THE EYE OF ALL-SEEING WONDER

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The Society of the Resurgent Octagon

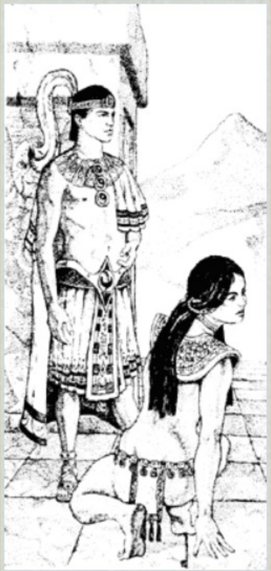
David Bailey presents a fine adventure for high level characters.

Introduction

This is a scenario for between four and six reasonably advanced players. They are most likely to be soldiers who are trying for a promotion at between sixth and tenth circle. It would be possible for a scholar of war or history to join them, or even for the personal slaves of some soldiers to give it a go, with a little modification of the seating plan at dinner, I presume!

The group of competitors should be made up to half a dozen by non-player characters, may I suggest Hetle hi Ssanmirin, Legion of Potent Destiny and Orun hi Kurushma of the Legion of the Givers of Sorrow? It is best to make the non-player characters fairly impressive, as this should spur the players to greater glory! (There is no need for their statistics, as they ought not to have to do anything).

History



The Society of the Resurgent Octagon was founded in 142 by Trakonel I as part of his effort to counter the uprising of the One Other and its followers. After his victory he endowed it in perpetuity as a centre of excellence and military research. Its key aim is to preserve the Imperium from any manner of external threat. Its other functions are to be the ultimate arbiters of martial prowess, to study theories of battle and all manner of military matters, and to be independent record keepers. Over the millennia it has faded to a barely remembered outpost, but the Tsolyáni love of ceremony means that it continues. Its sole purpose, apart from a little research, is to run an annual competition. It is probable that the thing would have faded away totally if it were not for the support of the stability temples and their legions. The flame legions have been a little more curious of late; this may be as part of Mirusiya's drive to revive old military customs, or there again it may be because a few officers would like to cultivate new friends in these times of trouble.

As is the way with these things, Emperors and politicians have found uses for the Society since it was founded. The current Emperor, Dhich'une 'Eternal Splendour' is distinctly hostile to this establishment, for some obvious reasons. Even an apparent Militarist such Mirusiya has an ambivalent attitude, partly because the Society actually did very little to assist him after the Kolumeljalim. On one hand he has withdrawn all but the most token of guard detachments, ostensibly because they were needed to reinforce the borders. On the other hand he has rewarded champions of past competitions with valuable Imperial posts and public displays of honour—even extending honours to a couple of Thúmis molkars from the Legion of the Clan of Standing Stone who won last year.

The Fortress

The Society is based at an ancient grey stone octagonal fortress on the Eastern borders. The fort stands 25 metres tall on an island in the middle of a river, with sheer cliffs falling 30 metres all around its base. The only known way in is via a dangerous looking cage which is lowered from a balcony down to the punts that moor at a makeshift landing stage on the river.

The fortress has six levels in current use, the topmost is the roof, which has decking and a rail around the edge, albeit a rather low and old rail. The parapet is decorated with classical Tsolyáni motifs and these continue throughout the castle in all the rooms and stairs.

There are three staircases that run from top to bottom, one large central stair that is basically square in section with landings at each level, one east spiral stair (a bit slippery and worn now), and a very small west stair used by the servants that runs only from the dining room to the kitchen. There is also a dumb-waiter that can carry about 20kg that runs beside the west stair.

The fifth level, directly under the roof, is the servants’ and guards’ quarters. It is basically eight spartan rooms with pallets and bunks separated by curtains. With the lack of formal military discipline the rooms frequently resemble a clothing fight in a baggage train.

Beneath this is the grand dining hall, level 4, which is rectangular, the interstices being taken up with smaller rooms (including one holding the ’Black Arch’, of which more later)

On level 3 there are the studies and offices of the Society members, plus the four rooms of the library. Down on level 2 there are guest rooms and the quarters of the Society members. Finally, on the lowest floor there is a kitchen, various store rooms and ’reception hall’ that leads to the balcony and elevator. The fortress has its own well, sunk right down below river level, and a cunning system of chimneys and waste chutes. The major domo can chat about the drains for hours.

The Competition

Every few years the Society receives recommendations from a variety of legions for promising young officers to be made associates, with a certain degree of kudos and an undoubted fillip to their next promotion chances. The officers have to attend an award ceremony at the fortress.

The competition has run since its instigation in 1225 under Metlunel, The Builder. Legions send representatives in rotation—The Elite every year, venerable legions every two years and so on, down to every 10 years for minor legions. The competition, in its heyday would have gathered a whole semetl of officers from each legion together with entourages of noble spectators. The final parts and ceremonies were once held in Avanthar itself! Sadly the times of glory have faded, and the current situation is a very modest affair with only one or two representatives from each of the legions entitled to participate.

The customary rewards for success are the title of ’Bulwark of the Empire’, associate membership of the

Society and an honorary stipend of about one hundred kaitars per year from the Palace of War. Duties of the post involve a few presentations and being on the 'call-up' list for life.

The structure of the competition, as far as can be ascertained in advance, involves a day of tutorials and exhibitions, some ceremonies, a day of single combats and personal skills tests, a day of squad tactics and a day of theoretical legion scale battles. Any senior officer will have heard of this if asked. The last day is spent in further ceremonies and in deliberation by the judges. The whole thing has a slightly quaint and eccentric air about it. Bribery is strongly discouraged, though one could always make a donation to the library if one wished. Champions are allowed, and are encouraged for scholars! Invitees should present themselves, with a small honour guard, arms, armour, rations and whatever reference works they desire, at the fortress one week prior to the intercalary days.

