
For Jared
Blood, Steel and Honor

Houses of the Blooded

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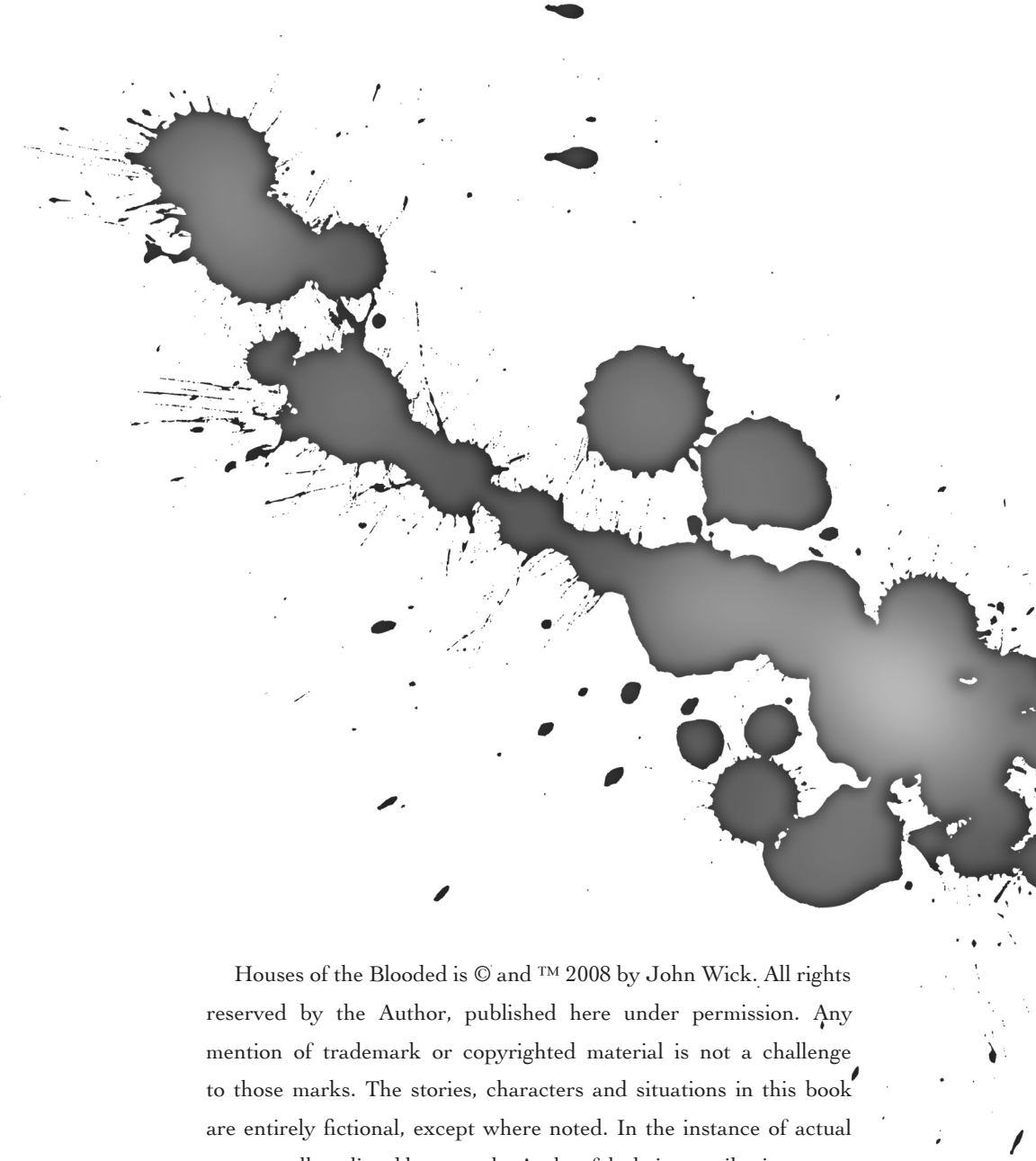
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Portions of this book will be released as Open Content; please see **www.housesoftheblooded.com** for more information.

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How to Use This Book

Hello there. My name is John and this is my roleplaying game. A roleplaying game about tragedy. With it, you play the role of a noble—one of "the blooded"—from a great and powerful household of nobles. You have lands and vassals and incredible power, but you are also hindered by your own passions and desires. You are the source of your own downfall.

Now, if you don't know what a roleplaying game is or how it works, don't worry. We'll go through all of that in this introduction. In fact, even if you *do* know how a roleplaying game works, I highly suggest reading through this Introduction. *Houses of the Blooded* is not your standard RPG. It challenges a lot of tried and true standards. So, before we go any further, let's take a look at how *Houses of the Blooded* sets itself apart from its cousins.

> There are many lies in the world, and so few hold any truth.
>
> This lie is true.
>
> For it is true there was a time when our world was newly born and the Sun was red and rain was black and the Moon shone with a golden darkness.
>
> And it is true that humanity fell from Heaven, but not the Heaven of any God we know.
>
> Wary and wise are those who keep their minds ignorant of these truths, for those few who learn of how the world was, they pine for it like the kiss of a lost lover.
>
> Nights of golden moonlight.
>
> And storms of black rain.
>
> — The Book of Whispered Psalms

What is a Roleplaying Game?

A roleplaying game is a kind of storytelling game with rules for handling narrative conflicts. Let me explain.

You need at least two people to play, but you can have more. Most groups feel comfortable with four to six players. As a group, the players tell stories about their characters. Whenever those characters take risky actions, the players roll dice to determine the outcome. The higher you roll, the better.

In *Houses of the Blooded*, you play the role of a character in an ongoing story. You define your character with traits listed on a character sheet. Together with your friends, you sit down with other players and make your characters together, relying on each other to assist in that process. This game calls those characters **player characters** because they are characters controlled by the players.

One player takes on a special role. She doesn't make a character of her own, but instead, plays all the characters in the story you and your other friends don't play: the servants, enemies, rivals, and allies of your player characters (or **PCs**). Most games call her either the Game Master or the Dungeon Master. In this game, we call that player **the Narrator** because that better fits her role in the game.

Like I said, the Narrator plays all the secondary parts in the story you and your friends will tell together. She also *narrates* details of the scenes to the other players, serving as kind of a storyteller and referee all rolled up into one. She is also the final arbiter in disputes between the players.

So far, all of this should sound familiar to regular players, but we're about to jump off the deep end. Hold on to your life preserver.

How is *Houses of the Blooded* Different?

In many ways, really. Let's go through them one-by-one.

The Anti-*D&D* RPG

I have to be right up front about this. *Houses of the Blooded* has two inspirations. The first is an ancient Antediluvian race called "the ven." We'll talk more about them later. The second inspiration is the Big Daddy of Roleplaying Games: *Dungeons & Dragons*. I designed *Houses* with *D&D* in mind. No hiding that. But I did so as a *reaction* to D&D. I didn't want to re-design that game, but design a new game that was a kind of *response* to it.

Almost everything that's true about *D&D* is *untrue* in this game. In *D&D*, the most common kind of character is a wandering nomad who lives outside the law, an adventurer roaming the countryside, scouring dungeons, killing monsters, gaining treasure and weapons so he can kill bigger monsters. Cities are little more than outdoor dungeons and characters rarely—if ever—encounter the upper class or deal with politics.

In *Houses*, you play a noble. A character with a past. A character with a family, with vassals, responsibilities and duties. The Law is an ever-present factor in your life. Because you are a noble, "treasure" really has no value for you and problems such as "wandering monsters" are problems for someone of lesser status to handle. Someone you can hire. Someone expendable. And rather than living in a bubble immune to the effects of political scheming, your character lives in a world that looks like a bastard child of Tanith Lee and Niccolò Machiavelli.

Time

If you've ever played a roleplaying game before, you may have noticed that characters seldom age—locked in a perpetual state of twenty-five years old—and they always seem to "get better." As they move through their lives, experience points always add to the character's abilities. Regardless of how old they look, all RPG characters seem to be an eternal and everlasting twenty-five years old.

Not so here.

Characters in this game begin young. Perhaps sixteen to nineteen. As the game progresses, they age. As they grow older, they learn new skills and discover new talents. As they grow older, however, age creeps up on them like an inevitable shadow. You can't escape it. Always around the corner.

This game is not about a constant push upward toward perfection. It is about doing everything you can in the time you have. There's a clock on your character, constantly ticking. That hour hand always moving toward midnight.

It is always later than you think.

Her dreams were hungry, eating away her days.

Her sweat-soaked sheets clung to her skin, her bones so heavy, her muscles so weak. Even the noonday sun was dim in her eyes. Solace was upon her and all she could do was think back. Think back to her truest love and her truest enemy.

And, of course, he was the same man...

—from *The Great and Terrible Life of Shara Yvarai*

Success and Failure

Most roleplaying games use dice, cards or some other "random number generator" to determine the outcome of risky actions. If you roll well, the Narrator tells you how your character succeeded. If you roll poorly, the Narrator tells you how your character fails.

Not so here.

In this game, if you roll well, *you* get to narrate the outcome of your character's action. If you roll poorly, the *Narrator* tells you about your success or failure.

It's not at all different from a standard RPG. The only twist here is that *everyone* gets a chance to be the Narrator. To be author of their own destiny.

Tragedy

There are all kinds of roleplaying games. Horror, fantasy, science fiction. But no matter the genre, there is one literary element that is almost *never* employed. The element of tragedy.

Houses of the Blooded is a game about tragedy. Now, most folks think tragedy means "when something awful happens." That's not what we're talking about here. What we're talking about is when the main character makes a terrible but well-informed choice. A choice the audience can clearly see as misguided, but because of his own circumstances, the hero cannot. As far as the hero can tell, his decision is the best decision to make, but because the audience has more information, they can see his choice will lead to his own downfall.

We hope the hero will recognize his mistake in time, but we know he will not. We hope for a happy ending, and the author may even give us hints that such an ending is possible, but we know in our heart that the end is inevitable.

This can only end in tears and blood.

But exactly who are the main characters of this collective work? An ancient and nearly forgotten people who called themselves "the ven."

The purpose of this game is to portray ven myth, not ven history. It is important to make this distinction. Players who want a more "realistic" game can easily omit the fantastic elements while keeping the key themes of Romance and Revenge.

This is Not a Work of Fiction

I learned about the ven about a decade ago. A pre-Atlantean people mentioned in texts such as the *Book of Dzyan* and the *Voynich Manuscript*, the ven were a passionate people obsessed with etiquette, beauty and art. And revenge. Always revenge.

When my own research began, we knew almost nothing about them. No primary sources. The secondary sources were suspect at best, written almost entirely in Greek. The translations from those documents dated back to the late 1800s. Needless to say, the "scholars" of that time took many liberties with the Greek translations, and the Greeks probably took many liberties with the primary sources.

But in 2002, a breakthrough. Discovered in a cave just south of Damascus, a small bundle of papers gave us our first primary sources.

The true voice of the ven.

A year passed before the first translations were released to the public, giving us our first look at the convoluted and trap-laden language. Since then, four translations have been released. An exciting time for ven scholarship.

Little Games

Meanwhile, as my research crept along, I was designing little games for a publishing house I owned with my business partner, Jared Sorensen. We called it "The Wicked Dead Brewing Company." Little roleplaying games. Books no bigger than 100 pages (with one notable exception), focused themes and short-term play. All of these were very small compared to work I'd done on "big games" like *Legend of the Five Rings* and *7th Sea*. And while my friends all enjoyed my little games, it was my friend Rob who voiced their collective desire.

"John, you should write a Big Game again."

By Big Game, they meant something that could be played over a long period of time. A campaign game.

I didn't want to design another Big Game. Starting that kind of project is like taking a blind dive into a swimming pool, hoping you'll find water and not the naked concrete bottom. But, they kept bothering me and bothering me, and soon enough, I started to feel the urge to do just that. Design a Big Game.

And so, another dive into the pool.

As it turned out, there wasn't any water, but the ven were there to catch me.

Jared's Big Three Questions

When I first met Jared Sorensen, we spent a long time talking about game design. Most designers have at least a little philosophy about the subject, but most of these philosophies are pretty useless when it really comes down to *playing the game*.

I've adopted many different approaches to game design, learned from a lot of different people. I took a lot from talking to Dan Verssen about board games, I learned a whole lot from Dave Williams talking about collectible card games, and I learned from other gamers and my own playing experience.

Jared taught me three simple questions to ask when approaching a new game. In addition to everything else I've learned, I always keep these three questions close at hand. They help me keep focus on my work and re-direct me to my goals when I get lost. I also use them to help explain my game to others.

So, let's ask those three questions right now.

What is My Game About?

This game is about tragedy. Specifically, the kind of tragedy found in the literature of the ven. It is about their style of storytelling, their culture, their obsession with romance and revenge.

In it, you take on the roles of ven nobles struggling to survive in a deadly and duplicitous culture.

But you won't just play a single character. You have the opportunity to play many. Your noble will grow older as the years pass, transforming from a young noble to an adult, and then finally, to an ancient aristocrat looking for an heir. You may choose to play that heir, or you may choose to play another character. You can also take the roles of your noble's various vassals. Master spies, valets and maids, roadmen, masters of the sword: these are all characters that fill the pages of ven pillowbooks and populate the stages of the theater and the opera.

More than that, though, this game is about passion and the price it carries; the implicit moral behind all ven literature.

How Does My Game Do That?

My game creates a sense of ven tragedy by embracing their culture and mindset like a knife through the heart. Right up to the hilt.

The game takes the six most prominent ven Virtues (Strength, Cunning, Wisdom, Martial Prowess, Beauty, and Courage) and makes mechanics out of them. Every strength on your character's sheet is also a weakness: a vulnerability that can be taken advantage of by enemies. I have rules for trust, rules for betrayal, rules for love and rules for revenge.

In short, everything the ven portray as important in their own literature, I've made a mechanic in the game.

What Behaviors Does My Game Reward and Punish?

My game rewards players for acting like the characters from ven literature. Passionate but short-sighted. Powerful but vulnerable. Loyal but treacherous. The players are rewarded with "style points." These points allow them to use mechanics on their character sheet that make their characters more powerful, but they get these points by making decisions that make their character more vulnerable.

The Eastwood Defense

There are precious few ven scholars in the world, but I have a feeling most of them will find many problems with the liberties I've taken in this book. Just in case they are reading, I want to make it clear that I'm taking The Eastwood Defense.

Clint Eastwood once said he wasn't interested in making a "historical" movie as he was in making a film feel "authentic." I like that sentiment, and when I wrote a game about samurai in *Legend of the Five Rings*, I stole it. Later, when I wrote *7th Sea*—a game about Restoration Era swashbuckling—I stole it again.

When I first approached the ven, I did so as I first approached the Japanese and Europeans: I began by studying their language. I believe a culture's language is the key to understanding that culture. For the ven, the most revealing element of their language was the fact they use the same word for "love" and "revenge." Just a slightly different shift of accent on syllables.

Houses bears another similarity to my other big games. Like *L5R* and *7th Sea*, this is not a historical game. *L5R* portrayed samurai culture in a romanticized light. *7th Sea* did the same thing for 17th century Europe. But neither game was really about portraying historically accurate samurai or swashbucklers: both games were about portraying the literature of those cultures. The same can be said about *Houses of the Blooded*.

This is a romanticized version of the ven. It should not be considered anything near a historical document. In fact, I've done my best to pretty up the ugliest elements of ven culture while maintaining a sense of authenticity. It's been a troublesome juggling act. A good example of an issue I've dodged is how ven culture treats the fairer sex. At their best, the ven treated women as second-rate citizens. At worst, as property. I've elevated the role of ven women to be as equals, as per the literature of the time. Not out of any sense of political correctness, but because playing a second-hand citizen just isn't fun for most players. Of course, if you'd like to play a character the rest of the world considers little more than property… well, maybe I'll include that in a supplement.

So, again, in the tradition of *L5R* and *7th Sea*, *Houses* is not meant to be a "historical game," but rather, a game that authentically recreates the stories presented in ven literature.

Pillow Books, Theater and Opera

We have three sources of ven literature: pillow books, plays, and opera.

Ven pillow books (*ushavana*: "book for the bed") were written for women. Romance novels. Romance novels with blood. Scandalous things, they drew characters larger than life, performing daring and dangerous acts. The most fascinating part of pillow book lore is the ongoing assumption that the books—almost all written under pseudonyms—were written by ven nobility, based loosely on their actual lives.

The most famous pillow book series centered on the character Shara Yvarai. The hub of a long series of fortunes and misfortunes, Shara's story became a kind of prototype for others. The anonymous author, presumed to be a woman named Asara, was a maid to one of the most scandalous women in Shanri. Unfortunately, we do not have the true name of Asara's mistress, but we do have a majority of the series. I've drawn heavily from this particular series for examples and illustrations in this book.

An escape from their lives, pillow books were all the rage during the time I'm drawing from here. Of all their literature and history, pillow books are the largest source of information regarding the ven.

Ven theater, on the other hand, was a bloody affair, filled with revenge, violence, and carnage. Written for the masses, its powerful themes were considered *too* passionate by the nobility… but that did not stop them from slouching into a slumming cloak and sitting in the darkest corners of the theater to enjoy the spectacular mess.

Opera, however, is the Great Alchemical Art. A demanding and exacting form, opera invokes theater, music, dance, painting, and all the Arts. With ancient characters written bigger than mountains, it is, without a doubt, the most powerful of all the ven Arts. Ven opera must be seen to be believed.

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Theater, pillow books and opera. As I said, this book draws from ven literature rather than history. I've used scholarly sources to give certain ambiguous elements of the culture context, but in the end, this should not be considered an authoritative work. For readers more interested in historical documents, I refer you to the short bibliography in the nearby sidebars.

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The Ven Writing Style

I should also warn any readers not familiar with the ven language about a few eccentricities.

I have on many occasions (semi-humorously) referred to myself as a "method writer." I find adopting the philosophies of my subject matter helps capture the essence of their spirit as I write. It was so with games such as *Legend of the Five Rings*, *7th Sea* and *Orkworld*. Expect no different with the ven.

I have tried my best to adopt not only the philosophy of the ven, but in translating their texts, I have also made every attempt to stay true to their language. This will cause a few problems. To begin with, the ven had a very different attitude toward their language than most modern societies. For example, the ven language—*yllanavana*—has some rather lax rules regarding usage and grammar. The ven attitude toward language was, "If you can communicate meaning, your usage is correct." This particular attitude drives most Western scholars mad. Often times, you will find them breaking rules of usage for the purposes of effect. Single word sentences, fragments and other stylistic oddities are common.

Common.

The ven also employed repetition as emphasis as well as capitalization. The ven loved capitalizing Auspicious words. They did it time and time again.

And again.

And again.

As for the language itself, most scholars assume *yllanavana* was a kind of singsong, their prose reading like lyrics, almost like poetry. Every sentence an intentional act of Beauty.

I apologize in advance if my stylistic voice in this book escapes me from time to time. The ven viewed such writing as a Virtue. Such lack of discipline demonstrated the writer's passion. Petty rules of grammar could not hold back the emotion in his heart. Pounding. Seeping into the words. Finding the reader. Reaching up through the page, grabbing him by the throat, shouting into his face.

Again, apologies in advance. And you have been warned.

Now, enough of my yappin'! Let's boogie!

This is where it ends.
With blood and pain and
revenge. But it began with love.
This is how everything
begins and this is how
everything ends.

The Great and Terrible
Life of Shara Yvarai



Shanri & The Ven

Writing about a culture that lived and died in the Primeval Age—before Atlantis saw its great rise and Mu was still a distant dream—is no easy task. Theirs was a brief time, before the return of the sorcerer-kings and the Bloody centuries that followed. Still, for a moment, the world was theirs. Or so they thought.

They called themselves "the ven." Translated, the word means "all of us" or even just "we." They called the world around them "Shanri;" a word meaning, "the Great Enemy," giving a vivid clue as to how the ven viewed the world around them.

The best of us are always looking to take care for the worst of us.
Virtues, Cassias Aldophus

Everyone is looking for a place to put the knife.
Lessons, Cyrin Ildelvi

In this chapter, I'm going to talk about Shanri and the ven. I won't spend too much time on history; enough of that is already known and documented. Instead, I'd like to discuss the world of the moment, the world as they saw it. This is the Age of Clandestine Blood, the height of ven culture. The pinnacle. Standing high enough, close enough, to feel the heat on their fingertips as they reached to touch the sun. Just moments before they fell fast into the chasm of unforgiving darkness.

A Bit of History

Almost everyone knows the story. For thousands of years, the sorcerer-kings—the mysterious *aelva ∂anna*—made war against each other on an unimaginable scale. Using armies and eldritch sorcery, they almost destroyed the world, but instead, destroyed themselves. What they left behind was a shattered remnant of the world they created.

The servitor race called the *ven* dug themselves up and out of the rubble. The world they found was nothing like the world they knew. At long last, they were free from the *aelva ∂anna*, free from magical slavery, free to make their own destiny. It would take almost two centuries to re-build, but every step was worth it.

The world now looks completely different from the world of the sorcerer-kings. During their time, the land was rich and plentiful, a vast pangaea full of life and wonder. Now, the world is shattered, torn and mutated by sorcerous warfare. All that remains is a spiraling chain of archipelagos filled with mutant flora and fauna.

Bred to be industrious, the ven began rebuilding. The remaining armies of the *aelva ∂anna* gobbled up land. Led by the surviving generals, the armies held their territories with military might, promises of protection and threats of violence. The warlords were strengthened with their knowledge of ironworking, knowledge exclusive to the noble caste. Iron is one of the rarest elements on Shanri. Noble families looking high and low for new sources of the precious metal. Soon thereafter, civilization began to get under way again. Farmers returned to their work, learning how to woo their crops from the newly-changed soil. Glass blowers and brewers, bankers and blacksmiths all returned to their trades, almost oblivious to the wars around them.

A high king was chosen from among the nobles: a man who was wise, kind, and honorable. His family ruled the ven for almost ten generations… until the corruption of the sorcerer-kings returned. The promise of their power was too great, even for the greatest of ven. The remaining nobles drew together to overthrow him and his Bloodline, resulting in a deadly war that lasted over ten years. When the war was over, the king was overthrown and his family in disgrace, but there was a price to be paid.

The king cursed all who betrayed him. "The Betrayer Curse" settled on the heads of the noble families; a curse that would last one thousand generations.

Almost two centuries of warfare between the land-owning nobles eventually led to a system of non-violent settlement. This settlement led to the foundation of a Senate; a place where all may bring grievance and issue before the land-owning nobility. Each noble was given a certain number of votes based on his lands and title. When issues are brought before the Senate, the nobles vote on the best course of action.

Now, two centuries after the Curse fell on their heads, ven culture has been born again like a rose from the rubble. The ven not only maintain what they have, but send out explorers to chart the outer territories, looking for new lands to conquer and new resources to claim as their own. The common folk continue to live as they always have: as vassals under a ruling class that regards them as little more than property. The growing merchant class bumps into the culture's artificial limits as commerce blossoms. And the nobles continue to play their eternal games of warfare, intrigue and espionage.

After countless centuries, the ven have established themselves as masters of Shanri. Or so they believe. But the last two centuries have been turbulent. A brief outline follows.

200 Years Ago: The Betrayer War

Two centuries past, the ven were ruled by an Emperor. His name was Jaymen Steele, Earl of Blayloch, Blooded of the Elk, patriarch of the Steele family. His rule was hard, but not harsh. His mercy was rare, but predictable. He was, by all accounts, a good Emperor. He was also the last.

As his Solace approached, Steele began to seek ways to delay the great sleep, or prevent it entirely. This single occupation eventually turned into a passion, then an obsession. An obsession that drove him willingly into the arms of madness.

The Betrayer War brought together the combined forces of all Houses against the Emperor. So great was his might, those in his own House turned against him, and even that great Strength was barely enough to defeat Steele. Decades of sorcerous research empowered him beyond imagination. When he was defeated, a council of nobles gathered to cast the course of the future. No ven should ever again be declared Emperor. More, that the House of the Elk be held at half-shroud. A warning if they should ever demonstrate the hubris of their Blood again. Sorcery was outlawed, except for the Blooded of the Serpent who were allowed to study the Forbidden Art for the purposes of never allowing any future abuse of power.

The Betrayer War forever changed the face of Shanri. Steele's researches unlocked old doors that should have never been opened. The land was filled with ancient horrors, terrible and unspeakable. The Blooded of the Falcon gave up their own lands to serve as "roadmen," protecting the common people against the horrors unleashed by Steele's ambition. The House of the Bear, most deeply wounded by the war, retreated to the mountains to heal.

Aeldana de Shanru Tala

"The world has no mercy."

The world that surrounds the ven is full of danger. The jungles are populated with deadly creatures—some of which defy reason. The Season of Storms lasts almost sixty percent of the year. Skimming the seas are leviathans, just waiting for the unwary sailor or fisherman. Travel requires bodyguards trained in the ways of the world.

When the ven speak of the world, they call her *Shanru Domya*, "the merciless mother." The ven pray to their ancestors, but not to Shanru Domya.

This attitude of self-reliance has found its way into the very heart of ven culture. Every child is expected to stand on his own. Those who rely on others are weak and worthy of ridicule, scorn and even violence. Those who cannot protect themselves do not deserve mercy. Even the ven legal system reflects this callous attitude (see below).

Those who are strong, those who grow from their suffering, those who prove themselves worthy may gain a blessing from the cruel mother, but none dare thank her. Speaking her name will only draw her attention and no sane man wants that.

150 Years Ago: The Quiet Poison

Over the next century, the Blooded of the Wolf moved quickly to consolidate their power and fill the vacuum left behind by an empty throne. The House of the Fox did the same, but met with quick resistance from the Adrente wolves. A second war erupted, but it did not find its end on the battlefield. Instead, the war was ended on the floor of the newly created Senate.

The Senate adopted what would come to be known as the War Amendment (taken from Jonan Drax's ancient Laws) forbidding any noble from gathering armies. The nobility was permitted to keep "a small personal guard for the purposes of security and protection," but otherwise, no soldiers, no garrisons, and no armies. Needless to say, the ven reacted to the amendment in their own way. They started gathering armies.

Because a noble was allowed a "small personal guard," the ven began acquiring soldiers for that very purpose. The definition of "small" varied from noble to noble, from twenty armed men to as many as one hundred or more. After all, according to the Law, nobles were also required to protect their vassals. Because vassals are property, they are—legally—an extension of the noble's person. And so, in a moment of pure irony, "personal protection" became the key phrase that allowed the nobility to raise armies.

But waging war was still illegal. And in reaction to that clause, espionage and assassination became the primary cause of death among nobles in Shanri. For seventy-five years, the death toll became almost epidemic. The primary method of assassination was poison, providing an anonymous method of doing away with powerful enemies.

Thanks to another amendment passed by the Senate, dueling transformed from a messy and bloody exercise into pure ritual. The Dueling Act forbade casual Swordplay, requiring proper procedure for the ven's most deadly art.

From all this bloodshed, the Wolf and Fox developed the rules for duels, refining them as they murdered each other. Warfare occurred in the courts, civilized and ritualized, but still just as bloody.

100 Years Ago: The Anguish

"This storm knows us," Uvand Philo wrote. "It knows our names."

The Storm, dubbed "the Anguish" by those who lived through it, ravaged all of Shanri. It first appeared a century ago, seemingly willful, seemingly knowing, all too deadly. A murderous Storm. It did indeed seem to know their names.

Ever since that day, the Storm returns, seeking the Blood of the ven. At first, they were unprepared, their homes and villages and crops wrecked. With no foreknowledge or understanding of what they were dealing with, the ven suffered. Their only warning a distant howling wind like the cry of a wounded animal and the slowly darkening sky.

Many ven moved into the ancient ruins of the sorcerer-kings for shelter. For generations, those buildings remained empty out of fear of what may lie within, but fear of a present danger trumped the fear of the past. The ven cleaned out the vast hallways and rooms, seeking shelter from the Storm.

But one ven sought truth rather than shelter. "The Storm knows our names," he wrote. "We shall return the favor." His name was Uvand Philo. Blooded of the Serpent, Duke of Ychara, Philo spent all his waking days searching for the origin of the Storm and all his nights communing with the suaven, seeking their Wisdom. It took him fifty years, right up to the edge of Solace, but in the end, he found what he was looking for. He went to a particular *aelven ∂anna* ruin with three others. Of the four, only one returned. Danaria Del, Blooded of the Falcon. She knew the Storm's name and she brought it back… but only for those of her Blood.

Since then, the Blooded of the Falcon alone know the Storm's name. They call upon the Storm and send it back, although sometimes its fury is too great for even those who know its secret.

Aelva danna de nuru

"The wicked ones only sleep."

The history of the ven is tied into the demise of Shanri's previous masters: the mysterious "sorcerer-kings" the ven called *aelva danna*. *Aelva danna* can also be translated as "the wicked ones," and is sometimes used as a pejorative against those who study the forbidden art of Blood sorcery. These "sorcerer-kings" ruled Shanri for… well, no ven knows for certain how long they ruled Shanri. For all the ven know, the *aelva danna* have always been. And they will return one day to rule again.

For thousands of years, these sorcerer-kings made war against each other on an unimaginable scale. Using vast armies and eldritch sorcery, they almost destroyed the world, but instead, destroyed themselves. What they left behind was a shattered remnant of the world they created.

50 Years Ago: Clandestine Blood

The Storm accomplished two things. First, it made the House of the Falcon—mostly disregarded by the other Houses—a vital and essential part of every noble's life. Second, it moved the nobles into the deserted mansions and castles of the sorcerer-kings. Many scholars mark this last move as the beginning of a new era for the ven. An era of comfort, security and overconfidence. The great lords—Earls and Dukes—began looking at expanding their domains. This led to smaller nobles—the Barons—looking for allies wherever they could

find them. Of course, this required a degree of trust no ven was willing to give. The Barons needed a solution… and they found it in the libraries of the sorcerer kings.

Sorcery, long since made illegal by the Senate, found a resurgence in the minor Houses of Shanri. It was Vudru Kouser, Baron of Etrain, Blooded of the Serpent who first brought the Blood Oath into the courts. His tiny lands were surrounded by enemies and he needed an ally he could trust. Using a secret he swore never to reveal, he forged a pact with five other Barons, a sorcerous oath that bound them together. The Oath, sealed with their own Blood, not only ensured no Baron would dare break the Oath, but also gave each noble secrets they swore never to reveal.

Kouser's Oath found its way across Shanri in a matter of months. In almost every court, Barons were taking the Oath, finding allies with sorcery they could not find on their own. The Barons were united, and because their Oaths were made in secret, no Earl or Duke was willing to step into the complicated web of alliances. A stalemate no one dared disturb.

Today: Totem Rex

The most dangerous kind of talk wanders the halls of the Senate. The Earls have been whispering of a "high king." Not an Emperor. A king. A monarch with independent powers, answerable to the Senate. While Shanri's greatest nobles (the distinguished "Earls") conspire to make such a title, they know the Barons will never agree. There are not enough votes in the Senate to pass such an amendment. That makes some Earls consider less peaceful options.

Meanwhile, exploration into ruins deeper in the world and further from the hub of civilization have uncovered dangerous secrets. New sorceries, unspeakable monsters, and

Organized Religion in Shanri

We have precious little information on the mystery cults of the Suaven, but we can make a few assumptions based on tangential references. We know the cults had secret hierarchies and the "high priests" (v'dallvyr) exercised considerable influence among the noble class. So much so that the high priestess of Talia Yvarai—wearing a mask as all priestesses of Talia are required to do—prevented Uvalon Burghe, the Earl of Tyvn, from murdering his adulterous wife.

We assume High Priests were selected by the cult based on their connection with the Suaven. The deeper the connection, the higher the rank and privilege. The nobility feared the clergy. Feared the wrath of the Suaven they served. Many nobles of lesser birth—second-, third- and fourth-borns—joined the cults in earnest, all but throwing away their titles for the ghost authority gained by the rank of clergy.

treasures of breathtaking Beauty. As this news makes its way through the courts, more nobles sponsor expeditions into the uncharted realms, hoping to bring back treasures and marvels to impress and awe the court.

