselves inside of their hosting nation, they begin stonewalling the Alchemical diplomats dealing with them, stalling for time as they attempt to directly influence the National Tripartite Assembly. It should be easy—they're *mortals*.

FAILURE

Even knowing about the Great Maker's many feats and accomplishments during the Time of Glory, and his treachery during the Primordial War, there are many things the Empress's ambassadors do *not* understand about Autochthonia. One is the nature of its cities. They fail to comprehend that their embassy is a gigantic oracular Charm plugged directly into an ancient Exalt, constantly studying and analyzing them. They fail to realize that the nation's capital is a hero almost 5,000 years old, enhancing the National Tripartite Assembly with a staggering array of will-focusing hypnotherapies flashed from every sign board or rattling forth from each



air vent they pass. They don't understand that the city can spend its own Essence to bolster the failing will of its citizens and rulers, or lend them its Clarity to see through honeyed lies.

In short, the mortals are not effortlessly bent to Infernal will. The same cannot be said of the mortal show guards of the ambassadors, who are constantly being prodded and tested by Moonsilver Caste infiltrators and other Alchemical heroes. It becomes evident in very short order that things do not add up where the Empress's ambassadors are concerned, though the Autochthonians' unfamiliarity with Creation's major powers draws out the process of discerning exactly what is going on. In the end, Starmetal Caste analysts finally do manage to sort through their accumulated data, Creation-side reports and ancient histories to reach the correct conclusion: These are agents of what Autochthonian mythology calls the Breakers, those nigh-apocryphal monstrosities who had been Autochthon's siblings, dedicated to destroying his creations.

FLASHPOINT

The Empress planned for the possibility of failure and instructed her agents accordingly.

When the Autochthonians attempt to arrest or eject the Realm's ambassadors, they touch off a terrible firestorm. Utilizing basic Ebon Dragon Charms, any Green Sun Princes in the group vanish into the teeming masses of the Populat. Their sabotage efforts are sudden, vicious and highly effective. Much worse are the akuma. They are few, but each is old, mighty and well versed in infernal sorcery. Total Annihilation spells channeled through the Malfean initiation bring hideous green sunrises to the Realm of Brass and Shadow, and in short order, the patropolis hosting the gateway to Creation has been slain.

The Infernals have grasped the fact that Autochthon is dying and that Creation seems to be his only hope for survival. The first goal of the akuma (unknown to their Green Sun Prince allies) is to destroy the portal connecting the two realms, which they accomplish in a sudden blaze of hellish magic. Their second purpose is to remain within the ailing world-body of the Great Maker, hastening Autochthon's death. The Empress believes that, when Autochthon is a drifting, dead husk, any surviving Infernals will be able to use their sorcery to escape back to Malfeas. Those who do not survive will simply have their Exaltations reclaimed and re-invested, a fair trade-off.

AFTERMATH: INFERNALS

With the portal to Creation destroyed and the city powering it either slain or badly damaged, the surviving Infernals find themselves the target of a concerted hunt by the greatest trackers and slayers of the Soulsteel Caste. The Infernals are mightier than the average Alchemical Exalt, but few, and the Champions begin refitting for the explicit task of hunting the intruders down. A retreat to the Reaches is likely prudent. Otherwise, a short game of cat-and-mouse ensues as the agents of the Empress attempt to move within the unfortunate nation that invited them in, attacking its infrastructure and slaying its people as opportunities present themselves, at least until sheer numbers bring them down.

Having retreated to the Reaches, the Infernals slowly realize that they have problems. Their attack has devastated the plans of the Autochthonians but harmed Autochthon barely at all. It is only over the course of weeks and months that they come to understand the sheer, horrific, dizzying scope of the Reaches, the staggering population figures of the Eight Nations in total and the unbeatable number of Alchemical Exalts occupying the Realm of Brass and Shadow. Survival is a constant trial for those not born and raised in Autochthonia. If a tribe of tunnel-dwelling outcasts is not conquered in short order, the Infernals are likely to starve to death quickly or die attempting to hack open random conduits.

From here Infernal characters have, essentially, two choices. First, they could either settle into the kind of long-term grinding guerilla war of sabotage and attrition practiced by the Void Lords of the Far Reaches (perhaps even allying themselves with one or more such Apostates). Second, if they bother delving into the mythology of Autochthonia, they could decide to set out for the Elemental Pole of Crystal and attempt to destroy the Godhead itself.

AFTERMATH: AUTOCHTHONIANS

The loss of a major city will be devastating to any Autochthonian nation. There is no time for a period of national mourning and soul-searching, though. Populat and Tripartite alike pass directly from sorrow into rage. Construction begins on a second Municipal Charm to re-open a portal to Creation in another city, but moreover, war plans are laid.

Unless the nation which made contact with Creation and suffered for it is Estasia, it is unlikely that the tacticians of that nation possess abundant

confidence that they will be able to fight Creation's mightiest empire, backed by the unholy might of the Breakers, and triumph. This calls for allies, and having been once bitten by the world beyond, casting about for random friends there will not suit the current mood of the Autochthonians.

Alchemical assemblies are drafted by the state and tasked with a daunting, vital mission: to journey through the Reaches and locate the other seven nations where they drift through the vast darkness of the Machine God's innards. These groups of Champions are to act as ambassadors, tasked with convincing not just the traditional allies of the injured nation, but *all* of the Eight Nations, that Autochthonia is in terrible danger from the returning Breakers and that only a unified invasion of Creation can save the Great Maker.

Such a feat of diplomacy will be ferociously difficult. Each of the nations has its own mounting crises, and international cooperation on this grand a scale has happened only once before in the entire history of Autochthonia, during the formal construction and acceptance of the current class-based social model used by the Eight Nations. Even if the Alchemicals should succeed, raising and outfitting the required armies will take time, as will preparing new portals to Creation.

The Champions will simply have to be greater than the task before them. The alternative is annihilation.

SUCCESS?

Another possibility, particularly if the ambassadorial team consists of Infernal players' characters, is that the Empress's agents manage to adapt to the unexpected surprises of this strange new world and thwart Alchemical spies and spymasters, eventually securing the alliance of the Autochthonians. This turn of events gives the Scarlet Empress significant military assets to draw on throughout the turbulent struggles ahead. Their ignorance of Creation means that the Autochthonians are likely to be the last to piece together the available context-clues and realize that their new allies are, to put it bluntly, evil bastards who are planning to kill them later once they stand astride the world as unassailable colossi.









CHAPTER SEVEN

END GAME

The Empress has reclaimed her Scarlet Throne as the secret Queen of Hell, masterminding a Creation-spanning plot to free the Yozis from their imprisonment. Although her hasty use of the Realm Defense Grid temporarily disabled that ultimate weapon, her blasphemous refitting of the Imperial Manse has now restored its power. Hell has struck a devastating blow against Heaven in the Lotus Massacre, leaving few Sidereal Exalted survivors, if any, to warn and rally Creation against its greatest threat. So begins the Third Age.

CONQUERED SUN

Once upon a time, there was chaos, and the light in that chaos was the King of the Primordials. His power and majesty shone over the early Creation as a bright green sun, beautiful and not yet mad, cast-

ing no shadows. This condition did not please the Ultimate Darkness, who also desired for his nature to fall on the world. Upon learning the secrets of crafting gods, the Dragon's Shadow forged the Sun from the antithesis of his empty, wicked darkness. A second orb illumined the sky, with every golden ray casting images of darkness upon Creation to glorify the Shadow of All Things.

The perfected, luminous deity rejected his maker immediately, calling him a creature of darkness and forsaking all ties to the Primordial. Yet, the Incarna's holiness gave him no power to raise his hand against the evil that wrought him. Then it was that the King of the Primordials, seeing the handiwork of his sibling, infused the Sun with indomitable will and made him Unconquered so that he might serve as an invincible guardian against the Wyld. Only long after, when

ARMAGEDDON TOOLBOX

This chapter lists a number of plots the Ebon Dragon sets in motion through his betrothed and other agents in an effort to free himself and wreak vengeance upon Creation. Storytellers should remember that the Shadow of All Things is infinitely devious, always making plans within plans and feinting with lies to laugh as his enemies flail about in confusion. His agents could enact all of these schemes and more, or just give the appearance of doing so to conceal something worse. Therefore, Storytellers should pick and choose which plot points to incorporate and when. Any plot point could be a key part of the Ebon Dragon's grand plan or merely a distraction from it. Storytellers who significantly alter events for their own series will need to adjust later plot points to make sense of them. This being **Exalted**, it's entirely possible that the actions of the players could take the story in a completely different direction than originally planned. This is a good thing.


the gods chose the Exalted and set them against the titans, did the Dragon's Shadow learn to fear his creation's judgment as it seared and transformed him into the Ebon Dragon. That light could destroy him, and so, the Shadow of All Things must murder his wayward herald.

IMPOSSIBLE VICTORY

The Unconquered Sun cannot be slain, for his nature is perfection and no wound can mar him. The Primordials also could not be slain, however, and yet, the Exalted did so. The Ebon Dragon understands too well that the Chosen can accomplish the impossible, so it is the Exalted who must kill the greatest of divinities. The question, of course, is who will do the deed.

The Green Sun Princes represent the most logical choice. They are, after all, forged out of Solar Exaltations and imbued with the power of the Yozis as god slayers and weapons of ultimate vengeance. Then again, the Neverborn twisted light into darkness to make their Abyssal Exalted, and they would dearly love above all other murders for these slaves to slaughter the Unconquered Sun, even if doing so served interests beyond themselves. Moreover, the dead Primordials know secret shortcuts to all places





with their necromancy, even the Jade Pleasure Dome. An alliance of convenience is in order, if possible. If negotiations go well, the Neverborn might order one or more Deathlords to participate in the murder. In particular, the First and Forsaken Lion has the martial prowess to duel the Unconquered Sun, especially if he is backed by Abyssals and Infernals.

Even after the Ebon Dragon secures assassins, however, the Unconquered Sun's vaunted invulnerability poses a considerable challenge. Fortunately, the Charm that provides his blanket immunity to injury functions only in scenes when he does not suppress his Temperance, just as his spear draws power from his indomitable Valor. Of all the Unconquered Sun's virtues, his Temperance is the most vulnerable and the most strained by his addiction to the Games of Divinity. By catching him when he has chosen to ignore his Temperance to indulge in the ecstasy of the Games, the Ebon Dragon's assassins can confront "merely" the mightiest god in existence rather than an indestructible force of nature.

Betting completely on the Unconquered Sun's lack of self control is not enough, however—not when the assassins get only one shot. To hedge this bet, the forces of darkness must first weaken the Unconquered

Sun by attacking his domain and thereby diminishing his Essence. As in all things, the Ultimate Darkness has a plan.

NOON IS NIGHT

The domain of the Unconquered Sun includes virtue, perfection and especially daylight. Efforts to subvert the Realm aside, virtue is too big a concept for the Ebon Dragon to attack directly. Besides, virtue is poisonous to him. Likewise, the presence of so many Exalted ensures the inviolability of perfection. This leaves day itself, one of the very few attributes of Creation that the Defense Grid cannot target. What can be targeted, however, is the Imperial Mountain, turning the Sword of Creation upon itself.

Should that happen, a column of Essence vaporizes Meru, piercing the Omphalos and obliterating the heart of Mountain Folk civilization. Gaia's wounded heart erupts molten Essence from the shattered peak to cloak the whole of Creation under a veil of ash and smoke. The four poles of the Threshold explode in element-appropriate holocausts of Essence as the Elemental Dragons rage against the wounding of their sibling.

This attack is what the Imperial Manse has undergone refitting to accomplish. This task is of such paramount tactical importance that the Ebon Dragon is willing to forfeit further use of the Defense Grid if it will help destroy his creation—no lesser disaster could darken the sky thoroughly enough to weaken the Unconquered Sun. The remaining question is how soon the demon engineers can finish their refitting work.

Taint Dependent: In this model, the corrupted Defense Grid can fire again only once the Blessed Isle has fully converted to the Cursed Isle through geomantic desecration (see pp. 43–45). Depending on the pace the Storyteller sets for this process, the weapon might be ready in as little as a few months from its last use or many years down the road, in which case this is very much a long-term strategy. Just as all manses on the island warp to obscene blackened palaces, the Queen of Hell fires the Sword of Creation for the last time.

Taint Independent: In this version, the project to refit the Imperial Manse is responsible for the poisoning of the Blessed Isle, but not dependent upon it. Therefore, the Sword of Creation may be fired again long before the whole of the continent falls under the Ebon Dragon's shadow. How much sooner is also a question of pace, since the move immediately pres-

THAT'S ALL?

The idea that the Unconquered Sun can temporarily deprive himself of his invulnerability by suppressing Temperance is predicated on the narrative arc that the struggle between the Incarna and his dark maker is ultimately a war of Virtue against Vice. Therefore, the Unconquered Sun is most vulnerable when he fails to be the heroic paragon he is supposed to be, whereas the Ebon Dragon can always be hurt by Virtue and must labor to confuse, deceive or corrupt his enemies into forsaking their best weapon against him. Storytellers who wish to add or substitute other weaknesses better suited to the specifics of their own series should certainly do so, especially in a series where playing the Games of Divinity helps sustain the universe and is, therefore, not intrinsically intemperate. More information on the Unconquered Sun's powers can be found in *Glories of the Most High*.



ages the assassination attempt on the Unconquered Sun and marks the beginning of open warfare with Creation's mightiest defenders.

PLAYING THE ASSASSINATION

As with the death of Chejop Kejak and the Lotus Massacre, the assassination plot against the Unconquered Sun affords a variety of possible plot points depending on the nature of the protagonists.

On the side of Creation, Dragon-Blooded won't likely have the power, opportunity or inclination to personally defend the Incarna against his killers, but they could certainly play a part in discovering and halting the refit of the Imperial Manse. What few Sidereals remain almost certainly have their hands full trying to warn and rally Creation, but they could involve themselves in this turn of events as readily as all others. Lunar Exalted aren't as likely to be part of this event, but they might uncover the plot while in disguise or simply stick their noses into the plot in the way that Celestial Exalted are wont to do.

Needless to say, Solars have the most at stake. No Incarna has perished in the recorded history of Creation, but apocryphal accounts and rumors whispered by Creation's enemies suggest that other such gods once existed and even had their own Exalted who fought in the Primordial War. Yet, these Chosen are no more. It is fortunate that the indestructibility of Exaltation proves some lie in the tale, but no reasonably sane Lawgiver aware of the stories wishes to test their veracity first hand. If Solars can intervene to save their god, they will, and likely successfully. Doing so certainly returns the Unconquered Sun's full attention to Creation.

Perhaps the most fun to be had with the assassination is carrying it out, a task that could be accomplished by Infernals or Abyssals or a joint strike force of both types. This is not a task to be undertaken lightly, or by any characters weaker than Essence 5. Even without his invulnerability, the Unconquered Sun is an absolute powerhouse. Although Luna would most likely aid him were she not elsewhere, the strike on Gaia's heart means that the Silver Lady and her lover's *jouten* withdraw immediately so that Luna can attempt to stabilize the Primordial's injuries. The Maidens do nothing, at the firm insistence of Saturn. If his ending has come, it must come. However it plays out, Storytellers should make the event a worthy "boss fight" for the attackers.