The Society Members

The senior members are called the 'Eight Walls of the Octagon'. They renounce their families, wives and legions on joining; swearing all to the Empire. Each has passed through the Jade Arch after ritually casting off robes bearing the names of their past attachments embroidered into the fabric using precious threads. (The cost of these gauze ritual clothes alone makes membership an exclusive thing!). In reality each keeps in close touch with clan and legion, and the atmosphere within the Fort can become decidedly heated over such matters!

Danitolen hi SsúSsúnu, Sword of Fire, Vimuhla. Ruby badge and plaque	43, trim, well dressed and agile. Aloof, personally wealthy, dedicated to the Flame. Expert in breaking sieges and in 'raiding for wealth'. Very intelligent indeed but not always logical in his designs. Well regarded and considerate. Doesn't like stinging insects and prefers not to be trapped in the corners of rooms or small spaces (hence his seat is always in the centre of the table, regardless of proper etiquette) Ex-Searing Flame. He has a huge collection of porcelain model soldiers. Motto: Confront them with annihilation
Danitolen hi SsúSsúnu, Sword of Fire, Vimuhla. Ruby badge and plaque	25, youngest and rashest. A political appointee by the Vriddi family and not yet an expert in his field. He is, however, bright, strong and quick. Not very wealthy. Relies on a legion pension, and borrowed armour. He does, however have several rare books. Very honest, to the point of rudeness at times. Detests all crawling and creeping things. Ex-Red Devastation Motto: Rapacious as fire, none can contain it
Kintashmoi Ito, temple of Hru'u guard. Obsidian plaque and badge	55, looks 65 because of over consumption of Hneku. Devises subtle plans and huge strategic masterpieces based on superb field intelligence and a slow corrosion of the enemies' morale. Clothes tend to be threadbare, leading one to believe he is poor; he is in fact the wealthiest. Ex-Priest and scholar. (None know that he was previously a molkar in the intelligence arm of the temple guard). Very lazy at heart and mortally afraid of precipices and arrow fire—you won't get him to look out of a window easily! He has a large cellar of dronu and mash

	brandy, and a few tsuhoridu bottles. Motto: Consider both benefits and harm, deny your enemy his desires.
Vrinsha hi Ssarananu, Emerald Kirtle, Hrihiyal. Jade badge and plaque, highly decorated.	29, plain and unAssuming. Expert in all manner of squad level manoeuvres and deceptions. Devoted and very proud of this post. Believes in the use of transport and in defence through evasion. Ex-Aridane Legion of Lady Mrissa. She has a smattering of healing sorcery and a few scrolls. Hates being alone (to the extent that she has a slave sleep in her room) and can lapse in retrospective ramblings when frightened. Motto: Establish the enemy's desires, but do not offer to fulfil them.
Vayamasu hi Ssanmirin, Sea Blue Hnalla. Wears a very large and valuable diamond on a bracelet.	38, immaculate, has bleached his hair to a silver grey. Superb planner of legion scale defences and a fair architect. Designer of the new forts in the Atkolel Heights. Strongly supported by clan and legion, he has ample current wealth and a small political following. Very pedantic, and can jump at the sight of moving shadows (he won't explain, but it involved going to a summoning when he was a child...) Ex-Ever Present Glory. Motto: Discipline, courage, intelligence, trustworthiness
Ganeshma hi Qizibi, Golden Sunburst, Karakan. Has a jasper braid about a long pony tail.	41, tends to the casual, but regarded as a fanatical proponent of the art of 'defence through attack' and the use of missiles. His relaxed demeanour hides one of the most calculating minds of his generation. His dislike of uniforms extends to occasionally wandering naked in the halls. He also prefers drab colours to the brighter orange that one would expect. Ex-Legion of Lord Kharihaya, he practises with a cross-bow from the roof at a kite every day that he can. Motto: Invincibility is a matter of defence, vulnerability is a matter of attack
Rustadz hi Qizibi, Golden Sunburst, Cheggara. Has tiger's eye broach.	44, usually wears scholar's robes, has no real love of conversation. Specialist in sub-squad level actions, counter insurgency and guerrilla tactics—not a well regarded field in the current climate. He sleeps on the rough floor, and regards the use of beds or mats a `ignoble in soldiers'. Filled with nervous energy all the time. Ex-priest and scholar. Motto: Honour is earned by the individual who acts in glory.
Thanotokoi hi Tungaqu, Blade Raised High, Ketenku. Has a simple steel pin and small plaque.	31, a prodigy who has based a sound tactical and strategic system on the preparation of a radical new form of cartography (in reality one several thousand years old). His advice is always of the utmost honour and slanted to the preservation of the maximum number of troops on both sides whilst securing victory. Ex-Battalions of Vrishtara the Mole, he really detests rain and deep mud. Motto: Be immovable as a granite mountain

Other Characters

The eight supervisory members of the Resurgent Octagon have about twenty staff, fifteen researchers and about twelve honour guards. All but the servants are resident in the village during the contest as space is at a premium and the upper floors will be turned over to the guests' own servants.

The staff are the usual mix of servants with a freeman of low clan as Major Domo, and a famous chef. The Major Domo is Hrinktu hi Fezamnu of Granite Lintel, originally from Usenanu, now too old to be really effective. The chef at the fortress was recruited recently from Jakálla where his skill had been reported as far as Bey Sy. The funds of Kintashmoi are probably responsible for drawing him here.