With the import of such valuables, piracy is at an all time high. Whereas before, the ven feared the orks of the sea, now they brave the waters. The seas are now filled with ships flying the colors of the Houses… and flying black flags: anonymous badges of piracy.

Shanri

You know the past. Let's talk about the present. At least, the world as seen through the pages of a ven pillow book.

Of Shanri itself, no ven maps survive. We have little idea of its geography or topography. Knowing what we do of the Atlanteans, it is safe to say the world we know now could have looked much different in the era of the ven.

We do know the sorcerer-kings all but wrecked the world, leaving in their wake disparate land masses filled with dangerous flora and fauna. Countless eons of experimentation and mutation turned the world around the ven into an enemy. They had to cut through hungry plants and Cunning creatures just to settle their homes.

We also do not even know the locations of the Houses. Most pillow books take place in a kind of fantastic version of Shanri itself—a "mythic Shanri," if you will. Different sources contradict each other on exactly where the Houses were situated. It is entirely possible strife among the Houses was so ruthless that land changed from hand to Bloody hand on a regular basis. At the very least, that is what the books suggest. And that's a truth we'll be maintaining here.

The various archipelagos where the ven lived did seem to surround a central "mini-continent" called *Q'nal∂inir* (a double meaning: "Golden Center under the Sky" and "Hub of All Revenge"). On Q'naldinir, the Senate was formed, meeting in one of the greatest ruins of the elder age. Poems of its Beauty and awful countenance fill page after page. Weaker ven were said to shudder and stammer in its shadow. I have also found various passages giving credence to the theory that Q'naldinir was also the central point of ven expansion. Other scholars have suggested differently, but I have found little evidence for their hypotheses.

As I said, the ven carved their homes out of the chaos around them with fire and Sword. The world did not yield itself lightly. Two hundred years of Blood and toil. At the time of this book, their work is still undone. Much of Shanri remains unexplored. Vast jungles and hidden ruins hold many promises. Dangerous promises.

Ork

Shanri has a wide diversity of creatures and plant life. None of it was untouched by the sorcerer-kings. Mutations are everywhere. To the ven, these are *ork*.

The word "ork" best translates as "monster." In the English language, we have many kinds of monsters. Trolls, vampires, hobgoblins, boogeymen. All of these fall under the category of "monster." Likewise, on the face of Shanri, there are many different kinds of orks. (The ven are lax on the usage of "ork," especially in terms of plurality. Sometimes, they use "ork" as the plural, and others they use "orks." I've tried to maintain a consistent usage here, but I'm afraid it slips now and then.)

On a deeper level, ork means "other" or "outsider." The context is plain: anything that is not ven is ork. And while we have a distinct hominid impression attached to the word, to the ven, an ork is any living thing that is not ven. It may be bi-pedal, it may be a carnivorous plant, it could also be a spectral force that cannot be entirely seen. Thus, there is also a malicious connotation to the word. Dangerous others are ork. Others that are less dangerous, or even downright safe, are not ork. Instead, they are just *ruk*. A little word that I've translated as "beneath notice."

Like peasants. *Ruk*.

Spectres

While orks make up the majority of visible, tangible threats on Shanri, the invisible and intangible should not be underestimated.

The ven word for a creature of the invisible world is *illðrua*. I've translated this as "spectre." (From Latin *spectrum*, meaning "appearance," from *specere*, "to look.") Not all ven can see into the invisible world. A few can. Others use rituals. But just as *ork* is a generic term used to describe many different species of monsters, the word "spectre" has the same function.

In ven literature, I found a vast amount of references to spectres. Most of these look more like the "hungry spirits" of the Chinese/Japanese variety. They can touch you, but you cannot touch them. And they take. They take because they hunger. They take your eyes, they take your tongue, they take your heart. Hungry. For what they cannot have.

Spectres take the form of the ven, but they are not the lost and wandering souls of the ven, because the ven have no souls. At least, that's what they believe. The entire concept of a soul—a spirit inhabiting the physical body—does not exist in ven metaphysics. Spectres

appear like the ven because it pleases them. It pleases them to terrify those who look upon them. A spectre's true form is terrible to behold. No mortal sees a spectre's true form and retains his sanity.

Spectres haunt the old ruins of the sorcerer-kings and ancient forests. They are not to be trifled with.

Orichalcum: The Sorcerous Steel

A mineral found in Shanri, almost extinct in our own time, orichalcum is also known as the sorcerous or sacred steel. Harder and lighter than iron, items and weapons forged from this material are highly desired by the ven. The secret of working orichalcum is closely held by those who know it; one of Shanri's greatest mysteries.

The most typical use of the sorcerous steel is in Swords. An orichalcum blade can shatter any other weapon, cut through stone, and slice a falling silk handkerchief. Not a blemish on the blade.

It is the anathema of spectres: the only material that can touch and injure them. This makes weapons and wards made from orichalcum highly prized, indeed. Swords, charms, arrows, medallions. Highly prized.

Orichalcum appears as a dark red metal, clearly different from iron, copper and tin. (The ven have not yet discovered the amalgam we call "steel.") It is cold to the touch and has been described as "holding the slightest vibration." It is not mined but created by a ritual known to only a few, merging gold and silver, bound together by Blood.

Gold and silver. Sun and Moon. Will and imagination. The vital instruments of magic.

Carry a sword. A quick apology stings less than a quick duel, and leaves fewer scars.

The Olivana: Sacred Animals

Some creatures familiar to our own time were also familiar to the ven. Although some are so foreign, so alien, scholars cannot find contemporaries.

A few animals, however, the ven regard as sacred. Sacred in an almost totemic way. In fact, I think it's safe to ditch the "almost." For the Houses, these animals are holy. Only the Blooded may hunt a sacred animal, and even then, only on holy days.

It is said the ven traded something to these animals allowing them to survive the destruction the sorcerer-kings brought upon themselves. Because of that bargain, these animals share a special kinship with the Blooded. When they are hunted on their sacred days, it is said eating of their flesh brings Strength and healing. Of course, the prey must be killed in a specific, ritualistic way. Otherwise, the hunter shows disrespect to the holy animal.

You can find them in nearby boxed text. All of them are similar to their modern counterparts, but larger, stronger, and smarter. Just like the ven.

Bear

From ven reports, the Shanri bear shares many characteristics with the American grizzly. It stands nearly twelve feet tall, has a predator's Cunning, but is not generally carnivorous, preferring fish and berries. It will eat predators and has been seen hunting larger animals such as elk, moose and deer if forced to. Bears move as family units and fight with tactics. They hibernate in the winter.

One of my favorite stories is the Blooded of the Bear who was lost in the mountains during winter. Stumbling on a cave of sleeping bears, he settled down and woke in spring. When he awoke, he was alone and unharmed but remembered vivid dreams of hunting with the family of bears.

Boar

Shanri boar stand three feet at the haunches. *Uvanðir*. The wrathful and stubborn. Boars remember. Living in small families, digging, knocking down trees while they rub down their skin. Tasty, but dangerous.

And they remember.

Cat

The Shanri cat, (*kachka*) is a curious creature. We know the ven didn't spend a lot of time domesticating animals, and yet, there was the cat. Illustrations show us many breeds of cats, large and small. We also know the ven suspected cats could communicate with a sophisticated unspoken language. Some even claimed to be able to speak to cats, but these folks were dismissed as we dismiss faith healers.

Well, at least, in my house we dismiss them.

The ven keep cats for a single purpose: they believe cats can see into the invisible world. When a cat suddenly reacts to something the ven cannot see, they assume the cat is reacting to a disturbance in the invisible world. The ven also believed cats had sorcery of their own. Disappearing at will, passing through doors, charming those with weak minds. Such is the mind of a ven: full of superstition and nonsense.

Elk

There is talk of *khanurðante*, the Great Elk of Shanri. A magnificent creature, pure white, antlers that shine like stars. King of all creatures, the ven give it powers beyond those of mortals and orks. It is some kind of source of terrible power. Many have quested to see it. All come back changed men, unable to speak of the experience. Visibly changed.

Elk are sacred to all Houses, not just those who wear the heraldry. No ven hunt them, although spotting an elk on a hunt is said to bring good fortune. Killing an elk brings... something else.

Falcon

Without domesticated canines, the falcon is the primary hunting animal for the ven. Vigilant. Courageous. Quick. A hunter without equal. Speed. *Shivu*. The falcon.

It is said those of the Thorne Blood perform a secret ritual with their hunting animals, allowing them to see what the falcon sees. Ven literature is rife with such rumors. Of course, that's all they are. Rumors. Of course.

Fox

It is said the *q'al*, the Shanri fox, can change its form. A creature of desire. A creature that cannot help but love. Foxwives, a legend we inherited from the ven, are common in the literature of the time. Most pillow books at least have some sort of reference to the fox and her ability to charm a man beyond reason. The twist on the ven version of this ancient tale is that the fox can only charm someone who has already won its heart.

Foxes are not hunted in Shanri. The ven know better. As beautiful as the fox may be, her anger is even greater. And the fox does not gain its Revenge through force or martial means. Oh, no. A fox hurts you where the wound will never heal.

In the heart.

Horse

There are three distinct breeds of equine on Shanri, some considered noble, others not as much. Ilderim, the noble breed are used for riding by the noble class. Tall and strong, their speed unparalleled by any other creature. The grusha, smaller (and by all accounts, uglier) horses, are used for pulling carriages. Finally, mules and donkeys are used by the peasantry for pulling carts and farm use.

Serpent

The Blood of Mwrr trace their lineage back to Serpent (*avala*), a mysterious figure in ven mythology. Like most primal animals, it was said Serpent had great power, but he gave that power up for Wisdom, surrendering it to the Well at the Center of the World. He was asked to give up his arms. He did. He was asked to give up his legs. He did. His ears. His beautiful hair. Then, his poison. That was one thing Serpent would not surrender. And so, he carries the Wisdom of the world… but not all of it. And he is cursed. Every question he answers leads to more questions.

The ven regard serpents with awe and respect. They are venomous creatures, black-scaled and quick. It is said their eyes can charm the weak-willed. I have taken that tale as fact.

Spider

We have many breeds of spider in our own time. Not so much in the time of the ven. Spiders are small, spiders are huge. The great spiders, deep in the jungles. Patient and deadly. Communicating by vibrating their webs. Prey. Danger. The ven word for spider is *agotha*. "I wait."

Deep in the jungles of Shanri sit the Great Spiders. Powerful and terrible, larger than a man, as old as the sorcerer-kings. Great is their knowledge for those who are humble enough to kneel. And bring sacrifice.

Wasp

While many scholars translate the word *eshanu* as "bee," I personally prefer translating it as "wasp." Eshanu are not the little honey bee we are familiar with. True, they live in hives and make honey, but the connotation of "bee" doesn't carry the same kind of danger that "wasp" brings with it.

A single sting from an eshanu can be deadly. More than one sting *is* deadly. But the honey… intoxicating.

Honey is a sacred food among the ven. If kept in sealed pots, honey never stales, never spoils. Honey makes everything better. Tasting like nothing else. A sacred food guarded by poison. Could anything appeal to the ven more?

Wolf

The closest Shanri comes to domesticated canine is the wolf, the *∂renδe*. Four feet at the haunches, two hundred pounds. Teeth and claws. Burning eyes, bristled back. The Shanri wolf hunts in packs, bringing down large animals (like bears), eating quickly and moving on. Migratory.

The wolf is always on the move, but if you know his secrets, you can always find him.

Some ven keep wolves on their grounds as a way to discourage spies. These creatures are far from "pets," although those of the Blood are said to keep a kind of kinship with the hunters. "No Adrente has ever been killed by a wolf." So the story goes.

A dream. Naked. Running under the moonlight. Blood on your lips. Pain. Teeth on your throat. A word, whispered in your ears. Awakening with the Bloody scars on your back.

Running with wolves.

Dragons

And then, there are dragons. *Avanadande*.

But not the cave-dwelling, virgin snatching, gold hoarding kind. Something very different. If she's lucky—very lucky—a ven may see a dragon once in her life. Perhaps only once. And only if she's paying attention…

A soldier looks up on a battlefield
and sees his best friend cut in two.

A woman watches a ship leaving port,
her own true love watching from the deck.

Brothers separated for years are
reunited at their father's funeral.

The first kiss of an affair
that lasts for decades.

In a moment. A brief flash of a moment. For there are moments when words fail. The limitations of language simply cannot contain the sublime truth.

These moments — these precious moments — when all the world falls away, all time falls away, when the moment rests for a thousand years, lifting all the weight from your heart, that we can feel the lingering after presence of a dragon.

Dragons are not physical creatures, but the manifestation of moments. Moments of power, moments of grief, moments of love, moments of hate, moments of hope. Some ven scholars speculate that the ven themselves create dragons: the raw emotional energy, the ven summons an aura of power so palpable all who stand in its aura can feel it. Like an ache in the bones. A lightning bolt down the spine.

A ven can live his whole life without ever knowing that sensation, but once it happens, there is no forgetting it. It remains, a reminder of the split second when the world paused, took a deep breath, and let wonder seep into its skin.

Ruins

The sorcerer-kings left behind more than just biological monstrosities. Amazing structures defying all the ven understand of architecture and geometry. Great and terrible. Frightening and beautiful. Houses, mansions, castles. Underground fortresses. These are the amazing *falin ∂ua∂a*. "Puzzle Houses." The ruins of the sorcerer-kings.

The *falin ∂ua∂a* are not only puzzles but prizes. Each lord dreams of making his stronghold from one of the old ruins. A house that guards itself. A house with a will of its own. And the ven know any will can be tamed. Time, patience and Cunning.

Falin ∂ua∂a come in all shapes and sizes, but one truth always remains. The doors are tall. The steps are tall. The corridors wide. Ancient artifacts linger within. So do spectres and orks. To claim your own puzzle house, you'll need a small army—I mean, personal guard—to clean the place out. Once inside, you'll find all sorts of treasures. Ancient documents written in the Old Tongue. Artifacts of untold power. Secret histories.

But like I said, to get the goodies, you have to get by the guards. And not everyone has the courage for that kind of action.

Travel

Getting around Shanri is no easy task. Even in the more civilized regions, orks linger on the tree line, waiting for unsuspecting travelers. Going anywhere alone is suicide. Unless you have the Blood of the Falcon. Then, it's just brave.

Caravan is the most common form of travel in Shanri. The ven use mules and other beasts of burden to pull their carriages, wagons and carts. They used Swords and pole arms to guard their carriages, wagons and carts.

And bandits. Let's not forget bandits.

Meanwhile, on the great blue, the orks of the sea include a wide variety of terrors, making traveling between Shanri's archipelagos equally dangerous. The ven connected a few of the closer archipelagos with bridges, but few are strong or wide enough to support caravans. Barges move cargo between the closer land masses, but ships are needed for longer journeys. Of course, moving cargo overseas isn't just dangerous because of orks, but because of piracy. Many nobles secretly employ pirates to raid foreign trade, splitting the profits with the corsairs.

No cannons. No muskets. No pistols. Just bows, arrows, Swords, pole arms and muscle. And rum. Yo ho.

Villages

Travelers can stop in local villages where the hospitality of the common people will feed and comfort them during a long night away from the secure castle. There's a headman with limited authority, usually assigned by a sheriff or baron. He carries no weapons but has the authority of the Law to protect him.

A village usually has a source of water, at least a few local farms and a small retinue of craftsmen to keep the place going. An elder council for important decisions. Because of its rural surroundings, villagers have to deal with orks quite a bit. Without the legal authority to wield weapons, they resort to farm implements. Pitchforks, shovels and the like.

Towns

Townships are grown-up villages. More organization, more bureaucracy. A mayor, a local sheriff, a small town guard (armed with tools such as saps, staves, and pitchforks). More farms, more farmers. Merchants. Blacksmith, cooper, baker, cobbler. Nightwatchmen. Perhaps even a shrine or two. Maybe even a temple. But certainly enough sharpened iron to keep orks at bay.

Cities

And of course, there's the hub of civilization. Most ven cities are built on ruins left behind by the sorcerer-kings. The buildings are larger but then again, so are the walls. The ven haven't quite figured out how the sorcerer-kings made the walls surrounding the cities so tall. Or at those angles. And what exactly is that they're made out of? It isn't stone. It isn't mortar. Even half ruined walls are better than the walls the ven could build.

Once inside those gates and walls, the city seems like a thriving entity unto itself. Merchants on every street, screaming their particular calls. Everything is for sale. Fruits, vegetables, milk, mead, wine, shoes, sex, smoked ork meat, a song. You want to find it, you can.

Cities are usually governed by a local lord or a magistrate with guards to assist him in keeping the peace. Because of the rather visceral nature of ven vengeance, there is surprisingly little crime in the cities. Or maybe that's just because the criminal element knows the exact price to keep officials quiet.

The Greatest City in the World

Davfanna Aldrena.

Hub of the world. The Shining Star. Home.

Approaching it from the water, all the sailors can see are the walls. Reaching up tall enough to scrape the clouds. A single gate allows ships in and out. The busiest port in all of Shanri. Once inside, the city looms over you like an angry parent. Its tallest minarets. The wide streets. The bridges. The canals.

Divided into two cities—upper and lower—by an eruption of land reaching up into the sky. Hard black stone, ripping up from the soil, dividing the Blooded from the unblooded. In the upper city, the remains of the great palaces and temples. The tallest structure—the Senate—sits in the center, making all other buildings just satellites.

The lower city, on the other hand, is carved apart by canals. The buildings half-submerged in the sea surrounding it. The city has no worries about large underwater orks, and smaller ones are kept out by underwater gates.

Below that, the undercity. Nobody goes there.

Food

The ven enjoy all kinds of food and drink, but as with most things, the most common foods depend on which part of the social order you belong.

Peasants eat lots of vegetables. Beans, peas, carrots, corn, peppers, potatoes, radishes. The usual. Peasants also drink water, milk and brew their own beer. Peasants may not hunt game. Because they are not allowed to carry weapons, most don't mind.

Nobles like fruits and meats. They grow orchards with orange and cherry trees, blackberry bushes and grow peanuts. Nobles never drink water, but enjoy a wide stock of alcoholic beverages. Wines are very popular as is rum.

A noble never drinks beer, except when there is nothing else but water and milk. And even then, sour cat piss might be a better alternative. After all, beer's pretty much the same thing.

Language

The ven use three languages: the High, the Vulgar, and the Old Tongue.

The nobility employ the High Tongue, a shifting and cryptic language. Servants are trained to speak it, forbidden from speaking anything else while in the presence of the nobility. The language is filled with double and secret meanings, changing its shape and form with the whims of those who speak it. A kind of spastic slang altering with the whim of the courts. With such a quirky tongue, it is difficult to determine exactly how the language *worked*, let alone how it sounded.

Each Season, the most influential and fashionable of nobles decide on changes of phrase, changes of pronunciation, changes of meaning. They enforce their

will through sheer linguistic bullying. If you don't speak as they do, they simply do not speak to you. Each Season.

The Vulgar Tongue remains in the streets and taverns and theaters of Shanri, but forbidden in the presence of the Blooded. From what we can tell, the Vulgar Tongue is a sing-song language designed for its tenor rather than its clarity. A ravishing language. A passionate language. A language of the heart, not of the mind.

Finally, the Old Tongue. This is the language of the sorcerer-kings. The language the peasants never hear. Kept in complete secrecy, the ven use the Old Tongue for sorcery and ritual.

"What is the ritual for..."

The ven have a lot of rituals. All through this chapter, I've mentioned obscure rituals for even the most minor tasks. Now, I could write a whole book of ven rituals, but instead, I think it would be much more fun for players (at least, I thought it would be more fun) if I gave them the authority to invent the rituals as they went. Give the players the power to set precedent.

So, as you go, if you find the need for a ven ritual, make it up. Go ahead. I trust you. Besides, making up rituals is a blast. Why should I have all the fun?

The Horses of Shanri

We should probably spend a few moments on horses. Like the Sword, a Blooded ven's steed is a symbol of pride and power. And, like the Sword, this particular symbol is kept only for the worthy. The peasantry must live without.

There are three distinct categories of equines in Shanri. The first are the *ilderim*. They belong only to the nobility. Next are the *grusha*. These are the animals used by the peasantry. Lastly, are the other beasts of burden: donkeys, mules, and oxen.

Ilderim

There is no direct translation for the word *ilderim*. The closest scholars can come to is "steed" or "high-bred horse." The term "horse," when used in ven documents, refers only to the ilderim. As I said earlier, the ildirim belong to the Blooded. Only the Blooded. They are worth thirty times one *grusha*. For a peasant to kill an ilderim is punishable by death (as if there's any other punishment for a peasant). If one of the Blooded kills another ven's steed, it is a horrendous insult.

The ilderim are tall. Tall enough to accommodate the impressive stature of their riders. They stand about 16 hands (64 inches) at the shoulder with slender bodies, graceful legs, and

a high tail carriage. Their refined heads, set on proud necks, are made all the more elegant by long, flowing manes; large, intelligent eyes, and short, alert ears. Their coats are sleek and come in a variety of solid colors comparable to those of modern horses: bay, chestnut, gray, black, palomino, etc. White markings on the legs and faces are particularly prized.

Ven raise ilderim on luxurious stud farms managed by highly trained and well trusted staff. The ilderim are allowed to breed only once every three years, and then, only in the spring, so that when the foal is born the following spring, he can graze on the most lush pastures that Shanri has to offer.

Riding is Shanri's primary means of transportation as well as entertainment. Horse races are a spectacle held in most courts—with significant wagering, of course. Hunts are held on horseback, the ven using riding equipment worthy of their steeds. Heavily embroidered saddle blankets, quilted pads of silk, velvet or other fine fabrics.

The saddle—complete with girth and stirrups—made of tooled leather, embroidered fabric, ivory, and precious metals, sometimes ornamented with bells and gemstones. Plumes, tassels, bells, precious metals, and beadwork. The shoes themselves are not nailed on, but shod with metal shoes fastened to their feet like a sort of sandal.

All Blooded children are taught to ride and only on ilderim. These noble steeds are never used as draft animals, never put in harness—with a single exception.

Chariot racing.

Grusha and Other Beasts of Burden

Again, there is no direct translation for the word *grusha*, but the closest is "people's animal." It is also called a pony, cob, or *tarpan* in ven writing.

In comparison to the ilderim, the grusha were small – never taller than 14 hands (56 inches) at the shoulder. They had thick, stout bodies; wide crested necks; and short, stocky legs. Their ears were rather long, and their eyes small, placed near the top of the head. Their manes and tails, which were coarse and sparse, were almost always black; and their rough coats only came in shades of tan, grayish-yellow (dun), mouse, and brown. They had no white markings. They had hard little feet that did not require shoes.

The grusha were hardy animals that were often required to glean what nutrition they could from sparse pasture and harvested fields. They were allowed to breed as the farmers saw fit, and feral herds of them were not uncommon.

They were sometimes used as meat, but were more commonly used by the peasantry as a riding and pack animal (along with donkeys and mules). The peasant saddle – when one

was used at all – was rarely more than a simple saddle pad that may or may not have had a girth or stirrups.

It does not appear that the ven used the horse collar. Instead, they used yokes and neckbands. The trouble with this is that horses pulling large weights without a collar are very inefficient. As a result, for pulling heavy loads and for plowing, oxen were used more often than equines. It was not uncommon to harness a donkey, mule, or grusha alongside an ox for heavy pulling.

Carts and Carriages

Carts and carriages in Shanri are somewhat primitive, with a single, long shaft extending from the axle to which a pair of animals are harnessed. Most carts and carriages (and chariots) have only two wheels. Four-wheeled vehicles are not commonly used.

Carts are for working, for carrying loads, for carrying peasants. Not for carrying ven. Carts are pulled by donkeys, mules, or grusha. Mules are highly-prized as driving animals. Hybrid vigor makes them stronger than grusha and larger and heartier than donkeys.

When they choose not to ride, the ven use carriages. (So did very rich peasants who were acting above their station.) Carriages were used primarily for the infirm, the elderly, and for those wishing to make a statement of decadence. A carriage holds between one and four passengers. Carriages are ornate, usually a combination of carved wood and fine, embroidered fabric, pulled by a pair of large mules.

Other Cultures

The ven never mention other cultures, but we do know they co-existed with the early Atlanteans, Lemurians and Hyperborians. These cultures were in their infancy (it is anyone's guess if the ven would consider them anything other than ork), but they do exist.

Like I said, these alien cultures never appear in any ven literature. Given the auspiciousness of such a meeting, we'd expect even a casual mention of Atlantean magicians, Lemurian mystics or even Hyperborian warlords. But, unfortunately, there is nothing.

Your strength is a measure of your desire.

The Ven

And now, with the setting done, ink and pain still drying on the canvas, we turn our attention to the stars of this little spectacle. Still unrehearsed, they walk onto the stage naked except for their bravado. Playing at what they are not, overwhelmed by what they might be, we see them for what they truly are.

Basics

For biological facts, I'm drawing from the only sources we have: the pillow books. We must assume there's at least *some* exaggeration going on here, but since the game is about the ven found in their literature, let's use those numbers.

The ven look a lot like us. Arms, legs, heads, fingers, toes. I do not know if the term "mammal" is appropriate. Designed from scratch by the sorcerer-kings to be servants, lovers and warriors.

The average ven male and female appear to stand between five foot ten and six foot three with variations on either end. The oldest character I can find in any of the literature seems to be approximately 100 years old. I'm setting that as the cap.

The books also demonstrate ven heroes and heroines performing incredible acts of physicality. Lifting, jumping, pulling, pushing. On the other hand, a single knife to the heart or throat qualifies as a mortal wound. While they may be stronger and faster, they certainly seem just as mortal.

From the minimal mentions of pregnancy in their literature, scholars have come to the conclusion that the ven pregnancies lasted approximately three to four months. This comes from two passages from ven pillow books, both making mention of pregnancy lasting "a Season" (four months).

Physical Features

The variety of ven is as mixed as *homo sapiens*, although there are a few common descriptors. But before we get into all that, here's an important note on a character's appearance.

Ven authors used physical characteristics as identifiers; a kind of short-hand the author uses to identify particular kinds of characters. Blue-eyed characters are usually inquisitive while gold-eyed characters fall more into the trickster category. Villainous or untrustworthy characters are identified with red hair, pale skin and grey eyes. The more of these traits the character has, the more villainous she is.

Ven skin is dark. Not black, but dark. If a ven walked down our own streets today, he would most definitely not be considered Caucasian. Perhaps some biracial heritage, but not Caucasian. Ven skin color varies from deep tan to darker red. Eye colors always sound fantastic and spectacular. Ice blue, gold, silver, russet and sometimes black. Ven hair is anywhere from gold to shimmering red to midnight black. It is usually curly (like the kind found in the Mediterranean) and wild while straight hair signifies a more serious kind of character. I found very few blondes.

Cosmetics

The ven use cosmetics to alter their appearance. They use dyes in their hair and pigment to adorn their skin. Men either keep their hair short or grow it very long. Tied with a braid. Beards and mustaches are common. Nails are painted black or red or whatever color suits him.

Women always grow their hair, weaving elaborate spectacles. A woman's hair is a source of pride. Cutting it is a source of shame. Usually a punishment or the bad end of a bargain. Dark or light around the eyes, rouge for the cheeks and lips.

Solace

The ven age, but they do not die from it.

The ven never get sick.

The ven do not believe in a soul. They wouldn't even understand the concept.

For the ven, there are only two sources of death: accident and deliberate murder.

The ven do not die of old age. Instead, they pass into the Quiet Winter. Something they call "Solace."

The word is *q'va*. Sometimes translated as "the Stillness," a ven begins showing signs of Solace in his late fifties. The bones begin to ache. The muscles do not respond as quickly as they used to. Vivid dreams. Bloody dreams. Seeming memories.

As the ven age, they grow taller and thinner. Their eyes turn a shade of gold. Widening. The bones ache because they are changing. Thinner. Taller. Many ven approaching Solace also demonstrate peculiar habits. Obsession with tiny details. A deep passion for a particular kind of fruit. A constant and knowing grin.

In the later stages, the body begins excreting a thick, sticky white substance. Almost like hair, from every part of the body. The ven call this *vaq'in*: "webs of dreaming." The muscles continue to slow down. Voice drops. Difficult to move. Sleeping longer every night. Physical desires dying. Food, drink, sex. Only sleep. Where the dreams wait.

Calling.

Finally, the body surrenders. Solace.

Deep in sleep, the *vaq'in* envelops the ven in a kind of cocoon. It solidifies, making the ven inside nearly invulnerable from the outside world. No ven knows what happens inside that cocoon, but they do know no ven has ever awoken from Solace.

Not yet.

Still, the ven know *something* is happening. For if a ven sleeps close to her dreaming ancestors, they can hear voices calling to them. Voices from Solace. Voices and dreams. Oracular visions. Cryptic conversations.

These are the *suaven*. The sleeping ones. The dreaming. Some day, we will join them.

And some day, we will awaken.

Murder

The ven are vulnerable to *zvanstoz*, the Final Sin. Murder. While they seem stronger and faster than us, a cold shaft of iron through the heart or drawn across the throat is enough to kill even the healthiest specimen.

Murder and accident are the only ways ven die of natural causes, and both are events of significance. Robbed of Solace. Robbed of Eternity.

Revenge.

Suicide

There is another option. The call of the blackest despair. Complete defeat. The Loneliest Death.

Suicide is rare in ven culture, but it is present. And even more than natural death, suicide is a source of true grief.

Like everything else in their lives, ven view suicide as a ritualistic, symbolic act. An act with true meaning. Not an act of passion, but an act of intention.

An act of Tragedy and Beauty.

Castes

The ven divide their society into two castes: the Blooded and the unblooded.

The Blooded

Powerful. Intelligent. Cruel.

In their Blood is the sorcery of the old ones, the unspeakable sorcerer-kings, long dead but far from forgotten. Taller. Faster. Almost angelic. They look down on their lesser

counterparts, not out of irrational emotion, but cold-Blooded logic. They are the strong, the powerful.

You own what you hold.

Blessed by secret ritual, the Blooded—*bajkalay* in the ven tongue—rule the ven civilization of Shanri by right of force. The ritual that turns an ordinary ven into one of the Blooded has remained a secret for… well, no ven really knows how long. That would require looking back through time to the past, and that's a difficult thing for most ven. Looking back means looking in the direction of the sorcerer-kings, and that's not done. Speaking of the past is taboo. And living in it.

Dukes and barons, they own the land, bless the less fortunate with their mercy, and play their elaborate games while the unblooded toil for the pleasures of their masters.

Blood and Land

As I said, I'll be using Shara as an example all through this book. So, when it comes time to illustrate a noble's life, let's use her.

Let's start with a simple question. Why is Shara a noble? Two answers. Blood and Land.

First, her Blood burns with the Fox. When she was a girl, she underwent the Ritual of Blooding: a sorcerous procedure separating her from the common folk. Without that ritual, no ven is Blooded.

Second, Shara owns land, but unlike their modern counterparts, ven nobles do not inherit land. They fight for it.

For the ven, the concept of possession is a bit different than our own. The Law states that you only own what you can keep. If someone steals something from Shara, she wasn't clever enough to keep it. And no ven noble would ever admit to being less than clever. That's an insult to yourself. Admitting you had been taken, fooled, tricked. Never. No nay never. And so, when items are stolen, the subject almost never comes up. The shame of admitting you've been put on the wrong end of a trick, that someone got the better of you, is just too great. Just admit to yourself you were beaten and move on.

This is important when it comes to Shara's lands. As long as she can prove they belong to her—by protecting them from other nobles—the lands belong to her.

A noble cannot simply inherit his land from another. He must *fight* for his lands!

Blood makes the soil rich!

Blood makes the soil rich!

Blood makes the soil rich!

The more you say it, the more you must believe it.

(But don't overdo it. Bad form.)

Therefore, when a noble dies, his lands become *disputed*. Any noble with the Strength to take them is fully within his rights to do so. This means the nobles who have an heir in mind put actions in motion ensuring their heir's success. Of course, just because you have a plan doesn't mean it will succeed. And, as *Lessons* teaches us, you don't have to be smart to have a plan.

A Noble and Her People

How does Shara interact with those who belong to her?