If the protagonists aren't actually going up to Heaven to kill the Unconquered Sun, Storytellers have two broad options for handling his death:

Scripted Demise: The Unconquered Sun just dies and there is nothing the protagonists can do about it. On one hand, this option runs counter to many of the core themes of **Exalted**, in that there shouldn't be much that determined heroes can't accomplish if they really set their mind to it. On top of that, the Incarna's murder is probably the sort of event that players would want a chance to stop. On the other hand, though, his death creates more story than it closes off, giving room for protagonists to rise to the occasion and be Creation's saviors rather than depending on leadership from above or the *deus ex machina* of an angry Incarna backing them up. Therefore, making the death part of plot is recommended.

Uncertain Demise: The alternative is that the Unconquered Sun can be saved and thereby pulled away from the Games of Divinity to rally his Chosen and the divine host against his maker. While this is a truly epic deed for any Exalted and helps the plot feel less set in stone, the problem is that the Highest of Holies pretty much takes full command of Creation's defense in the aftermath without regard for any protagonists who were already doing that job. Of course, if he is not killed, but badly wounded and/or kidnapped, his dominance must wait until he gets better or until daring Exalted rescue him. Depending on how long this takes, he might not even have a chance to take command before the end game.

DEATH OF AN INCARNA

As the Sun falls, liquid orichalcum pouring from fatal wounds, he gasps out a final command to his Chosen: "Avenge me." The ashen clouds disperse within a week to reveal Creation's sun dimmed to a blood-red orb no brighter than the final rays of twilight. As it was the judgment of the Most High that determined who is a creature of darkness, the Sun's death removes this designation from existence and makes Holy Charms largely useless. The Ebon Dragon laughs as his imperfection closes. Nothing can kill him now.

Meanwhile, every Lawgiver in existence hears these thunderous words in her soul as her anima blazes to iconic splendor. Abyssals, Green Sun Princes and Solar akuma remain deaf to the cry. The legends that the death of an Incarna would drive its Chosen mad are true. The madness that befalls the Solars is that of obsession and fury, as each one develops an Intimacy of righteous vengeance against the Ebon Dragon. With his last Charm, the Sun adds to this Intimacy by providing full replenishment of motes, Willpower and

AND THE OTHERS...?

It is highly unlikely but not impossible that the Sun is not the only Incarna to meet his end. The base effect of any Incarna's death follows the same rules as the Sun's demise, though the Intimacy given by a Maiden is more likely to guide Sidereals to some fated deed rather than simple vengeance. Should an Incarna choose to empower her Chosen with her death, the overall benefits mirror the Sun's grace apart from bestowal of Charms. Luna gives four Charms and four Knacks, while the Maidens grant eight Charms (which can include astrological Charms if the dying Maiden unlocks them). Killing a Maiden affects only those Sidereals of the appropriate caste. Sidereal and Lunar akuma receive nothing.

Gaia is too far removed from the Terrestrial Exalted for her death to have any impact (although Creation's climate will return to the cataclysmic instability of the primeval epoch without her souls regulating its Essence flows). The death blessing of one of the Greater Elemental Dragons automatically restores full motes to every being in existence that shares its aspect, including elementals and Terrestrial Exalted.

Virtue channels as well as an additional dot of Essence and 10 Charms (selected by the Solar's player), all bestowed instantly and without cost. Needless to say, this is not *at all* what the Ebon Dragon anticipated, and he is most displeased to have his otherwise absolute victory marred so.

AFTERMATH

Although the red ember of sunlight rises and sets in the cycle of day and night, the light no longer carries any judgment. Hungry ghosts walk brazenly beneath its bloody glow unharmed, basking in its hellish light. Creation is severely demoralized. Although the event galvanizes the Solar Exalted to even greater prominence and power, the Ebon Dragon no longer fears them. Such overconfidence is unwise, but not unexpected. Yes, the Defense Grid no longer functions, and that means Creation's defenders can invade the Realm with impunity, but this is all irrelevant to the fact

that no one can hurt the Ultimate Darkness now. All that remains is for him to free himself so that he may properly celebrate his invincibility.

NEW DAWN

There is always an ending, but as long as Creation lives, there is also a beginning. The death of the Unconquered Sun leaves the Ebon Dragon overconfident, not realizing that the Maidens have unlocked the full power of astrology for the remnants of their Chosen and that this power includes the means to ordain a replacement (see pp. 181–182). The Maidens keep this fact to themselves for as long as they can, biding their time until the Ebon Dragon can be lured into exposing himself to enemies whom he does not believe can hurt him.

Only at the right moment will a new sun shine in the sky and the writ of holy decree blaze in the hearts and Charms of the Exalted once more. Likely candidates for the position include Lytek, God of Exaltation, and the Golden Lord of An-Teng, both faithful lieutenants of the Unconquered Sun with the virtue and wisdom to accept that burden. The Golden Lord is an especially good choice, as he is among the more temperate deities and therefore well suited to upholding his invulnerability. Five Days Darkness offers a stranger choice, allowing the shadow of the Unconquered Sun to become the Sun even as the shadow of the Ebon Dragon became him in his transformation to a Yozi.

Ahlat makes a poor, albeit seemingly attractive choice, as his ambition and arrogance would cloud his judgment upon his ascension. If he somehow learns that the matter is under consideration, he will lobby fiercely for the honor, citing his long-standing support of the Unconquered Sun and involvement in the selection of the first Solar Exalted. If the matter is not decided quickly, the Southern God of War and Cattle will set off a fierce battle for appointment to the station of the Most High, creating pressure to elevate a new Sun earlier than is tactically optimal. His doing so would place the lives of the remaining Sidereal Exalted in even greater jeopardy as they become the primary target of every assassin and military asset the Ebon Dragon commands. Alternatively, the squabbling divinities of Yu-Shan might be bypassed altogether to see the honor bestowed upon an extraordinarily worthy and virtuous human or Dragon King.

By far the most ambitious and rewarding option is to allow a Solar protagonist the chance to become the Unconquered Sun, though doing so means the

character forfeits both flesh and Exaltation as her souls fuse to absorb the destiny and panoply of the Highest of Holies. This is a truly heroic course for a Lawgiver, though the attendant power of the transformation means that such a character likely radically exceeds the prowess of former peers, which could be an issue, depending on the players in question. Other types of Exalted are too closely entwined with the Essence of their patrons to receive this transformation, save perhaps for the most spectacular redemption saga of an Abyssal that could ever be.

ALL HAIL THE QUEEN

Although the Scarlet Empress does an excellent job masquerading as her former self, the ruse cannot last forever. She can silence those who realize that the Blessed Isle is changing for the worse, but eventually, people start to wonder at the number of supposed traitors spouting this particular heresy and examine the situation for themselves. Then, too, the gradual erosion of morality within Realm society raises its own red flags. Even if no one actually succeeds in blowing the whistle beforehand, the conversion of the Isle's manes to blackened palaces of wickedness and the explosion of the Imperial Mountain's peak to shade the world sufficiently convinces the whole of Creation that an apocalypse has come. However the truth comes out, the Scarlet Empress abandons her disguise the moment it is no longer necessary and reveals herself to her horrified people as the Queen of Hell.

To say that the Realm does not take well to the news is an understatement. What remains of the Immaculate Order in the face of oppressive moral taint declares her Anathema and immediately rebels. She anticipates this revolt, of course, and directs her infernal mutant legions, Dynast akuma and other fully loyal forces to purge the monks. Worse, many weaker-willed Dynasts find themselves unable to resist the authority of her Dynasty Charms, even knowing full well what she is. These unwilling pawns join in the killing.

With the Immaculate Order virtually wiped out, the Queen's forces turn to all other dissident elements of society, forcing rebels to go underground to avoid being slain or taken away to undergo desecration into monsters. The responsibility for enforcing martial law gradually shifts from the legions to the thousands of demons the Queen of Hell begins moving onto the island. Mnemon's Righteous Orphan Rebellion gains a breath of fresh air, and it labors to evacuate rebels off the island and away from its accursed miasma so

that they can plan an organized coup and gather allies from the Threshold.

UNHOLY NUPTIALS

Throughout her return to Creation, the Queen of Hell has merely been engaged to the Ebon Dragon, rather than his actual bride. The other Yozis do not realize this, as the wedding in Malfeas immediately preceding her retaking of the Realm was the stuff of epic legend (see pp. 165–166). Yet, this is only one half of the ceremony that the Ebon Dragon has planned, uniting the two under the laws of hell. A second ceremony in Creation is still required to join them under the unwilling eyes of Heaven.

Before her damnation, the Scarlet Empress owned the entirety of the Blessed Isle. Not all of Heaven acknowledged the legitimacy of this claim (she was just a Dragon-Blood, after all). From the standpoint of the land itself and its innumerable least gods, however, her rule established metaphysical ownership. Such ownership did not lapse when she fell into the claws of the Ultimate Darkness, but neither did it transfer to him, and no wedding of Hell could make it so.

The total desecration of the Blessed Isle into the Cursed Isle changes matters, allowing for a very carefully worded set of vows that permit the Queen of Hell to share ownership with her husband as their kiss seals the wedding. This act will draw the Cursed Isle and the Ebon Dragon's Essence together across the infinitudes of Cecelyne, freeing the Shadow of All Things from his prison without also freeing his siblings. He never much cared for sharing.

THE CEREMONY

Since the Infernal Exalted working with the Queen of Hell might ask pointed questions about why she is getting married a second time, the plans for the ceremony remain a closely guarded secret until just before the event. The affair is not a private, quiet deal, though. That would not satisfy the ego of the Ultimate Darkness. When the inauspicious day arrives, demons descended from the Ebon Dragon's souls roam the ruins of the Imperial City, kidnapping citizens and dragging them to a plaza beside the Imperial Manse to bear witness and provide the celebratory banquet for the bride and groom.

A Chosen of Serenity akuma pledged to the Shadow of All Things officiates, binding together the couple through the auspicious marriage vows writ by Venus herself. The Minister of Reconciliation stands as the maid of honor, assuming Tepet Ejawa was elevated to that office. If not, Manosque Cyan will serve just as

well (see **Scroll of Exalts**, pp. 144–145). The part of the groom is played by a Third Circle demon unhappily possessed by its overself for this special day, doomed to perish from the strain of containing the Ebon Dragon. If a hand must break to shatter the wall, such is scripture.

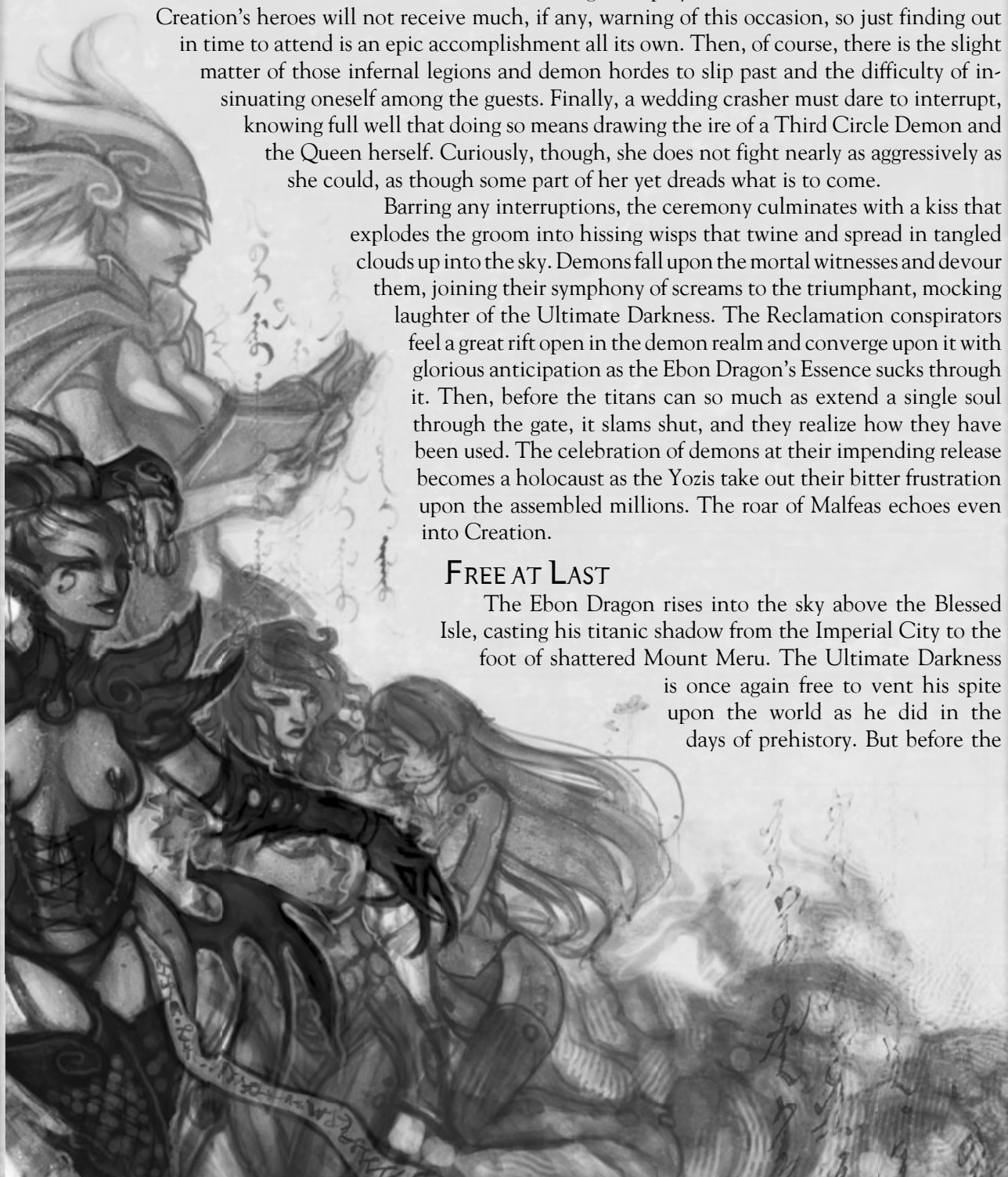
PLAYING THE WEDDING

While Fiends and Dragon-Blooded might attend the wedding and be welcome (in a manner of speaking), the whole point of doing the ceremony the way the Ebon Dragon has planned is to keep out undesired elements. Therefore, the real fun to be had at the wedding is to play one of those undesired elements. Creation's heroes will not receive much, if any, warning of this occasion, so just finding out in time to attend is an epic accomplishment all its own. Then, of course, there is the slight matter of those infernal legions and demon hordes to slip past and the difficulty of insinuating oneself among the guests. Finally, a wedding crasher must dare to interrupt, knowing full well that doing so means drawing the ire of a Third Circle Demon and the Queen herself. Curiously, though, she does not fight nearly as aggressively as she could, as though some part of her yet dreads what is to come.

Barring any interruptions, the ceremony culminates with a kiss that explodes the groom into hissing wisps that twine and spread in tangled clouds up into the sky. Demons fall upon the mortal witnesses and devour them, joining their symphony of screams to the triumphant, mocking laughter of the Ultimate Darkness. The Reclamation conspirators feel a great rift open in the demon realm and converge upon it with glorious anticipation as the Ebon Dragon's Essence sucks through it. Then, before the titans can so much as extend a single soul through the gate, it slams shut, and they realize how they have been used. The celebration of demons at their impending release becomes a holocaust as the Yozis take out their bitter frustration upon the assembled millions. The roar of Malfeas echoes even into Creation.


FREE AT LAST

The Ebon Dragon rises into the sky above the Blessed Isle, casting his titanic shadow from the Imperial City to the foot of shattered Mount Meru. The Ultimate Darkness is once again free to vent his spite upon the world as he did in the days of prehistory. But before the



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Worse, soil loses its ability to interface properly with the element of Wood, causing less hardy plants such as crops to wither away over the span of a week. World-wide famine approaches as soon as current stores run out, save where sorcerers and gods supply their allies and followers. Valuable minerals tarnish and gems lose their luster, but the imperishability of jade keeps



Threshold economies from collapsing overnight (save perhaps where silver is the standard). Elementals of earth redouble their efforts, and in those areas where they are powerful and well organized, they are able to stave off the deterioration for a while. Throughout most of Creation, however, they are quickly overwhelmed and soon sicken from their exertion.