Private study at the seminary is allowed, but the journey is onerous and the main material is available in Avanthar or Bey Sy anyway. Few bother to travel here except for discussions with one of the Eight Walls. Private tuition is sometimes carried out, usually as a clan favour, but sometimes for money. Fees are high, mainly to prevent applicants overwhelming the few tutors. Currently only one student, Girikma hiZiya of Red Dawn, is resident. She is reserved, shy, keeps her eyes down and her fingers clenched whenever she is addressed. She has a reputation for working all night, and wears a motif denoting that she is mourning a close relative. She will not be drawn on the matter. Students are sent to live in the local village during the competition as rooms are severely limited, but they can travel in to observe the proceedings as part of their studies.

The local Hlaka 'flight', of which there appear to be about 25 members, regards the top of the butte around the fort as a sacred site of sorts, and have a long standing agreement with the Tsolyánu for its use. The oral tradition has it that the butte was all that was left of a high mountain after a minor battle between the gods. In return the Hlaka are paid well for the simple task of carrying sealed messages to the nearest Tsolyánu sakbe station. This rapid postal service is essential, and helps preserve secrecy. The Hlaka smell a bit and are prone to hanging around the roof urging players to `join them for a quick flight off the walls', a jest that causes them great hilarity.

A deal with the local farms for food and the rental of land and woods for the use of the fort is also seen as a good thing by both sides.

On Arrival

The player characters meet at the nearby village and are given rousing, if slightly lengthy, introductory speeches from two of the well respected scholar-soldiers of the Imperium, Danitolen and Ganeshma. The day is windy and overcast. There is the threat of sudden rain and squalls and the weather threatens to continue like this throughout the festival period. The other troopers, slaves, guards and competitors are quiet. Are they too overawed by the experience of being spoken to; or is it the thought that copies of their achievements might be reviewed by the Emperor himself?

> Many wonder why they ever agreed to sending their crack Imperial soldiery for a three day hike over mountains infested by local Hlaka, smelly local goat herders, kayi and the usual round of mountain beasts, only to be greeted by some detached old fogies.

The fortress, when they see it for the first time, will make a fair impact on the main players for its apparent impregnability. Few will be prepared for the lack of formality at the fortress itself. In many ways it resembles a seminary.

The players are greeted by the major domo who offers rooms on the second floor, some refreshment and free access to the excellent library (which it is said contains some ancient texts—if they can persuade old Finuela the librarian). This is a fine place to relax after the rigors of a long overland journey—the major domo makes it obvious that they should have come on a comfortable boat instead.

> No single player could get past the librarian into the closed stacks without incapacitating him—not an honourable option—but if two players co-operate then one could distract him while the other nips past. Finuela is particularly fond of reminiscing about campaigns in Yan Kor over a beaker of chumetl laced with cheap dna spirit....
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> In the stacks one may find copies of three magical texts and a strange treatise on `The Black Arch’. Translation from the Duruob language could be performed by Girikma hiZiya of Red Dawn. There is also a scroll containing a reference to the ’Ways Of The Judges’ which states that the only other known routes by the fort are from the Imperial Tower in Avanthar or from the Governor’s palace in Fasiltum. A reference may also be found to the existence of four caves beneath the cellars, one used as a store for records, one full of rubble, one large and one small and full of gold. These may be found on any day.

Dinners will be informal in style, and the social mores of reclusive academics may not mix well with the more rigid discipline of Imperial Legions. Only Danitolen hi SsúSsúnu and Vayanmasu hi Ssanmirin will set strict seating plans, inviting the players to join them. Kintashmoi will probably offend a few officers by inviting them to join him for a snack and a drink in the kitchen with the servants.

Talk each night will be concentrated on exotic tactical plans, and on the great battles of the past. Rustadz has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the reign of Hejjeka which comes in useful, as may Vrinsha’s knowledge of cartography. The players will learn much about the format of the competition.

> Encourage players to read around the subjects and to feel empathy for these great and noble soldiers. There is a real feeling of camaraderie and plenty of food and drink to help it along.

On Day One

Players must pass the tests of martial prowess—basically a duelling competition against each other in which they must demonstrate very fine technique beyond pure brutality! Players chose their own opponents—choosing a really tough player to fight will be well regarded, as will the use of advanced techniques, such as riposte, disarm, evades, and feats of bravado. A huge variety of weapons are available in the ground floor armoury with which to duel.

The duelling square is set on the roof, has a sawdust and sand floor, padded walls, lots of banners and shields and four large pillars to run around. Observers and judges stand on a raised wooden platform. Mrikitoi acts as chief judge. He looks unfavourably on anyone who surrenders before they have taken at least a minor wound, and will offer to fight personally if anyone appears to be in need of extra tuition!

> Don’t forget to award points, say one for every great move and five for a win. If players get carried away Vrinsha hi

> Ssarananu knows lots of first aid, but she will need to read a scroll to remind her of any healing spells, and this will lose the players most of a day in convalescence.

On Day Two

Tests of tactical prowess are dealt with by a question and answer session, written tests and then a brief squad level manoeuvre that evening along the river bank. The players will face no worse risks than falling in or being eaten by the local epeng-midges!. Thanotokoi is chief judge for this section, and he will deduct points for any lost 'troops'. Vrinsha will control the opposing forces.