When Shara Yvarai walks in the villages and cities of her land, she never pays for anything. After all, to her peasants, she provides protection from the horrors of the Great Enemy and the greed of enemy neighbors. (The ven word for "neighbor" is also the word for "enemy.") She can go to a blacksmith and demand a new Sword, go to a farmstead and demand food, go to a leatherworker and demand new boots. She provides a valuable service: she protects them from orks and neighboring nobles looking to take over the land. Because of her generosity, because of her kindness, because of her compassion, Shara's people love her and gladly exchange their labor for hers.

The only thing that matters to Shara—from an economic point of view—is her harvest. Because of the feudal contract between herself and her subjects, she retains a majority of their labor. They pay her in spices, wines, food, lumber and stone: the fruits of their efforts. She uses those to make contracts with neighboring nobles, hire personal guards, roadmen and other officials to protect her roads and villages. She also uses it to expand her domain. A stronger domain leads to more security for her subjects. More security leads to happier subjects.

When outside her own lands, Shara's situation changes. If Shara goes to another domain and demands service from a merchant, tradesman or craftsman, the peasant may answer, "I am already under the shadow of my lord." This indicates he cannot cease his current service and the noble has to find a different peasant to bully around. Of course, the noble can answer such insolence with violence… at a risk. More on that in a bit.

But let's go back to Shara's own domain for a moment. Shara has the authority to "protect" her subjects any way she sees fit. If that means fire and pain, she's within her rights to do so… but there's a downside to mistreating peasants. Unhappy peasants lead to subtle revolts. Resource shortages. Spies for foreign enemies. Missing sheriffs. The liege who only uses the stick and never offers a carrot learns this lesson. Sooner than he expects.

The unblooded

Ruk. That's what we call them. Lesser. Inferior. Unmentionable.

They are the peasants, the merchants, the workers. Trading their toil for safety. Trading their sweat for safety. No Heart. No Life. No Blood.

Among the unblooded, we have the classic peasant, but we also have a new kind of peasant. Proud dirt. We'll talk about them in a moment as well.

Peasant

Veth. A poetic interpretation may be, "People of the Soil." That was a common way to address ven peasants in older texts. More recently, scholars have been employing the less politically correct translation.

Veth. Dirt.

The peasant caste is mostly illiterate. Mostly. There are peasants who can read, but not many, and the nobility doesn't go out of its way to change that fact. This makes the ven economy difficult because almost every economic transaction involves a contract. Almost.

Most peasant communities have developed a "share and share alike" economy. The blacksmith repairs everyone's tools. The farmer shares all his food. The cobbler repairs everyone's shoes. Hand-me-downs don't just go from sibling to sibling, but family to family. This is what the ven call *tuthallen*. I've translated this word as "generosity." The literal meaning is something along the lines of, "What is mine is ours."

Personal possession is still present in peasant culture, but you have to understand the mindset. For the unblooded, an object can only be claimed if someone else acknowledges it is yours. Your mother passes away, for example, and your father—who inherits all her belongings—gives you her favorite shawl. The community recognizes that shawl as yours.

This brings up the entire notion of inheritance.

But for the moment, understand that among the unblooded, nothing belongs to you unless it has been given to you by someone else. Of course, the sincerity of the gift may go questioned by another, and in that case, the community decides who owns the item.

And by "item," I mean houses, cows, land, forks. Everything. Possessions belong to the community.

Peasants also spend most of their time toiling away, proving their worth with labor. When harvest arrives, they surrender nearly everything they produce to the liege while he leaves them enough to survive until the next harvest. To be fair, not all lords and ladies are tyrants. A few—a precious few—treat their peasants well. Enough to be exceptions.

Most peasants never walk a mile away from the place they were born, but a few carry fruits, vegetables, skins and other tradable items to the local faire. However, most peasants do not have enough time to "go to town." Each Season provides a new opportunity to trade with distant cousins. Or perfect strangers. Trade is the commerce here. A farmer brings his carrots, dried peas and salted ham. A blacksmith has new tools. A carpenter puts up a sign for repairs. Everyone has something to trade. The trick is finding someone with what you want willing to trade for what you've got.

The peasant caste trades for tools and repairs. Better tools for the farm, repairs for old tools not ready for abandonment. Most of these deals are made on the spot. Once the trade is made, it's done. No quibbling, no arguing. Done, done, done.

That's the tradition among traders. One says, "Done." The second echoes his remark. The first says it again. "Done." "Done." "Done." That seals the deal.

Once a deal is set, there is no going back. And because verbal deals are quick, nobody needs to argue over it. If you got shafted, you know to deal with a different trader next time. That's peasant law. Live and learn. And leave me alone.

Long-term deals are also available, but only by contract. Most peasants cannot read, so signing long-term contracts is out of the question. A few bring along a literate relative to look over contracts. Few and far between.

So a peasant's life is spent in toil and trade. Toil for his labor, trade for his labor. It isn't a pretty life, no matter how the poets and playwrights try to make it so.

This says enough. Saying more will only soil my tongue.

Merchant

For merchants in Shanri, the economic situation becomes... a bit murky. Peasants work for their labor. The nobility bleed for their labor. A merchant... he sells the labor of others. Murky.

Ven Law has not caught up with the quick rise of the merchant class. Ven who have made a living from the loopholes in the ven economic system. Contracts. It has everything to do with contracts.

The merchant class (not caste) arose twenty years ago when a small group of craftsmen realized their goods were worth more than food. "An apple in the stomach is gone tomorrow, yet my knife cuts more apples," wrote the merchant Tulthande Shen ("Shen, the Blacksmith"). He made the connection that his craft remained.

His idea spread quickly, but quietly. Being a ven of half a mind, he knew such an idea was dangerous, so he kept it to himself and a few others. Twenty years later, his circle of friends has grown, but not by much. He remains one of the most powerful and richest ven in Shanri. But his secret, like most secrets, did not stay in its box for long.

The only box that can hold a secret is a coffin.

In the era depicted in this game, the merchant class moves closer to eclipsing the nobility. Recognizing goods and services as the prime commodity, they trade for real estate and recognition with the Blooded, earning themselves titles, but not the full status of nobility. The "merchant barons" hold lands bartered from nobles in exchange for goods and services, but no noble has traded away any title higher than baron. Not yet, at least. That moment is yet to come.

And no merchant baron has yet to be called "Blooded." Before that can happen, a murder must take place. That event is also on the horizon.

And so, for the merchant barons, they must be content with their borrowed titles. They own land but cannot pass it down to an inheritor. They have title, but not access to the sorcery of the nobility. They have what might be called wealth, but in fact, they are little more than the peasants they look down upon.

Shluah veth. "Proud dirt."

Rising and Falling

It is possible for the *ruk* to be raised to the rank of the Blooded. Courage, conviction, loyalty. Proving himself beyond his birth, a peasant may be brought above his own station.

A ritual of Blood and trust.

It is rare, but it occurs in the literature more than it does in history. Because this is a game concerned with the literature and unconcerned with history, we'll assume it happens every once in a while.

A long while.

Questions

Can the Blooded become unblooded?

No. Although I'm sure there's a ritual out there somewhere that takes care of that.

What happens when an unblooded murders another unblooded?

Property vs. property. Do you really care if a cow kills another cow?

The Houses

From the ruins of the old world came warlords of might and power. They united the ven under banners of war and cleared away the rubble and jungles of Shanri. Staking their claims, they built empires from the dust. Once they were ten. Now, they are six. All others are covered by the black veil of shame.

The Senate currently recognizes six unveiled Houses.



Give me a man and I'll make him a Bear.

Blooded of the Bear

Families: Burghe, Steiner, Rusu, Reinhold, Bowen

The House of the Bear holds lands far to the North, away from the reach of "civilized" hands. While no Blooded noble would ever say so to his face, the Blooded of the Bear are considered less refined than their southern neighbors. The House of the Bear know this, and could not care less.

Legends of the House founder—Jacob Burghe—are told all around Shanri. His Strength and courage are unquestioned, equaled only by his desire to be left alone. When the Betrayer Curse fell, Steiner took his family and followers North, far from the war they left behind. Some say he sought lands where he could teach his inheritors independence. Others say he wished to escape the inevitable politics that were sure to follow. But all agree on one motivation: he didn't trust anyone he could not call kin.

The Burghe's motives live on in his descendants. They are fiercely independent, strong, capable, and isolated in their tundra. Children are taught how to fend for themselves, shunning subtlety and politics for pure honesty.



Nobility is not only in the Blood, but in the purpose.

Blooded of the Elk

Families: Steele, Thayl, Jasnine, Uvan, Ballan

One of the most powerful families in the land, the Thayl held the Imperial Throne for centuries. The last Thayl Emperor, however, was driven insane by his own ambition. He was put down by the other Blooded families but not before he could impart a curse upon each one. His final curse shattered the land, sending all the families to the five corners of the world. Ever since then, the Blooded of the Elk have sought to restore their family's name.

Regardless of their past, the Blooded of the Elk are still masters of the Subtle Game. They are the backbone of the courts, the power behind the thrones. Nearly every Great House has an Elk advisor, putting them in key positions all throughout the land.

Despite their unique position, many Laws restrict their Strength. These Laws, passed by the Senate, restrict how much land the Blooded of the Elk may hold and what sorceries they can practice. All of this ensures the family that almost destroyed the world will never have the opportunity to do so again.

Blooded of the Falcon

Families: Thorne, Askhen, Krev, Sinjin, Thali



I am all that I own.

After the Betrayers Curse fell on the Houses, the Blooded spread across the face of the world looking for lands amidst the ruin. The lands were snatched up quickly, leaving little room for stragglers. One House, the Blooded of the Falcon, didn't look to the land for a home, but looked within themselves.

For centuries, the Falcon had no homeland. Instead, they wandered the lands by both caravan and ship, maintaining their Bloodline through discipline and strict code. Mistrusting all other Houses, developing secret symbols, signs and rituals to identify true cousins from false ones.

But fifty years ago, the Falcon made a daring move. Striking from the forests and wild lands, they took lands as their own, carving out their own provinces, unveiling their banner in the halls of the Senate. Because of their position, the Blooded of the Falcon are the noble house closest to the common folk. They Operate in the world of the unblooded, dealing with their issues, facing their troubles. Of all the houses, the peasantry trust the Falcon more than any other.

Blooded of the Fox

Families: Yvarai, Silja, Q'n, Eshu, Tammel



Never Enough.

Their names are as elegant as silks and their poetry is like spice. The Blooded of the Fox take a special pride in Beauty elegance and indulgence. They are the harvesters of culture and etiquette, masters of innuendo and double-meanings, speaking in elaborate codes that only the initiated may decipher.

The House of the Fox was founded by a man obsessed with excellence in all things. "If one is good, ten is better." Their music is loud and full of passion. It was the Fox who

brought the Courts of Romance to the Blooded Houses, introducing the concept of courtly love with stories, poems and songs, and they are the masters of Opera—the high alchemical art—filled with stories of doomed lovers and grand tragedies. They are also masters of *sanjien*, a martial art that binds the soul and Sword.

The House of the Fox views hedonism, *ajurna*, as the "art of pleasure." Knowing one's limits is the first step of this art: knowing when to stop the pleasure before pain begins. Excess causes pain, and the first lesson of ajurna is how to indulge in pleasure while avoiding the consequences of pain.



I carry Wisdom's price.

Blooded of the Serpent

Families: Mwrr, Jalan, Ovjen, Ru, Valar

The House of Jalan was instrumental in Thayl's downfall, freeing the other Houses from the mad emperor's tyrannical rule. This historical fact has not been forgotten by the other Houses, but it does not diminish the level of mistrust they hold for the Blooded of the Serpent.

Houses must deal with politics, intrigue, and sorcery. All of these things have one element in common: the element of secrecy. The Serpent is a symbol of dangerous Wisdom in ven mythology. He is the trickster spirit with poison that kills the weak and enlightens the strong. The Blooded of the Serpent are the only house who do not trace their lineage back to a man, but back to Serpent himself, the grand trickster, who fooled a mortal woman and begat his children through her (although some suggest it was she who fooled Serpent).

No other House knows more about Shanri than the Serpent. Her mysteries and secrets, her hidden ruins and strains of ork. Vast libraries document Serpent's knowledge of the world, available only to those strong enough to carry the pain of Wisdom.



We are either tools or weapons.

Blooded of the Wolf

Families: Adrente, Banin, Drew, Sheeda, Tal

The Blooded of the Wolf live in the central isles where mountains reach up from the waters. They are a small people, dark-haired and dark-eyed. They who revere memory can list their lineages by heart. They take pride in knowledge and scholarship, but are best known for another trait: in combat, they are completely mad.

The House of the Wolf see knowledge as a weapon—just like everything else in the world—that a ven must use to maintain his freedom. They are fanatical scholars and truth-seekers. In fact, one could say the Wolf are fanatical about *everything*—at least the things important to the Wolf.

The dichotomy between scholar and berserk is the defining trait of the Wolf. The founder of the House, Tal Adrente, was a small man of great mirth and anger. Easily riled, he carried no weapons. "I'll just take his," he once said of a particularly rude opponent. He did, and beat his enemy to death with his own Sword.

Accounting Books

Many ven carry *didjerva*: "accounting books." Not so much accounting as in "keeping track of things," but "someone is going to pay."

Small bundles of pages to keep track of their various Promises and obligations. In later years, accounting books became all the rage, each noble upping the ante.

Accounting books also became kind of journals for nobles. After passing into Solace, many accounting books were published by friends and family members—with proper editing for decorum's sake, of course.

Names

To the ven, names are sacred. I know, in our own culture, names don't mean squat. But for the ven, naming a thing means you own it. Parents name their children. Nobles name their lands. A noble may even give a peasant a new name. She owns the peasant, after all. Her right. For better or worse.

For the ven, names also have a spiritual significance. A name can set your destiny. Change your name, you change the path you walk upon. This is a deep spiritual truth for the ven. A name is no small affair. Sublime. Blessed. Sacred.

More than that, names are so powerful, that if you name a thing, you own it. So is your power over it. You define its destiny. A mother and child. A beloved friend. A triumphant enemy.

You name a thing, you own it.

Blooded Names

Blooded ven have three names. The first is the *family name*, indicating who owns you. The second is the *public name*. This is the name people use when addressing you. Most ven, but not all, change their personal name when they come of age: a symbolic act of "claiming yourself." Last is your *secret name*. The name your mother whispers in your ear when you are only a babe and you never forget it. No, that isn't a metaphor.

House	*Family Name*	*Meaning*
Bear	Burghe	"Alone, we stand together."
Elk	Steele	"I have never surrendered."
Falcon	Thorne	"I am the land."
Fox	Yvarai	"Desire is tamed with a kiss."
Serpent	Mwrr (moor)	"I bear Wisdom's price."
Wolf	Adrente	"My weapon is myself."

UnBlooded Names

Unblooded ven have two names. The first is the name of your father or mother. The second is the region you were born in. That's about it for the unblooded.

Some unblooded follow the tradition of their more noble cousins, adopting a third name—one of their own choice—upon adulthood. Many unblooded see this as vanity and asking for trouble.

Titles

The ven love titles. A title is like another name. Another element of power.

Nobles bestow titles on their subjects, those whom they hold regency over. Duke, Marquis, Count, Baron, Roadman. The Duke of Marvanday, the Earl of Basinforth, the Marquis of Vashthrena. Nobles who swear fealty to someone higher.

Liege Lord

Now, before we go any further, I should explain an important term. *Altrex*. "Liege lord." This is the noble who has direct authority over you. If you are a roadman, your liege is a Baron. If you are a baron, your liege is a Count. Counts swear fealty to a Marquis and the Marquis swears fealty to a Duke. There's always someone higher on the ladder. Except if you're the Duke. Then, you're A #1.

Barons, Dukes and Counts, Oh My!

In our own time, noble title is inherited. Passed down through Bloodlines. For the ven, this is also true, but not as often. In fact, more often than not, someone other than a noble's direct lineage inherits his land. This is because, in the world of Shanri, "nobility" is something that is taken, not inherited.

The ven put a great emphasis on taking what is yours and keeping it. Demonstrates courage, conviction and Cunning. They like that. Getting something because you were

born in the right place at the right time is shameful. Bad form. Therefore, daughters and sons must at least make the *appearance* of usurping their land from their parents. Some, however, don't need to make a play out of it.

Taking another noble's land from the hands of his incompetent heir is both right and honorable. A weakling cannot rule. Strength. Courage. Cunning. These are the things that make a ven noble. Not inheritance.

And so, as you read on, remember this distinction. Nearly every noble mentioned *took* the land they rule from someone else. That end result did not have to end in death. Surrender is an honorable option.

Surrender gives you the opportunity to live another day and plot Revenge.

Gaining Title

Ven scholars know how a noble gains title. He takes it. But what does it mean to be a count or a baron or an earl?

If a ven demonstrates he is able to maintain a large enough amount of land—a barony—he may appeal to a higher lord for the right of title. He appeals to a Baron—one who has demonstrated he can maintain land—and asks for the right to be knighted. To carry the title. If the Baron feels the ven's request is fair, he bestows the title of Knight upon the ven, granting him rank and privilege.

A Knight must then go out into Shanri and conquer land in the name of his liege. By conquering land, the Knight forces others to swear fealty to his own name, or he may win the favor of other knights through less violent means.

Eventually, a Knight has vassals of his own: those who have sworn fealty to him out of respect, love or fear. When a Knight has these followers, he brings them before the Senate and declares himself a Baron, offering his fealty to any Count who may take it. (A Baron may have a specific liege in mind, but the ceremony of announcement is a ritual that should not be disregarded.)

If the noble claim of Baron is not accepted by any Count, the Knight remains a Knight. The Senate rejects his claim of Baron.

Noble Rank

Ven nobles do not have a pecking order. I mean, nothing says a Baron can't smart off to a Duke; he just has to understand the consequences of doing so. It's the threat of retaliation that gives a noble his authority, not his rank.

The pillow books and other literature have all sorts of examples of nobles throwing around attitude, regardless of rank. Now, younger nobles are seen as impetuous for doing so, but the ven regard that sort of behavior as a Virtue, not a vice.

Nobles who take offense at every little insinuation? Boorish louts who need to get a sense of humor, delicacy and taste. Bad form.

Bold Lords

The Ceremony of Progression—that's when a noble comes before the Senate and declares his title—is a time-honored tradition. Not something to be taken lightly. But when a noble comes before the Senate and no other noble accepts his claim, he is expected to accept his rejection quietly. With dignity.

But there is another tradition. When no noble comes forward to claim the ven as his own, some nobles simply claim the title. Take it by throat and make it theirs.

The ven must admit a grudging respect for such nobles who do so. Daring. Unafraid. Bold.

The term *q'valrux* means "bold nobility." Those who come before the Senate and claim their title regardless of what others may think or say. A kind of announcement: "This is mine, and if you disagree, try taking it from me."

Of course, a *q'valrux* has no higher liege to protect him. If some other noble comes to mess with a bold Baron, he cannot call for help from his Count. He has no Count to call upon. Those who make the bold claim must have the Strength to do so. Cunning to do so. Have the Courage to do so.

Likewise, when a Baron has enough vassals who have sworn fealty to his name, he may go before the Senate and make the claim of Count. And a Count make the claim of Marquis. And the Marquis make the claim of Duke.

You can find the rules for noble progression—how a Baron can become a Count, a Count become a Marquis, etc.—in the *Seasons* chapter.

Rights of Nobility

Being a noble means you have certain rights. (We'll get more into these in the *Law* section, below.) Among them are:

- Exemption from paying taxes
- The right to wear a Sword and have a coat of arms
- The right to own land and hunt on that land
- The right of Revenge

Unblooded do not have these rights. Peasants cannot carry Swords, cannot own land, cannot have a court of arms, cannot declare Revenge. Only the Blooded. Only.

Each title bestows the noble with rights, lands and wealth, but also specific duties. It is the duty of the noble to protect those lands from the liege lord's enemies, collect taxes, and raise an army. I mean, "personal guard." (That's a joke. You won't get it for a few pages.)

Not only does the liege lord have the right to create these titles, but he has the right to take them away, and even remove them from existence. In this way, the lord's land is divided into duchies, earldoms, marches, and baronies, each with their own rulers, duties, and responsibilities.

When the lord creates a title, he creates a contract for that title. The contract includes details such as the lands the title will control, the length of the title's existence, and the number of soldiers the title is allowed to muster. I mean, the number of *personal guard* he may retain. High ranking nobles deal out titles carefully, making sure no noble has enough income or force to overthrow his own rule.

Some contracts are for a single generation, while others last in perpetuity, as long as a clear heir is declared. In the end, a noble's lands almost always belong to the liege; he grants lesser nobles the right to govern the lands. It is the rare exception a noble is granted free title to his lands. In the time of this game, "generational land grants" are more common that in previous eras. Also, a recent Law has nearly trumped all other land Laws. We'll talk about that in a moment.

Noble Rank

Now, let's look at the rank and file of ven nobility. We'll start at the bottom and work our way up.

Roadman ("Knight")

A quick note. In the ven literature, "knight" is not the correct word to use here. There is no ven word for "knight," but there is a cultural equivalent. *Yvil*. Road warden. Or, more informally, "roadman." One Victorian translation I was particularly fond of is "highwayman." That's my favorite.

Yvil are men and women of note, given title by a lord, granting them privileges not available to those of lesser status. Becoming a roadman is recognition by the noble class of "a worthy heart." When a group of heroes saves a village from a band of orks or rescues a Baron's daughter or thwarts an assassination attempt, the typical reward is the title of roadman.

Heroes are made roadmen for two chief reasons:

1. So the lord can be identified with the heroes who performed the deed, and
2. So the lord can fund the heroes' efforts and further his association with them.

Turning brave common ven into roadmen increases a lord's reputation among his people and the reputation of his court. Of course, only rarely is a roadman Blooded. That particular ritual is reserved for those of exceptional caliber.

A roadman receives a financial reward, gets invited to the lord's court functions, can gain prestige among Shanri's wealthiest. The courts expect a certain behavior from roadmen, although commoners-made-roadmen may be given a bit of latitude. After all, they're only commoners. Exceptional commoners. Exceptional dirt.

Don't Break the Dishes

While ven parties are often wild exhibitions of uninhibited debauchery, a line must be drawn. That line starts with the dishes.

The ven phrase "*Pala da nata*," means "don't break the dishes." It refers to an old tradition, the tradition of Hospitality. No matter how wild a party may become, the guests must make every effort to respect the home of the host. You can drink every last bottle in his cellar, you can eat every last morsel in his kitchens, you can have sex in the courtyard fountain, but *don't don't don't* damage the house.

A ven's house is sacred. Don't mess with that.

When roadmen perform daring and famous acts, the lord's name is spoken in the same breath; and when the roadmen need food or shelter, they can go to the lord and, as his roadmen, ask for aid.

Also, roadmen are recognized by the noble class as equals. Well… lesser equals. Either way, roadmen gain a certain amount of prestige in polite society. Roadmen are invited to official ceremonies and other celebrations, getting a chance to hobnob with the wealthy and privileged. This, of course, leads to the "it's not what you know, but who you know" philosophy of getting ahead in life.

Ranks

Even among roadmen, there are ranks. Here's where translation gets tricky. The ven are very casual with rank among roadmen, often using (what appear to me) to be contradictory distinctions. While it may not be completely correct, I'm using a rather arbitrary system using the terms available. My apologies to the purists.

The term *yvil* seems most often used with warriors rewarded with title through acts of courage and dignity. The lord's court provides a home for the roadman, a roof to sleep under, a blacksmith to repair his weapons and a table to satisfy his appetite. Even if the roadman doesn't partake of the lord's hospitality, he is expected to attend the lord's court and answer the lord's requests for counsel and assistance.

Yvaya seems to be what most scholars interpret as "highwayman." This is a roadman who has been given a small parcel of land from his lord. He usually has a single castle to maintain. This is a roadman who is still proving himself to his lord, given his first responsibility to prove he can handle more. He has no retainers of his own to command and is not allowed personal heraldry.

Yvalta is a distinguished roadman allowed to wear his lord's colors and heraldry. I'm going to translate this as

"Yvtavia"

And now, some fun.

In the ven pillowbooks, a lady's personal guard are not called *yvil*. They are not "roadmen." Instead, they are *yvtavia*. This word has a lot of weight. It means "a lady's guard," but the literal translation is "guardian of the garter." This title comes from the original duty of a lady's personal guard: to protect the lady's Virtue from discreet suitors. Of course, the word has a double meaning. *Yv* can mean "guardian," but it can also mean "keeper," or "he who has taken."

Make of that what you will.

Yvtavia also has another meaning. "Lady's Guard." It is the tradition that the lady's roadmen should go out into the lands and prove themselves worthy of her favor. Defending the helpless, hunting orks, finding beautiful things. You know, chivalry. Spend most of the year out hunting, then return for the winter to tell great tales. Keep the ladies warm with stories and songs. That sort of thing.

So while the lord's roadmen stay at his side, a lady's roadmen are always on the road. "Where they belong," one might say.

"banneret." It seems to carry the same connotation. A banneret serves as a sergeant for a squad of dozen lesser-ranked *yvil*. A lord usually has many banneret, each leading such a squad.

The highest rank of roadman are those who serve as personal retinue to a noble. This is the *yvasa*. "The Master of the Road." An *yvasa* represents the best roadman in the lord's lands and sometimes even serves as a personal bodyguard to his liege.

Proper address for a roadman is "sir" or "dame" accompanied by the roadman's personal name. A roadman is referred to as "honorable," as in "the honorable Tilvan Syver."

The Master of the Road

Meanwhile, a special kind of roadman, a Master of the Road, is usually assigned to maintain a shire (a collection of villages). The position of Master of the Road is usually delegated to the highest roadman in the lord's employ. A sheriff usually owns no land of his own, but is responsible for collecting taxes and returning them to his lord. A sheriff has a number of *constables* to assist him in his duties, usually strong, young worthies pulled from the common folk.

"Na Nanva"

The ven consider a straight up "No" one of the most rude things you can say to one of the Blooded. Intolerable for the unblooded, insufferable for another noble. You simply don't answer any request with a simple "No."

Instead, the ven say "Na nanva." It means, "Not now" or "Perhaps later." The connotation: "Your current request is inconvenient; ask me again at a different time."

So, if one of the Blooded asks you to do something—especially someone who can make trouble for you—never *ever* say "No."

Say, "Not now."

Baron/Baroness

The baron is on the bottom of the land-owning lord, one step up from being a Banneret roadman. A baron does not always own the land he governs, but is given the title to distinguish him from the other non-land owning nobles. In the end, a baron almost always reports directly to a higher noble and stands the chance of having his lands revoked if he offends. A baron's land contract is often for a single generation and must be renewed by his liege.

Proper address for a baron or baroness is "Lord" or "Lady." Barons and baronesses are referred to as "Your Lordship" or "Your Ladyship," as in "Her Ladyship, the Baroness of Q'nn, Shara Yvarai."

The ven word is *r'shana*.

Count/Countess

When a Baron has gained enough self-sufficiency and proven enough loyalty that he can accompany his lord on important journeys, his liege promotes him to the title of count. A count is responsible for a *county*: a large parcel of land made up of many shires and townships.

Counts and countesses are referred to as "Your Excellency" as in "His Excellency, the Count of Vimour, Lord Pywnn Steele."

The ven word is *rhushva*.

Marquis/Marquise

"Marquis" is a distinction given by a duke to an impressive (and dangerous) count. The title was originally given to a noble who was set to guard the outer lands (the marches), a place of great danger. Dukes gave these lands only to those they trusted most. A high gift. A dangerous gift. While his lands may not have been as vast as another noble, they held a particular value that could not be entrusted to just anyone. Since then, the title has changed. A marquis is now a title of distinction, demonstrating one who has taken lands of another by force, guile and Cunning. He has risen up through the ranks of the nobility by his own actions, earning him respect and fear by the other nobles.

A marquis and marquise are referred to as "Your grace" or "the lord protector." As in, "His Grace, the Marquis of Flouven, Lord Protector Ellwn Thorne."

The ven word is *fyllyn*.

Duke

Shanri's most powerful nobles are the dukes. The title comes from the personal guard the Emperor kept, the most powerful and influential ven in Shanri. These days, ven Law forbids an Emperor. Instead, the people are divided by the Houses, ruled by the dukes, the true owners of Shanri. Dukes own their own land. They are vassals to no-one. Their word is Law and their authority unquestioned—in the open, at least. Dukes are high above the social order, almost immune to it. Almost.

A duke or duchess is referred to as "Your Highness." As in, "His Highness, the Duke of Myvster, Olderon Burghe."

The ven word is *ohlrex*.

Earl

At the head of each House is the *avirex*. The "high duke," or Earl. There are currently six Earls: one for each unveiled House. Technically, the Earls are Dukes, but I have given them a different name to make a distinction between the Dukes who rule their own domains and the Dukes who govern the Houses proper.

While the Earls are the heads of the Houses, they are often portrayed as distant and removed from the daily politics of the Houses. Unaware of the petty maneuverings of their underlings, the Earls live in decadent splendor, relying on others to protect their lands. This, of course, led to many usurpers stealing the title of the Earl.

Women who held the title were called *avirexa*. I've taken the liberty to keep the translated title gender neutral in this book; a woman holding the title is still referred to as an Earl.

Sorcery

It is called *senva*. Blood magic. A relic from the sorcerer-kings. The ven are magical creatures imbued with power. Power that can be harnessed and channeled. It flows in their Blood.

On altars high above their ancient and arcane cities, the sorcerer-kings sacrificed hundreds of ven at a time, harnessing the power in their Blood. Now that the sorcerer-kings are no more, this ancient and unholy art should have gone forgotten.

Should have.

Blood spilled. Power harnessed. What ven can resist power? Even if it means spilling his own Blood. Or the Blood of another.

Scholars do not agree on when the ven began using sorcery. Official records do not give us any clues. It is clear that, since the Fall, ven Law have expressly forbids use of sorcery under penalty of death. Of course, this did little to hinder research of the topic.

The earliest histories make mention of the House of the Serpent's deep association with Blood magic. From the very beginning, journals and other records make note of "the sorcerous Serpents." The Senate records do note that almost two hundred years after the founding of the body, various members—often associated either directly or indirectly with the House of the Serpent—made any use of sorcery illegal. While this may seem contradictory, it only adds to the Serpent's advantage. For the Serpent, the cat was already out of the bag: nearly every member of the House was well associated with the rituals of the sorcerer-kings. Making the art illegal would only Strengthen their position.

Since then, use of sorcerous rituals has become almost commonplace in the courts of Shanri, although it is still considered a crime on the streets and in the fields. In fact, it is still considered a crime *anywhere*, but the dark art has become so commonplace among

the nobility, any condemnation of it would only point out one's own hypocrisy. Almost every noble Swordsman carries a Blood Sword. Nobles use sorcerous oaths to maintain alliances between Houses. Espionage using various sorcerous tools is an everyday occurrence. If any noble dared to accuse another of using sorcery, he had better have his hands clean of Blood.

Needless to say, some Houses keep a minor noble around for just such a happenstance: a young ven who has never cast a ritual, never been the target of a ritual, and never makes use of any Blooded tools. In the current social climate, however, this is incredibly dangerous. Not utilizing the benefits of Blood magic puts one at a significant disadvantage. However, it also keeps a ven's conscience clear when he makes an accusation of sorcery.

Bad Form

Blunda. Most translate this as "bad form." Ven who break tradition, who overuse tradition, who otherwise make an ass of themselves commit *blunda*. Bad form. You'll see it used in this book.

Ambigrams

The ven used a particular writing style called *vanadanav*. Ambigrams. Words like "vrente" were written to mean one thing, but when the text was turned over, the same word meant something else.

The ven used the vanadanav style to write secret letters as well. If you know the correct way to read the letter (upside down), you can discern the hidden message.

Ritual

Ven culture is a mass of etiquette, courtesy and ritual. ("Mass" in both the measurement and the Catholic sense of the word.) For the ven, there is only one correct way to do anything… and a dozen exceptions to every rule. A proper way to say goodbye, a proper way to say hello, a proper way to elicit aid, a proper way to apologize, a proper way to eat, a proper way to drink, a proper way to smoke those little black cigars made from the leaves of "witchwood trees," a proper way to flirt, a proper way to kiss, a proper way to love, a proper way to murder, a proper way to die.