It does not suit the Ebon Dragon for Creation to fail in this manner. Not yet. The world must endure to know its torment and become a broken shadow of itself. And so the Shadow of All Things conjures forth a number of his second circle souls and renders them into black chalcant, forging them into a web of shadows with which to hold the volcanic caldera of the Omphalos together.

THE BLACK SPIRAL

The Ebon Dragon's construction project demands the labor of countless demons, the assistance of Infernal sorcerers and the forging of a number of his own souls into an immense and immensely powerful N/A artifact. The web spans the rim of the burning caldera that is now the shortened peak of Mount Meru. When completed, the construct twists down in a space-warping spiral of absolute darkness tracing the hollow left by the shattered Sword of Creation. The coils stretch through the world to the darkness beyond Creation where only the Ebon Dragon's Charms have delved. A palace of wicked splendors caps the structure, overlooking the Cursed Isle like a spire-encrusted parody of the Jade Pleasure Dome. The interior of the spiral's corridors is both maze and oubliette, like a new demon realm in which captured enemies can know the same eternal torment the gods devised for him.

Depending on distractions and the amount of labor the Shadow of All Things is able to conscript for his project, constructing the Black Spiral takes anywhere from a season to a year. More than any of the preceding blasphemies engineered by the Ebon Dragon's schemes, this project must be stopped, lest his horrid will suffuse the Omphalos and all of Creation's Essence becomes his eternal playground. The Black Spiral is not an elemental pole per se, having no element of its own. Its mockery of elemental principles is sufficient, however, to infect the rest Creation with dim flames that cast more shadows than light, obscene fruits ripe with the promise of desecration, cold winds that carry laughter but no joy and black waters in which only monsters swim. During the construction of his masterwork, the Ebon Dragon remains in near-constant vigil over the shattered peak of the Imperial Mountain, ordering his

Exalted and the Queen of Hell to make sure he is not disturbed. By night he can be seen as a black absence written into the hellish glow above the mountain's shattered peak, visible even from an Imperial City overrun by the forces of Hell.

A TIME FOR HEROES

Creation reels, devastated by a chain of cataclysms. Nations have fallen, Heaven is in disarray, the sky is blackened, Gaia is terribly wounded, perhaps mortally so, and the earth is soaked with the blood of heroes. The Ebon Dragon believes the hour of his final triumph has come. As in the Primordial War, only the Exalted stand in his way.

A MATTER OF SCALE

There are essentially two scales on which stories of heroic resistance to the Ebon Dragon's escape can be told. The first option is to keep the story small-scale (well, small for **Exalted**), with the narrative and its attendant action focusing directly on the players' characters. If Creation is to be saved, its salvation relies on a few rogue Exalts striking out on their own, rising above the clamor and confusion of the Time of Tumult to carve their legend into history as the Scarlet Empress did when she seized the Sword of Creation.

The second option is the "full-sweep" story—**Exalted** with all the trimmings. Such a saga prominently features Mnemon's Righteous Orphan Rebellion (even if the characters do not join or directly oppose it), the Lotus Massacre, the Lunar Exalted flooding in from the Threshold and the various counterstrokes of the Deathlords. In short, a story encompassing the full scope of Creation's power players. While the players' characters are sure to remain important in a story told on this scale, they are unlikely to save Creation single-handedly. More likely, they will forge coalitions, arrange alliances and end up leading an army of Exalted up the slopes of the Imperial Mountain to face the titan coiled around its erupting peak. A third option is to fuse the two narrative arcs. A great and cataclysmic war looms, but ultimately, it falls to the protagonists to win the day while the rest of Creation's defenders engage the Ebon Dragon's hordes.

THE DRAGON-BLOODED

The Realm is shattered. The Blessed Isle, last bastion of civilization in a fallen world, is now a poisoned abode of monsters. The architect of the greatest empire the world has ever known has now murdered her creation, and the Ten Thousand Dragons are scattered to the winds. This will not stand.



The Dragon-Blooded probably do not have the raw power to stand against the unveiled Queen of Hell and her husband. If Terrestrial heroes are to have a hope of saving Creation in a tight-focus game, they must probably head off the Ebon Dragon's plan before his escape. Mnemon's Righteous Orphan Rebellion stands ready to reclaim the Realm, if it can only achieve proper internal unity and the power to stand against the subverted Exalts who guard the Empress's blackened empire. Characters in a small-scale game could uncover ancient First Age weapons (or even an earth-shattering wonder like the Eye of Autochthon) that give the Rebellion a true chance of fighting its way back onto the Cursed Isle despite the awful power of the Empress and her Green Sun Princes. Alternatively, they could crash the Ebon Dragon's wedding ceremony, objecting to the union with bare daiklaves. If the Roseblack serves the Queen of Hell as a brainwashed Minister of Reconstruction, an especially daring coup could involve secretly kidnapping her and freeing her mind ahead of the nuptials so that she can cut down her ancestor as an unexpected assassin.

For a broad-focus story, the dilemma of the Dragon-Blooded is in deciding whether or not to stand with the rest of the Exalted host. The resurgent Solar Exalted likely cannot save Creation without the might of their Terrestrial soldiers, and the Dragon-Blooded, in turn, will almost certainly fall without their onetime golden generals. Fifteen hundred years of systematic lies and murder have estranged the Exalted from one another, so reuniting to face the Ultimate Darkness and his bride could present a challenge as difficult as actually fighting the Ebon Dragon. Ironically, Mnemon's very lack of scruples might save the day on this front, as she's not above working with anyone to save Creation, no matter how wicked she thinks they are.

THE ABYSSAL EXALTED

The Ebon Dragon's triumph bodes as poorly for the Abyssal Exalted as it does for anyone else in Creation. Loyal deathknights will find themselves facing an opponent who is not only completely opposed to the agenda of their masters, but one against whom they have little to no power as creatures of darkness. If the Ebon Dragon prevails, the Neverborn lose. Therefore, the Scarlet Empress must die before she is able to unleash her husband upon the world. Finding and killing the fetish of the Ultimate Darkness will force him to regenerate as a new Yozi, presumably with a new imperfection that allows deathknights to finish the job. Murdering the titan before the Black Spiral is complete has the

added perk of leaving Creation without an Omphalos to stave off its grim unraveling.

Rebellious Abyssals are little better off. If they can convince the other Exalted to accept their assistance, they prove formidable (if chilling) weapons to bring to bear against the poisoned Realm. They are no more directly useful against the Ebon Dragon himself than their loyalist counterparts are, but renegades are more than adequate to the tasks of murdering subverted Dragon-Blooded, hewing through demon armies or slaying any component souls of the Ebon Dragon with whom they are able to catch up. Not all renegades must follow a redemptive arc, though. The Ebon Dragon admires the Abyssal Exalted after a fashion. They are infused with terrible darkness, after all. Some defect to his side when it appears he stands a chance of winning, figuring that they have already made a devil's bargain once and their immortality affords them a chance to spite Oblivion if they take their place as warlords in the Dragon's court.

THE INFERNAL EXALTED

Green Sun Princes are few enough in number that they are mostly suited to small-focus stories. As the deadly left hand of the Scarlet Bride, Infernal characters have most likely been the architects of her triumph to this point.

There is no guarantee that the characters are content with the latest turn of events, however. Dedicated to the belief that the Yozi's imprisonment was unjust might be shocked by the Ebon Dragon's blatant betrayal of the Reclamation. Their twisted piety puts them in the uniquely bizarre position of trying to rescue Creation from an unbound Yozi in order to deliver it into the hands of a different set of Yozi. Alternatively, Green Sun Princes might watch their friends and acquaintances from the Conventicle Malfeasant fall one after another while carrying out the Empress's schemes, slowly becoming convinced that carrying out Hell's escape plan is a fool's game. By slipping their leash and defecting to the side of Creation, they gain the freedom to expend their hellish might to support their own dreams and ambitions, rather than slavishly advancing the agenda of uncaring, fractious titans. Or, schooled in treachery by its supernal embodiment, a coven might simply attempt to hijack the Ebon Dragon's triumph as its own.

All that stands between the Infernal Exalted and the freedom that is their right as Solar Exalted (of a sort) is the Ebon Dragon. And with the Shadow of All Things free in Creation, all the rules and orders of Hell set aside, the Green Sun Princes have a perfect



opportunity to *personally* express their gratitude for all those bouts of Torment since their Exaltation...

THE SIDEREAL EXALTED

The Five-Score Fellowship is shattered, but its survivors have re-armed themselves with weapons not seen since the Primordial War, and they enjoy a clarity of vision and unity of purpose lost for more than 5,000 years.

Or so one hopes. The remaining Sidereals have no time for bickering or division. It will fall to them to convince Creation's heroes to save the world.

A Sidereal game is almost certainly both small- and large-scale by nature. The remaining Chosen of the Maidens are far too fragile to have much hope of facing down the Ebon Dragon in direct combat. In their role as Viziers, however, they stand slightly apart from the rest of the Exalted host, even as they attempt to

bind it together and advise it. When the final battle comes, it is likely that the last Sidereals will stand apart from the titanic struggle with the Shadow of All Things, facing down a foe forgotten or unguessed by the rest of the Exalted host. Perhaps they'll face the Dragon's fetich soul or a coven of Green Sun Princes preparing to unleash a weapon of mass destruction like the soul typhoon that decimated the Dragon Kings. A showdown with the Scarlet Bride might end in her death or redemption, avenging the late Chejop Kejak either way. It is the nature of Sidereals to fight their ultimate battle out of sight and out of mind of their fellows, saving the world from a threat it does not even recognize at the time.

The true challenge the final Viziers face, of course, is to bind the remaining Exalted together into some kind of unified force. Distrustful Lunars must be reunited with newly reincarnated Solars. Dragon-




Blooded who have been indoctrinated for 15 centuries to hunt and kill the Celestial Exalted must once again be convinced to take orders from them. If possible, any Abyssals or Infernals who question their causes must be brought into the fold. This will take the work of master prognosticators, propagandists, manipulators and politicians—and probably a judicious application of old-fashioned fist-to-face. Fortuitously, the Maidens seem to have designed their Chosen to meet the moment of Creation's greatest crisis.

THE SOLAR AND LUNAR EXALTED

Whether they like it or not, the Chosen of the Sun and the Moon must hang together in Creation's darkest hour, or they will most assuredly hang separately. The Solar Exalted are unmatched in leadership capability, raw power and the particular holy might that is (or was till recently) the bane of the Ebon Dragon.

The Lunar Exalted have spent the last few centuries building up huge, rugged, durable societies, many of which have weathered the cataclysms leading up to the Ebon Dragon's return and are now ready to march to war—if they can be motivated to do so. Someone is going to have to step up to lead a reunified Grand Celestial Army, as in the Primordial War. The Bull of the North would be a decent candidate, save that he is likely dead by the time the Ebon Dragon escapes from Malfeas. In his absence, the task is likely to fall to the players' characters.

Alternatively, in smaller-scale games, Lunars or Solars could fight to save the world in a series of discrete encounters. Likely beginning in the Threshold, they proceed through a number of confrontations with Green Sun Prince and akuma agents of the Empress's plans, eventually realizing that the true threat originates on the Blessed Isle. Sneaking ashore



in the riotous confusion of the Civil War's fallout and the darkening of the Isle, a small band of heroes must attempt to retake the Imperial Manse, face down the Scarlet Empress and/or even engage in direct combat with the Ebon Dragon himself. Any of these tasks would be daunting for an army of the Exalted, but Lunars and Solars share one thing in common—a deep reluctance to acknowledge the impossible.

THE ALCHEMICAL EXALTED

Autochthonia represents a wild card in the battle for Creation. If the Empress has managed to form an alliance with the Realm of Brass and Shadow, her betrayal is timed to coincide with the destruction of the Omphalos of Creation. Thousand-forged dragons are activated and set to rampage through the camps of Autochthonian armies, while Green Sun Princes unleash terrible sorcerous devastation. The unbound Ebon Dragon celebrates his freedom by scouring Autochthon's Chosen from the face of Creation, picking off the deliberately fragmented and scattered armies of the Machine God one by one.

If using the "War on the Home Front" scenario from Chapter Six (see p. 187), the armies of Autochthonia make their reappearance as whatever Celestial army has managed to assemble itself prepares to move on the Blessed Isle. Eight gates breach the dimensions at various points around Creation, and men, Exalts and war machines pour into Creation by the tens of thousands, all intent on ending the threat of the Breakers.

In this scenario, the Alchemical Exalted are intended to serve as an 11th-hour cavalry to relieve the beleaguered forces of Creation, which are badly outmatched by the Ebon Dragon's enormous demonic armies. Suddenly having a near-First Age-quality military force appear at all points of the map and converge toward the center does quite a bit to even the odds, especially one led by hundreds of Celestial-level Exalts.

Of course, if Creation wins thanks to Autochthonian assistance, then on the day after the Ebon Dragon's defeat, it will find itself face-to-face with a battered, fractious, but still titanic army that is in de facto occupation of much of the world...

OTHERS

It is a strange story indeed that sees the Ebon Dragon undone by mere mortals, but the Virtue that is his bane may be found in the most unlikely of hearts. Such heroes would need more than courage to slay him, probably some sort of plot-level artifact such as the Eye of Autochthon or the opportunity to ascend

to the Throne of Heaven as the new Unconquered Sun and take command of the Army of Light. Generally speaking, **Exalted** games leave epic deeds to epic heroes, but then again, it was unthinkable that the Scarlet Empress should ascend beyond her station to halt the Balorian Crusade. It's no more unthinkable that the savior Creation needs is not who its heroes and villains imagine.

Similar themes of unlikely heroes can apply to Mountain Folk, God-Bloods or any of the other beings normally relegated to supporting cast. Dragon Kings bear special mention for being a race cut down before they had a chance to properly face the Primordial enemies of their god. The remnants that remain could yet have that chance, driven by extremes of passion and virtue to become a strike force the Ebon Dragon cannot anticipate. Raksha also prove a special case. They have no love for Creation, but the story the Ebon Dragon would tell is a tragedy from which there can be no new chapter. This must not be. If he falls to gossamer knives, then a Prince of Chaos has struck one meaningful blow of retaliation against the Primordials for the blasphemy of the world and simultaneously made fools of the Exalted.

The victory of the small over the mighty is a powerful tale whose telling cannot help but refashion Creation in the aftermath and examine themes of justice. Will glorious heroes give honor and bow before a lesser who shamed them all with her heroism or cast her aside to squabble among themselves for the reins of power?

ENEMIES OF MY ENEMY

Abyssal Exalted are potential protagonists and peers of their fellow Celestials, but the same cannot be said of their Deathlord masters or the Neverborn beneath them. Just as deathknights stand divided on how to deal with the Ebon Dragon, so too do their immediate masters. Some, such as the Bishop of the Chalcedony Thurible, remain zealously dedicated to Oblivion and thus absolute enemies of the freed Yozi. This doesn't mean such Deathlords help the Army of Light, but any demons their spectres kill are demons the heroes don't have to fight.