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> Use tactician and soldiery rolls, or set real tests using miniatures. In the evening the real skill needed is leadership as the 'troops' are the local villagers 'armed' with straw bundles! (They get paid 10 dlash each—a whole kaitar from an officer would inspire them massively! Award points, say out of ten for the questions and out of twenty for success with the local 'troops'
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> Vrinsha will employ a novel technique called 'men of fog' in which she will strike lots of small straw fires to confuse the field, whilst her 'troops' clash pots and shields to make it seem like they are many!

On Day Three

Tests of strategy, based on epic battles of history. There is a siege of Ke'erto to break, the city of Paya Gupa to defend, a pitched battle on the Jakállan plain and a long range sea mission to relieve a garrison on the Isle of Petris Layoda. However players answer, the tutors will have plenty to say on each case, indeed, running out of time is a real risk!

At the end of day three the judges retire to consider the results before an award ceremony to be held in the great refectory that evening.

> Use history, strategy and tactician skills, with a dash of reasoning...or read bits of Deeds of the Ever Glorious and argue about how it should have been done! (Jack Bramah's ecellent article from a previous Issue would be very useful). Award points as you see fit
>
> Kintashmoi leads the judges here, and will, basically disagree with everyone for the sake of it, but politely. Danitolen and he will contest the best strategy, as can be seen from their CVs!

The Awards

The players filter into the great refectory, there the servants all mill about serving refreshments and snacks. The servants appear rather surlier than usual, and one or two of them have not been seen before.

> GM: butter them up. It will have been a hard few days. Why not award study points on accelerated bases, as their tutors are the best around? Soldiery, tactician, strategist and weapon skills could all get a part level boost.
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> As this is a dinner, no-one needs to wear armour, or carry weapons, now do they? This would be very rude indeed. Hrinktu will insist on formal robes, medals, badges, ribbons and so on.

Talk is rudely interrupted by the ceremony known as the signing of the registers. They players will be summoned one by one into a side room. They have to duck under a low lintel to get in. This prevents them looking up to see the imposing black stone arch that surrounds the door, although they may be distracted by the strange glyphs carved onto the steel plate on the floor! VayamaSsú explains how the Black Arch works: "The Arch through which you will have just passed is a symbolic passage towards true glory as a servant of the Empire. Turn your thoughts to the good of Tsolyánu. Recall the great deeds of your clan and your legion. The gods will judge your intentions as you think on these things." Vayamasu and Kintashmoi stand behind the writing desk, on which is a beautiful hide book. "Come forward and record your glory" they intone. The air of incense becomes thick and there is a moment of dizziness. They read from a scroll "Each will sign his name, clan, and legion to proclaim the glory of the Empire!"

The Black Arch

The Black Arch is a highly simplified Jade Arch. It records the players' thoughts about the Emperor and the Empire, and players will be selected for further advancement into the inner mystery based on their attitude. Maybe you should have encouraged them to talk about the Emperor before now? Roll a PR or MRF defence, secretly, and make it difficult. If they resist they will be marked in the book next to their name with a little black triangle and red bar, this can be seen by the next player through, this is the sign that their thoughts were not recorded, and will be both a blessing and a curse in later promotion.

After passage through the device, players will feel elated and inspired, they will have one or two problems explaining why to people that have not passed through.

If, by some astonishing coincidence, a player has been replaced by a pariah god demon, then it is curtains for them if they pass through the Arch.

If they baulk at passing it, they will be marked down in the book as a failure, and will be quietly forced to leave their legion at a later date, just in case they are a 'security risk'.

> In the book are the names of most of the great generals and soldiers of the last five hundred years, just take your pick from all the game books!

The return to the meal will be welcome, all are offered a little of every thing. The quail stuffed with mushrooms is a rare treat.

Within minutes, three of the noble scholar hosts go grey and stagger about: Thanotokoi hi Tungaku, Vrinsha hi Ssarananu, Ganeshma hi Qizibi, to be joined by Orun hi Kurushma of legion of the Givers of Sorrow (If you use this non-player character). It looks like bad food, perhaps the oysters or the grouse? The surprise at the 'food poisoning' might be very little, after all the place was remote, and facilities primitive. There should be more surprise at the way in which four of the servants take out chlen daggers to attack the sick, while some run screaming for the kitchen (downstairs).

> It would be foolish of a player to have seconds of quail... This is poisoned, and for each dish they must make a hard

CON check to avoid being sick and disabled as the effect of minus five to dexterity and intelligence takes hold, shortly thereafter followed by a second check to avoid falling over and being paralysed. Did anyone notice the clues about a new chef ?

This fight can go on for four or five combat rounds, the servants are fairly poor warriors, and one or two seem to be under hypnosis or some such. There are carving knives to use as weapons, broken pieces of table, large wooden platters, the candle sticks and pillows (like shields absorbing two points and potentially disarming the knife wielders!)

A servant rushes in to the room screaming 'The library is on fire! Girikma is trapped!'

Then the sky falls in! Well, not the sky, only the decorative lattice and paper false ceiling (so recently installed by Mrikitoi as an aesthetic gesture). The mode of entry of two identical women dressed in pale grey-green thesun gauze, the verdeigris vambraces and tattooed foreheads are unusual, as was their way of greeting the party: 'stay still, and you may live.' With their backs to the main exit, and plenty of cover from overturned cushions and pieces of ceiling, it would be very hard to rush them, and harder still to engage them. They are armed with throwing knives and move like acrobats. Two more drop at the back of the room, closing off the stair to the kitchen and the dumb-waiter hatch.

Anyone foolish enough to try to fight unarmed, and unarmoured, faces a hail of little metal poison daggers. The toxin is quick and allows them to hear and feel and see, but not move. It wears off in ten combat rounds. Impromptu weapons for the brave are the cruets (temporarily blinding anyone if they hit the eyes) and a large tapestry or two that can be used to entangle.