If you want chaos, go live with the orks.

Weights and Measures

The subject of weights and measures is a highly disputed topic among scholars. The chief controversy revolves around exactly what constitutes a *ah'vla*. However, because this is a game rather than an archeological paper, I'm not going to burden you with this mess.

Instead, let's assume the ven measure things the same way we do. That is, the same way Americans do. Pounds, inches, leagues, miles, gallons. Unless you don't live in America, in which case, just assume all measurements are metric.

There's a distinct line drawn between authentic and fun. For me, these kind of details cross that line. If you feel differently, you can try to make sense out of the *ah'vla* controversy. Good luck.

Measuring Time

The ven system of measuring time is… well, let's call it complicated. I could write an entire book on how the system works, including all the exceptions and calculations. Yes, the ven make exceptions for time.

Instead, let's assume ven time works like our own. Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years. That'll make things easier.

Yes, I know you lose some of the fun of using a foreign calendar. I'm a gamer, too. I know how much fun that is. But trust me, the ven calendar is a mess. It makes little sense to those who have studied it for years, let alone trying to include the thing in a roleplaying game.

So, for ease of convenience, just assume the ven don't count weeks or months. Just Seasons. Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. And years. If you want a detailed summary of the ven year, there are plenty of other resources to draw from. Go find them and enjoy.

Education

The Blooded remove boys and girls from their families at an early age: between six and eight, depending on the child's maturity and competence. Like everything else in ven culture, we're talking about ritual. A special meal and drink, the last supper with mother and father. Gifts. Mementos. The mother and father both give the child a token to remember them by. Then, in the morning, the child is gone.

Training takes place in *ushanavan*: schools for young nobles. The schools teach manners, etiquette, history, politics, and self-defense. Schools are independent—not attached to any particular House—but while the school has no political leanings, the same cannot be said of the faculty.

Other ven employ private tutors to raise their children, teaching them the arts of Swordplay, politics, and treachery. Poisons, music and *sush*: the way of silence. (Literally, "moving without a shadow.")

The world has more fools than days in the year, hours in the day, and minutes in the hour.

Veta a Vasha

Face and Fan

"Face and fan." What you hide and what you show.

For the ven, high society is a game of illusions, misdirection and calculation. You cannot calculate what you cannot see.

The tradition of carrying fans to hide a blush or an expression of surprise. What you hide and what you see.

Permitting another to see beyond the fan is a matter of trust. Betray that trust and you cause Insult. You may even cause Injury. The pillow books are littered with stories about ven who extend a modicum of trust for the sole purpose of setting up a betrayal. So, take care of whom you allow behind the fan… and take care whom you allow to take you there.

Art

Tala. "When we are reminded that we are not alone."

To elevate or render finer. To convert into something of higher worth.

For the ven, the entire purpose of art is to transform the viewer from the mundane to the sublime. The wretched to the holy. The profane to the sacred.

Opera, theater, poetry. These things transform us with the sublime language of Art. Anyone who has been to a concert, the Grand Canyon, or seen through a telescope knows what I'm talking about. Events that can only be reported, not duplicated.

Try explaining the Grand Canyon with just words. "Big" isn't big enough. "Enormous" isn't big enough. In fact, there is no word big enough to convey the BIG of the Grand Canyon.

You just have to stand in awe.

The ven love that sensation. Awestruck. Awesome. Terrible.

Sublime.

Art does that. Makes you hate a villain, makes you love a hero, makes you weep, makes you cheer. All for people, places and events that never existed.

Opera: the High Art

Alvathen. The High Alchemical Art.

Nothing compares to Opera.

The Art that demands all other Arts. Drama. Music. Architecture. Dance.

And, of course, Romance and Revenge.

Ven Opera is full of spectacle. Jim Steinman meets John Woo. The thunder of the music cracking the plaster in the walls. Actors bursting their throats, their eyes full of rage and tears. Musicians in the pit, playing beatific anger and furious joy. Choirs chanting choruses over and over and over.

There is no word in the ven language for "overstatement."

Like everything else, the ven are obsessed with the proper presentation of Opera. So much so that they only recognize seven plots as appropriate to the stage. This requires a bit of explanation.

Think for a moment about our own King Arthur. Just saying the name summons images and names. Camelot, Gwenevere, Lancelot, Excalibur, Mordred, Merlin, Morgana, love, loyalty and betrayal. Arthur's story has been told thousands of times in thousands of different ways, but the key characters and elements remain. And though storytellers have

taken liberty with Arthur's tale, we accept those liberties so long as the truth of the story remains intact and honored.

When Arthur's story goes too far from what we expect, we feel betrayed. Not an emotion easily explained. An instinct. An understanding. Almost as if we have to protect the story in some way.

So are the ven and their Opera.

Only seven stories are worthy of the stage. The ven recognize these stories from the character's names. Just as we would know the plot the moment Hamlet's name was mentioned. Or Odysseus. Or even James Bond. And while the plot may weave differently, certain key elements remain. Secondary characters come and go, but the lynchpin personae remain.

Authors and composers work to re-tell these seven tales with different voices, using each to communicate a new moral, a new truth. Just as Arthur's tale can communicate the conflict of true love and duty, so can it tell the conflict of Christian against Pagan. So can it tell the tale of Britain's natives against her invaders. Just a tweak of the pen and a familiar tale delivers a different message.

So are the ven and their Opera.

Lesser tales are delegated to playhouses and street theater. But not the Opera house. Not that great and sacred place. Seven stories. Only seven.

And there is only one ending. Blood.

The High Alchemical Art, combining all the disciplines into a transcendent experience. Music. Poetry. Drama. Transforming the Opera house into the place of imagination, where heroes and stories wait to be discovered.

This time in ven history is the golden age of Opera. Unfortunately, we have precious few texts from this time (because of the Dire Times that would soon follow), only a handful of the manuscripts from these amazing works. Most of the documents we do have are severely damaged, giving us only a glimpse of the work.

The Zhivali Deck

The Zhivali deck is a common distraction for the Blooded. A deck of cards with provocative pictures and themes, the deck is used for both simple card games and fortune telling. It's difficult to discern how much faith the ven put in a Zhivali deck. Sometimes, characters dismiss it while other times, it proves to be the foreshadowing of fortune or disaster.

The deck's most mentioned cards include the Sisters Fate and Fortune. Many scholars believe these two characters are hold-overs from old sorcerer-king mythology. It is said that when the world was new, the Sisters used the deck to determine who would govern the world. Fate knew the outcome, but Fortune got to deal the cards.

"Fate and Chance are the undoing of us all."
— from the libretto of *Ufaltir* by Rhondir Yvarai

Works and Fools

The ven were very specific about their Opera. So much so they recognized only seven Operas as "official." All other Operas were lesser works, not truly inspired, not Art.

These seven Operas, or Great Works, may be called tragedies if there were not so much joy in the libretto and orchestration. It seems the ven found great joy in Blood and death and calamity. But ven tragedy is very specific, and since the word has taken on so many different definitions in our own culture, I'll take a moment to specify what the ven meant by the word.

For the ven, tragedy has specific necessary elements. To begin with, the ending must include the death or undoing of the hero. Also, the hero of the tale must be responsible for his own undoing. This may be a slight at the beginning of the Opera that triggers a series of events eventually leading to his demise or it could be a deliberate action, a decision that destroys him. In short, "accident" does not belong in ven tragedy. Chance and Fate work against him, his end always inevitable, but his end is due to his own shortcomings. His own lack of Virtue.

The Great Works are based on seven characters that appear in all Operas. Each Opera focuses on one of these seven characters, otherwise known as "the Seven Fools." While the appearance of the characters may alter—the genders, the names, the relationships—the Seven Fools are consistent through all the Works.

Like I said, the Seven Fools have been portrayed as both genders, but the role itself is always gender specific. For example, there have been both male and female characters who fit the role of "the Rake," but because he first appeared as male, that role is always referred to in the male gender.

The Seven Fools are: the Actress, the Dowager Duchess, the Husband, the Rake, the Swordsman, the Wife and the Wise Man.

The world has given us two kinds of fools:
those who are easily duped and those
who dupe themselves.

Do not be a fool yourself: destroy them both.

The Actress

The character known as "the Actress" rises up through ven society through some sort of Art. She comes from humble beginnings, but convinced by the praise of others, she loses sight of those beginnings.

The first Actress was Q'vanna Yvarai from the Opera of the same name. A common theater actress, she took to the stage only to bring enough coin to feed her aging and crippled father. She was discovered by a slumming lord (the Rake), and enchanted by her Beauty and talent, he trained her in the ways of the Great Art, bringing her to Shanri's most magnificent Opera houses. But her pride blinded her. She abandoned her lover, destroyed her reputation with scandal, and ends her life with suicide. The variations on the Actress are many, but nearly all of them end with the ambitious youth taking her own life.

The Dowager Duchess

The Dowager Duchess is a woman (or man) who is advanced in age, but refuses to acknowledge the inevitable grasp of Solace. She acts like a young woman until the cruel truth of the world comes knocking on her door, and finding her unprepared, she faces death, losing the sleep of Solace forever.

The first Dowager Duchess was *Lady Peacock*, a very popular character in ven literature. A tragedy in every sense of the word, the Opera begins as pure farce, a comical satire of ven culture's hypocrisies and double-standards. She spends so much time with banter, she never takes advantage of opportunities to say something meaningful, to say and do the things she should before Solace takes her away. The Opera ends with the Duchess's inevitable passage into Solace, surrounded by friends and family, unable to speak, weeping, longing for just one more minute so she can say what needs to be said, to alter a tragedy of her own making. Of course, Solace claims her voice and all she can do is watch. The theme of the Opera is plain: the end is sooner than you think.

The Husband

The Husband is the archetypal neglectful spouse. He is often male, although he has been portrayed as female on rare occasions (and equally rare success). His undoing is underestimating his wife's (or husband's) desires for independence and happiness.

The first appearance of the Husband occurs in the Opera *Darby's Pride*. Darby Steele spends all his time securing his lands, building a great castle, and ruining his enemies. All the while, his wife's own desires are neglected. The Opera portrays her as devoted, loving, and willing to sacrifice for security. She gives away a chance at true love with a less ambitious baron for Darby, and slowly regrets her decision. At the end of the Opera, Darby discovers her in the arms (and bed) of another man. He kills them both and burns down his castle, racing into the wilderness, completely mad.

The Rake

The Rake is unmarried, either male or female, looking to rise in society through romantic conquests. His undoing is his own shallow heart and misunderstanding of the sacredness of love.

Of all the Great Works, it seems the ven were most liberal with the Rake. Identified by his name—a play on Sh'van, the original Rake—each Opera seems to be a different argument about the true nature of love. He may be young, he may be old, he may even be a woman, but he always faces the conflict of love versus duty. In the original Opera, he is a young noble seeking to restore the lands of his wounded father. Unable to maintain the lands himself, the Rake seeks allies by seducing wives of other nobles, secretly making alliances behind their backs. But true love calls in the form of a family friend, thought long lost, and everything the Rake has worked to accomplish comes crumbling to the ground when he must choose between the woman he loves and a woman who can save his lands. How the Rake chooses changes with each tale, but it always ends with a betrayal and tragedy.

The Swordsman

His Prowess unmatched, he walks the streets of Shanri unafraid, taking all challenges. This is Cyrvanto, the Swordsman. Arrogant, and proud of it, he refuses apology, demanding the Sword answer all threats to his honor. All of which, of course, lead to his ruin.

In *Cyrvanto*, we see the Swordsman: a man of courage, wit, and cruelty. He has no patience for those who would oppose him, no mercy for those who taunt him, no mercy for those who question his honor. But then, he meets his match: a woman of equal skill, of equal wit, of equal cruelty. It is she who undoes him. Looking to make a reputation for herself, she wins his favor and eventually his heart. Then, using the knowledge and trust she gained, she challenges him to a duel. Unable to kill the one thing he learned to love in all his life, her Sword finds his heart, ending his life and the Opera.

The Wife

The Wife is demanding, selfish and proud; the things that allowed her to reach the pinnacle of society. Unfortunately, these same qualities are her undoing.

The story of Benejitrix is a familiar one to the ven, found in the Opera, *One Stitch Too Many*. Benejitrix is a beautiful woman married to a scoundrel of a man. Marrying for his lands, she hopes to end his life prematurely, claiming his lands as her own. Her stepson, equally ambitious, plots with his mother. (Many versions play up the sexual implications only hinted at in the first production.) Her plans are thwarted, however, by her own ambition and the betrayal of her stepson, leaving her scandalized and alone.

The Wise Man

The character of the Wise Man is one of the least popular subjects in ven Opera. Of all the Fools, his tragedy seems the most difficult to make compelling to a ven audience. Most Artists see the Wise Man as a challenge, attempting to make this character into high Art. Most fail. Neglected for decades, it seemed the Seventh Fool would fall from grace… until one Artist succeeded to such a degree, all his following work was said to pale in comparison.

Entitled *Bjornae*, this particular Wise Man was not wise at all. Instead, he was a simple soldier thrown into circumstances beyond his control. On the verge of an attack from a legion of Swordsmen, the desperate Count turned to a ragged soldier, seeking any advice at all. The soldier, completely over his head, gave the Count his advice. "Swimming requires stamina," he said. The Count becomes transfixed with Bjornae's simple wisdom, employing the simpleton as his advisor. The tragedy of the tale, of course, does not fall on the Wise Man, but on those who think themselves wise. Yvala Mrr wrote the Opera, a daring shift from paradigm that stuck in ven consciousness for generations.

The Servants

Another omnipresent element of ven Opera is the presence of "the Servants." Two Servants, always named Ythala (a woman) and Talsho (a man), appear in all variations, acting as a kind of Greek chorus, giving exposition to the audience with their gossip.

Traditionally, the servants have the last word, giving the moral of the Opera to the audience, although more bold artists use the Servants to *comment* on the moral. Dangerous. But then again, true Art is always dangerous.

Theater: The Recalcitrant Heart

No self-respecting Senator would ever be caught dead in a theater. Where the commoners put on their unremarkable pageants. Where actors summon inspiration from their own hearts and minds with something they call "improvisation." As if the words of the author were not good enough for their peasant tongues.

Filthy. Uncouth. The crowd screaming at the actors, throwing biscuits and fruit. A mob, not an audience. And high above this mob, high above the rotten straw and the spilled beer, are the cloaked boxes where hooded figures watch. And smile.

No self-respecting man or woman of the Senate would ever be caught dead in a theater.

The theater is the common man's Opera, but ven nobility have discovered a Truth about theater. It is where actors embrace what the ven call "the Recalcitrant Heart." Plays

are written by authors, but the actors are not expected to memorize the lines. Instead, they learn the part well enough to bring the true emotion of the character to the stage. Summoning the spirit of the character. Letting him enter you. Letting him speak for you. Letting him guide your hand, your tongue, your heart.

Often, the character cannot keep with the script. His own desires, his own passions. They guide him. Not the passions or desires of another. Actors on the stage know this and embrace it. They allow the character to take over, to take the lead. Some ven claim to see a different person when an actor takes the stage. Possessed by the character, he *ὼ* a different person.

Dangerous magic. Peasant magic. Not the forbidden sorcery. Something different all together.

This is the theater. Allowing the character to take the stage.

No set number of plots or characters. No rules. But the audience is always watching. The audience is unforgiving. They came to see that magic. Possession. And they can tell when an actor has it and when an actor does not.

Ithuna. "Faker."

Cabbages and biscuits.

In the theater, the audience cheers, the audience cries. They boo and jeer. They grow deadly silent. Waiting.

When the ven go to the Opera, they know what to expect. No-one knows what to expect in the theater. Anything could happen. Love. Revenge. Murder.

And an actor cannot be held responsible for what his character may do.

Love. Revenge. Murder.

The theater.

Circling Patterns

We're not exactly sure what kind of instruments the ven had, although a few engravings give us hints. We know the two most popular ven instruments strongly resembled the harpsichord and the guitar. The ven called these the *pendala* and the *jiv*, respectively. The pendala was a little larger than our own historical harpsicord, although not as large as a piano. Also, the pendala had three sets of keys rather than two. Meanwhile, the jiv had eight strings rather than six, a longer neck and a deeper body, providing for a richer sound. Another instrument, the *ojava*, resembled a violin or fiddle. Variations on these three key instruments made up the majority of ven music.

For other instruments, the ven relied on something resembling a didgeridoo they called a *voca*, a hammer dulcimer they called a *toola*, and a lute (looking very much like a sarod) called a *tamtalt*.

The chief characteristic of ven music is its reliance on silence for punctuation. Long, still moments passing. No sound. Also, most compositions rely on repetitive patterns, variations on those patterns, and return to the original structure. The silence allows the listener to contemplate the variations and their meaning.

As far as we can tell, the concept of the ballad—a song that tells a story with accompanying words—did not exist in ven music. Perhaps it was seen as a slight to Opera, setting words to music. Perhaps.

Portraits and Landscapes

Painting with inks, dyes and oils. Water colors.

The ven don't paint fruit.

People. People in motion. Laughing, crying, loving, dying. The purpose of Art is to unveil the Truth. There is no Truth in a basket of apples.

Ven art bears a strong resemblance to German Expressionism. Extreme angles. Beatific and grotesque. Details fall by the wayside.

I have no more words to say about pictures.

The Senate

Davfanna Aldrena, the Senate, is the voice of the ven, those who own land and guide Shanri's destiny. They sit in the Senate because they fought for that right. Bled for it. Killed for it.

For each region a noble governs, he owns a seat in the Senate. The number of seats he owns equals the number of votes he may cast when the Senate votes. He may use his votes as he wishes, splitting them or even abstaining. His votes are his own.

A Senator's rank depends on the land he owns. A duke outranks a marquis outranks a count outranks a baron. You will soon discover a rank's importance.

The dukes lead the Senate. They recognize speakers. They call for votes. On matters of order, they perform "the duke's privilege." The council of dukes—however there may be—vote on the matter in question, settling disputes and deciding on matters of unclear precedent.

The Senate meets on the first new moon of each Season. Any Senator may bring voice to the chamber, but he must be recognized. At least three other Senators must recognize him. Three other Senators who outrank him.

One recognized, he may speak for as long as he may hold the floor. He may not sit, he may not drink, he may not ask for support. He may pause for questions, but he must answer the question posed directly. Avoidance of questions calls for removal from the floor. A Senator indicates he is finished by kneeling and bowing.

At the end of his speech, the Senate hears comments. Then, the Council of Dukes calls for a vote. Votes are made in public. The duke's privilege is made in secret.

No duels allowed on the Senate floor. No Bloodshed.

If a lord loses all his land, he loses all his seats.

Emergency meetings of the Senate have been called, but are difficult to pull off. The Council of Dukes must have a majority vote (one half, plus one) to call an emergency meeting. Sunrise, two days following, the Senate gathers to discuss the emergency, giving enough time for Senators to gather.

How Many Votes per Seat?

A noble holds a number of votes in the Senate based on his title. The actual system is very complicated, so to simplify it, I've said that a noble has a number of votes equal to the number of Provinces he holds. Therefore, a Baron would have at least one vote while a Duke could have many dozen. You can find out more about Regions in the *Seasons* chapter.

The Dance of Words

Another tradition of the ven Senate is *∂achanau*, or "the dance of words."

(A quick side note. The ven word for "duel" and "dance" have the same root. *Dacha*. The literal translation is "feet moving.")

If a Senator calls for dachanau, two Senators are chosen to take opposing sides of an argument. They stand in the center of the Senate on either side of a table. On the table is a golden rod. When a Senator has the golden rod, the other Senator cannot speak. When he is finished making his point, the Senator puts down the rod and the other takes it up, rebutting the first Senator's arguments.

The purpose of dachanau is to illustrate the various points-of-view on a complicated subject; to educate Senators who may not understand the finer points of an issue. Multiple debates may be held on a single vote.

Dachanau has become a popular event in the Senate, even drawing outsiders to watch the flamboyant duels of words. It has become such a fashionable activity, it has passed into common usage among the public, seen at parties and taverns alike.

The *Vashna*

The Senate has the right to appoint *vashna* ("investigators") in any matter the Senate deems appropriate. Vashna are marked with the Senate's colors: black and silver. Black for the color of non-identity, putting aside House and personal honor to protect the Senate. Silver for the purity it represents. Black cloaks, silver trim.

Cunning is the mastery of desires: your own and the desires of others.

The Duke's Council choose the vashna, assigning them to tasks and duties. They are the Senate's roadmen and no ven is above their authority. The vashna hold the authority of dukes and may use it at their discretion. Keeping an eye on the parts of Shanri where the Senate cannot go.

They must be delicate. A vashna carries the authority of the Senate, but a black cloak cannot protect anyone from a poison cup. Who is to blame when a vashna dies in his lands? No-one can say. Especially when the lord of those lands was a thousand leagues away when it happened.

Vashna cannot declare Revenge. A vashna has no personal honor to defend, only the honor of the Senate, and the Senate does not declare Revenge.

The first moon of each Season, just as the Senate meets, so do the vashna report their investigations. Evidence, testimony. Judgment.

The ranks of the vashna are filled with nobles who owe favors, who have been disenfranchised from their families. Landless, homeless. And then there are those who seek the power the black cloak gives them. Carrying the weight of the Senate's vengeance.

Each vashna carries a signed letter and a signet ring, bearing the seal of the Senate, as evidence of their authority.

Fashion

Ornamentation. That's the first word to know. The ven word is *aelvaðyn* which means "little stars." Ven legend says the sorcerer-kings came from the stars, thus the similarity with the ven word for the sorcerer-kings… a word I will refrain from using out of respect for that tradition.

Like the ven themselves, ven fashion is extravagant. Exaggerated. Opulent. Magnificent statements of Beauty and glamour.

Unfortunately, that's about all we know about ven fashion. We know a few other details—like the symbolic importance of color—but other than that, we're pretty much in the dark. A few snippets here and there, what we have are words impossible to translate.

For example, most scholars agree the corset was a part of ven fashion—at least in this period—but only because the word *ƨyldana* seems to be from the same word as *ƨylv*, which means "to bind." The context given suggests a woman wearing a garment that "binds the bust." Thus, we give *ƨyldana* the distinction of being the closest thing we have to a ven corset.

Most mundane words are easy to translate. We know the ven wore hats. Wide-brimmed. Gloves, boots, coats. Dresses, we have, but we're not exactly sure what kind.

We also know it was uncommon for women to dress like men, and was not viewed in any kind of positive light. This says much about ven gender issues—although, we'll take a deeper look at those a little later.

The reason I bring all this ambiguity up. We don't know, so you should feel free to be creative. We know the ven certainly were. Lady Shara's dresses were supposed to be scandalous. I can't exactly imagine what the ven would consider scandalous, but we know she set a precedent with her formal gowns.

If you see the ven in corsets, cloaks, gloves and gowns, go for it. If you see something closer to a Restoration Era costume set, or perhaps a Regency era style, feel free to go for it. If the experts can't agree, I don't see any reason why we should be limited by their disagreement.

The Earls

At the time this game represents, the Earls of the Houses are as follows:

House of the Bear

The Burghe, Aelvan, Earl of Tain

House of the Elk

Dalvinosh Steele, Earl of Ivanisck

House of the Falcon

Bennyn Thorne, Earl of Uq'v

House of the Fox

Vishashael Yvarai, Earl of Aeldrena

House of the Serpent

J'sae Mwrr, Earl of Heenag

House of the Wolf

Q'll Adrente, Earl of Gashva

Colors

While we don't know the exact details of ven clothing, we do know they had a profound symbolic attachment to colors. The pillowbooks are filled with characters identified by specific color combinations, all symbolizing different attitudes, standings, and other details.

These are the colors I use for my home campaign based on my own favorite pillow books. Different authors use different colors, but I'm assuming a level of organization the ven probably didn't have. If you want to change up the colors, switch them out, or use completely different combinations, feel free to do so.

Also, the ven had about twenty different words for each color, each word with a different meaning. Like that old story about the Inuit and their many, many words for "snow," the ven had just about as many words for "red," "green," and all the other significant colors.

Again, this gives us the opportunity to use the base meaning and apply subtle differences. Bright red, dark red, Blood red, pink. All slight variations on the primary meaning.

Black

"I am veiled by my shame."

For the ven, wearing black is a symbol of shame. The ven word *∂ulla* (doo-EE-ah). Best translated as "veiled." You may also translate it as "invisible."

Criminals wear black. And no-one speaks to them. No-one helps them. No-one pays attention when they're being mugged.

Dulla.

Nobles hire personal guard. Personal guard do not use Swords, they use spears. To hide their identity—and their shame—they wear masks and black robes. At parties, everyone ignores them. No need to point out another ven's shame. He's already being punished enough.

So, no black. Sure, you can have black boots and black gloves. That's fine.

Red

"Get out of my way."

Red is the color of passion, the color of Romance, the color of Revenge.

Romance. Revenge.

In the ven language, Romance and Revenge are the same word, differentiated only by stressing different syllables. Red is its color.

Wearing red indicates to others that you have declared Revenge or Romance. Or both. We'll talk about Romance and Revenge in a moment or two, but for right now, what you need to know is this. Nothing stands in the way of Revenge or Romance. No Law, no ven.

Nothing.

Grey

"Tears are not enough."

Grey is the color of mourning, but for the ven, death has a deeper, more tragic meaning. For most human cultures, we assume an afterlife. The dead are not truly gone, only waiting for us on "the other side." But for the ven, death is the End. The ven do not believe in a soul or an afterlife. Solace, at least, holds some kind of promise, but death holds no promise at all.

Yellow

The forbidden color. Illness. Madness. No ven wears yellow.

Old stories. Unspeakable horrors. Something darker than orks.

No ven wears yellow.

GREEN

"Spring is in my veins."

For the ven, green is a color of youth. It is the color of spring, vigor, lust, and Strength. Pillow books use it to symbolize characters who are particularly naive. It is also associated with generosity.

The young have yet to learn the blessings of selfishness.

The ven use green as the color of sincerity, renewal and rebirth. Because it represents renewal, the ven also wear green when seeking forgiveness, giving it a strong association with regret.

To understand we have done wrong, we must put aside what we think and remind ourselves of what we know.

Blue

"I want to know."

Blue is the color of Wisdom. As wide is the sky, so is all a child has to learn. Blue and green are common color combinations.

I have learned much, but there is still much more to know.

Both male and female children wear blue. Older ven wear deep blue robes symbolizing their experience and knowledge. The deeper the color, the greater the Wisdom. As the sun reaches the west, so grows darker the sky.

Wearing blue — especially darker colors—invites questions and debate. The color also communicates "I want to learn." At ven parties, I imagine seeing rooms filled with ven wearing blue, all in various hues and shades, debating all kinds of topics. Of course, choosing which hue to wear is important. Safe to wear a lighter color than you think you deserve to wear. Then again, who ever accused the ven of being safe?

Lavender

"Entertain me."

Lavender is the party color. Enjoyment. Delight. Not as intense as red, purple is the color of idle enjoyment. Theater seats fill with lavender. Reclining in parlors. Whimsy. Foolishness. Simple pleasures.

An undemanding color. Disarming. I am playing the game, but not for keeps.

White

"I am ready."

Solace is the inevitable. Ven wearing white are preparing for Solace. A symbol of serenity and patience, those who wear the color of Solace are ready for their end.

Wearing white can also symbolize that a beloved relative or friend is passing into the Great Sleep. You show your thoughts are with them as they enter eternal slumber. Some mystery cults encourage their members to wear white from an early age, signifying the long preparation for the great sleep. Others weave small white fabrics into their clothes, eventually replacing their colors with pure white.

Brown

"I am not playing the game."

Many ven don brown for the sole purpose of remaining outside the various machinations and plots of their neighbors and kin. Brown is the color of soil. Labor. "I am too busy to play." Brown is also the color of "honest work." Although the nobility would never admit it, an unspoken truth lingers here. An acknowledgement that all play and no work allows civilization to fall apart.

Brown also carries the connotation of the unblooded. Many nobles wear brown to show an appreciation for the labor of the unblooded, a respect for the underclass. Controversial, at least. Scandalous at best.

Gold & Silver

Gold. The color of the sun. The color of reason. Soft, malleable.

Silver. The color of moon. The color of emotion. Hard, cold.

The colors of nobility. Power and purity. Only the Blooded may wear these colors.

Roses

Wearing a rose of a particular color serves as an accent. A secondary message. Mixing roses with primary colors—wearing a red rose with a blue dress, for example—sends subtle signals.

Giving a rose in full bloom is kind of like an exclamation point. Giving a rose while it is still in the bud is a more subtle expression. Giving a withered rose... don't do this unless you mean it.

Black: given to a ven under the veil of shame

Bouquet in full bloom: a sincere expression of gratitude

Dark Crimson: Revenge

Garland or crown of: reward of merit

Pink: please believe me

Red and white (given together): unity

Red: I love you

Thornless: love at first sight

White: secrecy and silence

Yellow: nobody gives a yellow rose

Economy

There is no money. No coin, no paper. The ven do not have currency.

Gold is abundant. So is silver and platinum. The mines left behind by the sorcerer-kings make digging these things out of the soil easy, but other resources such as lumber, food, and stone—are more difficult to acquire. You see, the sorcerer-kings populated the world with monsters. Outside the protective walls of the cities, the forests and fields teem with unspeakable horrors. Villages often suffer from ork attacks, making the need for sheriffs and rangers essential. (Of course, this is where the Blooded of the Falcon come in to the picture.)

Farming, fishing, mining, and other "common work" is dangerous. The peasants expect the nobles to keep their end of the "feudal compact" alive: I will serve you if you protect me.

But there is no money. No coin, no paper.

Ven economy is based entirely on trade and promise. Although, the ven are self-aware enough to realize just how much a promise is worth. That is why every barter and bargain is written down and signed by both parties. This has created an incredible amount of bureaucracy: contracts are the standard for all ven interactions. Some of those contracts involve Blood—but we don't talk about that in public.

Let's look at an example. The farmer comes to town with his seven bushels of wheat. In town, there is also the fisherman, the tailor, the baker... almost everything you could want. The farmer knows he needs a new plow, the wheel fixed on his cart, and getting his wife a bolt of material for a new dress would make her very happy indeed. He goes to the blacksmith first. He produces the contract he has with the blacksmith, outlining the bargain they made two summers ago. The blacksmith takes wheat in exchange for a new plow. The blacksmith isn't very happy—there is too much wheat in market this Season, making it easy to get—but the contract is for one more Season. Next Season, he'll renegotiate. Next is the carpenter who is in a similar situation. He can get wheat wherever he wants it, so he tells the farmer he isn't interested in trading this Season. So much for that new wheel. The tailor, on the other hand, is getting as much wheat as he can. Nobody's really sure why. But he's more than willing to honor his contract with the farmer and take all the wheat he can get in exchange for a bolt of fine cotton fabric.

Meanwhile, the farmer has to renegotiate his contract with the baker. The contract he signed is up this Season and it is time to settle on a new deal. The farmer and baker sort it all out and settle their new contract with an exchange of wheat and pastries. The pastries will go good with that bolt of cotton. His wife will be very happy this Season.

There is no money. No coin, no paper. But there is barter and trade. And contracts.

Contracts

As far as the Law is concerned, any formal agreement is a contract. To make an agreement "formal," a particular ritual must be performed. (Of course.) However, no matter what form the contract takes, the Law sees all contracts the same. Same enforcement, same penalties.

A simple handshake suffices for most contracts. Witnesses help enforce such verbal agreements. An older ritual called for a kiss, but only nostalgic, romantic ven adhere to this. Only romantic, nostalgic ven. In other words, every single noble in Shanri.

Written contracts are pretty standard in ven society, creating an entire profession of contract writers. The ven call them *puja*. "Quills."

Contracts can last days, weeks, years, even generations. Breaking a contract calls for a steep penalty. See *The Law*, above, for more details.

Sorcery

"Sorcery" in Shanri is actually the amalgam of three different belief systems. Two of these are native to the ven but the third is what remains of *aelva ðonna* sorcery.