Other Deathlords are more pragmatic. The Mask of Winters tries to play both sides, but such a strategy just makes him everyone's enemy. The Lover Clad in the Raiment of Tears imagines she can seduce the Ebon Dragon and displace his puppet queen. He lets her harbor this delusion as long as possible, but when she realizes he has spurned her, her wrath drives her to give every aid to the gods purely out of spite. The

First and Forsaken Lion might be swayed to the side of the Shadow of All Things with a deal brokered by his treacherous advisor Meticulous Owl offering to free him from the accursed armor of He Who Holds in Thrall. The Silver Prince, however, might be approached by the righteous deathknight (or redeemed Solar) Fallen Wolf of the Cutting Sea as an emissary of the gods, perhaps inspiring whatever tiny shred of dignity and goodness remains in the Deathlord's heart to choose a better path. It is hard to imagine a Deathlord finding grace, but the end of days is an opportunity for startling occurrences.

The rest of the Yozis want the Ebon Dragon killed and have no qualms about lending aid to the Exalted to see him punished. Such aid comes with heavy strings and plenty of fine print, but help is help, and the Army of Light can't really afford to refuse any potential assets. Though neither Ligier nor the Unconquered Sun can personally face the Ebon Dragon on account of the geasa protecting him, the two might join up for a bit of not-so-friendly rivalry in a contest to see which color light obliterates more of his horde.

The Fair Folk present no particularly unified position, save that none of them want the Ebon Dragon to win. Shaped and unshaped alike agree on that much, at least. The forces of chaos could make excellent cannon fodder against demon legions, or they might just hold out for an opportunity to stab the Exalted in the back for the fun of it, consequences be damned. Wise generals will remember that the raksha do not always do what is in their best interest when confronted with a more interesting alternative.

HORDES OF DARKNESS

In his escape from the Demon Realm, the Ebon Dragon pulls along all his souls, behemoths beholden to him and every demon transformed by the horn of Erembour. It is that last contingent that swells his army from terrible to calamitous, forming the backbone of his horde. In addition, he summons the buried gods the King of the Primordials ordered exiled beneath Creation and bids them join his throng beneath the crimson glow of a dead and powerless sun. The untold races of Darkbroods likewise find their way into his service as cannon fodder, viewing him as the ultimate deity of mercy for striking down the pitiless fire that consigned them to the depths. Most accept their station with a reverence the Shadow of All Things finds truly hilarious. The Ebon Dragon's akuma and Green Sun Princes still loyal to his cause lead his forces, aided by Exalted traitors and an unhappy vanguard of Dynasts

enthralled by the Charms of their damned progenitor. The common denominator of most of these forces is their tendency to burn in sunlight, the return of which affords a chance for a truly awesome rout.

THE SCARLET BRIDE

Once freed, the Ebon Dragon has little further use for the Queen of Hell, believing himself invincible and utterly triumphant. Still, she remains a pawn of great power, and it amuses him to retain the onetime ruler of Creation as his watchdog and concubine. He charges her with defending the Cursed Isle while he knits together the fractured heart of Creation that it might live on to serve his purposes.

The Scarlet Queen has little choice but to obey her husband's commands. She gathers what legions remain, then provides demonic reinforcements to shore up their numbers. She knows that the forces of the Threshold *must* now attempt to move against the Realm and stands ready with all the strength remaining at her disposal. The broken Dynasts enslaved by her Charms must fight on the side of darkness, however much they despair at being pawns of such evil. If freed, they will vent their fury on the monsters around them, hammering their ranks from behind even as the Army of Light joins battle in a two-front pincer action. This gives strong incentive to dispose of the Queen of Hell at the auspicious moment: one way or another.

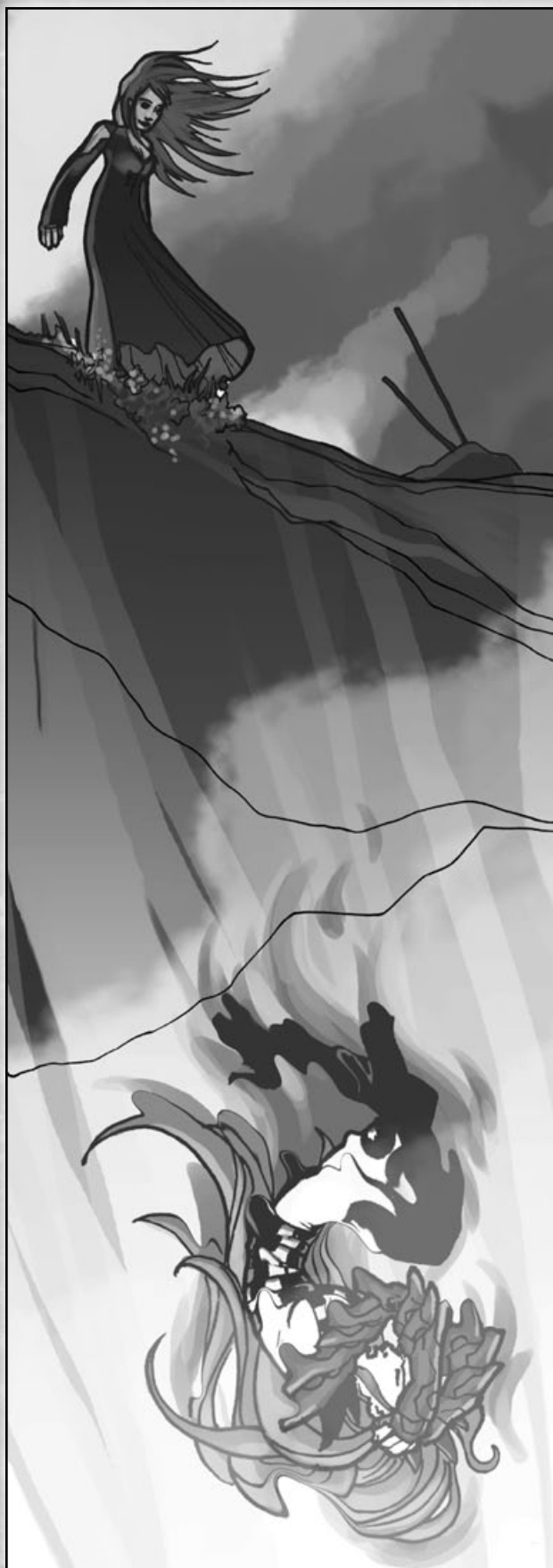
TRAGEDY

If the Scarlet Empress is an akuma or the players' characters are set on seeing her pay for her various crimes and atrocities during the scope of this story and beforehand, then it is likely she is beyond any form of salvation. She serves as a massive, terrible military obstacle in the path of the Grand Celestial Army and will stop at nothing to prevent invaders from reaching her husband atop the shattered peak of Mount Meru. The Empress is a ferocious opponent, both as a tactician and when she directly takes the field, unleashing terrible combat Charms such as the dread *As In the Beginning* and the awful battlefield-blackening tricks of the Ebon Dragon. If and when she finally falls, her defeat serves as an object lesson in the dangers of power and ambition. Whether anyone bothers to pay attention to this lesson in the face of immediate Armageddon is another matter entirely.

TREACHERY

Of course, infusing the Scarlet Bride with all his own propensity for treachery and deceit might not have been the wisest thing the Ebon Dragon has ever done.





The Queen of Hell's Urge as an akuma could conceivably be interpreted in a fatal manner, and it would only be appropriate for the Ebon Dragon's triumphant escape to quickly culminate in his bride attempting to liberate him from the constraints of his living nature. As the Queen of Hell, she has no chance of standing against him in single combat—no matter how powerful her infernal magic renders her—but she might find some means by which to stand aside, allowing the armies of the Exalted to strike at him. She might even offer covert assistance.

SALVATION

Finally, it is possible that a dedicated group of heroes might attempt to save the Scarlet Empress, despite the litany of horrors she has perpetrated since her return to Creation. Perhaps she has managed to resist the Investiture of Infernal Glory and is only chained by the Wedding Band of the Scarlet Bride. In that case, freeing her from the Ebon Dragon's control is "only" as difficult as engaging in combat with the most powerful Terrestrial Exalt in history, backed by the full might of the Ebon Dragon, and amputating the finger upon which the ring rests.

There are several possibilities if the Empress lives out the war against her latest husband. It is unlikely she will be able to resume control of the Realm, particularly if a Celestial army occupies it. (Then again, maybe she can. If she were rescued by a *truly* unlikely group of heroes, such as a band of God-Bloods or heroic mortals, then it is likely that the Empress herself rallies what is left of the Realm to actually pull Creation back from the brink.) It is equally unlikely that she will gracefully step down from power, having become quite accustomed to wielding it over the last seven centuries. It is almost certain that some parties will call for her execution, while others vociferously disagree. She probably attempts to escape in the confusion. From there, she could abandon her former identity and come to prominence under a new legend in the future, or attempt to raise up a Realm-in-exile with which to retake her throne.

For a truly shocking ending, the humaniform *jouten* of Gaia appears on the battlefield in the wake of victory, fresh shoots bursting up from the charred earth where she limps. With a smile, the wounded Primordial claims the former Scarlet Empress and casts her into the smoking caldera, purging and transubstantiating her dark Essence through the crucible of her Terrestrial heritage. The Empress burns like lava as she falls, shattering the coils of the Black Spiral as she passes between them and

swells into a new Elemental Pole of Earth and adopted soul of Gaia. The world goes on, and it is fitting that the woman who was hero enough to save Creation and villain enough to bring it to the edge of destruction should answer for both deeds by anchoring existence and receiving the singular honor of representing Gaia at the Games of Divinity beside the Incarna. Her absorption also conveniently leaves the administration of Creation to those who delivered it from her husband's clutches. A powerful Dragon-Blooded protagonist might receive this honor in her stead if worthier or if the Empress has already perished.

ATTACKING THE DARKNESS

The Ebon Dragon's forces outnumber Creation's heroes by a wide margin, but the Exalted have the advantage of quality over quantity. The ascension of the new Unconquered Sun scatters much of the Dark Horde like so many cockroaches scurrying for cover, but unveiling this asset too soon forces the Ebon Dragon to turn tail and run before Exalted heroes have the chance to confront and vanquish him. Such an outcome risks forfeiting any chance of decisive victory. Accordingly, the Army of Light must confront the Dark Horde without this ultimate weapon, suffering terrible casualties in bloody all-out war as they carve a path of devastation toward the Imperial Mountain. Judicious use of the spell Undisturbed Convocation Veil ahead of the showdown with the Ebon Dragon keeps him from using sorcery to teleport away once he realizes his folly, with extra poetry if an Infernal sorcerer casts it. Even once sunlight and restoration of Holy magic leaves the Shadow of All Things vulnerable, he is still one of the mightiest beings in existence and offers an incredible climactic fight to whatever Exalted engage him.

If the protagonists don't have the combat muscle to beat the Ebon Dragon directly, it is probably better to supply an alternative win condition rather than unsatisfactorily leaving his demise to Storyteller characters. This includes hunting down his fetich, uncovering another secret weakness, finding and using the requisite plot device at the right time or perhaps winning the Scarlet Empress so she reveals some critical chink in his armor. However victory is obtained, it should be won at great cost and with great effort. He is the ultimate villain, after all.

HUSBAND AND WIFE

What follow are the traits for the chief architect of the Reclamation and his bride, so that Creation's heroes can physically combat these twin threats.

THE EBON DRAGON

THE SHADOW OF ALL THINGS

The mastermind behind the Reclamation, architect of the Empress's return, darkest of all the Yozi and sworn nemesis of all things. Once he was the Dragon's Shadow, a sinister dark reflection and denial of every thing that proclaimed itself virtuous. Maimed at the end of the Primordial War, the Ebon Dragon was transformed from his shadow into himself. Now he returns, alongside the Queen of Hell, to reclaim Creation as his own.

For more on the Ebon Dragon, see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**, page 13. For more on his Charms, see **The Manual of Exalted Power—The Infernals**, Chapter Five.

Motivation: None. See Ego Shell Ascendancy.

Urge: (Ophidian) Darken all of existence until Virtue and light cease to be, leaving blackened chaos upon which his will alone dictates possibility. The Ebon Dragon accumulates Limit and suffers self-imposed Torment like a Green Sun Prince with an Ophidian Urge, distracted from his goals by meaningless indulgence. His favorite of these is meaningless wickedness that avails him nothing, whether taking a child's toy or taking the form of a lover to spurn his betrothed to suicide. Paying one Willpower and making a Limit roll allows the Ebon Dragon to ignore his Urge for a scene as his Chosen can; it is his nature to betray even himself.

Attributes and Abilities: All 0, unless temporarily bestowed by Puissance Mimicry Intuition. The Charm Ebon Dragon Glory Incarnate lets him apply an (Attribute + Ability) dice pool of 20 to any action that could be enhanced with his First Excellency, and he may use that Charm to enhance this pool normally as though it were his actual rating. If the action in question is unopposed, he may automatically succeed with a threshold of 10 instead. Should an effect check his actual rating in an Attribute or Ability, he has an effective rating of 10 when he can express the concepts of his Excellency in the context of the reference or 0 otherwise. For truly passive uses of a trait over which the character has no control or opportunity to apply themes (such as checking Stamina to determine soak), the Excellency is considered to apply.

Virtues: All 1. See Hollow Heart Transcendence.

Backgrounds: The Ebon Dragon commands virtually limitless resources and servants, giving him a rating of 5 (or even N/A where such advantages can be extrapolated further) in any Background that reasonably expresses

this authority and station. If he wants something and has ever had any remote chance of obtaining it, he has probably done so.

Adapted Yozi Charms: *Adorjan*: Dissonant Lies Made True, Threat-Monitoring Excitement (+1wp cost to detect threats from Virtue-enhanced actions); *Cecelyne*: As You Wish, Bestowal of Accursed Fortune, Demonic Primacy of Essence, Hellscry Chakra, Scoured Perfection of Form (desecrates

others according to his own precepts), Unquestionable Yozi Authority (x2; all banned attacks strike only empty darkness and fail), Verdant

Emptiness Endowment, Wayward Divinity

Oversight (x3);

Malfeas: Solipsistic Rejection of Impossibilities; *She Who Lives In Her*

Name: Analytical Modeling Intuition (x2; can't extract information about Virtue-enhanced actions instead of emotional state),

Essence-Dissecting Stare, Ego-

Infused Pattern Primacy (x3),

Factual Determination Analysis,

Unmarred Form Technique (**Cost**: —;

Mins: Essence 6; **Type**: Permanent; **Duration**: Permanent; **Keywords**: None;

Prerequisites: Ego-Infused Pattern

Primacy [x3], Wholeness Rightly Assumed [x5]; Reduces cost to instantly

heal damage with Wholeness Rightly

Assumed to 2m per bashing level and 3m per

lethal and allows aggravated levels to heal at the

rate of one per hour.), Wholeness Rightly Assumed

(x5). Others as the Storyteller deems appropriate.

Charms: All Ebon Dragon Charms. Some of his more

defining Charms are listed here. Charms listed with

(Ebon Dragon) in their name are Charms that exist for

each Yozi, building on the appropriate prerequisites.

(Ebon Dragon) *Yozi-Body Unity* (**Cost**: —; **Mins**: Essence 5; **Type**: Permanent; **Duration**: Permanent; **Keywords**: None; **Prerequisites**: First Ebon Dragon Excellency): The Ebon Dragon's body is simultaneously material and dematerialized, allowing him to perceive and physically interact with beings and objects in either state as though he shared that state. He can walk through sanctum entrances like a dematerialized being but may ignore them as a materialized being. All the results of his actions likewise benefit from this unique nature. If another effect defines the character's state as exclusively

material or incorporeal, he may ignore

that effect at will to exist

between states. A second

purchase at Essence 7+

removes the need for

sustenance, air and

sleep and grants



immunity to non-magical disease, plus lets him hear prayers from any realm of existence (but

doesn't make him a

spirit). This Charm may not be

learned through the Eclipse anima

power or equivalent effects, save for Primordial Principle Emulation (see **Glories of the Most High—The**

Unconquered Sun, pp.30–31).