After ten rounds the women will disengage and run out. Two go down to the kitchen. Two go to the central stairs then up towards the roof. If anyone follows there will be a simple ambush: two doors on the landing are ajar, concealing two more of the women who are excellent knife throwers, All women are identical in all respects. They throw bags that burst, scattering clouds of green powder into the corridor—DON'T PANIC (it is harmless sneezing dust, but don't tell the players!

From the windows, or from a successful pursuit two of the women can be seen to leave the roof on a rope runway, running down to a tree on the other bank. They have a boat waiting. They are clearly carrying a large parcel wrapped in hide.

Note that if the women are intercepted, and it is possible for the players to slide down the rope if they are strong and dextrous, they will drop the parcel and flee on foot. The players will discover that it is a false parcel and contains only some damp white, cheesy material—it could be Sagun spores!

There have been six women so far, four in the room, of whom two run to the roof, and two run down to the kitchen, plus two in the corridor

It is about now that the fire in the library becomes so strong as to cause smoke to be seen in the corridors. It will not spread outside the library, but will be causing a lot of damage in there. Coughs and weak screams can be heard from the study, but a person would have to brave the fire to get to Girikma.

If not dealt with in ten minutes the fire in the records wing of the library will have destroyed it, and all trace of the fact that the alumni records were stolen. Girikma hi Ziya of Red Dawn is in there, choked by smoke, as she is locked in the study. She is clutching some stainless steel keys that she has taken from a hollow book. These survive the fire even if she doesn't!

Those metal keys will open the personal box of the scholar, Girikma, to discover that she had been sending messages in code to a member of her family. If alive—she breaks down and weeps : "my cousin, who passed through the arch, died of a strange brain disorder. I am suspicious of the whole place, and worry that someone has been trying to use something here for evil purposes, so I pretended to be a history scholar"

If anyone is a cipher expert and you have had a chance to work on the coded notes Girikma left for a few hours; then one or two ideas come to mind. With a few substitutions and a basic knowledge of Red Dawn clan history you can decode many of the meanings in the otherwise rambling letters which at first appeared to be full of harmless gossip. The latest one reads:

"Uncle, To reiterate my previous letters, which I suspect have been intercepted, I have stumbled by accident onto a part of the puzzle of the irrational behaviour of my cousin. There is a device here which is being used to affect the minds of those who visit. Most frighteningly it may be able to undo the loyalty of certain highly placed servants of the Empire; unfortunately it is far from simple in operation, and, in cases such as my dear cousin, has lead to terrible internal conflicts between spirit and intellect. I cannot determine who is controlling the device, on one hand it seems that the Imperialist are using it to increase the loyalty of some people, whilst the War Party seem to be using it to deliberately increase tension between the Imperium (but not, it seems, the Emperor) and other groups, such as the Royalists and Conservative-Militarists. Today I managed to find a way into the records room (I made a hole in the wall—so much for security) and took a copy of the last few pages of people who passed through the Octagon. I shall leave tomorrow and begin the work of decoding and deciphering the pages. Yours...postscript (in rough hand)"

The door is locked! Already I feel weak and fear that I have been poisoned. I have given a copy to the Hlaka and put this into my jewel box. May the Octagon find only gossip in my scribbles! Put my name in the sacred rolls of the clan, for I did my duty by them. If you are sent my body whole look within for other jewels............(a post mortem will reveal that she has swallowed a small leather bag containing a piece of paper on which is written a list of twenty names in a cipher. Two Red Dawn names are in plain hand, it is a job for a clan cousin of Red Dawn to decipher—or a very good Ksarul scholar with a few days to spare)

Time for Reflection

The servants start to put out the fire. The librarian begins to take stock. Healing and alleviation scrolls are dragged out of dusty old boxes and used as required, but only four are available. After about half an hour the place is calmer.

Here is how the members view events, they will expound these views to any player that talk to them in private.

The Militarists

Danitolen, Mrikitoi, and Ganeshma are really angry. To start with they appear to have lost Rustadz These three either want to run off and catch the baddies, or apologise to the Imperialists and kill all members of dark clans or temples ('it's obvious that the girls were Hrihiyal, and the Ito sponsor trouble from Livyánu...') Mrikitoi is especially suspicious saying that 'Kintashmoi was the one who hired the new chef'.

The Imperialists

Vayamasu and Thanotokoi say "we are consumed with guilt for the problems that this is likely to cause the Empire. We have realised that they were duped about the real purpose of the Black Arch" and have pretty well discovered the true purpose of the Militarists, of whom they have become very suspicious. Vayamasu is playing along for a while.
They are not critical of the others; they add that "we are too clever to fall for such as obvious ploy as dressing assassins in green to discredit their colleague, Vrinsha—and anyway we know more about what Vrinsha was

researching than the Militarists ever will".

The Others

Kintashmoi and Vrinsha would both like to spend the next several months laughing about the incompetence of the Militarists, whom they have been watching for months. Kintashmoi had all but sussed how to break the Black Arch himself, and was just waiting for moment to put a spanner in the works, now he doesn't need to. He will tell players that "the Black Arch records enough detail to blackmail anyone who has used it. Worse, the psychic traces it retains could be used for other purposes. It is an abomination in these times."

An Interruption

Servants then report that two other servants ran off up the hill with a little parcel about ten minutes ago. They can be seen cresting a rise in the distance. A really fit person could just catch them, or even better use the eye of Aerial Excellence that the librarian suddenly remembers that he has! If the players don't go, then Mrikitoi will go alone.