What the ven conveniently call "alchemy" is actually a combination of two religions: old world alchemy and new world polytheism. The principles of these two religions have many complimentary factors, but they also have many contradictory principles. The ven see no contradiction in these two sometimes-opposing beliefs.

Valae Tyrun: Sorcery

A much older magic exists in Shanri, but one the ven view with suspicion and fear. *Valae tyrun* (Blood magic) was created by the sorcerer-kings thousands of years ago. Its power is undeniable, although the price is costly. To invoke the powers of valae tyrun, the sorcerer must draw Blood… either his own or the Blood of another.

Use of Blood magic is not illegal, although it is viewed by many as immoral to say the least. Stories of practitioners stoned to death by peasants are regular and those who practice it in the noble caste are outcasts and social pariahs. Although, two rituals—the "Blood oath" and the "soul Sword" ritual—are used regularly in upper circles.

Blood Oaths

While most of the nobility is bound by family loyalty, individual members are also bound by a *valae tiquim*, or "Blood oath." One of the artifacts of the sorcerer-kings, Blood oaths are magical agreements nobles take ensuring loyalty in a state of deception and double-crosses. While *valae tyrun* is forbidden in Shanri, the ritual of the Blood oath is its last legal remnant.

(Some might argue the utility of *valae tiquim* is what keeps the practice legal and alive, but they do not argue it too loudly.)

When a noble signs a *valae tiquim*, his promise is sealed by magical symbols. If he violates the agreement, the document burns and a symbol from the Old Tongue appears on his head: *worloch*, the symbol for "oath-breaker." The brand lasts for a year and a day, although wearing it often damages a noble's political career for life.

Most nobles make Blood oaths in secret – the practice of Blood magic is looked down upon in almost all circles – although the number of Blood oaths present in the Council is more than any would dare suspect.

Senvu Swordsmen

The *senvu* ritual involves mingling one's Blood with the red-hot iron of a Sword. The Sword and Swordsman are bonded… "two souls become one," as the ritual says. The senvu ritual is very popular among nobility (many noble families have declared the ritual illegal by anyone of the merchant or peasant caste) and the presence of senvu Swordsmen in the courts has become quite commonplace. The sevnu see themselves as a kind of elite brotherhood, keeping the secret of their ritual to themselves. Any who disclose the secrets are found dispatched in a most brutal way: with their tongues torn out, throats slit, left on the shore for the crabs.

There are other sorcerous rituals, but most have been lost. Sorcerers seek out these rituals in the ruins of the sorcerer kings... but these places are haunted by the past. Vast catacombs of underground cities populated with horrors from before the cataclysm…

Blood Contracts

Ven Law says Blood contracts—a dangerous sorcerous ritual—are illegal… except when they aren't. The Law is explicit on its view of sorcery. Illegal illegal illegal. But the Law also allows for exceptions to absolutes.

Specifically, the Law states that no ven may enter into a Blood contract unwillingly. If all parties agree, Blood contracts are perfectly legal.

All promises lead to ruin. Make men your slaves by your promises while offering none of your own.

Hospitality

One of the most important traditions in ven culture is *hovana*. Hospitality.

When a noble invites another noble into his home, he has the opportunity to extend the rights of hospitality. These protect the noble from all harm. All harm. No poison. No treachery. No games. All harm.

In exchange, the visiting noble tacitly agrees not to sneak around the house, open locked doors, and otherwise respect the home he visits.

This is a sacred tradition. I cannot over-emphasize its importance. A noble who violates the tradition of hospitality asks to wear the black for a long, long time. (See the *Revenge* chapter for what I'm talking about.)

Vow of Hospitality

The Vow of Hospitality is very, very long. This is a highly abbreviated version for folks who don't have a few weeks to memorize it.

Host: *I swear to you now safety in my home. Be my brother/sister. For while you are here, I will protect you as my own Blood.*

Visitor: *I sear to you now safety in your home. My brother/sister. While I am here, I will protect you as my own Blood.*

Revenge

Vrentae. The Hate. The Old Tongue. A red spirit possesses the Heart. Hungry. It can only dine on retribution. To satisfy the Hate, one must undertake High Revenge.

You will always be hated.
Doing good, doing evil.
You will always be hated.

This is not analogy or allegory. The ven believe the magic of their Blood creates a spirit that swims through them, poisoning all it touches. They grow ill. They cannot eat. They cannot sleep. Consumed by Hate, action must be taken.

Hate. The sickness that can only be cured by the cause.

This particular subject is so important, it has its own chapter later in this book. But until then, let me spend a moment talking about what the ven call "the Sacred Passion."

First off, there is no word in the ven language for "justice." That is the first and last time you will see that word in this book. It just doesn't exist.

On the other hand, "Revenge" is a word that can be found in every legal document, every pillow book, every Opera, every play.

The ven aren't interested in fairness or equity or harmony. If he's been wronged, a ven only cares about making the one who harmed him *suffer the same*.

Suffer the same. That's Revenge. And that's what you need to keep in the forefront of your mind while we discuss ven Law.

How did this obsession begin? How did it take such a hold on the hearts of the ven? As far as we can tell, it was an inadvertent response to an idealistic Law.

No War

That's what Jonan Drax said when he laid down his Seven Laws. A sensible idea backed by harsh realities of ven life.

The concept of war, as we understand it, is completely alien to the ven for many reasons. The first is resources. While the ven are not a culture of scarcity, there is not enough land to support and maintain a standing army. The ven did inherit the ideas of warfare from the *aelva ∂anna*, but it is no longer seen as a practical method of resolving dispute. The ven adapted and evolved, developing a style of warfare that fit their circumstances.

No Ven Shall Make War.

Unable to wage war on a large scale, the ven have mastered waging war on a small scale. Demonstrating how reverently the ven treat "little wars," they use the Old Tongue of the *aelva ∂anna* when speaking of it. The word most commonly associated with the act of ritual violence is *vrentae*, which best translates as "Revenge."

The ven are civilized creatures. They agree upon a set of Laws, and abide by those Laws, surrendering certain civil liberties in exchange for safety. Without this mutual agreement, the ven would be reduced to chaos. Nobles are the keepers of civilization, the watershed against that chaos. Even so, there comes a time when words and rhetoric fail, and when they do, the only recourse is action.

The noble caste recognizes this, and recognizes a noble's right to defend his honor, and defend it with Blood, if necessary. Violence is a part of ven culture, but if arms must be taken up, they will be taken up with a mind toward Art. Two opponents, each with the same weapon, facing off to prove or disprove a claim of honor. This is the purpose of ritual Bloodshed: to address the necessity of violence in a civilized culture.

As we've seen mentioned elsewhere, for the ven, Revenge is a sacred part of their culture. Not to be trivialized, disrespected or abused. The ven right of Revenge is sacrosanct. But, in order to perform Revenge properly, you must know the proper rituals.

Insult & Injury

Another word that doesn't appear in the ven language. "Crime." There is no crime. Only Insult and Injury. Let me explain.

> If I cannot have his heart, I will have his lands.
>
> — Lady Niassa, *The Great and Tragic Life of Shara Yvarai*

Violence is illegal in Shanri, except under specific circumstances. Those circumstances are "the Three Offenses," conditions upon which a ven may rightfully commit violence against another. Under the Law, only the Blooded are allowed to commit violence. No unblooded may commit violence under *any* circumstance.

The Senate's Laws regarding violence are strict and the punishment for breaking those Laws is not pleasant. Those who are already familiar with the ven know this, but I'm making a concerted effort to remind you of those consequences here.

The ven do not tolerate random violence. Only righteous violence.

When a ven breaks the Law, he has committed Insult or Injury or both. This is different from our own legal system which tries to isolate the victim from the crime. (At least, that's the idea.) Murder or theft are crimes no matter who the victim is and the decision of a judge or jury is based on legal precedent. Past decisions determine the punishment with slight modifications depending on the circumstance.

In ven Law, this is not the case.

There is no precedent in ven Law. Every case is unique and must be considered carefully. Must be scrutinized. And the judgment must be proper to the case.

If it has been found that a ven is guilty of Insult or Injury, recompense must be administered. Not fairness. Not equity.

Revenge.

When a ven finds himself Insulted or Injured, he goes before a Jury to make his case. If the Jury finds in his favor, he is allowed to seek Revenge.

Typically, this means the right to challenge his rival to a duel. And, of course, the consequences of this always end in tears.

But how does all of this happen? How does the Jury decide what is worthy of Revenge and what is simply petty bickering?

We'll discuss all of that in the *Revenge* chapter.

Romance

Dalven Suena

"What you have is what you deserve."

For the ven, there are no inalienable rights. What you have is what you deserve. Those who have the Strength to take what they want earn what they get. Those who are weak deserve nothing. This isn't to say that ven culture is without rules. There are many, many, *many* rules. However, there are more loopholes than rules and those who are clever know them all.

Just as the ven value Strength, they also value Cunning, and most of all, they value *manners*. After all, manners demonstrate *mental* Strength. Any brute can kill and take what he wants, but those who make weapons of their minds are highly regarded. The ven are not beasts. They are creatures of dignity, honor, and sophistication, differentiating themselves from the foul creatures of the jungle. The vulgar are seen as less than weak, held below contempt. The ven have a procedure for everything: acquiring land, arranging a marriage, and even purchasing an apple. They most certainly have rules for the grand and noble art of the duel. Violating the rules shows mental weakness—a lack of discipline—and carries dire consequences.

Vrentae. The Lust. The Old Tongue. A red spirit possesses the Heart. Hungry. It can only dine on the rage of Passion. To satisfy it, one must undertake Romance.

This is not analogy or allegory. The ven believe the magic of their Blood creates a spirit that swims through them, poisoning all it touches. They grow ill. They cannot eat. They cannot sleep. Consumed by Lust, action must be taken.

Romance. The sickness that can only be cured by the cause.

Poets have been put to death for writing of it. Men and women alike have been punished horribly for believing in it. The Senate has condemned it, calling it a weakness.

That crazy little thing called love.

The ven were thunderstruck by this notion of personal love; their social structure completely unequipped to handle it. In a world of arranged marriages—where the bride and groom rarely met before their wedding day—such a notion undermined the entire social order.

To understand how drastic a perspective shift this all is, imagine for a moment a world devoid of the notion of love. Love at first sight, falling in love, flirting, dating, the first kiss—imagine all of these notions we take for granted simply did not exist.

All of it is nothing more than simple Lust.

Lust. A poison infecting your heart. Rushing fever through the body. Inducing foolishness. Bringing illness. You act against your family for it. Against your House for it. Against all your better instincts. Just for a chance to win the glance… the touch…

the kiss…

skin…

Love is a sickness. The sickness that can only be cured by the cause.

And then along comes a notion that perhaps love isn't a sickness. Perhaps, and I'm going out on a limb here, that perhaps love is something else. Something virtuous. Something righteous. Something worthy.

Perhaps even something sacred.

Vrentae: "Holding my heart."

The word *vrentae* is best translated as "obsession," although the literal meaning is "holding my heart." Depending on the accentuation, the word has two connotations. The first is "love." The second is "Revenge." If the first syllable is accented—*vren*-tay—it means "love." If the second syllable is accented—vren-*tay*—it means "Revenge."

In the minds and hearts of the ven, these two things are nearly identical.

First, let us explore "Revenge."

The concept of war, as we understand it, is completely alien to the ven for many reasons. First among them is resources. While the ven are not a culture of scarcity, there is not enough dry land to support a standing army. The ven did inherit the ideas of warfare from the *aelva ðanna*, but it is no longer considered a practical method of resolving dispute. The ven adapted and evolved, developing a style of warfare that fit their circumstances.

The most common way to settle a dispute is private duel. One-on-one combat. The two combatants agree on terms through a disinterested third party, meet at a predetermined time, select weapons, then ceremoniously try to kill each other. The winner is considered "correct" in the dispute.

However, despite all of this formal combat, deaths occur outside the parameters of legal duel all the time. We would call this "murder." The ven call it *uvanla*: "a moment of opportunity." When a ven is killed outside the scope of legal murder, the relatives of the deceased are obliged to call *vrentae*. The process for calling *vrentae* is complicated and must follow the correct procedure. If it is not correctly followed, the *vrentae* is not considered "official" and may carry dire consequences.

When a ven calls for *vrentae*, he marks himself in a distinct manner—usually with the color red—and is considered immune to almost all other procedures and bureaucracy. No other matter is more important than avenging the wrongful death of a relative. He is considered free of sin until the *vrentae* is carried out. However, if he fails to carry out the *vrentae* in the proper amount of time, or does not carry it out in the proper fashion, his reputation will be severely damaged.

My lady is not vengeful. She was cursed with a forgiving heart. Her love for you would make a poet weep. Make the stars stand still. No, my lady is not vengeful. That is why she sent me.

— TALASH VA,
THE DUCHESS OF VALANTAIN

More on duels and formal combat can be found in a later chapter. And now, let us talk about the other side of *vrentae*. Let us talk about "love."

While many have translated *vrentae* as "love," it is not a fully correct translation. "Romantic love" is closer, but still not completely correct. The ven do not view love as eternal, nor do they understand the concept of a "soul mate." Marriage does exist in ven culture, but as a bargaining chip for settling land disputes, inheritance and for making heirs. All of this is rather cold, but *vrentae* is anything but. It is hot. It is the passion that drives men and women mad. As one ven poet wrote, "It is the sickness for which the only cure is the cause."

For the ven, *vrentae* is a cause for poetry, for song and for story. It makes us unwise, drives us to tragedy, and blinds our reason. This is *vrentae*. And, just as those who are driven by Revenge wear a color to distinguish themselves, so do those who have fallen under the mad spell of love. While wearing such a distinction, a man or woman may expect a bit more tolerance from those who understand the sickness of love. Those under its sway act madly and do foolish things. They cannot be held responsible for what they do: they are in love!

But love, like Revenge, does not last. It fades like the Seasons. Eventually, an affair grows cold and becomes like the marriage the lovers fled from. Marriages last forever, but affairs come and go. This is the way of love: powerful but fickle, passionate but passing. And while it may make us mad for a time, we cannot be fools forever.

"IS THIS A KISSING BOOK?"

Go to your bookshelf. Go pull down your favorite fantasy novel. It could be Tolkien, it could be Zelazny, it could be anything with "fantasy" on the spine.

One hundred years ago, a book like the one you're holding wouldn't be called a "fantasy," it'd be called a "Romance." A work of romantic notions like heroes, heroines, acts of derring-do, swashbuckling and something called "true love." Romantic notions. The novels of Alexandre Dumas were *Romances*, the Arthurian myths were *Romances*, and yes, the War of the Ring was called a "Romance" in the time the Professor wrote it. Not a fantasy, but a Romance.

(Technically, he called it a "history," but we're willing to allow the Professor a mistake or two now and then.)

And with that in mind, look through the pages of that fantasy novel of yours. Look at the passion of the characters, willing to throw their lives in the way of danger for romantic ideals. Romance can be silly, but it can also be dramatic, subtle, and even tragic. Romance can be an adventure in itself, or it can be the springboard for adventures, giving your character a reason to act as he does. Greed only carries a man so far; what happens when he collects his 100,000 gold pieces? He retires from the dangerous profession of adventuring, gets married and has a few kids, opens a smithy and spends the rest of his life in relaxed luxury. But a man in love will do just about anything, even don that armor one more time, kiss his wife and children goodbye and go out into the wild world to protect everything he's built. Love is the greatest motivator in the world, and it can provide a hero with powers he never knew he had.

As we'll see later…

Romance is a vital and powerful force in Shanri. It burns in the hearts of the ven. You will learn more about passion and love affairs in the *Romance* chapter.

Sex & Taboo

Homosexuality, lesbianism and incest are not taboos in ven culture; they're more like *excesses*. Mistakes. Errors in judgment. While they are *scandalous*, they are at best *insults* in the eyes of the ven.

Someone asked me if the ven recognize gay marriage. They do not. The purpose of marriage is procreation, not pleasure, happiness or love. That's what Romance is for.

(Notice Romance is capitalized and marriage is not. That should tell you something.)

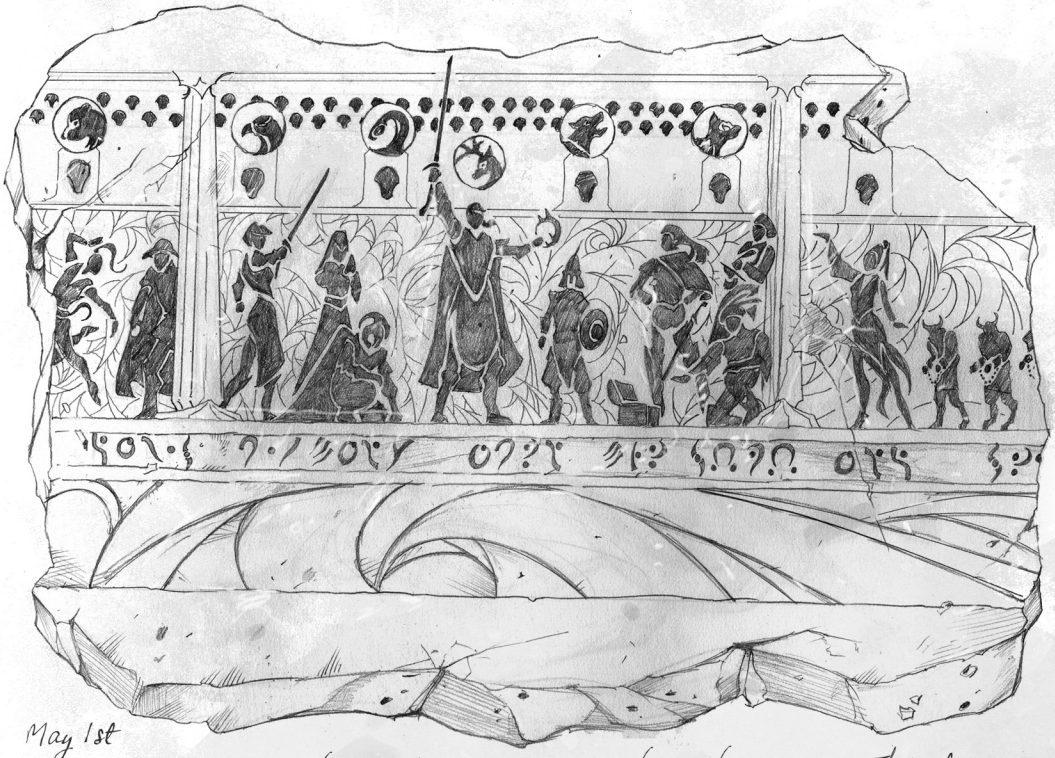
Conclusion

And there you have it. Your primer on ven culture. Of course there is more. So much more, I could write six or seven books on the subject and not even begin to scratch the surface.

A book about the Wastelands outside ven civilization. A book about how the ven go Slumming through the cities of the unblooded. A book about the Senate and all its political machinations. A book about Manners, filled with the intricacies of what the ven call *the Invisible Language*. And speaking of "invisible," I could also write an entire book about the rites and rituals of the suaven. The Invisible World.

Six or seven.

But, until then, continue on. You now know enough to make intelligent choices about your ven character. The next chapter teaches you how to make that character, including his lands, his vassals, his enemies. You'll need some paper, some pencils and some friends. So, get to it.



May 1st

This is an interesting find. It depicts a minor scene from a famous opera. The center figure is a supporting character, who's military victory is a backdrop catalyst for some of the major characters.

But what is more interesting is the visual depiction of ven opera's classic archetypes... The second figure from the left is the "Wise Man" archetype. Obvious for his hunched form, and watching from behind the column, keeping tabs. The Eighth figure, going left to right, is "The Husband", often portrayed as neglectful, his back is turned to us, unaware of the proceedings.

From an art history point of view, this piece is very intriguing. On the surface, it appears similar to Egyptian, Sumerian art. Which often use height hierarchy but if we look closer, there is a sophisticated use of perspective, despite a two dimensional silhouette. The silhouettes themselves owe more to Chinese or Japanese brush paintings. Yet, height hierarchy is in play here as well. The bowed captives on the right side are not pushed back in space. They are cowed, fettered and insignificant. S.

Character

Creating a character is a social exercise. In other words, you should not do it alone. In fact, you cannot take advantage of certain benefits and bonuses if you create your character in a vacuum. So, be sure to get together all your fellow players, get character sheets, pencils, snacks and drinks, and get ready to make characters.

Judge a man by the quality of the company he keeps.
—Human proverb

Judge a man by the enemies he makes.
—Ven proverb

Step-by-Step

Making a character in *Houses of the Blooded* may seem like a huge undertaking, but like most journeys, if you concentrate on the steps, you'll get to the end faster than you think. And you won't be alone. I'll be going through the chapter as you do, making my own character. I decided to make Shara Yvarai—one of the most popular pillow book characters—using the same system. We'll see how true to form she comes out.

Step 1: Background

Your character's younger years are important: building the foundation for the rest of his life, helping him into adulthood. This step determines his Family (not something you have a lot of choice in, I'm afraid), his Name (a powerful influence on his life path), and which House he belongs to.

Step 2: Virtues

This step determines your character's Virtues and his weakness. All ven have a weakness and your character is no exception.

Step 3: Phases

The ven measure their lives in Phases, based on the four Seasons: Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Solace (Winter). Phases determine the number of Aspects your character has and how many Contacts he's gained.

Step 4: Devotions

The sleeping ven, the Suaven, wait for your reverence. They have blessings to give you. All you must give in return is your Devotion.

Step 5: Domain

This step outlines your character's lands and vassals. What he owns. Rolling plains, majestic mountains, cunning spy masters and faithful swordsmen. All at your command.

Step 6: Bonus

Your character also gains a number of bonus points to spend.

Done and Done!

Once you've done all five steps, you're ready to play. So, let's start at the beginning. Let's talk about your character's past…

Step 1: Background

Here's where we begin, with who your character was before the very first game. Her mother and father, siblings (if any), the House she was born under… all of these are elements of your character's past.

Now, I have to warn you: this is also the only part of character generation that is completely random. You may know the saying, "You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family." Well, I've made that phrase a part of the game. A mechanic. The only element of chance in character creation rests here. Your family.

Roll on each of the following tables to determine the specifics of your family. Now, because I believe folks should have *some* degree of say in who their character is, I've given you three points to modify the results of your rolls. Each point moves your roll up or down one point. You can spend all three on one result, one point on three results or decide you don't want to spend any points at all. But remember. This is your family. You may not have chosen them, but they belong to you. And you belong to them.

If it's okay with your Narrator, you can *choose* from these charts without rolling. I like the random factor, but at the same time, I'm a control addict who wants to be free to make choices when I make my character. I sympathize with both sides, so I leave the choice up to you.

Parents

1 Bear	4 Fox
2 Elk	5 Serpent
3 Falcon	6 Wolf

First, find which House's shadow your parents were born under. Again, you have a total of three points to modify your die rolls. Each point modifies your roll one pip, either up or down. If you spend a point here, you have only two points to spend on your other rolls.

Once you've got your parents' Houses, choose which parent was dominant and which parent was submissive. Roll a die for each one. Whoever gets the higher roll is the dominant.

Finally, choose which House you adopt as your own: your mother's or your father's.

Siblings

Time to determine your siblings. Roll one die. This is your rank in the birth order. In other words, if you roll a 3, you were third born.

Next, roll one more die and subtract one from the total. This is the total number of surviving children in your family. Because of the possibility of rolling zero and one (rolling one and subtracting one or rolling two and subtracting one), you may be the only child remaining.

Finally, roll one die for each sibling. An even result indicates a brother, an odd result indicates a sister.

Again, you can use your three points to modify these rolls in any way you like.

Family Standing

All starting characters begin as Barons, but your parents' titles are still important to know. Roll for your parents' social standing. Again, roll one die and check the table to the right.

1	Baron	4	Count
2	Baron	5	Count
3	Baron	6	Marquis

Pick a House (Under the Shadow)

Your parents could be from the same House or be from two different Houses, but you've chosen to align yourself under the shadow of one House: your mother's or your father's. Thus, when you introduce yourself, you will do so as "(your name), House X."

In other words, if my chosen House was the Serpent, I would introduce myself as "John Wick, House of the Serpent." You can choose either your mother or father's House, but you have to choose one.

Your choice of Houses influences every other step of character creation, so choose wisely. There are currently six unveiled Houses in the Senate. What follows are simple illustrations of the six unveiled Houses.

House of the Bear

The embodiment of self-determination, the Blooded of the Bear live alone in the mountains. They are not isolationists, nor do they shun the company of their cousins, but prefer to remain above such petty matters as politics. Pillowbooks paint caricatures of Bears as boorish and loud, disregarding tradition and fashion, but they can also be duplicitous as the most crafty Elk or Serpent. The Blooded of the Bear can use intrigue to solve matters, but prefer to deal with such issues up front, in the open, and with brutal honesty. The virtue the Bear value above all others is *strunaga*: "Strength." The ability to stand alone.

House of the Elk

The Elk are a shunned House, but their banner has not yet been veiled. Once the most powerful House, the Blooded of the Elk were nearly stripped of their lands and titles. If not for the precious favors they traded to keep their status, the Elk would be no more. Now, their banner sits half-veiled in the Senate, a symbol of their shame. But they are still one of the most powerful Houses, masters of politics and intrigue. Moving their influences from sight, they are the most subtle manipulators, regaining their Strength and glory one maneuver at a time. The virtue of the Elk is *inguena*: "cunning." To plot, to plan, and to execute.

House of the Falcon

After the fall of the Empire, the Blooded of the Falcon gave up their lands to wander Shanri. "We have lost our way," the Grand Earl of the Falcon declared, veiling his own banner. And for many years, the Blooded of the Falcon were gone. Five years ago, they returned, reclaiming their lands in daring raids and sieges. The grandson of the man who veiled their colors took the black from their heraldry, declaring their return. Of all the Houses, the Falcon have the closest bond with the common folk and are most familiar with the ways of the Road. The virtue the Falcon reveres is *talanday*: "Courage." To maintain virtue above all temptations.

House of the Fox

With voices like choirs, they announce their arrival. The Blooded of the Fox are the shining jewels of the court. They are masters of all the Arts, but they are best known for the fine Art of seduction. Music and Romance are in their Blood and they ache to share their Arts… but only with you. Of course, only with you. The virtue the Fox reveres is *yaytha*: "Beauty." To bring sublime majesty to all things.

House of the Serpent

Mysterious servant of the underworld, he is a symbol of knowledge… and the price it carries. The Blooded of the Serpent know this price. They have paid it well. And now, they wield the benefit. The House of the Serpent are keepers of all manner of esoteric knowing, including mastery of the forbidden Blood magic of the sorcerer-kings. If you want to know a secret, the best place to start is with the Serpent… but be prepared to pay. The virtue the Serpent reveres is *waltua*: "Wisdom." To suffer painful knowledge.

House of the Wolf

"Are you tool or weapon?" This is the question the Blooded of the Wolf ask their children. Just before they throw them into the pit. Brutal taskmasters, the House of the Wolf does not suffer those who show weakness. All their lives, they study strategy and tactics, learning the subtle Art of advantage. They are taught to see strength and weakness in all situations, for in the eyes of the Wolf, every moment is war. The virtue the Wolf reveres is *wavenda*: "Prowess." To find advantage.

Names

One of the most important traits on your sheet is your character's Name. Your character's Name has a deep history; you walk in the footprints of those who carried your name before. When you choose your character's name, you choose a destiny.

Your name has three parts. The first part is your *family name*, which is your dominant House.

The second name is your *secret name*. Do not divulge this name to anyone. Keeping this name a secret keeps you safe from the more dangerous and deadly sorcery. The reason the name is secret is so your *full* name can never be revealed. If someone discovers your full name, you will be at their mercy.

Family Names

House	Family Name	Meaning
Bear	Burghe	"Alone, we stand together."
Elk	Steele	"I have never surrendered."
Falcon	Thorne	"I am the land."
Fox	Yvarai	"Desire is tamed with a kiss."
Serpent	Mwrr	"I bear Wisdom's price."
Wolf	Adrente	"My weapon is myself."

Finally, you have your *public name*. This is the name you use from day to day. Your "first" name. The name everyone knows you by. It is also at this time that you should name both your father and your mother. If you don't know any ven names, you can check at the end of this chapter for some examples.

Age

Let's decide how old your character is. The ven age up to about one hundred years before passing into Solace. Listed below are the four "ages" your character will inevitably encounter over his lifetime. The default starting Age for characters is Spring. Your Narrator may allow older characters, but that's really up to her.

Age Chart

Adolescence (Spring)	(10 - 19 years)
Adulthood (Summer)	(20 - 49 years)
Maturity (Autumn)	(50- 79 years)
Solace (Winter)	(80-100 years)

If your Narrator allows characters of different Ages, decide on an Age for your character. Not the years, but the Season. Are you a Spring character, a Summer character, an Autumn character or a Solace character? As far as the system is concerned, specific age doesn't really matter. We'll cover how your character ages in the Seasons chapter, later in this book.

Spouse and Children

It's true. Your character is probably married.

Most ven marry between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. Marriages are nothing more than contracts, peace accords, and land deals. The married couple seldom, if ever, meets before the wedding day.

Your spouse isn't just a ball and chain around your ankle. He can also be a mechanical advantage. In fact, he can be a *few* mechanical advantages. Your spouse can be an Aspect. I'll explain what that means in a little bit. Also, your spouse can take Season actions. Yeah, I'll explain those, too.

You also have to decide which of you is the "dominant" partner in the arrangement. If you are the dominant partner, the land belongs to you and your spouse is along for the ride. If your spouse is the dominant partner, you're the one along for the ride.

The *yvestra* (dominant) takes care of the land. The land is the yvestra's responsibility. Management, improvement, all that stuff. The *yvestra* makes all the decisions, has all the authority, has all the responsibility, has all the accountability.

The *ytola* (submissive) has no authority, no responsibility, no accountability. Also, the bureaucracy favors the ytola over the yvestra if that messy Romance thing shows up and someone makes a stink about it. After all, the *yvestra* is supposed to be the responsible one, right? If hanky panky is going on under his nose, that's *his* problem.

Weakness.

Also, if the *yvestra* dies, his parents find the *ytola* a new mate: someone they find aceptable. As far as the Law is concerned, the ties to the old *ytola's* family are cut—unless some manner of exception was made in the marriage contract.

Your character's lands are a combination of all the holdings he owns and his spouse brought to the marriage.

Roll	Married?
1-4	Yes
5-6	No

So, you have another decision to make. Are you married and do you have any children? Most ven nobles get married before the age of 16, so the answer to your question is probably "yes." Although, not all ven marry so young. And not every married couple has children.

Roll	Children?
1-2	None
3-4	1
5-6	2

While such trivial matters would not matter if you were a wandering mercenary, looting and pillaging your way through the countryside, without care or ethics or morals, but you're a noble now, and your priorities have to change. Besides, there are mechanical advantages to having a spouse and child.

If you want to roll randomly to decide, use the charts to the left.

TITLE

Titles are distinctions your character carries with him. Titles give your character a degree of authority, identify him as the rightful owner of land, and give him legal powers other nobles do not have.

Every character created with this system is assumed to be a minor noble, therefore, all characters start with one title which is either Baron or Baroness. Later on in the game, you may also have titles such as "Sheriff," or "Master of the Road," or "Master Spy."

But for now, just write "Baron" or "Baroness" in this space.

Background Example

For Shara, I wanted to make her faithful to the character in the pillow books, so I decided to use those three points to make sure her parents' Houses were correct.

Parents. I roll a 5 and a 4. Serpent and Fox. I want Shara to be born from a Wolf mother and a Fox father, so I use one point to change the Serpent to a Wolf and keep the Fox.

Siblings. I roll a 3. 1 – 1 = 2. Two surviving siblings. In the pillow books, Shara is an only child, so I use my two remaining points to deduct that 2 to a zero. I'm now out of points; I get no more modifications.

Standing. I roll a 3. Shara's father is a Baron.

Pick a House. Like the Shara from the pillow books, my Shara chooses to be under the shadow of the Fox.

Name. Shara. The Veiled Rose.

Age. I choose Spring. The young Shara. Naïve Shara.

Spouse and Children. Shara is unmarried when her adventures begin, so I choose to make her unmarried.