(Ebon Dragon) *Eternal Essence* (**Cost**: —; **Mins**:

Essence 7; **Type**: Permanent; **Duration**: Permanent;

Keywords: Blasphemy; **Prerequisites:** Ebon Dragon Yozi-Body Unity [x2]: The Ebon Dragon cannot be killed by mere injury. If lethal or aggravated damage would reduce him below his last Incapacitated level, it is not applied, nor may an effect slay him outright. Effects that can permanently kill spirits bypass this protection and transform his Essence into a ghost (or Neverborn, if he knows Ebon Dragon Cosmic Principle).

GREATER IMPERFECTION OF ULTIMATE DARKNESS

The Ebon Dragon suffers from his own imperfection more severely than the Infernal Exalted do, as defensive Charms suffering this flaw also cost a number of additional motes to activate equal to the rating of any Virtue channeled to enhance the attack. Worse, his intrinsic antithesis to Virtue means that it is always permissible to channel any Virtue to enhance attacks against him, defend against his attacks or take any action that he directly contests with his traits. Finally, channeling a Virtue to enhance a defense against any physical or social attack the Ebon Dragon makes causes the defense to perfectly succeed. The death of the Unconquered Sun removes the base inapplicability of his perfect defenses to resist Holy attacks, but it does not remove the other effects of the greater imperfection.

(Ebon Dragon) Cosmic Principle (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 10; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** Shaping; **Prerequisites:** First Ebon Dragon Excellency): This Charm shapes the Ebon Dragon's Essence into a single Personal pool with a capacity of 1,000 motes and makes him immune to aging, but it imposes the Greater Imperfection of Ultimate Darkness on him. Upon learning this Charm, a character loses all non-Ebon Dragon Charms and Combos containing such Charms (and the capacity to learn such powers), converting lost magic into appropriate experience points. If an Exalt, his Exaltation departs as it no longer recognizes him as human, leaving him with "only" the Primordial power he has become. He may adapt thematically appropriate Charms from other Yozis to his own imagery and principles as Ebon Dragon Charms without regard for their prerequisites, but he

can't teach these Charms to others. Once learned, this Charm and permanent Charms building off it do not deactivate if the character loses permanent Essence for any reason. The fetich of the Ebon Dragon cannot channel this Charm or any Charm requiring it as a prerequisite, as the part cannot be the whole. This Charm may not be learned through the Eclipse anima power or equivalent effects, save for Primordial Principle Emulation (see **Glories of the Most High—The Unconquered Sun**, pp. 30–31).

(Ebon Dragon) Conceptual Harmony (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 10; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** None; **Prerequisites:** Ebon Dragon Cosmic Principle): The Ebon Dragon uses his own Charms even more adroitly than a spirit uses its own. He can unleash any possible Combo of his Charms without needing to spend Willpower to do so or declare which Charms he intends to activate (as long as the Combo is valid). Moreover, all of his Charms gain the Combo-OK keyword. He can even use reflexive Charms while casting spells, but he cannot do so to enhance the spell in any way. Finally, he is immune to all harm from Ebon Dragon Charms. Learning this Charm converts all known Combos into experience points and prevents the character from developing Combos.

(Ebon Dragon) Pantheon Unfurling (**Cost:** [Essence x 100] m; **Mins:** Essence 10; **Type:** Simple; **Duration:** Instant; **Keywords:** Blasphemy, Shaping; **Prerequisites:** Ebon Dragon Conceptual Harmony): By paying 100 motes per dot of permanent Essence (capped at 9 for non-fetiches), the Ebon Dragon spawns a Third Circle soul with full motes. If he lacks a fetich, he is irresistibly compelled to spawn one as soon as he can pay the cost. If his fetich is destroyed, the Ebon Dragon ceases to exist except as an Essence pool that can't be interacted with, imploding all component souls into himself. He recovers motes until he has enough to create a new fetich, redefining himself as a new Yozi with similar Storyteller-defined themes. If a Green Sun Prince knows any of his Charms, the new Yozi remains equally powerful; otherwise, diminishment is likely. He can't possess more than (Willpower + highest Virtue) Third Circle souls beyond his fetich, lacking Charms to grow via Progenitive souls as many other Yozis do. He can possess his souls (or demons descended from them) as explained in **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II** and can telepathically communicate with such beings across all distance and realms of existence (information exchange only; no social attacks). Influence is two-way, however, as the dragon has an Intimacy of dedication to

each of the current Motivations of every Third Circle soul that cannot be removed or altered by any means save altering the Motivations of the demons in question.

(*Ebon Dragon*) *Glory Incarnate* (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 10; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** None; **Prerequisites:** Ebon Dragon Cosmic Principle): The Ultimate Darkness has a base rating of 0 in all Attributes and Abilities, but can apply dice within the bounds of his Excellency as explained before. He also remembers the comprehensive memories of everyone who has ever learned this Charm. Such conceptual purity also confers immunity to undesired Shaping effects, though this protection temporarily abates while he has spent all Willpower points or has no motes remaining. Even the most powerful Shaping attacks such as Soul Mastery and Pattern Spider Touch cannot penetrate this perfect defense. Upon learning this Charm, a character converts all Attributes, Abilities and specialties into experience points (four experience for the first Attribute dot) and can no longer learn such traits.

(*Ebon Dragon*) *Worldshaper Assumption* (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 10; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** Shaping; **Prerequisites:** Ebon Dragon Eternal Essence, Ebon Dragon Glory Incarnate): Unless defined by other Charms, the Ebon Dragon's Yozi body can take any shape he desires with a size ranging from 1–100 yards in any dimension. In any shape, he is made of tangible darkness and possesses the same traits. His natural soak is (Willpower + Essence)B/L/A, and he has the health level track in this write-up. He naturally heals damage at the rate of one bashing or lethal level per hour or one aggravated level per day, starting with the least severe damage as normal. He is completely immune to all harm or penalties from environmental conditions not imposed by the direct actions of another being and all harm not imposed with a Charm, spell, artifact or other magical effect. His base movement rate is 15 yards per tick (30 yards per tick while dashing) with any form of locomotion, including flight and teleportation through barriers.

(*Ebon Dragon*) *Epic Panoply* (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 10; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** Shaping; **Prerequisites:** Ebon Dragon Worldshaper Assumption): The Ebon Dragon has (Willpower)DV/MDV against any attack as appropriate, choosing how this defense manifests (such as literally dodging aside or allowing attacks to pass harmlessly through him). His intrinsic cowardice prevents him from parrying physical attacks as other Yozi can. He gains three attack options

as noted here, manifesting them in any way appropriate to his themes. A strike may be a tail swipe or bite as a dragon, or a weapon he conjures while appearing humanoid. His blast may be an arrow shot from a summoned bow or a miasma of killing hate he breathes. Normally, he cannot attack except in accordance with Ebon Dragon Glory Incarnate. If he steals traits using Puissance Mimicry Intuition, he may use those traits to attack at will, with an Accuracy of (Dexterity + [Melee or Martial Arts]) for close combat and (Dexterity + [Archery or Thrown]) for ranged combat.

Hollow Heart Transcendence (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 4; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** None; **Prerequisites:** Witness to Darkness): The Ebon Dragon cannot channel Virtues, but he gains a second pool of Willpower points equal to his Essence rating that he can choose to refill when regaining points as normal. Points from this pool may be spent to power Ebon Dragon Charms (but not activate Combos), to resist unnatural mental influence or to ignore all negative effects of a failed Virtue roll required by an external effect (one Willpower point per roll). If an Infernal learns this Charm, his Virtues drop to 1 and can't be raised again. Lost Virtue dots convert into experience. Until a character has Essence 10, his primary Virtue remains 3 for the sole purpose of Limit gain.

Noon as Night Evocation (**Cost:** 5m; **Mins:** Essence 3; **Type:** Simple; **Duration:** One scene; **Keywords:** Combo-OK, Sorcerous; **Prerequisites:** Seeing Is Blindness): The Ebon Dragon conjures unnatural darkness centered anywhere up to (Willpower x 10) yards away and spreading in any desired shape that fits in a radius of (Essence x 10) yards. This blackness is opaque to those outside and blinds all within who lack magic to see in darkness. Sunlight created by something with an Essence, artifact or hearthstone rating higher than the shadow's creator's Essence dispels it; normal sunlight does not. A character with Essence 4+ who knows Life-Denying Hate, Ever-Hungry Shadow Affliction or Despair-Choked Spirit Maiming may add any of these Charms' costs to the cost of Noon As Night Evocation, cursing everyone besides the shadow's creator who isn't protected from Shaping attacks to suffer as though being tagged by the Charm(s) in question while remaining in the darkness. Essence 6+ extends the maximum range and radius to one mile and three miles, respectively.

Exiled by Wicked Hate (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 4; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** Shaping; **Prerequisites:** Life-Denying Hate): Whenever

the Ebon Dragon “kills” a target who is not immune to permanent destruction using an attack enhanced by Life-Blighting Emptiness Attack, the victim is banished beyond existence as per Life-Denying Hate and made immortal to suffer forever. Magical possessions and Celestial Exaltations remain behind.

Mere Wounds Mocked (**Cost:** — (+3m, 1wp); **Mins:** Essence 4; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** None; **Prerequisites:** Damning Petulance Technique): The Ebon Dragon can pay an extra three motes and one Willpower when activating Damning Petulance Technique to boost its duration to one scene. The boosted Charm automatically contests all attack rolls against the Ebon Dragon while active and further applies its effects to all damage rolls made against him. (Damage not resulting from Virtue or stunt-enhanced actions is target number 9.)

Ego Shell Ascendancy (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 3; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** None; **Prerequisites:** Nemesis Self Imagined Anew): The Ebon Dragon has no inherent Motivation of his own, though he may temporarily bestow one on himself using other Charms. Yet, he automatically ignores all mental influence as unacceptable orders if it seeks to build a positive Intimacy in him toward anything outside himself or attempts to make him like, respect or otherwise be positively inclined toward another being. Infernals who gain this Charm lose their Motivation.

Enemy of All (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 5; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** None; **Prerequisites:** Nemesis Self Imagined Anew): This Charm permanently upgrades the range of its prerequisite to one mile. It also makes it Stackable so that it can simultaneously target as many different enemies as the Ebon Dragon commits motes to effect. Multiple opponents may be simultaneously copied with the same activation, paying one mote per enemy. Only one antithetical Motivation is conferred by the Charm at once, but the Ultimate Darkness may reflexively switch between options once per action tick. Ending the Charm Black Mirror Shintai restores all adversarial commitments made with all activations of Nemesis Self Imagined Anew the character had upon activating the shintai.

Wretched Vile Lies (**Cost:** 10m, 1wp; **Mins:** Essence 3; **Type:** Supplemental; **Duration:** Instant; **Keywords:** Combo-OK, Illusion, Social; **Prerequisites:** Soul Crack Exploitation): This Charm enhances any Manipulation-based social attack aimed at convincing others of something untrue. The lie must be directly harmful for the listener to believe it, such as

convincing a heroine that her lover is dead (when she is alive and well) or that the Ebon Dragon is her friend. All targets with an MDV less than the successes rolled develop an Intimacy toward the lie and cannot recognize the unnatural mental influence for what it is or weaken the Intimacy without spending two Willpower points per scene. Excising the Intimacy ends the deception and instills a new Intimacy of hate toward the deceiver.

Talent Theft Internalization (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 5; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** None; **Prerequisites:** Puissance Mimicry Intuition [x3]): This Charm improves its prerequisite, allowing the Ebon Dragon to mimic multiple traits with a single activation of the Charm, paying the appropriate motes to do so. If the character knows Enemy of All and has targeted multiple characters with Nemesis Self Imagined Anew, traits may be simultaneously copied from separate targets. Finally, the cost to absorb Attributes and Abilities decreases to four motes and two motes per dot, respectively.

All-Shade Mockery (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 7; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** None; **Prerequisites:** Puissance Mimicry Intuition [x3]): This Charm permanently improves the range at which its prerequisite can copy Charms to one mile. It also allows the Ebon Dragon to copy individual Charms without knowing prerequisite Charms or meeting trait minimums other than Essence. Any Charms he copies with a Flaw of Invulnerability suffer the Imperfection of the Shadow of All Things instead.

Shadow Slave Extraction (**Cost:** — [20m, 1wp]; **Mins:** Essence 6; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** None; **Prerequisites:** Black Mirror Shintai): Upon activating Black Mirror Shintai to target someone he can perceive within one mile, the Ebon Dragon may pay 20 motes and one Willpower instead. Doing so does not pull the victim’s shadow into himself. Instead, the stolen shadow coalesces within 10 yards of the Ebon Dragon into a copy of the target, possessing the traits the Ultimate Darkness would gain using the shintai. The copy comes into existence with the same health and Willpower points remaining as the original had at the time of duplication, but it has no motes of its own and spends its creator’s motes (as long as he permits the drain). The copy is as obedient to its creator as a bound demon is. This Charm can spawn only one entity at a time unless the character has Essence 9+, in which case as many different characters may be concurrently duplicated with a single activation as the Ebon Dragon wishes



to sustain with committed Essence. The character cannot copy himself or copy the same character with separate activations of the Charm.

Tenebrous Apotheosis Shintai (**Cost:** 35m, 1wp; **Mins:** Essence 8; **Type:** Simple; **Duration:** One scene; **Keywords:** Blasphemy, Form-type, Obvious; **Prerequisites:** Mere Wound Mocked, Exiled By Wicked Hate, Black Mirror Shintai, Bloodless Murk Evasion): For the duration of this Charm, the Ebon Dragon temporarily gains the Greater Imperfection of Ultimate Darkness and the effects of the Charms Ebon Dragon Worldshaper Assumption and Ebon Dragon Epic Panoply (unless he already has these qualities). His current damage applies to his new health track upon entering the form, but leaving it with more damage than his base form can endure only reduces him to Incapacitated. At Essence 9+, the Charm's Duration increases to Indefinite.

Dragon Who Swallowed the Sun (**Cost:** —; **Mins:** Essence 8; **Type:** Permanent; **Duration:** Permanent; **Keywords:** None; **Prerequisites:** Tenebrous Apotheosis Shintai): Upon activating the Charm's prerequisite, the Ebon Dragon's body expands into his distinctive draconic form, stretching up to 50 miles from snout to tail and two miles wide. This epic size does not make him easier to hit, as attacks he dodges pass harmlessly through him. His own attacks cannot be part of a flurry, but simultaneously hit everything within a radius of half his width around the desired impact point with a single attack roll, against which each target in that radius separately defends. His blast attack also has a range increment of three miles. Charms enhancing his attacks apply equally to all victims as though they were the sole target. Infernals who learn this Charm may swell into a dark titanic version of their iconic anima instead of assuming dragon shape, subject to the same size limits.

Spells: All sorcery spells of all circles permitted by the Ebon Dragon's initiation Charms. His mastery of necromancy is not exhaustive, but it extends to most of the more common spells of the Iron and Onyx Circles as well as all spells that invoke darkness, reflections and other principles closely resonant with his nature. He vastly prefers to keep his Essence attuned to life and does not refashion himself as a creature of death with Ultimate Darkness Internalization to access necromancy unless he wishes to do something he absolutely can't do any other way.