> Each of the servants had been mind controlled by a little spawn of Tsur'ru (see Pe'dedh statistics at the end) and these little things look like purple rubber socks with spiny tentacles on one end. They jump off the servants, who collapse, and can cause mayhem with their attacks. On the way back try to avoid the irate Hlaka, who resent any other flyers in their air-space—and say so, loudly. Sadly the parcel is just old clothes, wrapped up, another diversion.
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> Mrikitoi, if he goes out for it, won't say what he recovered, but will take the parcel to his quarters to burn it.

Back in the fort, all is not harmonious in the ranks of the Resurgent Octagon. Mirikitoi (if he didn't go after the servants) apparently tried to kill Kintashmoi, first with a bucket of water and then with a sword. Mrikitoi "you blackguard, it is all your fault! You weakened the defences with your research."

Vayamasu becomes increasingly tight lipped. A pe'dedh is found attached to Rustadz, who has collapsed in a side corridor leading to the kitchen. The day is restored to normal when Danitolen takes charge. "I suggest a council of war", he says. This degenerates into a shouting match, and gives a perfect opportunity for Mrikitoi to try to kill Kintashmoi again. Mrikitoi: "I hate you! All Ito are untrustworthy. May you rot in a dark pit" Fortunately Kintashmoi had already told of his suspicions to others. Kintashmoi yells "Fool, Buffoon, Idiot! It was your masters who arranged this, can't you see? The flame has burned away your common sense. Leave me alone! (ouch)".

> He will be prevented after a few blows, either by Vrinsha using magic or Thanotokoi using a big stave, yelling "Where is your nobility? Cease and desist, at once, or I will invoke the ancient power of the fortress against you"

The combined brains of the generals, the servants and any players may like to try to account for all of the assassins, servants and staff. `Who is missing?' they all ask. The librarian completes his inventory—the last few books of names of people who passed through the arch are missing.

Thanotokoi then opens a panel in the floor under the steel plaque beneath the arch. He pulls out a metal rod, twists its end and places it, upright in a slot in the floor. "Now none may enter or leave" he says, "this place is sealed for a month and a day. The demon Tkel is bound to guard us for that time, and that alone. I will arrange the sacrifices." Outside the sky appears to be filled with black and red sparkles.

Down in the Kitchen

Beneath the food scraps and debris there are trails of slime that have dried to a silvery dust on the floor. They lead through to a hole in the brick floor. The hole has been smashed upwards from below. It is dark down there, and it smells awful. (Something is slithering.) In the rough space below the kitchen is a store room, and a hole has been made in this floor as well. A smell comes up through this hole from the bodies of four servants and the chef, who have been partly eaten by Pe'dedh.

> The Pe'dedh will leap out from the shadows and spring around attacking anyone who shows a torch down here, they will not attack anyone in the dark quite so readily, as they can't see very well. After each lunge they will hide under debris for a bit, making them very hard to kill.

Behind the second hole is a natural cave. In the middle are two alabaster coffins that glow with an inner light. They are side by side and connected by a slimy tube, which is too tough to cut except with some magical weapons. Inside the coffins is a luminous slime, the source of the trails, and of a pale light through the alabaster. The trails appear to be 8 sets of foot prints, one original in sandals, and seven bare footed. All the same size. A really good tracker would find that the sandals had just appeared from nowhere in the middle of the cave. There is a strong residue of magic!

At this point any non-player characters will leave, either to get help, or just throw up. If opened, one can see in each of the `coffins' a wonderfully engraved verdigris-copper foil can be seen, partly unrolled.

> GM:- I don't expect anyone is this stupid, but... anyone who so much as gets a drop of this slime on them (and it is very hard not too, as the stuff is highly tropic towards living tIssue) is immediately overcome. They fall to the floor and are in agony, or preferably fall into the coffin, dragged in by slime tendrils. The slime dissolves their skin and flesh like wax. They writhe even though just bones and tendons. Only their spinal cord, eyes and skull seem untouched. In my experience a player usually tries to release them from torment with fire or magic before the process is complete.
>
> After about half an hour the flesh begins to grow back onto their bones, all their wounds are healed, and they have gained one strength and one dexterity. They have also changed sex Meanwhile the lid of the other coffin will slide back revealing a double of the player. This one is, sadly, a mindless animation that stumbles about mewling and tries to clutch hold of anyone it sees, pleading with sad eyes. I leave it to the GM to decide which of these is the one that contains the true soul of the player.
>
> The coffins will stop seething after this If anyone tries to use them a second time, just dissolve them.
>
> The scroll is an incantation to the Goddess of the Pale Bone. It is written in Duruob. Sadly few can read this. It appears to describe how the 'Black Arch' detects servants of the Goddess and renders them harmless, and describes how the Arch depends on a magical key that can be removed and substituted for one that is ineffective against the servants of the Goddess.

Ganeshma orders "Everyone out of the kitchen and cellars", and ushers them up to the (now tidy) great refectory. He asks for ideas as to how to deal with the situation....

Mrikitoi suggests killing all people who have passed through the arch, in case they become subverted.

Kintashmoi suggests that "It really is about time that they all realised that more than one crime is being committed here. The Black Arch is no longer a secret. What has passed you by is the idea that the Flame radicals under Mirusiya have probably stolen it for their own benefit. The theft will throw all non-flame people into dispute ('is he affected?' men will say of their commanders) and cause chaos in the minor legions. It will cause many to believe in a strong external enemy, and will give good grounds for a tightened state control of magic, borders, research and intelligence. I think that 'protective custody' of important persons will be a natural consequence."