Title. Finally, like all starting characters, Shara is a Baroness.

Virtues

Your character sheet shows six Virtues. Six. But, you must choose which of these Virtues your character does *not* have. That's right. Six, but you only get five of them. The Virtue you do not have is called your *weakness*.

So, read through the Virtues. Each is associated with a specific House. In case you're wondering, you may choose your House's Virtue as your weakness… that's a valid choice. And a risky one.

Bear's Strength

Strength represents almost all your character's physical actions. Lifting, pushing, tearing, pulling, punching, jumping, wrestling and other forms of unarmed combat are all determined by Strength.

If you choose Strength as one of your Virtues…

…he can always lift, push, pull, move, jump, run, climb better than anyone else around and never needs any help for anything.

If you do not choose Strength…

… your character is a weakling. He can't shove heavy (or jammed) doors open, can't bend bars, and certainly can't lift gates.

You roll a number of dice equal to your Strength for any physical risk. Physical force, manual dexterity, everything. If you do not have Strength, you get no dice. No dice means you do not get to narrate your character's success or failure.

Elk's Cunning

Cunning is a measure of your character's ability to see what others are trying to hide and find creative solutions for difficult problems. You know how to put together elaborate plans from disparate parts and how to see patterns where others cannot.

If you choose Cunning as one of your Virtues…

… your character is always thinking outside of the box. He doesn't go for traditional solutions, turns disparate advantages into delicate and detailed plans. He can *see*.

If you do not choose Cunning…

… your character is overwhelmed by obstacles, cannot think quickly on his feet, or see what others want to hide.

Cunning also determines the number of Season Actions your character gets. Without Season Actions, your character's Domain will grow very slowly; more slowly than other Domains.

Falcon's Courage

Courage represents your character's physical will and determination to go on, regardless of the things that stand in his way. Whenever you face danger, whenever you must make selfless decisions, whenever you have to fight through the pain, your Courage helps you reach the other side.

If you choose Courage as one of your Virtues…

… your character's will is powerful. Others must test their skills to tempt him. He can ignore pain and fear, and do what must be done.

If you do not choose Courage…

… your character finds temptation and distraction difficult hurdles. He doesn't have any midnight oil to burn and he can't face danger without some external motivation to push him along.

Without Courage, your character's risks will face difficulties. Every dangerous risk requires that you test your Courage. If you are successful, your character receives bonus dice. If unsuccessful, your character's dice are penalized.

Fox's Beauty

Beauty represents your character's creativity, expression, and natural charm. Whenever your character embarks on a creative endeavor, his Beauty determines his ability to create works that resonate.

If you choose Beauty as one of your Virtues…

…you're character knows and understands the finer points of sophistication and culture. He can debate, paint, sculpt, write music and plays, or conduct an orchestra.

If you do not choose Beauty…

… your character does not care for the finer parts of culture—probably because he does not understand them. He cannot interpret poetry, appreciate music, or enjoy the subtle nuances of any of the Arts.

A ven without any sense of Beauty will find great difficulty with Romance, Art and other vital elements in the game. You may want to take a few Aspects to compensate for your weakness.

Serpent's Wisdom

A character's Wisdom represents his memory and learning ability. When you have to recall facts or memorize charts, you call upon your Wisdom.

If you choose Wisdom as one of your Virtues…

… the amount of information you carry is immense. You know something about everything and can talk for hours about even the most trivial matters.

If you do not choose Wisdom…

… your character is very naive about the world around him. He won't be able to draw on any experiences, won't know what berries are poisonous, and has problems recognizing different breeds of orks.

Without Wisdom, you cannot define elements of the world. Wisdom is the key trait to knowing Shanri's secrets. If you want your character to know *anything* about the ven and their world, you must have Wisdom.

Wolf's Prowess

Prowess reflects your character's martial training. Using weapons, surviving on a battlefield, understanding strategy and tactics all fall under the purview of Prowess.

If you choose Prowess as one of your Virtues…

… a sword feels like a natural extension of his body. He will dodge deadly blows, maneuver through battlefields, and understand the philosophy of warfare.

If you do not choose Prowess…

… your character has never even been in a fight, let alone held a sword. He cannot stand on his own against a trained opponent and will likely break at the first sign of danger.

Without Prowess, your character will lose every fight. He'll be helpless. No hope. No chance. Get yourself a bodyguard or buy up some "fighting Aspects" to compensate. Otherwise, you'll be nothing more than a tool in a world of weapons.

Virtue Ranks

You must now assign *ranks* to your Virtues. A rank is a number representing the Strength of the Virtue. The higher the rank, the stronger the Virtue. Thus, a character with a 2 Strength would have a great deal of difficulty wrestling a character with a 5 Strength.

Also, be sure to remember, one of these Virtues is your weakness.

Choose one Virtue at rank 4.

Choose two other Virtues at rank 3.

Choose two other Virtues at rank 2.

Then, choose one Virtue to be your *weakness*. Write "weakness" in the space provided.

Finally, when you are all done, add one rank to your House Virtue. That is, if your character is Blooded of the Wolf, add one rank to his Prowess, whatever it may be. Likewise, if your character is Blooded of the Bear, add one rank to his Strength. If your House Virtue is your weakness, you may *not* add a rank to it.

Virtues Example: I always start a new character by picking her weakness. The one Virtue she does not have. For Shara—the young Shara—it's pretty easy. Wisdom.

Now, that leaves me with five Virtues and five numbers. 4, 3, 3, 2 and 2. Here's how I sorted them out. Because Beauty is the Virtue of the Fox, I add one to Beauty, giving Shara a Beauty rank of 4.

Strength	2
Cunning	3
Wisdom	weakness
Courage	2
Beauty	3 (+1 House bonus)
Prowess	4

PHASES

While creating a character, you won't just look at who he *is*, but you'll also take a look at who he *was*.

Your character's past is told in a series of *Phases*. A Phase represents a certain amount of time in your character's past. For example, the Spring Phase embodies your character's youngest years: from birth to adolescence while Solace represents your character's twilight years.

Each Phase is different, representing a different time in your character's life. The more Phases you choose for your character, the older your character becomes. Age brings advantages but also carries the weight of certain disadvantages. See each Phase below for details.

For each Phase, your character gets *Aspects* and *Contacts*.

Phase 1: Spring
- 2 Aspects
- 1 Contact

Phase 2: Summer
- 4 Aspects
- 2 contacts

Phase 3: Autumn
- 5 Aspects
- 1 Solace Aspect
- 3 contacts

Phase 4: Solace
- 6 Aspects
- 2 Solace Aspects
- 4 contacts

ASPECTS

Aspects are words, phrases or even quotes that help define your character. They are the keywords you use to describe not only who your character is, but what your character *means*. Aspects can make the difference between a good character and a great character.

Start by thinking about who your character is. A ven noble. What makes your character unique from the others you'll meet? What makes you stand apart?

If you had only two things to say about your character—and each had to be summed up in five words or less—what would those two things be? That's a good way to start thinking about Aspects. And remember, an Aspect can be a single word, a couple of words, a phrase, an item, or even a quote. Here are a few examples to get you started.

House Aspect

I've also given each house an Aspect based on the Family Name. If you like, you can take this Aspect or choose to make a house rule that *all* characters have a House Aspect. You can find these in the *Aspects* Chapter.

Impromptu Wit
"I Never Promised You Anything!"
Clever
Momma's Boy
Regal
"I Never Forget a Face."
Short-Tempered
Favorite with the Ladies
Honorable
Broken Heart
Eyes Wide Open
My Father's Sword
Dastardly
My Mother's Diaries
Quiet
"No, You Do it Like This!"
Bookworm
Withdrawn
Willful Eyes
"I have a bad feeling about this."
Clever Smirk
No Stranger to Pain
Untrusting
"Why won't you die?"
Home-Wrecker
Willing Smile
None More Black
Born of the Storm
"Trust me."
"My favorite dish is Revenge."
Boastful
Bureaucrat
"I never forget a face..."
Court Gossip
Impetuous
My Lord's Right Hand
Perfumed
Poison Kiss
Old Sword
"I will never love again..."
Forgiven
Silent as Midnight
Cold as the Winter Wind
Brother to All Who Know Me
"I am sure you're mistaken..."
Strong and Certain Grip
Now, it's dark...

This book is *littered* with aspects. You can find a ton of them in the *Aspects* chapter. Go check it out for more examples.

Invoked, Tagged, Compelled

Aspects are made up of three *elements*: the invoke, the tag and the compel.

Each Aspect gives you a particular advantage. This is the Aspect's *invoke*. You, and only you, may invoke your Aspect to gain bonus dice on your character's rolls.

Each Aspect also has a particular disadvantage. This is the Aspect's *tag*. If another character discovers your tag, she can use it against you in contested rolls.

Finally, an Aspect can make you act a certain manner, for good or for ill. This is the Aspect's *compel*. Any player (even the Narrator) may *compel* your Aspect to limit your character's behavior.

For each Aspect, decide on the Aspect's three elements. These three must be *specific*. In other words, your Aspect can give you bonus dice under an explicit circumstance. An Aspect that is too general, that can be invoked at any time under any circumstance, is power gaming and should be avoided by grown-up, responsible, adult gamers who know better. If you don't know any adult gamers, get yourself a different group.

An important note: Your tags and compels are *secret*. Nobody can tag or compel your Aspects unless they know them. If they don't know how to tag and/or compel your Aspect, they can't take advantage of your weaknesses.



Swordsman: A Sample Aspect

Here's a sample Aspect to give you an idea how the whole thing works.

Let's say your character wants an Aspect that makes him a brilliant swordsman. Picking an aspect like "Fighter" is a bit too broad, so, you take "Swordsman" as an Aspect.

Invoke: You invoke this Aspect when using a sword. Invoking this Aspect gets you 3 bonus dice.

Tag: Other players (and the Narrator) can tag this Aspect to gain bonus dice when fighting against you. The tag represents a weakness in your fighting style. You decide your overhead strike leaves a severe opening in your defenses. If someone figures out your weakness, they can tag this Aspect for bonus dice.

Compel: Finally, your Aspect limits your character's behavior in some way. This Aspect gives you a particular code of honor. Your code of honor means you will feel compelled to risk your own life to protect others.

Solace Aspects

As the ven grow older, they begin showing signs of Solace, the Great Sleep. As your character ages, she too will begin showing these signs. These are reflected on your character sheet as "Solace Aspects."

Solace Aspects can be tagged and compelled, but they cannot be invoked. Tagged and compelled, but not invoked. That's right, getting old sucks.

Solace Aspects reflect physical difficulties or mental abnormalities your character has taken on. Ven reaching Solace are taller. Ghostly grey skin, silver eyes. Their voices echo in their own throats. Their fingers grow long and thin.

If you play a character in Autumn or Winter, you must choose Solace Aspects to reflect your character's progress into the Great Sleep. Like I said above, these Aspects can only be compelled and tagged, so you must find physical difficulties or changes that allow other characters to gain bonus dice and limit your behavior in some way.

Solace Aspects cannot be hidden. Another player does not need to make any kind of risk to know the tag and compel. They sit right there, out in the open, ready for anyone to take advantage of them.

Finally, Solace Aspects are Free Aspects. That means they don't count toward the total number of tags your enemies may take in a risk. You'll learn more about Free Aspects in the Aspects Chapter.

Aspects & Style

Invoking one of your own Aspects costs a Style point. If another player or the Narrator tags or compels one of your Aspects, you get a Style point.

And about Style points. You don't know what they are yet. That's fine. We'll get to them in the *Risk* chapter.

Contacts

All through your character's life, he's made important connections with other ven. Sometimes those connections fade, sometimes they last for years. Each Phase, your character has an opportunity to make a contact, a friend or ally that lasts through the storms life throws at relationships.

Each Phase, pick another player. That player's character is this Phase's Contact. The two characters have some sort of connection, a story about how you met and why you became such close friends.

If you like, draw a name out of a hat or make a deliberate choice. Either way, you should choose a different character for each Phase.

Not only does this build relationships with other characters, but it also helps build your own history, filling in details, getting input from other players, facets of your character you may have never thought of yourself.

Mechanical benefits for having Contacts are many. For example, you may spend style points to refresh a contact's Aspects and trading resources and goods are easier with a contact. As we go through the rules, you'll see other places where contacts provide advantages you'll want in the game. Keep an eye out for them.

Phases Example

Young Shara starts out as a Spring character. She gets 2 Aspects and 1 Contact.

For her first Aspect, I pick a quote from one of the pillow books. "I know how to hurt you." For the second Aspect, I pick another quote that seems to match Shara's character: "I know what you want." You can see them in a nearby sidebar.

For her Contact, I pick a childhood friend. Valin Burghe. A young Bear recently returned from… well, nobody really knows where from. I'll talk more about Valin in the Narrator Chapter.

Courtier: Another Sample Aspect

You want your character to be trained in handling sticky social situations. Handling sticky social situations is a bit vague. I mean, just about any situation could be interpreted as a sticky social situation, so we have to be a bit more specific. In this case, the player decides "knowing my manners" is a good definition for this Aspect.

Invoke: You invoke this Aspect when you want to know the right thing to do at the right time. Invoking this Aspect gets you 3 bonus dice.

Tag: Other players (and the Narrator) can tag this Aspect to gain bonus dice when acting against your character in a particular circumstance. Remember, every Aspect has a weakness. This Aspect's weakness hinges on dealing with unruly people. A raging Bear, a vengeful Wolf, an overly-friendly Fox. When folks act *inappropriately*, you don't know what to do and they get 2 bonus dice against you.

Compel: Finally, your Aspect limits your character's behavior in some way. This Aspect gives you a particular way of behaving. Behaving properly. Another player (or the Narrator) can compel this Aspect to make you act according to the rules of culture and etiquette.

Limp:
An Example Solace Aspect

Your character has developed a heavy limp from his muscles tightening and his bones growing thin.

Tag: Other players (and the Narrator) can tag this Aspect to gain bonus dice when acting against your character in a particular circumstance. Remember, every Aspect has a weakness. Your weaknesses are your thin bones and decrepit muscles. Any time you are in a contested risk against another character and your bum leg may be a factor, your opponent gains two dice.

Compel: Your Narrator—or other players—can compel this Aspect, forcing your character to fall or fail at some kind of physical action because of your limp.

I Know How to Hurt You

Invoke: Shara gains three dice when trying to cause physical injury to an opponent.

Tag: Shara's fighting style is too reckless. She makes little attempt to protect herself. Anyone who knows this tag can spend a Style point to gain two dice against her in a duel.

Compel: She's not only good at hurting people, she likes it. Anyone who knows this can spend a Style point to force Shara to pick a fight… just for the chance to give someone a scar.

I Know How What You Want

Invoke: Shara knows desire. She knows lust. She knows exactly what you want. She gains three dice when making rolls to find out what another character wants.

Tag: Shara knows pleasure and desire so well, she's a victim of both. Another ven who knows this tag can spend a Style point to gain two dice when trying to seduce Shara.

Compel: Like her other Aspect, Shara is compelled by her impulses. She loves the game. Maybe a bit too much. (She's a Spring. Give her a break.) Learn this Aspect's compel, spend a Style point and you can make her play the game: she'll do it just for fun.

Do not injure an enemy: destroy him.
The world has no mercy for the merciful.

Devotions

When they pass into Solace, the ven are trapped between the visible world and the invisible world, communicating with a symbolic language few understand. The ven on the waking side still communicate with their sleeping kin through visions and dreams. Your character has found some kind of communion with one of these *Suaven*. Devotion for the patron saints of Shanri.

Your character can devote himself to one or more of these Suaven, winning their favor and Blessings. You measure your Devotion to a Suaven in ranks—just like everything else on your character sheet. If you revere a Suaven, you are said to have Devotion to that Suaven.

Like our own patron saints, the ven associate the Suaven with a particular attribute. Just as Saint Jude is "the patron saint of lost causes," Althana Steele is the Suaven of desperate measures. Althana is not the only patron saint of desperate measures and everyone has a favorite.

Devotions Example

In her youth, Shara was devoted to two Suaven: Talia Yvarai and Falvren Dyr. While readers of the book may dispute which is closer to her heart, my own judgment tells me it was Talia who was her primary Devotion... until certain circumstances changed that.

I therefore choose to give two of my three points of Devotion to Talia and my third to Falvren Dyr. When Shara visits their shrines and seeks their wisdom, the Narrator will determine which Blessings she will receive.

Each Suaven is surrounded by a mystery cult: a sect of devoted followers. Joining a mystery cult allows you to learn the secrets of that Suaven's life. The more you learn, the more you know how to communicate with a Suaven in his dreaming state. You learn symbols associated with that Suaven, surround yourself with those symbols, and further attune yourself to her slumbering mind.

Now, if you show your Suaven the proper respect, reverence and adoration (like bringing wine and flowers to their shrines), the Suaven return your kindness with Blessings. These are supernatural gifts that benefit your character in specific ways. You can read all about the Blessings in the *Suaven* chapter.

You can have a Suaven of swords, a Suaven of bridges, a Suaven of gardening, a Suaven of just about anything. You may not have a Suaven of "winning rolls." That would be lame. Bad form.

This book lists six major Suaven. You may choose to divide your Devotion among these Suaven. You have *three points of Devotion* to give these Suaven, each point increasing your Devotion to that Suaven by one rank. For example, if you put two points toward Ashalim Avendi, your Devotion to the Falcon's Friend is rank 2. If you put one point toward Falvren Dyr, your Devotion to Old One-Eye is rank 1.

Ashalim Avendi: master of the road, falcon's friend, the beggar brigand. Call upon him when you seek insight into the ways of the Road.

Falvren Dyr: swordsman, old one-eye, the crimson cloak. Call upon him when you seek insight into the ways of the Sword.

Talten Steele: the Iron Heart, Winter's Promise, the Ruthless. Call upon him when you seek insight into the ways of Politics.

Manna Renay: the hearthmother, ward-teacher, grand dame. Call upon her when you seek insight into the ways of Etiquette.

Talia Yvarai: the celestial muse, sacred harlot, keeper of roses. Call upon her when you seek insight into the ways of Romance.

Tyane Bran: keeper of secrets, the blind one, whisperer. Call upon him when you seek insight into the ways of Intrigue.

DOMAIN

I assume your character is a landed noble: a ven with lands and followers. As the last part of character creation, it's time to determine what Regions and Vassals he owns.

A Domain is a vague stretch of land with various geographical features. Because the sorcerer-kings not only experimented with flora and fauna, but the structure of the land itself, Shanri's geography is a chaotic mess. Deserts next to forests, tundra next to mountains, and all other kinds of oddities.

You begin the game with five points for Regions and five points for Vassals.

DOMAIN, PROVINCE, REGION

The total amount of land you own is called your *Domain*. If your noble owned nothing more than a single field, that would be his Domain. If he owned hundreds of thousands of acres of land, that too would be his Domain. "Domain" just means "all the land I hold." Keep that in mind.

The standard unit of land is called a *Province*. A Domain may contain one, two or many Provinces. As a starting character, your Domain contains a single Province.

A Province is divided into ten *Regions*. A Region generally represents some geographical feature. Thus, a mountain range is a Region, a farmstead is a Region, a forest is a Region. All these Regions make up a Province.

As a beginning character, your Domain is not completely explored. You own a Province and within that Province are ten Regions, but not all the Regions are yet under your control. You must take some effort to expand your control so your Domain comes completely under your thumb.

To make this easy to understand, check out the Province Sheet at the end of this book. It has ten slots for your ten Regions. If your Domain eventually expands to many Provinces, you'll need a different sheet for each Province.

Building Your Province

You have **five points** to spend on your Province. Each Province can have up to ten Regions, each Region representing a geographical feature. For example, you can spend one point on a mountain range, one point on plains, one point on a forest, etc.

Two of your ten Regions are already spoken for. First, you have a Castle. That's one Region. The second is your Village. That's two. These are already listed on your Province sheet. Be sure to give them names. Castles and Villages without names are lonely places.

Your Castle and Village do not count against your five free Regions. Your Castle and Village are *free*. You have five *additional* points to play with above and beyond your Castle and Village.

Now, you may have noticed that you have eight empty Regions and only five points to spend. That's okay. All the Regions you don't define are either not yet explored or do not have sufficient Vassals to manage. You are only a minor noble, after all.

When you use a point to buy a Region, it is a rank 1 Region. So, spending one point on a Forest gives you a Forest 1.

You may buy multiples of the same Region. In other words, if you want to fill up your Province with different mountain ranges, please feel free to do so.

Regions

Castle: Urban. Doesn't produce anything, but it is the center of your governing power. A Caslte is a Region—just like a Farm, Forest or Plains—and follows all the rules for normal Regions. Building a Castle costs three Lumber, three Stone and one Season Action.

Farm: Rural. Produces either Food or Industry.

Forest: Rural. Produces either Food or Lumber.

Hills: Rural. Produces either Metals or Lumber.

Mountain: Rural. Produces either Metals or Stone.

Plains: Rural. Produces either Wine or Spices (two kinds of Luxury).

Ruin: Provides special bonus (see *Ruins* below).

Shoreline: Rural. Produces Trade.

Swamp: Rural. Produces either Herbs or Poisons

Village: Urban. Produces Goods.

Resources

Each region produces Resources: valuable commodities you can trade and develop at the end of each Season. If you have the right combination of Resources, you can develop them into Goods, such as weapons, clothing, and even Art. Weapons, clothing and Art get you Style: something every ven cannot get enough of.

For every point you spend on a Region, it produces one Resource. So, a two-point Forest could produce two Food or two Lumber. A three-point Mountain could produce three points of Metals. A Region cannot provide two different kinds of Resources; it must provide multiples of the same Resource.

Vassals

Vassals are skilled professionals who help you with your Season Actions. Examples of Vassals are your Personal Guard, Spy Network, Valet or Maid and Sword Master.

Each Vassal has a cost. You must pay the people who work for you, after all. Vassals require at least one Food per Year, but paying them more prevents bribes from enemies. Also, the less you pay Vassals, the more likely some other lord will send in a Spy Network to bribe them and steal them away.

Vassals

Apothecary: Creates medicines and treats poisons.

Caravan: Caravans move Resources from place to place, dodging Trouble whenever they can.

Artisan: Creates Art to decorate your home and inspire your fellow ven.

Court Scholar: Deals with all supernatural threats to your Domain, counters any belligerent sorcery, and makes sure no (other) sorcerers practice their illegal craft in your lands.

Herald: Notifies your people of your will and news of the day. Also delivers propaganda—I mean "messages"—to your neighbors.

Maid/Valet: Stands at your side and helps you with mundane tasks.

Personal Guard: Increases your personal security and prevents assassination attempts.

Roadmen: Roadmen (knights) wander the countryside solving problems and quelling trouble.

Spy Network: Increases the security of your own Domain and helps "investigate" other Domains.

Staff: Staff represent your butler, maids, cooks and other servants who make sure your Castle runs smoothly.

Spouse: If you are a married character, you automatically get a Spouse Vassal at rank 1. If you aren't married, you'll have to get one the hard way.

Full descriptions of Regions and Vassals are in the *Seasons* chapter later in this book, but for now, see above for a brief description so you know what you're getting when you spend the points. And these aren't the only kinds of Vassals available. There are more out there, but these are the ones you can start with.

You have five points to allocate to Vassals. Each point gives you a single Vassal. Additional points spent on a single Vassal increase its starting rank. Like Regions, you cannot spend more than three points on any single Vassal.

Some Vassals are not listed here. They aren't available at character creation. These are the Master Vassals. You'll learn more about them in the *Seasons* chapter.

Domain Example

I have five points to spend on Shara's Regions and five points to spend on her Vassals. I spend her five Region points like this:

- Bangladow Forest (rank 1)
- Shuathan Plains (rank 1)
- Adanda Plains (rank 1)
- Brengan Mountains (rank 1)
- Tolleumen Farm (rank 1)
- My Castle and Village are free, so I add those in.
- Yvarai Castle (free; rank 1)
- Tudana Village (free; rank 1)
- As for Vassals, I have five points to spend in this arena as well. I spend them thus:
- The Dranna Crew (Spy Network 2)
- Krav's Elites (Personal Guard 1)
- The Staff of Castle Yvarai (Staff 1)
- Talin's Shadows (Roadmen 1)

Style Points

Your character starts with three Style points. There all kinds of things you can do with Style points. You can read about how to earn and spend them in the *Risk* chapter. But, for right now, just know that you have three.

And another thing. At the end of each game session, you have to discard any style points you may have exceeding five. Five is the cap. This is called "banking style." You cannot bank more than five style points between game sessions unless a rule says otherwise.

You'll run into that later, too.

Bonus Points

At this point, your character is nearly done. We have one last thing to go over and that's *bonus points*.

Each bonus point you spend gets you a little something extra on your character sheet. It could be an extra Aspect, a Suaven relic, a new region, an *aelva ∂anna* artifact or even a sorcerous ritual. These cool goodies can only be purchased—at character creation—with bonus points.

You get five bonus. You can spend your points on the categories below. You cannot spend more than three of your points on any single category.

Artifact: Your character is in possession of an artifact from the days of the sorcerer-kings. It could be anything from a sacred dagger used in their Bloody rituals to a puzzle

house hidden in the hills of your Province. An Artifact costs one bonus point per rank. Thus, a rank 2 Artifact would cost two of your five bonus points. See "Artifacts" in the *Sorcery* chapter for more information.

Aspect: If you like, you can spend one or more of your points on bonus Aspects. You need to spend 1 bonus point for an additional Aspect. Each character may only have a number of Aspects equal to his Season maximum plus half his Wisdom, rounded up. Thus, a Spring character may have two Aspects plus a number of bonus Aspects equal to his Wisdom, divided by two. A Summer character can have three Aspects plus his Wisdom bonus. An Autumn character may have four Aspects plus his Wisdom bonus.

Contact: You may purchase an additional Contact with a bonus point. You may choose NPCs as Contacts with your Narrator's permission.

Devotion: You may spend a bonus point to increase your Devotion to a Suaven. No character may start the game with a Devotion higher than rank 3.

Friend: You may spend one or more of your points turning a Contact into a Friend. You can read more about Friends in the *Seasons* chapter.

Region: You can also investigate your unexplored Regions or increase the rank of an existing Region. Increasing the rank of an existing Region costs one point. Adding a new Region to your Domain also costs one point. You may not start with any Region higher than rank 3.

Bonus Points Example

I have five points to spend on Shara. Here's how I spent them.

First, I spend one point to get a Senechal. In the pillow books, Shara's Seneschal is a significant part of the story. Very important. I spend one point and get her a rank 1 Seneschal. Three things that are true about him: he's as thin as twig, as tall as a mountain, and very, very creepy.

Second, I spend two points get an Artifact. Shara had a Blood Sword in the first pillow book. Her mother's Sword. Her Blood Sword gives Shara two bonus dice in duels.

Third, I spend one point to add one rank of Devotion for Talia. (That makes a total Devotion of 3.)

Fourth, I spend my last point for an Artisan. A playwright. Shara's ambition is to write a play with operatic style. She needs help.

Relic: You can also spend bonus points to possess a relic: an item sacred to one of the greater Suaven. Perhaps a ring or a coin. A comb. A diary. See the *Suaven* chapter for more information.

Ritual: You know one or more of the dangerous (and illegal) sorcerous rituals of the *aelva danna*. Each ritual costs 1 bonus point. See *Sorcery* for more information.

Vassals: You can spend a bonus point to gain an additional Vassal or increase an existing Vassal's rank by one. You may not use bonus points to turn a Vassal into an NPC. See *Seasons* for more information on Vassals.

Finished!

You can see Shara's character sheet right over on the following page. Enjoy.

A List of Ven Names

Below, you'll find a list of the most common (and famous) ven names. I have no pronunciation guide. Scholars cannot agree on common pronunciations for the ven language—we simply do not have enough evidence—but I've tried to keep them as faithful to the ven spellings as possible.

Aban: "the world forgives daring"
Abazai: "the cherry blossoms fall"
Abendago: "the unforgotten song"
Abhaz: "born in the northern snows"
Aby: "the river's memory"
Alanya: "protector of the home"
Alexai: "the hand and the sword"
Ashla: "rest here"
Asvil: "born of light"
Atami: "thoughtful"
Ato: "first born son"
Bajinoth: "the wind whispers"
Cavala: "worthy of love"
Chayan: "born of the marsh"
Cosette: "peace of heart"
Dagul: "father of many"
Ddwyer: "hold fast"
Deta: "white and fair"
Davan: "tall and large"
Dara: "in my arms, be born again"
Dosajee: "in the Suaven I trust"
Dranna: "the heavens in my eyes"
Drial: "I am your friend"
Durt: "worthy of love"
Ecc: "Shanri's mysteries in my heart"
Feyla: "cheerful eyes"
Fyx: "I am alive"
Godfren: "devoted guardian"
Gryndil: "illuminating the darkness"
Gwanal: "my love will give you no rest"
Halia: "the hawk's white wing"
Haroon: "my father rejoices"
Icusalia: "cottage under the moon"
Illudyll: "the soul of the sun"
Isla: "ever watchful"
Jana: "my truth in you"
Jorja: "white hands"
Kavamadii: "purity and grace"
Kyocera: "I cannot be known"
Lisle: "appointed one"
Lonor: "I am the rival"
Lura: "brightest star"
Maja: "laughter heals"
Maura: "the red widow"
Maurevel: "keeper of the woods"
Meza: "where berries grow"
Moryandal: "inevitable victory"
Mxura: "master of the house"
Myri: "full of hope"
No: "forbidden kiss"
Olivama: "I will fool them with desire"
Niassa: "the ungentle night"
Rajh: "I will die on your grave"
Rali: "my meal will be wine"
Regana: "slender stem"
Ryandual: "the abandoned plain"
Sagay: "adviser to power"
Shajar: "little rose"
Shanina: "roots of the tallest tree"
Shara: "veiled rose"
Sitthydeth: "sweetest song"
Sorio: "the warrior brings peace"
Suahavan: "the harp"
Szazs: "the unrepentant heart"
Tasha: "the green meadow"
Tatjan: "friend of the mountain"
Tjan: "most earnest"
Torr: "iron does not bend"
Trixauna: "daughter of the Sword"
Tshanja: "the education of experience"
Tzao: "born of fire"
Ul: "spiced wine"
Uthandaye: "small stone"
Van: "little one"
Vangalio: "my deeds will inspire"
Vanglia: "my family will not forget"
Vrdj: "joined in harmony"
Weatha: "the elder tree"
Wyel: "I pledge"
Zrudura: "my heart aches"

Virtues

Bear STRENGTH	*Elk* CUNNING	*Falcon* COURAGE	*Fox* BEAUTY	*Serpent* WISDOM	*Wolf* PROWESS
					
2	3	2	4	W	4

High Concept

House	*Fox*
Family Name	*Yvarai*
Public Name	*Shara*
Secret Name	

Devotions

Suaven	*Talia Yvarai*	**Rank (** *3* **)**
Blessings		
Suaven	*Falvren Dyr*	**Rank (** *1* **)**
Blessings		

Phase

Spring Aspect *I know how to hurt you*

Invoke — Refreshed ( )

Tag

Compel

Spring Aspect *I know what you want*

Invoke — Refreshed ( )

Tag

Compel

Regions

Bangladow Forest (rank 1)
Shuathan Plains (rank 1)
Adanda Plains (rank 1)
Brengan Mountains (rank 1)
Tolleumen Farm (rank 1)
Yvarai Castle (free; rank 1)
Tudana Village (free; rank 1)

Vassals

The Dranna Crew (Spy Network 2)
Krav's Elites (Personal Guard 1)
The Staff of Castle Yvarai (Staff 1)
Talin's Shadows (Roadmen 1)

Extras

Bonus Vassal: Tyvn, Seneschal
Bonus Vassal: Falla, Playwright

Contacts

Spring — *Valin Burghe*

Artifact

Blood Sword

Conclusion

That's pretty much it. Shara's got her Virtues, contacts, Aspects, regions and Vassals. She's ready to play. Hopefully, you've come to the same conclusion. For more information on each of these subjects, see the like-named chapters. You'll find more examples, advice, and all sorts of information on the ven and their world.