Join Battle/Debate/War: 0 or 20, depending on how he initiates conflict. See Ebon Dragon Glory Incarnate.

THE HEART OF DARKNESS

This book is deliberately silent on the subject of the Ebon Dragon's fetich soul. Storytellers are encouraged to invent a fetich that suits the particular twists they have added to their story or, if necessary, that provides an easier means of defeating the Ebon Dragon if the Shadow of All Things proves to be too mighty for the players' characters to overcome in direct confrontation (or if they are playing an Exalt type, inherently unsuited to battle with the Ebon Dragon, such as Abyssals or Infernals). Guidelines for creating high-Essence spirits may be found in *The Books of Sorcery, Vol. IV—The Roll of Glorious Divinity I, The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. III—Yu-Shan* and *The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II*. Keep in mind that the fetich of the Ebon Dragon likely dwarfs the might of Erembour, its lesser sister.

The Ebon Dragon is no fool and most likely has an Infernal sorcerer summon his fetich into Creation well in advance of his escape, so that it cannot be summoned up from Malfeas at the next opportunity by his enemies. The fetich is then ordered into hiding, which may or may not grate on the Ebon Dragon's mightiest soul, depending on the specific demon assigned that role. As Ligier is not of one mind with Malfeas, how much more so must the Ebon Dragon fear the treachery of his heart? Is he a being of great Virtue, the worst of betrayals? Is she a thing more terrible still, whose glimpse of Oblivion has instilled in her the desire to see her over-self attain true Ultimate Darkness as the King of the Neverborn? Or is it simply a pathetic creature without even a perfect defense to its name, barely more than a Second Circle in its embodiment of the dragon's hollow heart?

Attacks:

Strike: Speed 5, Accuracy 20, Damage 10B/L, Parry DV —, Rate 5, Tags N

Clinch: Speed 6, Accuracy 20, Damage 10B/L, Parry DV —, Rate 1, Tags C,N,P

Blast: Speed 5, Accuracy 20, Damage 10B/L, Range 1 mile, Rate 5, Tags N

Soak: 20B/L/A (immune to non-magical attacks, among other threats)

Health Levels: -0x10/-1x10/-2x10/-3x10/-4x10/-5x10/-6x10/-7x10/-8x10/-9x10/-10x10/I

Dodge DV/MDV: 10 **Willpower:** 10 (20 points)

Essence: 10 **Essence Pool:** 1,000

Other Notes: None

THE SCARLET EMPRESS

ETERNAL RULER OF THE REALM, THE SCARLET BRIDE,
THE QUEEN OF HELL

Once, long ago, she was a young Dragon-Blooded officer in the Shogun's armies. Seizing the awesome and incomprehensible engines left behind by the Solar Exalted, she scoured the Fair Folk from the world and made Creation safe for its inhabitants once again. Then, for better than seven centuries, she was the Scarlet Empress, the woman who ruled Creation with a deft combination of cunning, ruthlessness,

canny statesmanship, enormous wealth and unrivaled military power. Now, she is the Queen of Hell, the Ebon Dragon's Scarlet Bride—abducted, tormented and bound to the will of the Shadow of All Things.

It is left up to individual Storytellers to decide whether the Empress has been only partially broken through a combination of torment, Fiend-sanctified oaths and the awesome power of the Wedding Band of the Scarlet Bride, or if she has completely surrendered to the Ebon Dragon's power as an akuma. The traits that follow present the Scarlet Empress as the free-willed ruler of Creation, with her modified traits as an akuma (or, for a more difficult non-akuma encounter, enhanced via demonic Endowments) following a slash, where they differ.

Motivation: To preserve Creation at all costs.

Some Intimacies include the Realm (pride), Chejop Kejak (wary fear), Lookshy



(grudging respect), the Wyld Hunt, and, against her better judgment, her treacherous daughter Mnemon. / None.

Urge: None. / To provide the Ebon Dragon with ultimate and final release. (This Urge represents the Queen of Hell as an akuma. Either way, she also carries the secondary Urge "Love, honor and obey the Ebon Dragon" and an Intimacy of love toward the Ebon Dragon, thanks to the Wedding Band of the Scarlet Bride.)

Aspect: Originally, Earth. Thanks to the Charm Transcendent Gaian Harmony (see **Dreams of the First Age: Book II—Lords of Creation**, p. 84), she has also incorporated the elements of Fire, Water and Air. As the Queen of Hell, she also encompasses Wood.

Anima Banner: A flawless, many-faceted red diamond. / A many-faceted red diamond with a serpentine black flaw in its depths.

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 5/7, Stamina 4; Charisma 7/8, Manipulation 8/10, Appearance 6; Perception 7, Intelligence 8/10, Wits 7

Virtues: Compassion 2/1, Conviction 5/1, Temperance 4/1, Valor 4/1

Abilities: Archery 5, Athletics 3, Awareness 5 (Assassins +1), Bureaucracy 8 (Thousand Scales +3), Craft (Air) 2, Dodge 5/6, Integrity 8 (Ignoring Emotional Appeals +2), Investigation 4, Larceny 2, Linguistics (Native: High Realm; Flametongue, Forest-tongue, Low Realm, Riverspeak, Old Realm, Rocktongue, Seatongue, Skytongue) 8, Lore 7 (Sidereals +1, History +2), Martial Arts 5, Medicine 7/9, Melee 5/8 (Spear +3), Occult 8/10 (Sword of Creation +3), Performance 8/10 (Public Address +2), Presence 8 (Subverting Enemies +1, Intimidation +2), Resistance 3/8, Ride 3, Socialize 8/10 (Great Houses +3), Stealth 3, Survival 2, War 7 (Logistics +1)

Backgrounds: The Scarlet Empress personally possesses Breeding 5. As ruler of the Realm, she has access to the wealth of the greatest empire on the face of Creation, commands tens of thousands of elite soldiers, controls one of the world's greatest spy networks and otherwise generally has access to almost any Background of which she finds herself in need at 5+.

Charms: The Scarlet Empress knows most Charms for which her Abilities qualify her. Bureaucracy and social Charms (including Integrity) are her highest priorities, followed closely by Occult and Lore. While she is personally a fearsome combatant, physical Charms have never been her main area of focus. (She has champions and the legions to do battle for her.) She *does* know As In the Beginning, as well as all Dynasty-keyword Charms from

KEYWORD: DYNASTY

This Charm concept, introduced in **Dreams of the First Age**, is briefly revisited here for the benefit of those without that supplement. Dynasty Charms have effects on the user's blood kin (especially descendants) and form one of the keystones of the Ebon Dragon's escape plan.

Honored Ancestor Exhalation: This Linguistics Charm allows the user to invent a Motivation. When her descendants channel Virtues in support of it, they replace their Virtue rating with the ancestor's Essence score and do not actually expend channels of the Virtue.

Implacable Progenitor Mien: This Socialize Charm grants a bonus to the user's MDVs based on the Magnitude of the unit that would include all of her living descendants. It applies that same value as a *penalty* to the MDV of her descendants against her own social attacks unless they also know this Charm. For the Scarlet Empress, this bonus/penalty is 9.

Puissant Precursor's Monologue: This Performance Charm allows the Empress to make powerful social attacks encouraging her descendants to change their Motivation to match her own (or, as the Queen of Hell, to match her Urge).

Thicker Than Stone: This Integrity Charm immunizes the user against mental influence from non-relatives that would cause her to knowingly harm her blood relatives and also extends this immunity to her descendants with Breeding 3+. The Empress also knows a Charm to suppress this permanent effect for the times she wanted her children set at each other's throats by outsiders.

Dreams of the First Age. As a martial artist, she has mastered the Five Dragon, Terrestrial Hero and White Veil styles. As the Queen of Hell, thanks to the Wedding Band of the Scarlet Bride, she also knows all Ebon Dragon Charms appropriate to her Essence rating.

Spells: The Scarlet Empress is likely the most accomplished Dragon-Blooded sorceress alive. While she has not mastered *all* published Terrestrial Circle spells, she

does know most of them. Moreover, thanks to her ownership of the Mantle of Brigid, she is also an accomplished Celestial Circle sorcerer. As the Queen of Hell, either through the Wedding Band of the Scarlet Bride or Investiture of Infernal Glory, she also knows a number of Adamant Circle spells including, but not limited to, Adamant Countermagic, All-Commanding Oversoul Beckoning, Benediction of Archgenesis, Soul-Twisting Defilement Radiance and Total Annihilation.

Join Battle: 12

Attacks:

Punch: Speed 6, Accuracy 11/13, Damage 4B, Parry DV 6/7, Rate 3, Tags N

Kick: Speed 5, Accuracy 10/12, Damage 7B, Parry DV 4/5, Rate 2, Tags N

Clinch: Speed 5, Accuracy 10/12, Damage 4B, Parry DV —, Rate 1, Tags C,N,P

Dire Lance (Eye of the Fire Dragon)*: Speed 4, Accuracy 16/21, Damage 15L/16L, Parry DV 8/11, Rate 3, Tags 2,L,R

* This jade dire lance inflicts aggravated damage to Solar Exalts. For more information, see **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. III—Oadenol's Codex**, page 43.

Soak: 2L/4B (Given the opportunity to prepare for battle, the Empress could certainly obtain armor of any desired quality.)

Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-1/-1/-2/-2/-2/-2/-4/Incap (if akuma, add three more -1 and -2 health levels)

Dodge DV: 9/11 **Willpower:** 10

Essence: 8/9

Personal Essence: 32/33

Peripheral Essence: 60/57 (78/75)

Committed Essence: 18

Other Notes: None

NEW DYNASTY CHARMS

The Scarlet Empress has mastered both of the following Dynasty Charms.

THE WIND TURNS

Cost: —; **Mins:** Lore 5, Essence 5; **Type:** Permanent

Keywords: Dynasty

Duration: Permanent

Prerequisite Charms: Elemental Empowerment Meditation

The wisest savants know that a breath sent out into the world can return as a hurricane, and a word sent out into the world can return as a revolution. So it is that the Grandchildren of Gaia are eventually empowered by the lives they have brought into Creation. The character's Personal Essence pool is permanently

increased by a number of motes equal to the Magnitude of the unit that would be formed by all of her currently living Dragon-Blooded descendants. Her Peripheral Essence pool increases by twice that number.

BLOOD SPEAKS TO BLOOD

Cost: 7m; **Mins:** Presence 5, Essence 5; **Type:** Reflexive (Step 1)

Keywords: Combo-OK, Dynasty, Social

Duration: Instant

Prerequisite Charms: Warlord's Convocation

Be she loved or reviled, a Dragon-Blooded matriarch can never be ignored. This Charm makes a Presence-based social attack against one of the character's descendants unblockable and undodgeable. Reduce the cost to three motes if the user has Presence 7+.

EPILOGUE


The final clash between the Ebon Dragon and his minions against Creation's defenders can end any number of ways, none of which have to terminate the series if everyone still wants to play.

AN AGE OF SHADOWS, A WORLD OF DARKNESS

It is possible that Creation's defenders will fail to stop the Ebon Dragon and he wins. This is almost assuredly not the ending the players had in mind if their characters led the Army of Light to ruin, but if there is no possibility of defeat, victory is hollow. Yet, just because the Ultimate Darkness wins the apocalyptic battle doesn't mean the war is over. Several possibilities for post-defeat plots follow.

REBELLION

The Ebon Dragon is now the Emperor of Existence, Overlord of the Omphalos and other such grandiose self-appointed titles. His forces spread out to crush what pockets of resistance they can find, enslaving the populace of Creation. His rule transcends mortal conceptions of tyranny, being utterly oppressive and capricious and self-serving. The Yozi does what amuses him, and what amuses him most is a world gradually unraveling not into nothingness, but worse, nothing but himself as the mad dictator of all chaos. Those who bear witness to the slow decay of everything good cannot even bemoan the loss for being enslaved to partake in the degradation. The anguish of his slaves delights him. He laughs when mothers splatter the brains of their babies against the walls for being inconvenient. He laughs when starving orphans eat each other. He laughs when his passage brings forth



monsters from beneath the earth in great orgies of rape until no pure human lineages remain. Surviving gods who remember miss the good old days when the King of the Primordials was their kindly master.

These are bleak times to be sure, but the situation is not hopeless. Exaltations can't be destroyed, after all, so there is always the possibility that new heroes will incarnate to rise up and overthrow the Shadow of All Things if he somehow kills the entire host of the Chosen.

Even supposing the Ultimate Darkness manages to trap the Essences of his enemies in a new Jade Prison, the Exaltations remain and wait, as the Solar Exaltations did, for the inevitability that some force will eventually set them free. Should the Ebon Dragon manage to corrupt every Exaltation into some Infernal mockery, the products of his labor will remain Exalted, capable of self-determination to challenge their dark master. After all, the cycle of Creation's history is a saga of subordinates overthrowing their lieges. Hope springs eternal, and hope is poisonous to the Ultimate Darkness.

A series could pick up centuries or millennia after the Ebon Dragon seized control, with new Exalted planning a guerilla uprising against the tyrant Yozi in a world ravaged by his reign. The protagonists might even be the reincarnations of the Exalted who perished in the long-ago apocalypse, picking up where their predecessors failed.

Alternatively, the rebellion starts even as the Ebon Dragon takes over. The heroes flee the battlefield—not as cowards, but to regroup and plan the next assault. Yes, they now have less infrastructure and support to back them up, but that's no reason to give up. The resistance might go it alone, trusting the next plan to succeed where the previous one did not. Of course, strange allies can be found in the other Yozis, who are still furious at their sibling's (hardly unexpected) betrayal. Where the legions of Heaven have failed, perhaps the hordes of Hell will succeed. Creation has certainly seen weirder sights than Solars riding Infernal behemoths into battle ahead of gibbering multitudes of erymanthoi. The price of such aid will be quite high, but better a devil you can bargain with than one you can't. Infernal Exalted loyal to the former Reclamation might even fight back-to-back with their golden cousins as twin suns dawning against the dark.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Those who survive the disastrous assault on the Ebon Dragon flee into the Wyld, hoping they can

outpace the spreading darkness and his minions. The goal might be to regroup far enough away to catch a breath, with the ultimate intention of returning and waging rebellion as discussed previously. Of course, with only horror and tyranny waiting inside Creation, its expatriates might instead decide to go looking for other worlds out in the reaches of furthest chaos built by other Primordials or Solar engineer-explorers of the First Age.

The possibility of Exalt-built realms might even offer inspiration to forge a new Creation with Shaping magic. The Titan citadel *Scattered Petals of the Thousand-Toothed Blossom* makes a perfect bastion for such a quest, as it is already equipped with the machinery necessary to build artifacts such as shaping engines and genesis labs to seed life in the resultant landmass. Finding a refuge in which to begin this monumental undertaking might span a series unto itself, with Creation's beleaguered heroes running one step ahead of the terrible force that doggedly pursues them. Even if they succeed, what happens when the Ebon Dragon eventually finds them? Or maybe the finding works the other way around as the citizens of New Creation eventually stage an invasion to retake their ancestral homeland.

BOOT ON FACE, FOREVER

Of course, there is always the possibility that the protagonists were Infernal Exalted or traitors among the Chosen who made the Ebon Dragon's victory possible. For such characters, the reign of Ultimate Darkness is not completely fun (he is a wicked monster, after all), but it has its perks. Terrorizing the natives might get old after a while, but creative minds can devise all kinds of new torments and hideous experiments to pass the time as favored pets of the titan lord. Of course, the other side is still out there, plotting rebellions to crush (or join or even lead if the Ebon Dragon becomes too onerous). The Chosen of the gods might even be going out into the Wyld to plan revenge or try to build something the dark master doesn't want built. Hunting them down could be fun, or maybe it would be better to give them a sporting chance to think they have found hope before dispelling the lie with overwhelming force in a game of cat-and-mouse.