Danitolen suggests "As none could have escaped, there has been a simple error, and the records were just lost in the fire."

Rustadz is still unconscious, and dribbles a lot.

Thanotokoi is concerned that "The wardings on the fortress must have failed. I want time to research some scrolls in my study.".

Vrinsha is worried, "My study had been ransacked, although nothing appears to have gone."

Thanotokoi waits for everyone to speak, then says "The Keys to the Arch are, indeed missing." He describes these as a black octagonal gem that slotted into the Arch. He only thought to look a minute ago, and is very worried. "I thought that none new that the Arch was a potent weapon against the servants of the unnamable gods, but now this weapon is damaged, and the secret will not be kept for long."

What is going to happen next?

Only a very diligent survey of the lower store room will reveal a concealed door, which leads down. At the bottom of the steps is the discarded armour and gauze clothing of the remaining assassin. In a tiny chamber, used to store ancient records in decaying trunks, a further hole has been cut into a long, twisting, downward leading cave. The walls are igneous rock—this is a gas bubble: the breath of Vimuhla!

> If the door is not found, have the major domo stumble on it later. There are piles of rubble, in some of which a Pe'dedh may lurk and the tunnel is curved, making it very hard to illuminate far ahead.

Around the final bend a blurry grey oval hangs, sizzling, in the air. Through it vague glimpses of a pale stone city can be seen in the distance, in the foreground a naked woman lays badly wounded, her left arm is cut off at the elbow, her legs appear to have turned to solid bone, and her right hand claws feebly at the rock. It is an overcast day. A limestone pavement stretches away to the city. There is scrubby vegetation under a bright and cloudless sky, and little else to see.

> In order to pass through the nexus one must remove the metal rod from the floor slot upstairs. It may be best if you wait for the room to be empty. It only needs to be removed for a second or so, but this will require a co-ordinated approach. Oh, yes, and you can't get back if the rod is replaced, which will happen if you leave it unwatched.
>
> Usual special effects for a nexus point, please. I quite like to reveal visions of wondrous places and other planes as the players hurtle down a grey tunnel, and to get them to roll a few PR or MRF type rolls just to scare them a bit; but then I'm not nice.
>
> The woman is dying, little could save her now. She gasps, "my name is Xantori. I expected to wait for the next cusp to allow travel to my sponsors in Sárku. I had spent the last few hours clearing off the fake tattoos, cutting my hair and getting ready. It should have taken about twenty hours for the nexus to be opened from the temple."

She is wracked by coughs, blood appears on her lips, her eyes roll. If revived she continues: "I was attacked by a fizzing white ball of icy gas. It knocked me down. I saw two pale women in kirtles made of finger bones walk up and take the book I had stolen. " She coughs some more, then Xantori laughs: "I am not a complete dupe, I have hidden the key under a rock." She dies with a wry grin on her face.

Unless the players can return through the nexus they are stuck. As they on an island near southern Livyánu it is a long walk, and I leave it to you for the adventures they will have. They will at least be attacked by a few brigands or plague survivors and have a few difficult explanations to make!

Outside the Fortress

After an hour the servant on watch spots, from the roof, several ragged looking men moving into cover along the cliffs. They are only brigands, attracted by the smoke and disordered appearance of the fort, but they can manage to put up constant arrow, sling, rock and spear fire on any party silly enough to mount a sally. They can't pass the barrier while it is up, but they can make travel difficult.

About an hour later dozens of hlaka begin to arrive, calling and circling. This causes most people to leave the lower levels and have a look.

Hrinktu has some bad news: "Rations will only last about five days for this many troops, and not the month that the barrier will last". He goes upstairs to tell the boss

Where is the Fourth Chamber of Gold?

Diligent searching will reveal that there is a tiny hidden ledge, reached by climbing up the fallen rocks in the middle of the bubble chamber. Normally torch light casts shadows that would conceal it. It could be seen by a party returning from the nexus, as there is a pale grey light from this. One could then strip and crawl through the gap, if very small and slim and even then with only a dagger.

It leads to a dazzling chamber of pyrites—fool's gold—crystals, in the centre lays the original, gel covered, Xantori. In her hands is the octagonal key to the Arch. She will lie still until, either all her other clones are killed, or someone finds her. She will point an eye at anyone who comes in, calling "I offer you truce, promise me safe passage, or I'll fire this!". She says "I am noble enough to honour my side of the bargain, and I want for revenge on my sponsors".

Pyrites is a potential ore of iron. Sadly, I cannot imagine any player character knowing this.

If none find her, then, about an hour later, chose your moment for her to emerge from the hidden chamber. She is aware that she has been betrayed and wants revenge. She will work her way back up to the fort, very stealthily. When she has stolen some food she will lay in wait for the characters one by one, seeking to enlist players she finds to her cause, in a very diplomatic and careful way. If anyone objects she will flee rather than fight. She will only give up the keys to the Arch to VayamaSsú or Kintashmoi, certainly not Mrikitoi. She wants safe passage, a boat, food and an introduction to a clan in the City of Sárku so she can track her betrayers. If she is killed or gives up the keys, let the players sweat for a bit as to whether the keys are the real ones or a substitute.

Wrapping up

Xantori was sent as the senior acolyte from the southern temple of the Goddess of the Pale Bone in a city that the players will not have heard of, Chetro Ketl. She was under a contract to the Temple of Sárku in the City of Sárku, who provided the nexus gates and the poisons she used. All of her equipment is of unknown origin as far as any Tsolyáni is able to determine. She will track down and kill an Arsemkoi in the Temple of Sárku within a year. He will be closely associated with Dhich'une's rise to power.