Character Creation Cheat Sheet

Lineage

Roll for Father's House, Mother's House
Choose which parent was dominant
Pick a parent's House as your own
Roll for Sibling Rank
Roll for Sibling Number

Name

Family Name (determined by your House)
Secret Name (the Name your mother whispered in your ear when you were born)
Public Name (the Name everyone calls you)

Virtues

Strength, Cunning, Courage, Beauty, Wisdom, and Prowess
One Virtue at rank 4
Two Virtues at rank 3
Two Virtues at rank 2
One weakness (rank 0)
Add one rank to your House Virtue (except if it is your weakness)

Phase

All characters start as Spring characters unless your Narrator says otherwise.

Phase 1: Spring

2 Aspects
1 Contact

Phase 2: Summer

3 Aspects
2 contacts

Phase 3: Autumn

4 Aspects
1 Solace Aspect
3 contacts

Phase 4: Solace

5 Aspects
3 Solace Aspects
4 contacts

June 12th,

The ven were enthusiastic gamblers. Mosaics of card and dice games abound. But what is odd, is we have yet to uncover any mention of monies... or the monies themselves. The chits depicted are translated as "favors". Other mentions of owing favors from "the game" abound. A "favors" being carried for a time. Some seemed to be inscribed with a letter, which I assume is an initial.

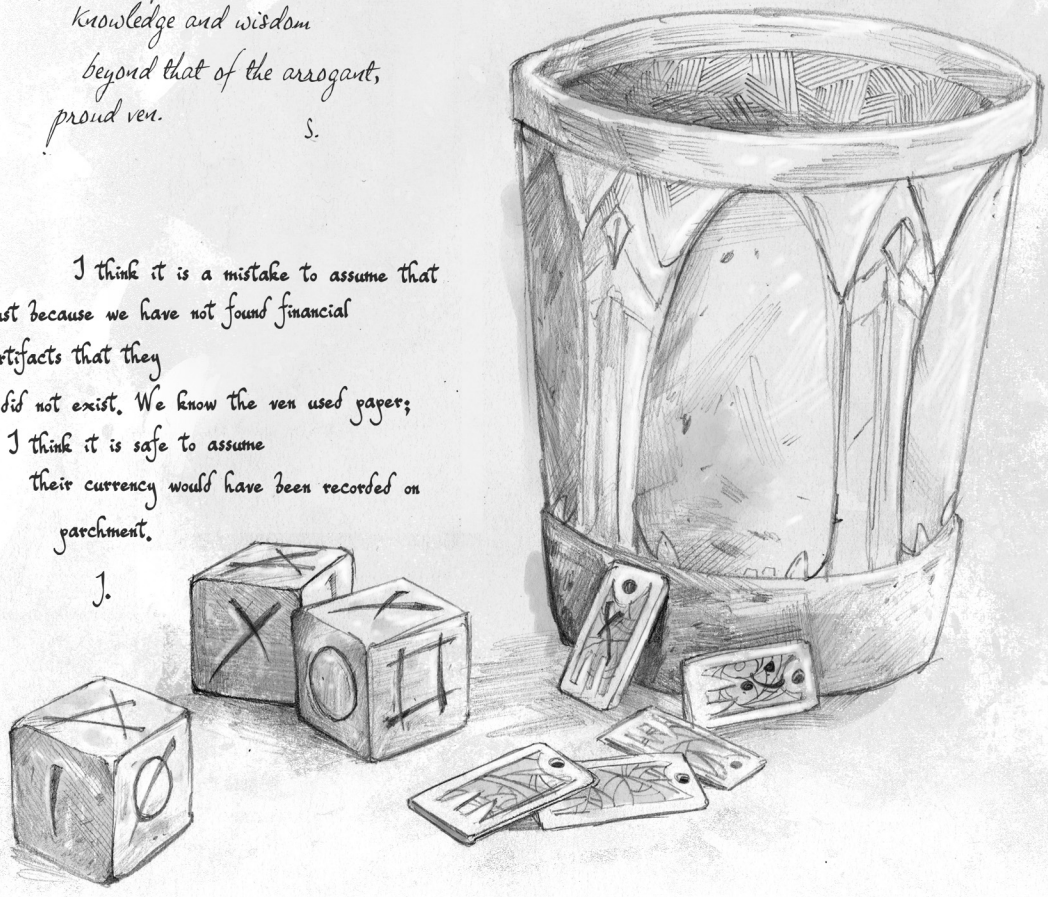
There have been mentions of a dice game, using 3 dice and a cup have appeared in more than one opera. But no opera we've uncovered gives a sense of the rules. Often, the dice game is seemed as a portent.. a warning of things to come by the "Suave-ven"..

The "Suave-ven" seem to be some kind of ancestor worshipped ghosts or spirits. The have knowledge and wisdom beyond that of the arrogant, proud ven.

S.

I think it is a mistake to assume that just because we have not found financial artifacts that they did not exist. We know the ven used paper; I think it is safe to assume their currency would have been recorded on parchment.

J.



Risk

This is the chapter where we talk about how you get things done. Or, specifically, how your character gets things done. Now, in most roleplaying games, this section is called something like "game system" or "mechanics" or "task resolution." Sounds about as sexy as repairing your dishwasher.

This chapter is different. This isn't about your character taking an action. It's about your character taking *risks*.

Whenever your character does something *risky*, the Narrator may ask you to roll dice. This adds an element of suspense and surprise into the game as neither the Narrator nor the players truly know how the roll may end up. You may know the odds, but you never know the result.

In the Great Game, failure doesn't always equal defeat.

— *The Great and Tragic Life of Shari Yvarai*

Fortune is like any other woman: easily charmed by acts of daring and bravado.

— ven proverb

Beat a 10

When your character takes a risk, you roll some dice and count up the roll. Add each die together for a sum total.

If the sum of your roll is equal to or greater than a 10, you have made a successful roll.

No adjusting target numbers. Just a ten.

Roll equal to or higher than a 10, and you have *Privilege*.

Privilege

Now, in most roleplaying games, when you get a successful roll, your character succeeds. Meanwhile, if you fail your roll, your character fails.

Not so here.

Here, what we're looking for is *Privilege*. Determining Privilege determines who gets to narrate the outcome of the risk.

"When Should I Roll Dice?"

Not everything your character does is a risk. When the outcome of an action is in doubt or has a meaningful impact on the story, that's a risk. When your character wants to do something that has no direct impact on the story or everyone agrees there is no serious doubt about his ability to do it, no risk. No dice.

So yeah, this is the part of the book where I tell you rolling dice all the time gets boring. You don't have to roll dice for everything. Not even most things.

Roll dice for the important things.

If you beat the target number, *you* get to determine how your character succeeds or fails. If you don't, *the Narrator* gets to say how your character succeeds or fails.

Let me say that again a different way so you get the importance of this distinction.

When you roll dice, the outcome does not determine success or failure. The outcome determines who gets to say what happens: the player or the Narrator.

If you roll ten or higher, you determine the how, when, where and why of your character's success or failure. Yes, you can intentionally cause your character to fail.

If you do not roll well, the Narrator gets to say what happens. He may say your character succeeds. He may say your character fails. Either way, he determines the outcome of the risk.

What Are My Chances?

When you take a risk, you may be asking, "What are my chances of success?" Take a look below and you'll see the percent chance of success of rolling a 10 based on how many dice you roll.

1 die: 0

2 dice: 17%

3 dice: 50%

4 dice: 90%

5 or more dice: almost certain

STYLE POINTS

Style is the true engine of this game. You want Style points. How do you earn them? How do you spend them? How do you bank them? (Bank…?) Let's talk about that.

EARNING STYLE

For the ven, flamboyance and panache is everything. Grace under pressure. Pomposity and presumptuousness. In a word: "Style."

The ven call this *sushana*, but for the sake of rules, we'll just use the English translation. Your character has Style Points. You want Style Points. As many as you can get. You earn Style with confidence and flair. By being all that you can be. By being ven.

Ven are dramatic. You get Style.

Ven don't read other game books at the game table. You get no Style.

Ven are tragic. You get Style.

Ven don't answer their cell phones during the game. You get no Style.

Ven fall in love. You get Style.

Ven don't argue about rules with the Narrator. You get no Style.

Ven declare duels at the drop of a hat. You get Style.

… I think you get the point.

I've got more information about Style in the *Player* chapter. You can read about it there.

When we resist temptation, we rob its strength.

Spending Style

Now, you've got a ton of Style on your character sheet. How do you use it?

You've already bumped into a couple of uses. Aspects, for example. There's a comprehensive list at the end of the book for all the ways you can spend style, but for this chapter, what you need to know is this:

In order to tag or compel another character's Aspects, you must use a Style Point. Go ahead and just give your Style Point to that player. It belongs to them now.

If someone tags or compels one of your own Aspects, you get a Style Point.

Also, each Aspect can only be invoked once per adventure. In order to invoke it again (second invoke, third, fourth, etc.), you must spend a Style Point.

The book has tons of other ways to spend Style, but each chapter will deal with those circumstances.

Banking Style

Your ven can carry as much Style as he wants, but he cannot keep all of it between adventures. Each game session, your ven may only bank five Style. That's it, no more. Just five Style.

That means every game session, you start with the amount of Style you banked from the last session. If you banked three Style, you start with three Style. If you banked four, you start with four.

There are ways to bank *more* Style. The ven bank Style in the cool, keen items they carry with them. That wide-brimmed hat, those knee-high boots, that great sword. All these things allow you to bank additional Style. The hat can bank 2 Style, the boots can bank 1 and the sword can bank 3. That's six additional Style, allowing you to carry up to 11 Style to your next game session.

TAKING A RISK

With that in mind, let's go through the act of taking a risk step-by-step.

STEP 1: DECLARING INTENTION

This is where you say what you want your character to accomplish.

STEP 2: GATHER DICE

Next, you gather dice from your character sheet (and other places).

STEP 3: RESOLUTION

Finally, you roll the dice. If you beat a ten, you get Privilege and may narrate the outcome. If you don't, the Narrator gets Privilege and narrates the outcome.

Let's take a look at all three steps in detail.

STEP 1:DECLARING INTENTION

Whenever your character takes a risk, you must first declare the intention. If you succeed in your risk, you say if you get your intention. Usually, intentions begin with the phrase, "I want…" That's very fitting for the ven: always thinking of themselves.

Here are some example intentions:

- "I want to jump across this rooftop."
- "I want to sing a beautiful song."
- "I want to sneak across the dark room without bumping into anything."
- "I want to know more about this breed of ork."
- "I want to lift this burning beam off my friend."

STEP 2: GATHER DICE

Whenever your character takes a risk, you can get dice from a lot of different places: Your Name, your House, your Virtues, your Aspects, your Devotions. A lot of different places to get dice. Let's take a look at all the places on your character sheet you can get dice and the *proper* way to get those dice.

Remember: you are the ven. Obsessed with ritual. This is a roleplaying game. The roleplaying doesn't stop when you pick up dice.

YOUR POOL

All the dice you can gather together for a single risk is called your *pool*. We'll be referring to your dice pool a lot in this chapter.

It is said that at the beginning of everything,
Fate and Chance threw dice to see
who would govern the world.
Fate knew the outcome,
but Chance threw the dice.

Declare Your Name

You may *declare* your character's Name. You do this by stating, "My Name is (insert your character's Name here)." You may only do this if the Name's meaning is appropriate to the risk. If your Name does not apply, you may not declare it.

Declaring your Public Name adds one die to your pool for overcoming the risk.

Your Family Name already gives you a bonus die: that's why we added one rank to your Family Virtue.

If you use your Secret Name, you must announce it. Make it Public. Using your Secret Name for risks gives you *three* bonus dice. But anyone who sees you use it *knows it*.

For example, Shara's Name means "veiled rose." If Shara is trying to keep or learn secrets, her Name is appropriate to the risk.

I'm not telling you her Secret Name.

Assert Your Virtue

You may also *assert* one Virtue per risk. You may not use more than one Virtue per risk. In other words, you cannot be Strong *and* Courageous, Beautiful *and* Cunning. One and only one.

Asserting your Virtue adds a number of dice to your pool equal to the rank of the Virtue. If your Strength is 3, add three dice. If your Beauty is 4, add four dice.

If the Virtue in question is your weakness, you cannot add any dice to your pool from your Virtue. You may add dice from Aspects or other bonuses, but not from your Virtue.

Invoke and Tag Aspects

You may also invoke and tag Aspects for bonus dice.

As you may have guessed, you must announce "I invoke," or "I tag."

If you tag another character's Aspect, your pool gains two dice.

Remember: invoking an Aspect for the first time (this game session) is free, but each subsequent time, it costs you one Style. Also, tagging and compelling another character's Aspects *costs* one Style. Finally, if someone tags your Aspect, you gain a Style at the resolution of the risk.

You Only Get One

For any single risk, you may not invoke more than one Aspect and you may not tag more than one Aspect. In other words, you cannot invoke two Aspects for a single risk. Also, you may not tag two Aspects for one risk.

One invoke. One tag. That's all you get.

Free Aspects

Now, there are such things as *Free Aspects* which let you break this rule.

Any Free Aspect allows you a tag or invoke that does not count toward your one tag and invoke limit.

For example, Injuries are Free Aspects: they do not count toward your single tag and/or invoke.

You're in a duel. You've tagged an opponent's "Reckless Fighter" Aspect for two dice. You cannot tag any more Aspects unless they are Free Aspects. But look! Your opponent has an Injury on his leg. (You just gave it to him.) A rank 2 Injury. You give him a Style and tag it for two bonus dice.

OTHER DICE

You may find ways to get more dice. Romance, Revenge, sorcery. You'll find them throughout the book.

STEP 3: RESOLUTION

Now, it's time to determine if you or the Narrator will narrate the outcome.

Roll your dice.

If the total of your roll is equal to or greater than ten, you get to say "Yes, I got my intention," or "No, I did not get my intention."

You may be as clever or creative as you like, but you cannot embellish your answer with additional details. Either "Yes," or "No." You can say why your character succeeded or failed, but when you do so, you cannot use any conjunctions or disjunctions.

In other words, your narration of the risk cannot include words like: *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, and *so*.

(Otherwise known as "FANBOYS." Thank you, Mario.)

The Narrator has the same rules. When he narrates the outcome of your risk, he cannot elaborate, either.

Effect

When you gain Privilege, your "Yes" or "No" counts as one Effect. That is, you can determine a single Effect in the outcome.

"I want to jump across the rooftop."

One Effect: "Yes, I made it."

"I want to know if Lady Shara is peeking at me when I'm not looking."

One Effect: "Yes, she is."

"I want to give you an Injury."

One Effect: "Yes, I gave you a rank 1 Injury."

A single Effect allows you to influence *one element* of the outcome. Just one. Yes or no.

But you can gain additional Effect. We'll talk about that in just a moment.

Dead-On Ten

Some Narrators may want to employ this optional rule. If a player rolls *exactly* ten, they get their intention, but not all of it. Something has gone wrong.

This allows the Narrator to use narrative control to twist a successful outcome into something different. This is not a caveat to allow the Narrator to turn success into failure. The player just didn't get exactly what he was expecting.

Remember the monkey's paw? Yeah. Something like that.

And that's it!

That's simple risks. You now know the basics for how to determine Privilege. It's a little strange for players familiar with roleplaying games, but for players who are new to the idea, they catch on pretty quick.

And so, with that in mind, let's talk about complications.

Wagers

Wagers are the real backbone of the system. They make the game *fun*.

Usually, when your character succeeds, he has one *rank of Effect*, or 1 Effect. But there is a way of increasing the Effect of your success. We do this through *wagers*.

Consider. About to roll for a risk, you look at your pool. You can easily beat the risk. You've got seven dice. Using four is a safe bet. Five is an almost guarantee. So, what do you do with those extra dice?

You *wager* them. Set those extras aside and roll the rest.

Setting dice aside before your roll is called "wagering dice." A wagered die does not get rolled with your other dice. If you beat the risk, each wagered die adds to the Effect of your success. Each die adds one Effect.

BONUS EFFECT

If you make a wager, you get *bonus effect*. Bonus effect usually leads to more Style points, but it can also be used to take narrative control of a scene and provide additional details.

Yes, this means *the players* tell *the Narrator* what's happening in the scene. Wagers give everyone the opportunity to be the Narrator, to be in charge, to add to the collective narrative.

The Wager Golden Rules

You cannot use a wager to contradict a previously established element of the scene. You cannot use a wager to say, "No." You can only use wagers to say "Yes, and…" or "Yes, but…" You cannot simply negate another person's wager. Wagers are used to add elements to a scene or to define undefined elements of a scene. You'll see how they work in the samples below.

You cannot use a wager to get a free risk. Any action that would require a risk cannot be accomplished with a wager. That requires an additional risk.

You can convert every two wagers into a Style point. We'll talk about Style in a moment.

A SIMPLE RISK EXAMPLE

For example, my buddy Sam is playing Baron Xvynnen. The Baron just got caught in a precarious situation: he's in someone else's bedroom after appropriate hours. He's racing across the rooftop and finds he wants to jump from one rooftop to the other. The Narrator tells the Baron's player, "You need to take a risk." That means rolling dice.

After looking at all his appropriate traits, Sam can roll seven dice. Rolling seven six-sided dice makes beating that 10 target number a little too easy. Sam decides to make his effect even more spectacular… so he wagers some dice.

Wagering dice means he sets a number of dice aside from his roll. He doesn't get to add them to his total. He's betting (or wagering) he can beat the 10 with fewer than the dice he has.

Remember: Sam has seven dice.

To beat the target number (which is always 10), he could roll as few as two dice of his seven dice and make the target number, giving him five dice to set aside: five wagers. But that's a little too risky. He decides to roll four of his seven dice and leave three aside for wagers.

He rolls his dice. 1, 2, 3, 5. That's an eleven. He rolled higher than the target number, so Sam gets to decide if his character succeeded and how it happens. If he had rolled 9 or less, the Narrator gets to narrate the success or failure of his risk.

One more time. If you roll ten or higher, you have Privilege: you decide if your character succeeds and how he succeeds or fails. If you roll nine or less, the Narrator has Privilege: he narrates the outcome.

Now, remember Sam set some dice aside? Out of his seven dice, he set aside three of them. That gives him three bonus Effect. Because he rolled 10 or higher, he gets to narrate whether or not his character gets his intention, but each wager gives him one bonus effect for a grand total of *four Effect*.

One free Effect for beating the risk, plus one bonus effect for each wager.

He can now use his additional effect for… well, additional effects. Here's how he uses them.

1 Effect (free for rolling 10 or higher): "I fall short of reaching the other side."

2 Effect: "And, I land on a balcony."

3 Effect: "And, the balcony opens to Lady Beatrix's bedroom."

4 Effect: "And, she offers me 'safe passage'."

Remember, success gives you 1 Effect. That's free. You don't need to spend your wagers to narrate your success or failure. You get that for free because you beat the 10. With that one effect, Sam lands successfully on the other rooftop.

Additional details ("I land on a balcony," "Lady Beatrix," and "'safe passage'") are from his wagers.

Using Wagers: How Much Can I Say?

When you make a Cunning or Wisdom risk, exactly how much can you say about a scene? Success allows you to say how your risk turns out: success or failure. Wagers allow you to say additional facts about the outcome.

By making a Cunning risk, you can answer "yes" or "no." Wagers allow you to give *additional* facts. For example, a player of mine entered a dark room. He asked, "Is there anyone else in here with me?"

I answered, "I don't know. Make a Cunning risk."

The player does and gains Privilege. So, I ask the question back to him. "Is there someone in the room with you?" He answers…

(risk) Yes, I see a hidden assassin,

(wager) *and* it is a woman,

(wager) *and* I recognize her from the party,

(wager) *and* she is Blooded of the Bear.

Again, if you succeed a risk with three wagers, that allows you to say four things. One for your success and one for each wager.

Risks without Wagers

Sometimes a risk just doesn't justify wagers. It's a binary question. Did your character succeed or did he fail? There isn't any Style to be gained, there aren't any details to be added. Just a simple question. Did you succeed?

If there are no wagers, there is no risk. The Narrator narrates the outcome. If the outcome of an action is that important to you, spend a Style. The Narrator will let you narrate the outcome.

Using Wagers to Add Details

Notice how Sam used one of his wagers to add a detail to the scene. "And there's a balcony..."

You can use wagers to add elements to any scene. Of course, these elements have to make sense within the context of the scene. We're not going to use this rule to make ourselves look cool at the expense of everyone else's enjoyment. Right?

Right.

Contested Risks

Sometimes you have to roll dice against another character. This is a *contested risk*. Follow these steps for a contested risk.

Step 1: Intention

First, both players announce their intentions. This can be as simple as "I want to trick you," and "I don't want to be tricked."

One character is the *acting* character. The other is the *defending* character. This should be pretty easy to figure out. The character acting against another character is the acting character. The character trying to defend himself against the acting character is the defending character.

Step 2: Gather Dice

Second, one by one, each player announces a source of dice until both pass.

The acting player goes first, announcing where he is pulling dice from, followed by the defending player.

For example, the acting player announces his Name, gaining dice from his Name because it is appropriate to the risk. The defending player can either make the same announcement, drawing dice from his own Name or pass.

Then, the acting player announces, "I have Wolf's Prowess." The defending player can either announce dice from his own Virtue or pass.

Then, the acting player invokes an appropriate Aspect, followed by the defending player, spending Style if necessary.

Acting and defending players may then tag Aspects if they wish, spending Style points if necessary.

This goes on and on, each player announcing a source of more dice, back and forth. If a player cannot add more dice to his pool, he passes.

If both players pass, the gathering dice step is over.

Step 3: Wagers

Third, both players make wagers in secret.

This is pretty straight-forward. Each player secretly sets aside a number of dice equal to the wagers they want to make for this risk. Then, the players show their wagers together.

Step 4: Rolling

Both players roll simultaneously, announcing their totals. Check to see if both players rolled above a 10. Then, check to see which player rolled higher.

- If *both* players do not beat a ten, the Narrator narrates the outcome.
- The player who rolls higher is the *winner* of the contest. The winner gets Privilege.
- The player who rolled lower is the *loser* of the contest. The loser does not get Privilege.
- If both players beat the risk (10), the loser only gets half his wagers, rounded up.
- If either player does not beat a ten, he cannot apply any wagers at all.

Careful readers will note that the active character can end up the loser which makes the defending player the winner. Acting and defending have nothing to do with winning and losing. Winning and losing has everything to do with who rolls highest.

Step 5: Resolution

The winner and loser then use their wagers to manipulate the outcome of the risk.

The winner gets his intention and narrates the outcome of the risk, using the usual rules.

The winner then determines who will use the first wager. He may decide he wants to use the first wager or he may allow the loser to use the first wager.

Each player spends one wager at a time. The winner, the loser, the winner, the loser. Or vice versa.

This goes back and forth with each using one wager at a time, each using narrative and impromptu skills to outdo the other.

If neither the active character nor the defending player beats 10, the Narrator tells both of them what happened. He has narrative control. And they're probably both in a lot of hurt.

Ties

That all important question. How do we resolve ties?

Whoever has the most dice (including wagers) wins.

Or, you can ask everyone involved, "How much Style are you willing to give up to win?"

A Contested Risk Example

Again, we have Baron Xvynnen, but this time, he's trying not to be seen. He snuck his way into Shara Yvarai's private quarters looking for a letter he can use to blackmail the Baroness. Halfway through his search, the Baroness unlocks the door and steps inside. Does she catch him? It's a contested risk.

First, both players declare their intentions.

Shara's player—that's me—declares that I want Shara to find the Baron.

Sam—the Baron's player—declares that he does *not* want Shara to find him in the room.

Second, gather dice.

Both of us add up our appropriate dice. Then, each secretly chooses how many wagers they are going to make.

Counting Shara's dice.

This is a contested Cunning risk.

I tell the Narrator that Shara's name means "veiled rose." Secrets. He gives me one die for my Name.

Shara's Cunning is 3. That gives me three more dice. Four so far.

Finally, my Aspect: "You Can't Hide from Me." Three more dice. A total of seven.

I have a total of seven dice. I secretly set aside three for wagers.

Sam has five dice. He secretly sets aside one wager.

Then, we both reveal our wagers at the same time.

Third, roll dice.

Finally, each player rolls their dice—wagers set aside—and we see the results.

Shara's roll: 2, 2, 4, 6 = 14.

Xyvnnen's roll: 1, 3, 3, 5 = 12.

I rolled higher than Sam did, so Shara sees the Baron hiding in the shadows. I get my intention and Sam doesn't get his. As the winner, I get to use all my wagers. As the loser, Sam only gets to use half (rounded up). Sam made one wager. Half of one wager is one half. Rounded up, that's one wager.

Finally, Privilege.

Shara's intention was that she see the Baron. She does.

Now, I say who spends their first wager. It could be me or Sam. Sam has only one wager and I have three. I decide that I'll spend mine first. That means Sam will spend his second and I'll spend my last wager third.

Using my wager first, I can now narrate one fact about the scene. A fact that cannot contradict any of the previously established facts.

I tell Sam, "You are not hiding by any windows."

Now it's Sam's turn to use a wager. He cannot contradict anything that has been previously established. Because neither Shara nor the Narrator has established this fact, Sam adds, "You are not carrying a sword." That's his one and only wager (and he used it very well).

Shara uses her second of three wagers. "But I am carrying a knife." I did not contradict a previously stated fact. Sam said Shara was not carrying a *sword*, not a knife.

I have one more wager to use. How I use it will influence the rest of the scene. I spend her last wager, saying, "And one of my guards, just outside the door, asks if everything is all right inside."

Shara hears the guard and smiles. Yeah, Sam's screwed.

Lying

Two important rules.

You can lie about how many dice you can gather and you can lie about your roll.

That's right. *You can lie.*

Let me explain.

If I'm the defeated in a contested risk and I beat ten with no wagers, do I get any say in the outcome?

No. The defeated gets nothing if he made no wagers. More merciful groups may wish to amend this rule giving the defeated at least one effect if she beats ten, but I wouldn't. Never give your enemy anything but the sharp end of your knife.

Is this a fair Effect? I recognize the assassin as a female, Blooded of the Bear from the party. I established 4 facts but I didn't use any of the FANBOYS conjunctions.

You are breaking the Wanker Rule. Bad form. Wagers establish *one fact*. Just because you didn't use any conjunctions doesn't mean you aren't trying to abuse the rules. Don't do it again.

If we're helping each other on a risk, is that a contested risk?

Yes. All risks involving two or more characters are contested risks. It gives your allies an opportunity to use their wagers as weapons.

Spending Style

Here's another option. If you think an action is important, but not a risk, perhaps the player has to spend a Style point to narrate the outcome. Putting that choice in the player's hands asks, "How important is this?"

Is it worth a Style point?

This option not only asks that important question but also gives you an alternative way of determining a risky outcome without rolling dice. Sometimes difficult choices require sacrifice.

If we all want to make a wisdom risk to establish facts about something, is that a contested risk even if we are doing it together?

Yes. All of you, one wager at a time, get to define the world.

Gathering Dice

So, you can lie about your dice. You can lie about whether or not your Name is appropriate. You can lie about how many dice your Virtue gives you. You can lie about your Aspects. You can lie about how many dice you have *as long as your lie is not greater than the number of dice you can actually roll*.

In other words, if you don't want to reveal that your Name is appropriate to stealth risks, you can say, "My Name is not appropriate."

If your Strength gives you four dice and you say, "I get three dice from my Strength," that's not cheating.

If you have an Aspect appropriate to convincing young husbands to leave their wives, you can omit that fact in any appropriate risk. You just don't take the dice.

You can lie about the dice you gather as long it is a detriment to you. As long as you are rolling *less* dice than you should.

Why would you do this? Think about it.

Your Roll

You can lie about how high you rolled as long as your lie is not *greater than* your actual roll.

In other words, if you rolled a 25, you can say you rolled a 17, a 7, a 4, a 22, or any other number as long as that number is not greater than 25.

Once you lie, however, that number stands.

Why would you do this? Lots of different reasons… but I'll let you find those out on your own.

EXAMPLE RISKS

Many players may be more familiar with a different kind of "task resolution system" where the "skill list" is laid out explicitly for the players, giving them a choice of what their character can do—as opposed to who their character is.

For those, I've included a list of "skills" along with a short suggestion of how a particular risk may be accomplished using Virtues and Aspects. Enjoy!

Acrobatics

Acrobatic twists and twirls are no doubt acts of pure Strength. Acrobats train their bodies for years to perform complicated feats of balance and timing… all the while making it look as easy as falling off a log. Of course, if a character has the "acrobat" or "ballerina" Aspects, he could add dice to this kind of risk.

At the same time, a feat of acrobatics could be considered a work of Art, and that would make it fall under Beauty. This all depends on the intent of the acting character. Is the intent to create Art or to leap as far as possible? Intent solves these questions. Beauty is for aesthetic purposes. So, for leaping across a rooftop with guards behind you, Beauty will not help you, but Strength will.

Likewise, a Strong ballerina with no Beauty will leave a lasting impression on the stage… one to follow her like a brooding shadow for the rest of her life.

Best for an acrobat to be both Strong and understand the subtleties of Beauty. Best to cover all your bases.

Appraise

One ven wants to sell, another wants to buy. Who gets the better deal? Of course, this involves maneuvers and craftiness, so we'll be using our Cunning for this kind of risk. Outthinking the other, verbal maneuvers, thrusts and parries. That's Cunning.

On the other hand, knowing the value of a piece of valuable art falls could fall under the auspice of Beauty. After all, studying Art teaches you how to appreciate Art, knowing the worthless from the priceless.

A true artist would also be better able to differentiate between craftsmanship and inspiration. Aspects such as "Sculptor" or "Painter" would be appropriate for such a risk.

Craft

Creation almost always falls under the auspice of Beauty. Woodworking, sculpting, painting… even the act of making a functioning cart could be called an act of Beauty. Of course, having the right Aspects helps a great deal. A blacksmith cannot apply what he knows to painting, nor can a painter apply what he knows to architecture. Sure, some knowledge is universally useful, but we're not talking about simplicity here. We're talking about secret knowledge.

Oh wait. Did I say "secret knowledge?"

Wisdom can also come into play here, especially when dealing with things like architects, shipwrights, and other craftsmen who keep the skills and tools of their trade deep secrets.

Again, much of this falls on intent. Is the intent to create something beautiful or something lasting? Beauty fades. Wisdom grows stronger with age.

DECIPHER

The ven love codes and ciphers. Use them all the time. Passing messages back and forth. Those little pieces of paper carry secrets bigger than any box can hold. Uncovering the secret of a cipher could call upon Cunning. After all, a code is only as clever as the ven who wrote it.

Then again, it could utilize Wisdom. A man who knows many codes could recognize a trick he's seen before. Because he's so familiar with so many, solving another is just a walk in the park.

Having an Aspect "Secret Tongues" will certainly give you bonus dice in this kind of risk.

DIPLOMACY

The Art of Diplomacy. The words almost go together, don't they? We all know the Art of crafting a speech, the Art of delivering a speech, the Art of improvising around mistakes… yes, watching a skilled speaker do what he does best is a thing of Beauty.

But crafting the speech… that requires Cunning. Debate and deliberation between breaths. One must have his wits about him. Diplomacy calls for thinking on your feet, recognizing the wants, needs and fears of your opponent and audience. The feint within the feint.

DISARM TRAP

If you want to keep secrets, you have to put them in dangerous boxes. Bit of ven wisdom for you there. No crime in using poison to protect secrets. The "victim" should have been smart enough not to get caught. Disarming a box armed with menace is directly interacting with danger. One could say that would require a fair degree of Prowess.

Of course, dealing with traps also deals a lot with Wisdom. Knowing your enemy, knowing his ways, knowing the way he thinks. Knowledge is a deadly weapon, but like most weapons, it is only deadly when applied correctly.

DISGUISE

Paint on the face, dye in the hair, a slouched shoulder, an altered voice. Creating a different persona and maintaining that persona through scrutiny… well, we're talking about creating. That means we're talking about Art. That means we're talking about Beauty. The set of skills an actor uses on the stage is the same set of skills a spy uses when he infiltrates an enemy's castle.