OR NOT

After a few years of the Ebon Dragon's rule, Oblivion really starts looking like the better deal. At least the hurting would stop. Abyssal Exalted can be the ones leading the resistance, with suicide commandos and death cults spreading in proportion to the misery

the Ultimate Darkness perpetrates. The Neverborn stir from the bloodshed. Perhaps they even awake, remembering which Primordial convinced them to keep fighting the Exalted with his false promises of help. Perhaps they recall how the curses he taught them as weapons turned out not to function except with their dying breaths empowering them, and perhaps this memory is not simply a delusion of their tortured madness. It could be that the final war is not light and darkness, but darkness wrestling darkness until nothing is left. The last Abyssal might spit upon the ashes as Oblivion consumes hope itself and only the indestructible Exaltations of the Celestials flicker as the last embers of existence. This is a horrid, nihilistic ending to be sure, but there is no question that life under the Ebon Dragon is worse.

AN AGE OF LIGHT

The Ebon Dragon dies, cut down by the blades and holy might of his enemies. Sunlight pierces the gloomy clouds above and shines once more upon Creation. Victory is at hand. Infinitely below, in the folded maze of nightmares and rotting husks of Primordial Essence, winding coils stir and twist. A darkness moves there, the shadow of the shadow of himself, but still the lie that was the Ebon Dragon. What then?

NEXT APOCALYPSE PLEASE

The Ebon Dragon was the most pressing threat to Creation, but he's hardly the only one. The unshaped raksha still lurk in the Wyld, hungering to consume the Tapestry and rend space and time into idle whims. With so many of Creation's champions dead and the borders of reality weakened in the aftermath of the war, these inchoate monsters grow bolder, launching storms and hobgoblin hordes in a brutal crusade. This assault could come right away or after a bit of time for the players to catch their breath, but the Exalted must continue to be the guardians of Creation against the terrible things that want to destroy it.

Another good candidate for evil-of-the-month is the Neverborn and their Deathlord slaves (should any remain). The undead titans don't have the mobility and drive that the Ebon Dragon displayed, but not for lack of dedication to their cause. Many, many people died in the war, and that's a good start—especially with new and bigger shadowlands through which spectres and war ghosts can plague the living.

The Ebon Dragon is now a Neverborn, too. The temple-tomb of the Dragon That Was has never been breached like his siblings' were, so he cannot even

whisper his hate at his enemies. Still, all it takes is one overcurious necromancer to pry open the seals and bring his voice into the cacophony of the Labyrinth. Perhaps he rises again, having planned even for this. Perhaps he alone among his kind can move (or worse, awaken) his siblings as the King of the Neverborn to begin their slow crawl up to the living world. Perhaps a terrible miasma bursts from the heart of Stygia, filling the sky with a great maelstrom of the shadows of all things dead. Perhaps the defeat of this horror might plug the Well of the Void, collapse the Underworld, allow the Neverborn to incarnate into new Primordials and end Oblivion forevermore. Or perhaps the Dragon That Was is truly helpless and special only for being fully aware of his helpless state, an impotent and obsolete monster crowned with failure. He deserves that.

Any one of the other Yozis poses a threat comparable to the Ebon Dragon, and if more than one escaped at once, the devastation would be unimaginable. The Shadow of All Things proved that the Demon Realm is not an inviolable prison, and even the rage the imprisoned titans felt when the Ultimate Darkness left them behind does not obviate their excitement to know they can be freed. It is only a matter of time before this happens.

Negotiations for peace could be in order, with the Exalted eventually offering to free the Yozis and let them go build new worlds out in the Wyld as long as they swear never to return to Creation. Or maybe a more brutal solution is in order—kill them all and hope the universe doesn't break any worse as the population of Neverborn grows. Or perhaps the time has come to give the titans back their Games of Divinity and the palaces of Yu-Shan, so that the gods once more dwell in Creation and take a more active role in its stewardship. If the Yozis agreed to remain in Heaven and leave Creation alone, keeping the Incarnae from the distraction of the Games, the world might end up a better place for it. But really, this is just overly optimistic thinking. The Yozis are terrible things, and before it could ever be safe to release them, they must be rehabilitated. Such a quest is a series unto itself.

The most insidious threat the Exalted face is each other. Unless the Great Curse can be discovered and lifted, its influence will eventually drive the Chosen to madness and excess as it did in the First Age. The cycle of violence and betrayal will continue. Therefore, the first order of business in building lasting peace is to deal with the spite of the Neverborn. The next is figuring





out who will rule and how, and especially how to do so with justice and heroism. Such negotiations afford excellent opportunities for social characters to shine.

As for the Ebon Dragon himself, he has a talent for escaping impossible confinement, and death is nothing if not that. Resurrection is impossible, but the Charms that define him still exist for some ancient Green Sun Princes to stumble upon one day and thereby become the principle that is the Shadow of All Things. More immediately, his wedding ring offers every one of his Charms to its wearer. Should it survive the war and fall into the hands of an Essence 10 being, his rebirth might come a good deal sooner.

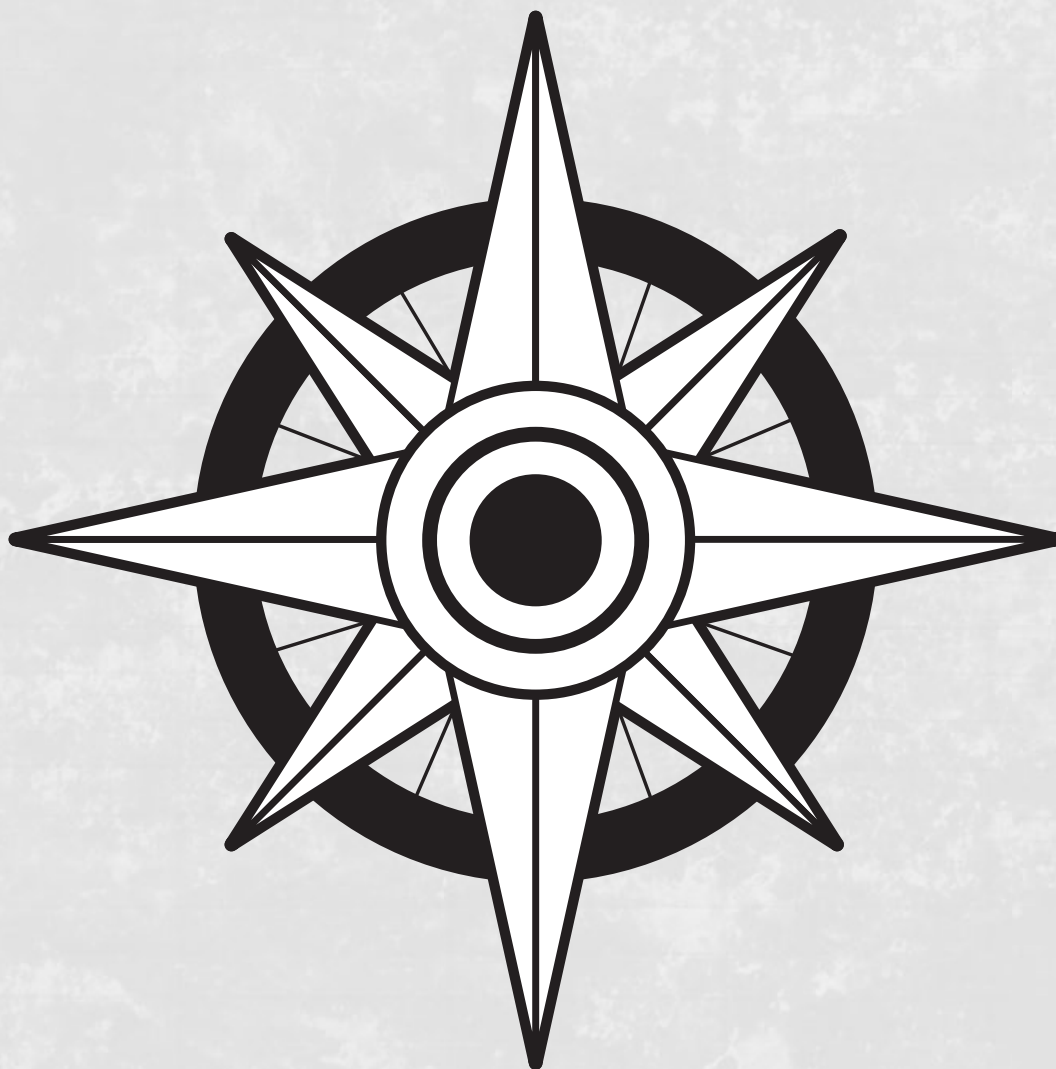
Death is not the only way that the Ebon Dragon can lose. Setting aside the possibility of a worse fate devised by his enemies, he is the most pathetic coward in the history of existence. Faced with the might of a reunified Exalted host, the wrath of his siblings and especially the unthinkable nightmare of a new Unconquered Sun, he might simply decide to fake his own death or take off and leave his hordes to burn. This could be a tactical retreat, a fallback to plan his next bid for apocalyptic world domination.

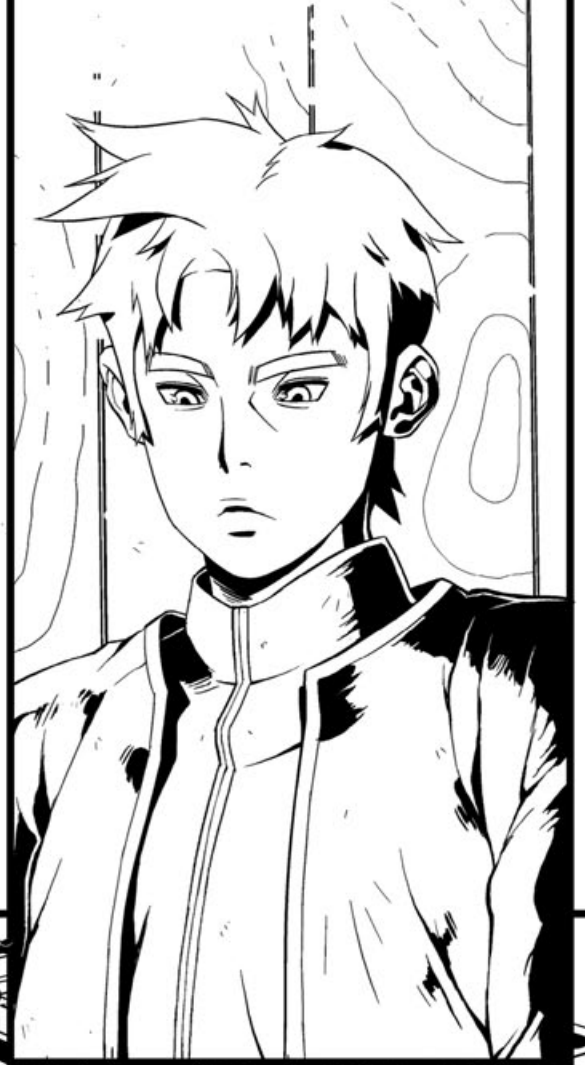
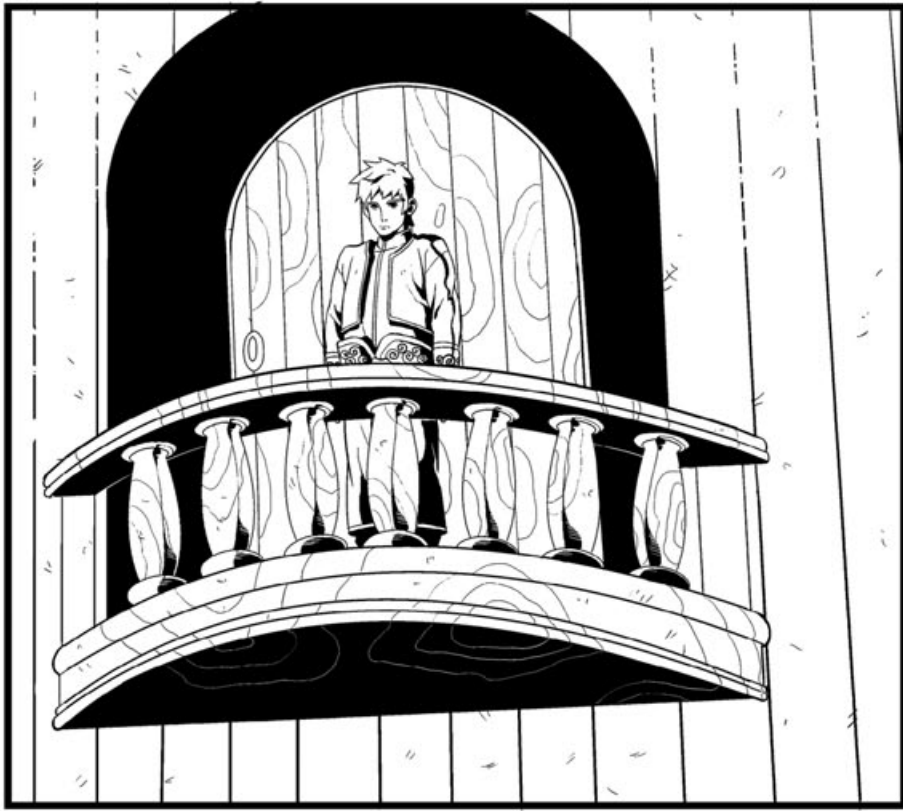
Otherwise, the Ebon Dragon might simply decide that discretion is the better part of victory and use his Charms to hide in the world as an eternal force of wickedness, vanishing time and again before the Exalted can find and kill him. One Primordial refashioned for war managed to fight a century-long guerilla war against the Solar Realm at the height of its power, and that titan was nowhere near as cunning or subtle as the Shadow of All Things. If the Ultimate Darkness avoids direct conflict, he could theoretically bedevil Creation forever. The world is a toy to him, and its capacity for suffering is infinite as long as the world lasts. Why should he ever stop playing with it? In this role of trickster-nemesis, he could thwart the schemes of the righteous and wicked alike, subverting all whose plots threaten his amusement.