She has swapped the keys over. The real ones were left under a rock in the pyrite chamber, and a very intense search or magical survey would be needed.

The barrier will be dropped after a week, when the players will be released and offered an escort to the road. Their careers will be a little blighted for a while, at least while Dhich'une is on the throne, and they may find that they are under surveillance for a while.

The 'coffins' are not saleable, but will attract a lot of unwelcome attention if moved outside the fort. They originally came from an island north of Lorun, if any are brave enough to follow that lead.

If any of the Society has been killed, then one of the players may be asked to replace them temporarily, a very noble post, but a little remote.

Statistics

There should be no need for the Society members to take part in any combat, but there is always the chance of a demonstration duel or competition. Clearly the non-player characters will have a vastly larger range of skills and experience than is described here, and a GM may wish to fill in the gaps by Assuming clan education, temple schools, private tutors and a couple of terms in the army or a temple. To keep things short this table covers the melee, missile, magic and damage bonuses, plus any unusual or key skills and items. Normally the society members will not be wearing armour, but may carry one weapon (except to dinner). If they do wear armour, use `Armies of Tékumel' for a description.

Name And Clan	Statistics
Danitolen hi SsúSsúnu, Sword of Fire	Initiative +2, Melee 15, Missile 6, Damage 0, Evade 13, MRF 15, HP 14, Soldier 16, Strategy 14, Tactician 14, Long one handed sword +13, steel equipment, almost supernatural ability to avoid traps and ambush (+10)
Mrikitoi hi Manishi'i, Red Mountain	Initiative +9, Melee 18, Missile 9, Damage 1, Evade 14, MRF 17, HP 16, Soldier 9, Strategy 10, Tactician 10, left handed, +20 ranks of two handed steel sword and excels at games of gambling and daring
Kintashmoi Ito	Initiative +2, Melee 12, Missile 6, Damage -1, Evade 3 (fat!), MRF 3, HP 11, strategy 22, historian 13, espionage 17, intrigue 18, eye of comprehension 15 charges. No weapon skills, but highly ambidextrous.
Vrinsha hi Ssarananu, Emerald Kirtle	Initiative +0, Melee 15, Missile 6, Damage 0, Evade 8, MRF 25, HP 13, Priest 17, Strategy 14, Tactician 13, History 11, Espionage 16, no offensive magic, scrolls of healing. +5 ranks of thrown and held dagger, ambidextrous.
Vayamasu hi Ssanmirin, Sea	Initiative +8, Melee 16, Missile 8, Damage 0, Evade 11, MRF 9, HP 15,

Blue	Soldier 16, Strategy 16, Architect 16, Engineer 12, Siege Weapons 14, considered very beautiful, +12 ranks of short sword (or Aruche if you wish)
Ganeshma hi Qizibi, Golden Sunburst	Initiative +2, Melee 15, Missile 6, Damage 0, Evade 9, MRF 12, HP 15, Soldier 14, Strategy 19, Tactician 17, light x-bow +15, heavy x-bow +18
Rustadz hi Qizibi , Golden Sunburst	Initiative +1, Melee 12, Missile 6, Damage 0, Evade 6, MRF 13, HP 14, Soldier 9, Surveying 19, Tactician 21
Thanotokoi hi Tungaqu, Blade Raised High	Initiative +2, Melee 14, Missile 6, Damage 0, Evade 8, MRF 9, HP 15, Soldier 12, Strategy 13, Engineer 15, High cartography 7 (actually 13 but he pretends ignorance), Geographer 16
Finuela, the librarian	Etiquette 9, Historian 16, Theologian 11, Lliyani 7, Engsvanyali 9, Bednalljan 8, Yan Koriani 3, Literacy 18, Calligraphy 15, Mathematics 7, Administrator (librarian) 17. Initiative +6, Melee 10, Missile 8, Damage 0, Evade 11, MRF basic 7, HP 13.
Hrinktu hi Fezamnu of Granite Lintel, the major domo	Etiquette 17, Historian 10, Engsvanyali 5, Bednalljan 3, Literacy 12, Calligraphy 12, Mathematics 5, Administrator 16, Negotiator 12, Singer 9. Initiative +1, Melee 10, Missile 5, Damage 0, Evade 10, MRF basic 6, HP 14.
Miakku hiRingalu, the chef	Etiquette 10, Literacy 10, Calligraphy 6 (on pastries..), Mathematics 9, Administrator 12, Chef 14, Wine Knowledge 13. Initiative +9, Melee 16, Missile 9, Damage 2, Evade 9, MRF basic 7, HP 15. Dangerous if cornered with a cleaver and pastry board!
Girikma hiZiya of Red Dawn, the scholar	Etiquette 12, Historian 17, Theologian 14, Engsvanyali 10, Literacy 16, Calligraphy 14. Initiative +8, Melee 16, Missile 8, Damage -1, Evade 14, MRF basic 7, HP 13.
Xantori, the assassin (and her clones)	Initiative +10 (and ambidextrous), Melee 17, Missile 9, Damage 0, Evade 14, MRF basic 4, HP 14, Espionage 14, Acrobat 13, Assassin 15, Mimic (ventriloquist) 7, Swimmer 9, Climber 10, Charage 18, Huon 16, Dagger and thrown dagger 18 (poisoned), 4 points of copper and silk armour, the `original' has an eye of departing in safety with 2 charges, an eye of healing with 3 and an eye of being and unimpeachable shield against foes with four.

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