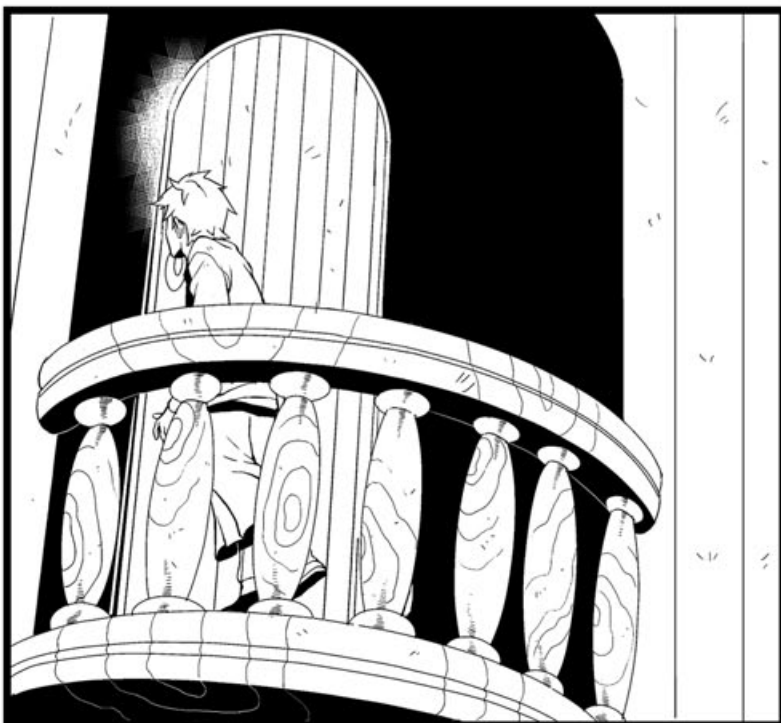
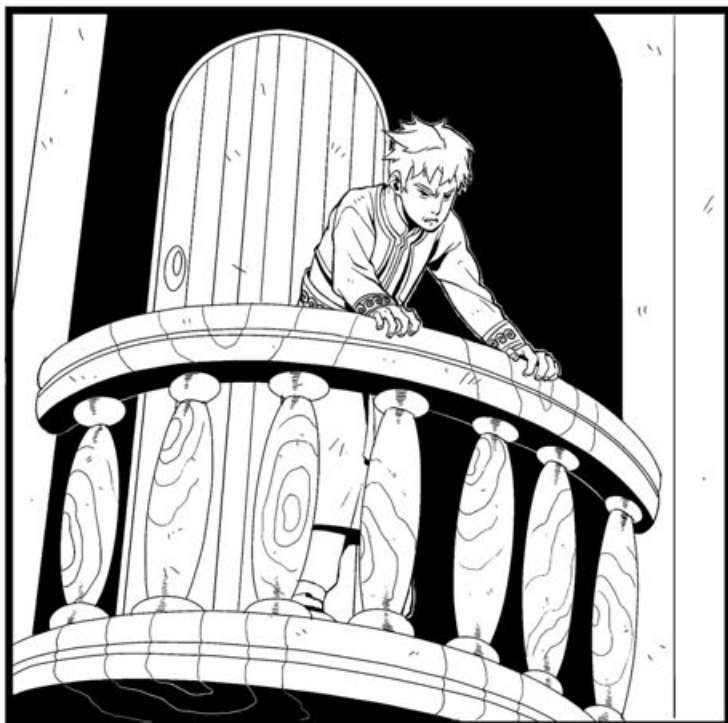
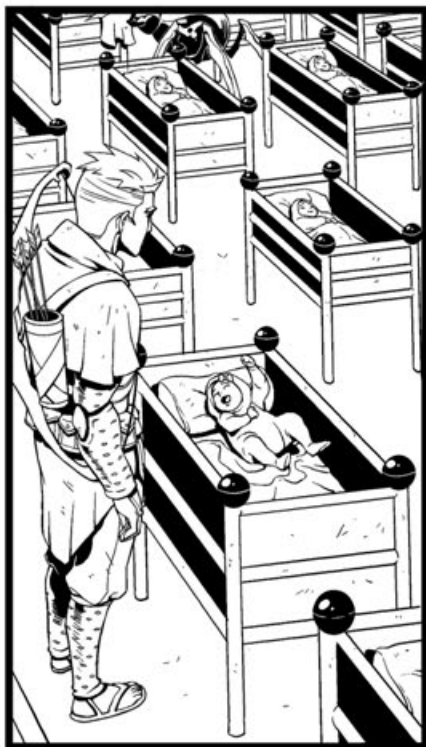
ALL GOOD THINGS

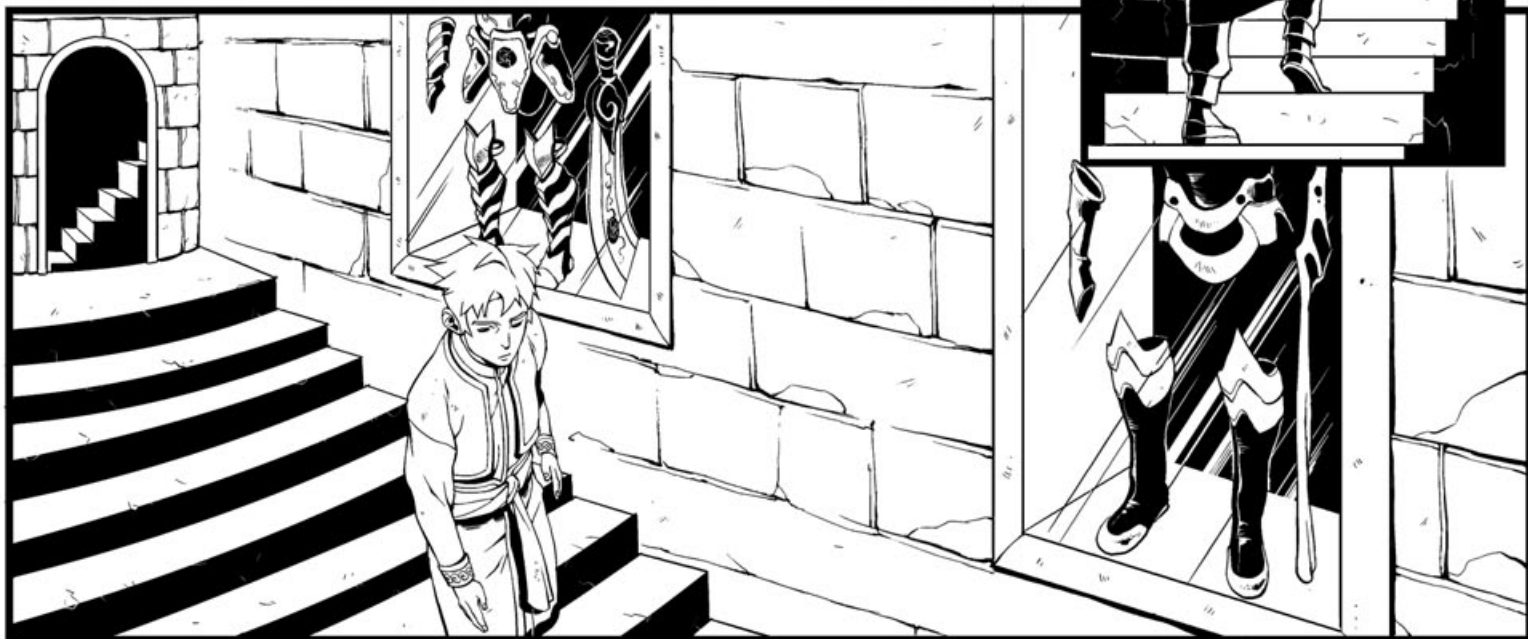
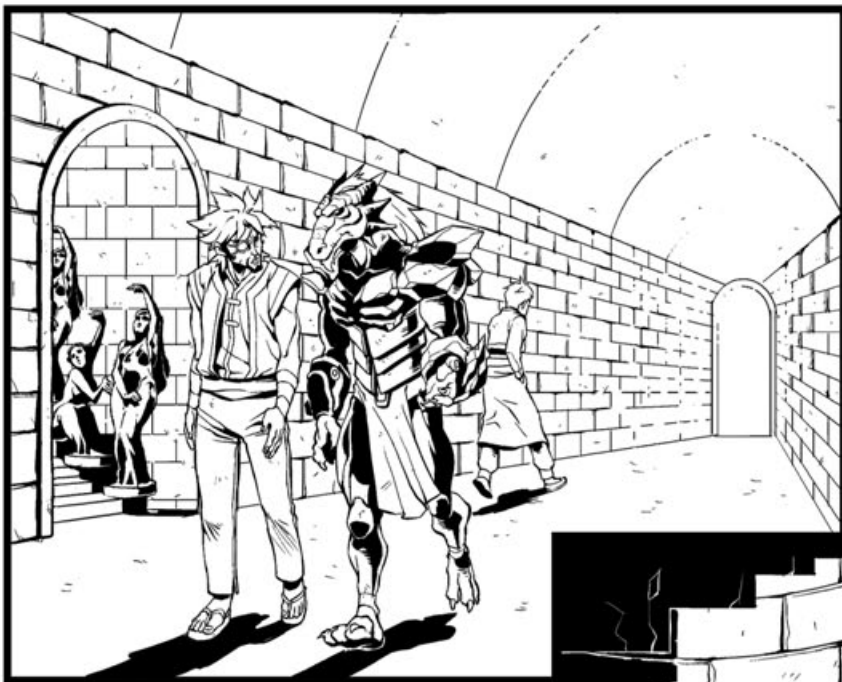
Generally speaking, roleplaying games don't have a win condition apart from having fun. Yet, when the protagonists have defeated the Ultimate Darkness, repaired the Omphalos of Creation, mended the cycle of reincarnation, healed the Yozis, taught them benevolence, cured Autochthon of his sickness, given him the Jadeborn to help him craft his next great work Elsewhere, driven back endless chaos, redeemed the Abyssals, integrated the Primordial and Alchemical

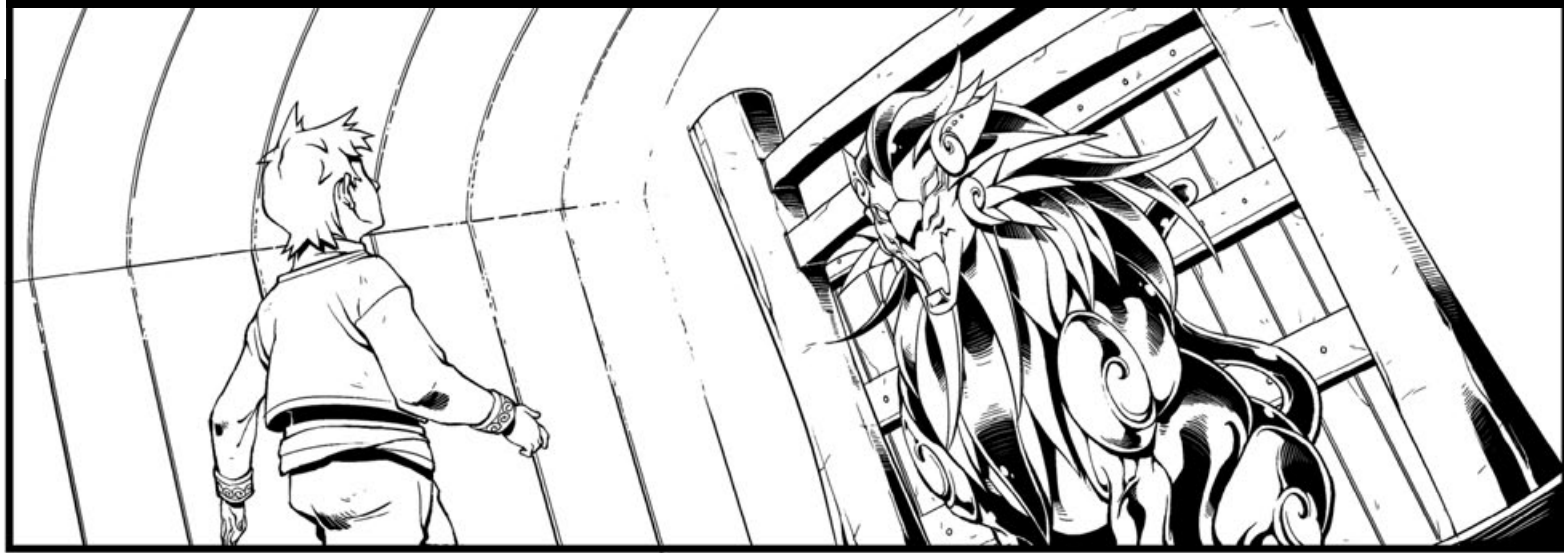
Exalted into Creation's blessed host, anointed the Dragon Kings as storytellers to keep the legends and lessons of the past ages alive and finally forged a new Realm of peace and law, there comes a point at which the world has truly been saved. Building a place of prosperity and hope, free from the ravages of angry titans and mad god-kings, a world where its heroes care for and nurture its people and each day brings greater wonder than the one before, *that* is an ending worthy of **Exalted**.











DÉNOUEMENT

Please, please don't cry, this is just "adios" and not "goodbye"
—Charlie Singleton and Eddie Snyder, "Spanish Eyes"

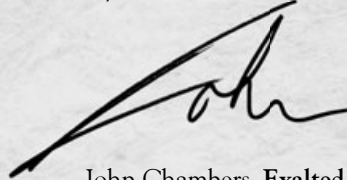
Man, what a crazy ride. It's hard to believe I've been working on **Exalted** in some capacity, be it as editor, writer or developer, for 10 years. A quarter of my life devoted to this amazingly immersive world of lost splendor, fabulous lands and ascendant wickedness, populated by shining heroes and dread villains the equal of any ever crafted for a roleplaying game.

But this message isn't about me. It's about thanking those responsible for making **Exalted** the game we all love. First off, I'd like to thank those responsible for creating the game, its developers, writers and artists. Without their efforts, this might have been just another generic fantasy game. As it is, I think it ranks as one of the finest RPGs ever created. If I had room, I'd laud all your accomplishments here, but instead, I'm forced to just offer you this heartfelt thank you. Two people, however, deserve special mention: Geoffrey C. Grabowski and Brian Glass. Without your initial vision, guidance and drive, Geoff, **Exalted** would not be the beloved gaming institution it is now. And Brian, you've been my cohort/accomplice/brother in arms on this journey for the

past decade, and creating this game wouldn't have been half as fun without you, nor would its books have looked half as good as they invariably do.

The people I'd most like to thank, though, are you, the fans. I count myself blessed to have been a part of this experience with you all, the brightest and most passionate group of fans in the industry. Thank you for your constant support of the game itself as a whole, if not every aspect of it. Your feedback and advice were always appreciated (though sometimes only after a cooldown period). I still look forward to seeing you guys and gals at cons, where I hope to here you're still playing and enjoying this setting, into which so many talented folk poured their hearts and souls.

See you on the other side,



—John Chambers, **Exalted** Developer

And now, the end is near;
And so I face the final curtain.
My friend, I'll say it clear,
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain.
I've lived a life that's full.
I've traveled each and every highway;
And more, much more than this,
I did it my way.
—Frank Sinatra, "My Way"

I just want to start off by saying what an amazing journey it's been. Having a hand in creating this world, working with all these talented artists and meeting fans and hearing your stories at conventions. I'm not going to lie to you, I'm going to miss it, but I've done about all I can do. We made board games, dice, a First Age box set and more than 30 books. That's just talking about **Second Edition**. Counting both editions of the game, we probably hit closer to 100 products or more. That's something to be proud of. That being said, I'm going to keep it short and sweet and start in with my thanks.

First off, thank you, the fans. You're the reason we were able to tell this story and have so much fun. Feel free to tell me tales of your characters or your series at any convention you find me attending.

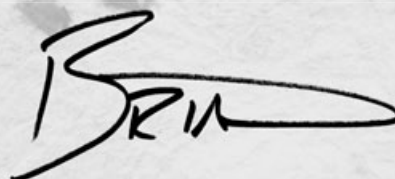
And thank you to my artists. I wish I could give out special thanks to each and every one of you, but honestly, I'd need a whole lot more than this page. You guys created the look of this game. I've never worked with so many talented individuals. I'm going

to miss getting in sketches and finished art and seeing what new pieces you've created for the world of **Exalted**.

Also, thanks to the amazing writers. Without having such amazing stories, there's no way I could have gotten such cool art.

Finally, thanks to my compatriot and *King Murder* to my *Spanish Maim* (see us fighting Dace and Contentious Sword in **The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V—The Roll of Glorious Divinity II**, pages 119 to 120), John Chambers. Without our constant bickering and undermining each other, **Exalted** probably would have been really cool. Jokes! Jokes! I kid! It's been an honor to work with John for so long.

Thanks everyone, it's been a blast!



—Brian Glass, **Exalted** Art Director



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