Of course, Cunning is also useful. Manipulating perceptions, dodging the wrong questions, putting the suspicious at ease. This is an act of pure Cunning. Of course, a few Aspects may help. Actor, troubadour, performer. Something along those lines.

Escape

Wrists tied with ropes, arms pulled behind your back. Nowhere to move. All you've got now is Strength. The strength in your muscles, the strength in your bones, the strength in your tendons, the strength in your heart to fight the pain screaming in your joints. All that takes Strength.

I really can't think of another Virtue here. Sometimes, you just have to rely on Strength.

Forgery

More deception, more duplicitous action. You'd think we're on a trend or something. Cunning works here, but then again, so does Beauty. Cunning for the feint and Beauty for the dexterous calligraphy skills. You'd think we're on a trend or something.

Gossip

Otherwise known as "Gather Information." Of course, that sounds like VCR instructions, so let's go with something a bit more sexy. Like gossip. If that doesn't tickle your fancy, perhaps you'll prefer scandal, hear-say, nattering, blather or tittle-tattle. (Thank you, Mr. Roget.) Either way, it's finding out things other people don't want you to know through the Art of conversation.

One could make an argument that devising, creating, crafting and delivering the right kind of information (or misinformation) then dropping it with complete and unobtrusive nonchalance is an Art.

Of course, it also takes a good deal of Cunning.

Then again, it also takes a good deal of Wisdom to know the difference between what's news and what's just prattling, chattering drivel. The word choice is up to you.

Hiding

Call it stealth, subterfuge or skullduggery. Sneaking around without being seen is one of the world's oldest and most important skills. Cunning is the ability to see the feint. It's also the ability to obscure your motives. And your movements.

Of course, remaining completely still while hanging upside down, a knife in your teeth and a drawn bow in your hands, waiting for the exact moment to let your grip go… that has at least something to do with Strength.

Intimidation

We're going to talk about handling verbal duels in a moment or two (look in the *Violence* chapter), but for the purposes of this chapter, let's just say that the *way* you choose to intimidate someone determines what kind of Virtue you'd call upon.

A physical act of bullying would probably call on Strength. A more subtle approach would involve Cunning. Of course, avoiding an intimidation attempt would probably involve a bit of Courage.

SORCERY

Some might call this "spell craft." Of course, only an unsophisticated, uncouth peasant would use the word "spell." We know this because a sorcerer doesn't cast spells; a sorcerer performs rituals.

Recognizing the effects and trappings of a ritual is Wisdom, of course. Then again, if you want to perform a ritual with Style and panache, stunning the participants into a solemn silence, that would probably involve Beauty. And hiding a ritual from others, performing it in plain sight without others noticing, would involve some sort of Cunning.

RIDING

Strength to hold on, Strength to control the horse, Strength to control its movements. Beauty to make it look good. Wisdom to know the horse's breed, age and other details. Prowess to attack from the horse's back or even to turn the horse from tool to weapon. Cunning to hide yourself and the horse as orks march by. Courage to face down a charging horse while on foot without succumbing to the perfectly reasonable temptation to jump out of the way.

I never relied on hope. I never stopped believing my destiny is in my own hands. I never learned to surrender. Do the things you know you cannot do.

SEDUCTION

What's more Beautiful than a well-planned seduction? Arranged and orchestrated with the utmost care and attention to detail, seduction is an Art. Of course, gaining the information necessary to find the necessary details is Cunning. Knowing the right and proper order to put things is Wisdom. Defeating your target's lover in a duel takes a good deal of Prowess. I'll leave the proper use of Strength to your imagination.

SWIM

Ah, swimming. When it comes time to spend skill points, everyone overlooks this one. Why? Because nobody ever needs it.

Trust me, in Shanri, you'll be using it.

Of course, this is Strength. Strength to keep your head above water, to fight against the undertow, the fight against the flow of the water. You can certainly make swimming look pretty and I'm sure some degree of Courage is necessary when facing the real possibility of drowning.

Do yourself a favor. Find a way to get an Aspect that involves swimming. You'll thank me later.

(That's for you, Jess.)

Getting Dice

Basic Dice

Here are all the usual sources of dice. You should be able to gain these dice for just about any risk (if appropriate).

Name: 1 die

If your Name is appropriate to the risk, you gain one die.

Virtue: dice equal to the rank

If your Virtue is appropriate to the risk, you gain a number of dice equal to the Virtue's rank.

Invoke Your Aspect: 3 dice

If your Aspect is appropriate to the risk, invoke it for three dice.

Bonus Dice

You can gain additional dice from other sources as well.

Injury

If your opponent has an Injury, you can spend a Style point and tag that Injury as a *free aspect* to gain bonus dice equal to the Injury's rank.

Items

Items can also get you bonus dice, depending on the rank of the item.

Romance & Revenge

If your character is involved in a Romance or a Revenge (or both), you may gain some bonus dice.

Sorcery

Some sorcery rituals also get you bonus dice.

Tag Another Character's Aspect: 2 dice

If you know your opponent's tag, and it is appropriate to the risk, you can spend a Style point and tag it for two dice.

Tag the Scene

You can spend a Style point to give the scene itself an Aspect that may be tagged by the players and Narrator. You must spend two Style points to create an Aspect that can be tagged for two dice (because tagging an Aspect always gets you two dice). Like any other Aspect, you have to spend a Style point to tag it.

The Royal Houses of the ven seemed to identify themselves with animal personifications. Stag, Bear, Wolf, Snake, Hawk are the most common. Some others, like Spider and Mongoose are much, much rarer. There is some debate among the team that what we are seeing as Wolf may actually be Wolf and Fox as two different factions.

However, I chalk this up simply to the stylistic differences between artists and time periods. One only has to look at our own depictions of religious art to see a vast number of stylistic iterations of the same subject matter.

S.

Have you been able to decipher the text on the Boar and Spider vases yet?

J.



Virtues

Six Virtues. Each associated with a House. How do we use them? After all, not all of them are so straight-forward. Let's take a moment and look at how you can call on each Virtue for dice.

No Virtue is learned quietly and without a scar.

Bear's Strength

The Bear's Secret: He knows his mind gives up before his body does. He fights the cold of Winter with his own breath. He doesn't only fight the wolves who want his cubs, he fights the the world that tries to kill him.

It was the Winter that gave Bear his Strength.

Strength is more than just muscle. Strength is blood and bone. Speed. Precision.

Every physical risk is a Strength risk.

A Bear can jump because his legs are strong.

A Bear's reflexes are fast because he exercises them.

A Bear's hand-eye-coordination is sharp because he practices.

Every physical risk is a Strength risk.

No weapons? Hah. The Bear knows better. Your hands are weapons. Wrestling. Punching. Breaking bones. That is Strength. Not a fancy sword. No maneuvers or feints or ripostes.

Head butts. Breaking thumbs. Twisting ankles. That's Strength.

The Bear teach their children this from a young age. From the moment they can understand. Only the fool thinks Strength cannot save you. In the mountains, when the wind comes calling like a spectre's song and you haven't eaten for days and you cannot see further than your own nose through the wind and snow… your sword cannot save you. Your cunning cannot save you. Your art cannot save you. Your books cannot save you.

The only thing that will save you is Strength.

Use Strength for any physical risks. *Any* physical risks that don't involve putting a weapon in your hand. That includes long-distance running, jumping, climbing, breaking through doors and windows.

Only Cowards Believe in Impossible

Use wagers in Strength risks to add to your physical ability. Don't just leap across a rooftop. Leap across the rooftop, grab the wind vane, swing down into a lower balcony and roll through the open glass doors. Then, introduce yourself to the young woman there and enjoy the rest of the evening.

Strength wagers do not allow you to use weapons better. That's Prowess, not Strength. Breaking weapons, on the hand… that's entirely different.

Elk's Cunning

Seeing the plan within the plan within the plan.

Do not judge a man by his company, but by those who seek to ruin him.

Putting together disparate facts, thinking on your feet, spotting the *important* details… this is the Secret of the Elk. Knowing what to see and what to ignore.

Use Cunning when looking for details. When trying to spot the hidden assassin. When trying to see what others do not want you to see.

Likewise, use Cunning when you want to hide the truth from others, when you want to confuse, disguise and cloak your intentions.

The Feint within the Feint

(Fair cop. I stole that line from Frank Herbert. All hail and praises unto him.)

Cunning risks open the opportunity for additional details and clues. For example, if you enter a room where a murder took place, the Narrator will probably ask you to make a Cunning risk to see how many facts and clues you can pick up.

Now, in most roleplaying games, this means rolling to find the Narrator's clues. No so here. In this case, *you* determine what the clues are, and you do it with wagers.

Walk into a room and announce you're looking for clues. Take the risk, rolling against 10, as usual. Privilege lets you find the clue and wagers give you additional clues.

Each wager puts the narrative in *your hands*. If you want a clue to lead to a particular NPC, you can find one. If you want a clue to lead *away* from a particular NPC, you can find one. If you want to find a clue that throws everything out the window… well, just remember the Golden Rule: you can't contradict something that's already been established. You can't say "No," you can only say "Yes, and…" or "Yes, but…"

Now, when I say "find clues," I truly and honestly mean "find clues." Because right now, I hear a bunch of players saying, "But won't that mess up the Narrator's plot?"

See, look how you're being responsible! That's so cute. And we Narrators really do appreciate it. But don't worry about the Narrator's plot. Honestly. I've got him covered in the *Narrator* Chapter. Go ahead and throw stuff in. If the Narrator really wants to, he can veto a wager. But, he won't do that. Not unless you come up with something *really* off the wall.

No, your Narrator wants you to find stuff he didn't count on. Stuff he *never* counted on. This is *cooperative storytelling*. You can make stuff up. Honest you can.

By the way, Cunning wagers do not allow you to know additional details, only find additional details. Knowing things is Wisdom, not Cunning.

Example of Using Cunning Wagers

You walk into a room at a party, looking for a little privacy with that handsome Blooded of the Bear, when you stumble on a body. Blood. An open window.

Your intention is to find clues.

You roll dice and make wagers. Cunning. You end up with three wagers. The Narrator says, "You find evidence." That was your intention, so he's giving it to you for free. What you find is entirely up to you.

All right, so let's look at the scene. We're in a room, but we don't know what kind of room yet. You can use a wager to determine if that room is the library, the study, or perhaps the conservatory. And another wager could find that secret passage behind the rose bushes.

The window is open. You know that much. Can't contradict that with a wager. But the Narrator did not say what was *behind* the window. A balcony? A walkway leading around the back of the building? A stairwell down to the garden maze? What's down there? A wager could tell you.

A body. The Narrator didn't say if the body was male or female. A wager allows you to establish that fact. And is the body dead? The Narrator didn't say so. Maybe just unconscious, or suffering from a fatal wound. Barely alive, the woman (there's a wager) tells you, "Beware the Lady Mwrr…" That could also come from a wager.

Remember: because you beat the target number, you get your intention. Find evidence. You get one piece for free. That was your intention. Wagers give you *additional* effect. So, with this example, beating the ten gives you one clue and your three wagers give you three more.

Falcon's Courage

No matter what his other Virtues may be, without Courage, they mean nothing.

Courage is often overlooked by the players. "Ah, my character is as brave as I want him to be."

Not so here.

The ven are selfish creatures. Self-preservation is primary. Now, I'm not going to put a mechanic in my game that makes your character a coward… but if he neglects Courage, it's going to be *harder* for him to accomplish particularly dangerous risks.

Before any ven can take an action that may cause serious physical injury or death, he must first make a Courage risk. Jumping across rooftops, challenging a superior swordsman to a duel, or even flirting with your enemy's wife. Danger. Injury. Death. Risk.

Most Courage risks are simple risks. The only thing you are competing against is your own fear. Target number 10.

Failure

If you lose Privilege, you must spend a Style to perform any risk other than run away. You have to pay to overcome your fear. Running away, on the other hand, is free.

Success

If you gain Privilege, a couple different things happen.

First, if the dangerous action you are about to undertake is not a risk, but an action (no dice rolled), you convert your wagers into style (two wagers per style, remember). This represents the panache with which you perform the dangerous action in question.

Second, if the dangerous action you are about to undertake *is* a risk, every wager you make adds an additional die to your forthcoming roll. If you cannot use your wagers in the subsequent action, you can convert your wagers into style as usual.

For example, Shara's been insulted by Duke Rinheld, a known swordsman of great skill and little mercy. She has a choice. She can accept the insult or challenge the man to a duel. The Narrator tells me doing so requires a Courage risk.

Shara's Courage is 3. I get three dice to roll against a 10. I look at Shara's Aspects and find nothing to help me. I get three dice.

Roll. 3, 2, 2. A total of *7*.

Because I failed Shara (I didn't roll high enough), her intended next action costs me a style point. I can opt not to spend the style point and let Shara back down, or I can spend the style point and have Shara slap the Duke's face.

Another example.

Shara's been cornered by a jealous Lady Talza. Lady Talza's swordsman stands behind her, his hand on his pommel. The wife asks, "Did you sleep with my lover?"

Shara actually wants to tell the truth in this circumstance, but everyone is watching. And that swordsman is right behind the Lady Talza. So, the Narrator says, "Make a Courage risk."

Terror

The rules for Terror can be found in the *Ork* section of the *Narrator* chapter. Suffice to say, some orks are scary. So scary, they terrify the ven. Scares their socks right off.

I'm not going to *tell* you how Terror works because the Narrator will *show* you that soon enough.

Again, Shara has three dice to roll. But, I announce that one of Shara's intentions in telling the truth is breaking Lady Talza's heart. I point at one of Shara's Aspects. *I Know How to Hurt You*. The Narrator admits this is an appropriate Aspect. I spend a Style point to invoke the Aspect (because I already used it at the party once) and I get to roll six dice instead of three. Three for my Virtue and three for my Aspect. I tell the Narrator I'm using two of those dice for wagers.

Roll. 6, 5, 4, 1. More than 10.

Question: "Did you sleep with my lover?"

"Of course I did," Shara says. "And I have to say, I've had more difficulty convincing my butler to bring me a cup of tea."

Not only does Shara get to do what she wants without penalty, but because I can convert those wagers into Style, I look good doing it, too.

Fox's Beauty

Contrary to popular opinion, Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. It's in the hands of the Fox.

The rose uses its Beauty to bleed the beguiled.

More than any Virtue, Beauty risks generate style, but the chief purpose of Beauty is creation and revelation.

Use Beauty whenever creating something awe-inspiring. Something heartbreaking. Something to make the eyes ache with tears. A passionate speech. A moving play. A vivid portrait. Beauty's power lies in its truth.

A lie can be pretty, but only the truth holds Beauty.

Inspiring others to look where they need to look. Creating a sword that catches the golden crimson of the morning. A gown that lets a woman's splendor truly shine. This is Beauty.

Cunning hides. Beauty reveals.

If you want to learn how to make incredible Art, you can find those rules in the *Seasons* chapter. But I've listed here a couple of things that chapter does not cover.

Contracts

Negotiating the details of a contract can be tricky, especially between two ven so keen on gaining advantage.

This is a contested Beauty risk. Convincing the other party to your terms. Roll Beauty plus bonus dice against your opponent. Winner keeps all his wagers and gets to set the first term of the contract. That's free. The winner also determines who spends his wagers first. Then, just like any other contested risk, each player spends a wager to add a term to the contract.

Debate

This was something I was holding on to until I do *The Senate* sourcebook, but here it is anyway.

If two ven want to have a debate, let them go at it. Then, they make a contested Beauty risk. Winner keeps all his wagers, loser keeps half of his.

Anyone who agrees with the winner gets a number of style points equal to the winner's wagers. Anyone who agrees with the loser *loses* a number of style points equal to the loser's wagers.

You can use these two mechanics to great ends, employing them in different circumstances.

Serpent's Wisdom

The world is our Enemy. Without knowledge of its ways, we are lost.

Knowledge isn't power; it's a weapon. The Serpent understand this better than any other House. How many times have they risked having their heraldry veiled on the walls of the Senate? Just for knowledge. Forbidden knowledge.

More than any other House, the Serpent know the secrets of the world. Anatomical studies of orks. Translations of tomes that would drive most ven scholars mad. Expeditions into the darkest corners of the world.

I bear the weight of Serpent's wisdom. And the scars.

While Cunning is the ability to see, Wisdom is the ability to know. Knowledge and foresight. Cousins perhaps, but not twins.

The Wicked Ways of the World

Whenever a question is raised about the world, you get to make a Wisdom risk. Now, normally, you'd think, "What's so risky about that?" Well, honestly… not much. But you'll want to make wagers anyway because each wager allows you to define an element of Shanri.

For example, you and your friends are out hunting and you come across ork tracks. What kind of ork is it? Everyone looks at you and your big bad Wisdom. You roll. Standard target number. You make three wagers. Making the roll easily, you now know exactly what kind of ork that is. Plus, you can name four things that are true about that particular breed of ork.

"It has wings," you say.

"And claws." You spend your first wager.

"And scales." You spend your second wager.

"And poisonous barbs." You spend your last wager.

Of course, the rest of the party thanks you kindly for adding those details to the ork. A few of them wonder why you didn't assign it any *weaknesses*. But what glory is there in bringing down a weak and defenseless creature? None!

Wisdom risks allow you to add details to the world. Geographical details, orkish details, sorcerous details. Just remember, wagers don't allow you to change established canon.

Add details to other nobles, invent peasant superstitions, refer to ancient mountain keeps. Wisdom allows you to *build the world*. Use it.

Adding Details to Other Characters

Only one caveat here. If you use a wager to add a detail to another player's ven, that player has the right to spend a style point and veto that detail.

However, if the other player accepts that detail ("Yeah, that sounds cool!"), the Narrator gives the other player a style point. Good form.

Now, some players may see this as an opportunity to drain another player of his style points.

Bad form. Don't be a wanker.

Wolf's Prowess

All the world is a weapon.

In the *Violence* chapter, you will learn how to commit terrible acts of cruelty, sadism and bloodshed. But here are a few other ways to use Prowess.

Call on Prowess for martial matters. Leading a small band of men? Use Prowess to coordinate their attacks. Looking for a castle's weak spot? Use Prowess. Evaluating a noble's personal guard? Prowess.

Now, all of this could step on Cunning's toes. After all, Cunning is the use of guile and deception, but Prowess is also determining *advantage*.

Is a man lying to you? Cunning.

Is he a capable swordsman? Prowess.

A hidden knife up the sleeve? Cunning.

Knowing to position yourself between the bad guy and the door? Prowess.

It's a subtle difference, but an important one.

Advantage

A ven of Cunning can look around a room and find tiny details. Important details. A ven of Prowess looks around the room and finds advantages. Advantages other characters can use.

Just like giving a scene an Aspect, Prowess wagers can give a room advantages. Saying "advantage" is just a fancy way of saying "an Aspect that gives us a martial benefit," but that's okay for us.

Use the same rules for giving the scene an Aspect, except remember these are *advantages*. They must have some sort of relationship to the inevitable bloody chaos you're about to invoke.

A sharp and heavy fire poker.

A leaded glass window pane.

A handful of hair pins.

Advantages. You see them because you're trained to see them. Trained to turn tools into weapons.

More Uses for Virtues

Of course, I could go on and on about how to use Virtues in the game. That's why I designed them the way they are. Come up with your own uses for Virtues, your own rules. Wagers are a great tool to turn into an even better weapon.

And when you do find new uses for Virtues, be sure to drop by our forums and let us know.

Question: How would you handle a gather information roll? Would I be a wanker to use Cunning instead of Wisdom?

Cunning and Wisdom are close enough to be kissing cousins, but you should not mistake one for the other.

Cunning is *seeing*. Wisdom is *knowing*.

I use Cunning when the object I want to know something about is in the room and I have time to examine it. Like Sherlock Holmes examining a potential client walking into the room. Wisdom, on the other hand, is knowing something about an object that *isn't* in the room. When Holmes lists off details about the times of trains or the various manufacturers of tweed jackets.

That's the biggest difference. *Seeing* and *Knowing*.

A rare example of a more representational ven form. I believe that style and fashion were very important to the ven. And yet this obvious feminine sculpture is complete with a sword scabbard.

The translation of the runes is "Golden Song", which might be another ven opera of, pardon the pun, note.

It is a shame that vandals of the past defaced this gorgeous statue. It would have been nice to look upon a ven... Although is this statue an actual person, or a sort of ven archtype?

S.



The figure is obviously a character from an opera. An exaggerated character. Not a historical character.

The very notion of a woman with a sword seems patently ridiculous.

J.

Aspects

In this chapter, we talk about Aspects. How they affect the game, how to tell a good Aspect from a bad one, and I'm gonna give you a whole ton of example Aspects. But first, a short history lesson.

A Touch of Fate

Aspects were first presented to me in a game called *Spirit of the Century*. *Spirit* uses an open license game engine called "FATE." It was written by Robert Donoghue, Fred Hicks, and Leonard Balsera. (FATE itself was designed from another game called FUDGE, written by Stephen O'Sullivan.) You can find the open source documentation for this game at **www.housesoftheblooded.com**. When I saw how Aspects worked for the first time, I was excited. They were the missing link in making *this* game, fulfilling one of my most crucial goals: coupling sources of strength on the character sheet with a source of weakness.

With Aspects, a player doesn't just choose from a list of skills, he has to *think* about who his character is. He has to think about where she came from, who she knows, and what she's learned. In other words, Aspects were anything but abstract. They represented the character's real experiences and the skills, talents an abilities she learned from those experiences.

That's what you should be thinking about when you create your character's Aspects. Not just *who* your character is, but *how* it all happened, *when* it happened, *where* it happened and *why* it happened.

Of course, with most RPGs, we have some sort of abstract skill system that implies these questions, but the system itself does not put you in the position of having to ask them.

Aspects were also open for interpretation. Most RPGs clearly define their skills—and for good reason. Generally, gamers are rules lawyers, and in a lot of cases, if you don't tell them clearly and concisely what a rule means, they'll argue for hours about it.

Hours.

No, more hours than that.

For example, "Swordsman" could mean a lot of things. It could provide bonuses for using a sword, for recognizing fighting Styles or schools, for having contacts in different cities. Again, providing more dimension for a character than just having an attack bonus or a knowledge skill. The potential seemed limitless.

My experience with player-vs.-player roleplaying games—and I've played in a lot of them—made me realize that Aspects were *too* open-ended for that kind of environment. In a PvP game, every player is looking for any advantage, looking to exploit any weakness. And, frankly, players can get damn emotional, exploiting every loophole, interpreting vague or unclear rules to far extremes to protect their own characters and crush those they didn't like. This is PvP after all, and there's a reason board games don't have Aspects, but clear and concise rule sets that can't be "interpreted."

Introducing Aspects to that crowd would be disastrous. I know this because I'm one of those emotional players. We need hard and fast rules for those tense moments when characters face off for the last time. And so, I took those multi-dimensional Aspects and turned them down a notch. I added that whole "one thing" rule. Aspects give you a bonus for one thing and one thing only. I wrote that rule for all the PvP players I know who are so damn good at exploiting that kind of rule, shutting down other players while they jump motorcycles through flaming loopholes.

But if you and your crew want to *really* let Aspects fly, if you *really* want to see how they can work, go ahead and open them up. I mean it. Don't let one Aspect give players a bonus under any circumstance, but at the same time, let Swordsman do what it's supposed to do: give you bonus dice in duels, give you bonus dice to recognize fencing Styles, give you bonus dice to know the history of sword making and anything else you find appropriate.

Don't let yourself be limited by other players. If you want, go for it. Nobody's stopping you. In fact, I'm *encouraging* you to do it.

Trust me.

The Three Elements

I've already said a lot about Aspects being three-dimensional. That's a good place to start.

An Aspect is made up of three elements.

1. The *invoke*
2. The *tag*, and
3. The *compel*

Invoking an Aspect only benefits you. Tagging an Aspect only benefits your enemies. Compelling your Aspect could help you but could also hurt you.

So, with all that in mind, exactly what makes a good Aspect? Let's start by building one from scratch. In fact, let's build one from Shara's name.

"Veiled Rose"

Names have powerful symbolic and supernatural influence over every ven. Shara's name is no exception.

Shara's name means "the veiled rose." If we were to turn that into an Aspect, how would it work? How the Aspect can be *invoked*, *tagged*, and *compelled*?

When you own a thing, you name it: a mark that reminds it of where it belongs.
—Lessons

How do you invoke your Aspect?

Invoking your Aspect gives you bonus dice for a particular risk. For example, Shara's name means "veiled rose." I could draw all kinds of meanings from that esoteric phrase, but I choose one in particular: she's damn good at keeping secrets. So, when she's doing just that, I can invoke this Aspect and gain bonus dice for my risk.

Now, this is important. Remember that invoking your Aspect gets you bonus dice for a risk. If you aren't rolling dice, you aren't invoking your Aspect.

Names as Aspects

Just for clarity: your Name is *not* an Aspect. I'm just using Shara's Name as an example. Although, a popular rule among the playtest groups was making your Name an Aspect. If you like that option, I encourage you to try it out.

How does someone else tag your Aspect?

When another player (or the Narrator) tags your Aspect, they get some sort of advantage out of it. This is when they are using your own Name as an advantage against you in a risk. Again, this is important. Unless someone rolls dice, she cannot tag your Aspect. Tagging an Aspect only comes into play when rolling dice. If you want a *narrative* advantage against someone, you *compel* their Aspect. You can read about that below.

Another character cannot tag an Aspect without knowing the tag. They discover the tag by making a contested Cunning risk against you. If they get privilege they can know your tag. Once they know the tag, they can spend a Style Point and gain two dice against you… if the tag is appropriate to the risk.

Using the above example, let's figure out how Shara's "veiled rose" can be used against her in a risk. This is someone taking some kind of risk against her, rolling dice, looking for additional advantage. In this case, I define that advantage as "untrustworthy." In other words, Shara keeps her cards too close to her chest. So much so, that sometimes she appears just a little too secretive to be trusted. When Shara is trying to make a case for relying on her word, someone can tag her Aspect, *veiled rose*, and gain bonus dice. Why? Because she's just a little too veiled to trust.

How can you be compelled by your Aspect?

When folks invoke and tag Aspects, they get bonus dice, but *compelling* an Aspect is a bit more direct. Invoking and tagging are mechanical advantages and compelling is a narrative advantage. (Or, in your case, a disadvantage.) When someone compels your Aspect, it limits your ability to act. But the real trick here is this: both you and other players (including the Narrator) can compel your Aspects.

Another character cannot compel an Aspect without knowing the compel. They discover the compel by making a contested Cunning risk against you. If they get privilege they can know your compel. Once they know the compel, they can spend a Style Point to force your character to act in a specific manner.

Using the above example again, someone can compel Shara's "veiled rose" Aspect to make her act a certain way. I have to come up with how that would work. After some thought, I come up with the answer. Again, this time, it has to do with trust.

Shara does not trust people. Her father's behavior taught her that those around her are weak. With the sole exception of her mother, of course. For Shara, weakness is like a disease. If you get too close to it, you can catch it. So Shara doesn't let the weak get close to her. She doesn't allow herself to trust.

Compelling Shara's "veiled rose" Aspect means she won't trust you, no matter what you say to her. Because this limits her behavior in a specific way, it is an appropriate way to compel her Aspect.

Now, other people can compel her Aspect to make her not trust people she should, or *I* can compel her Aspect to force her not to trust people. Both are viable options. I can even compel Shara's Aspect just for dramatic effect. Remember, the ven adore drama. So should you. Putting your character directly in harm's way, or even losing a small advantage, is good form. And you'll be rewarded for it.

Compelling an Aspect is *narrative*, not *mechanical*. By that, I mean that you don't get any dice for compelling someone's Aspect. Also, you cannot compel someone while they are taking a risk. Risks must resolve themselves out before you can try compelling someone. All the dice have to be rolled and all the wagers have to be spent before you can compel an Aspect.

To be clear on this issue—which is rather important—do not mix tagging, invoking and compelling. This way leads to madness. One thing at a time, each thing in its own time.

Style Points

This is important. Pay attention.

Refreshing Aspects

Any Aspect may only be invoked once per game session. Once you invoke an Aspect, you can't invoke it again until the game session is over. Not unless you're willing to pay for it.

You can *refresh* any Aspect by spending a Style Point. That allows you to invoke it again. You can refresh Aspects as many times as you like as long as you have Style Points to do so.

Tagging & Style

Whenever you tag another character's Aspect, you must spend a Style Point. In fact, you may as well hand that Style over to the player because when an Aspect gets tagged, the tagged player gets a Style Point.

In other words, tagging an Aspect costs you a Style Point and getting tagged gets you a Style Point.

Compelling & Style

If you want to compel someone's Aspect, you have to spend a Style Point. And, like tagging above, you may as well give that person that Style Point because getting compelled gets you a Style Point.

In other words, compelling an Aspect costs you a Style Point and getting compelled gets you a Style Point.

Denying the Compel

Now, if someone compels you in a way you don't like, you can *deny the compel*... but it costs you two Style Points. So, you can either go with the flow and take the disadvantage you asked for when you made the character or you can spend your Style Point to ignore the compel. It's up to you.

Perceptive readers will notice that denying the compel actually costs you *three* Style: the two Points you give up to deny the compel and the point you would have gotten if you accepted it.

Perfect, flawless Mary Sue characters don't belong in this game.

Aspect Icons

Hi, this is Daniel. John asked me to interrupt the book to briefly explain the little symbols you may have noticed in the Aspects.

As a visual learner, I found it difficult to really wrap my brain around the three elements of an Aspect without some kind of visual reminder of what each element means in terms of how you interact with your fellow player. Below, you'll see a summary of those elements in my words, along with an icon representing each one.

If you're of a visual persuasion, these icons might help your brain-wrapping just a wee bit.

Invoke

Use one of your aspects to gain three dice. The first invocation of this aspect costs nothing, but each subsequent invocation costs one Style Point.

Tag

Use another player's aspect to gain two dice. Give that player a Style Point.

Compel

Offer another player a Style Point. If she accepts, her character's behavior is limited according to your direction and one of her Aspect's descriptions. If she does not accept, she loses two Style Points, but her behavior remains uninhibited. In either case, no one gains any extra dice, compelling is a narrative advantage.

Right, now that we've summarized the basic player interaction for each element, here is an explanation of the icons.

Invoke

The upward-pointing arrow behind an abstracted human figure communicates "power-up," an upgrade in efficacy. A solitary figure means that there is no player-interaction when an Aspect is invoked. The human figure creates the negative space of a capital "A," which makes this a handy icon representing Aspects in general.



Tag

The arrow is turned on its side, pointing from a large figure to a smaller figure. The difference in size shows that the character being tagged cannot resist this action. It also represents the transfer of a style point from one player to another. Finally, if you blur your eyes a little bit, this icon looks like a fly. Use that as a reminder: Flies get swatted, which is like tagging. It's just as messy anyway.



Compel

Two figures of equal size represent both players being on equal footing. Arrows facing each other represent the option to deny the compel. The arrow pointing left creates a negative space in the left figure that resembles a mouth, reminding you that compels are a *narrative* advantage. This icon bears intentional similarities to the "tag" icon, because the two elements share some initial mechanical traits, but this icon has a distinct "X" silhouette to distinguish it at a glance.



Free Aspects

In this book, you'll find references to "Free Aspects." A Free Aspect does not count toward the "one invoke, one tag" rule of risks.

In other words, you already know you can only invoke one Aspect and tag one Aspect per risk. Free Aspects, however, do not count toward that total. So, you may invoke any number of Free Aspects as well as your one invoke and one tag when trying to accomplish a risk.

A good example of a Free Aspect is an Injury. You'll learn more about Injuries in the *Violence* chapter, but I'll give you a heads-up here.

If you get injured, other characters can tag that Injury as if it were an Aspect. Normally, they'd only be able to tag one Aspect per risk, but because Injuries are Free Aspects, an enemy can tag all your Injuries in a single risk. Each one he tags gets you a Style Point.

Solace Aspects

I've said this before, but it's worth saying again here.

If you have a Solace Aspect, you can't hide it. It sits right there in the open, ready for someone to abuse. You *must* announce your Solace Aspects. Wear a tag on your shirt. Make a flash card so everyone can see it. Be sure to write down the tag and compel.

You cannot hide your Solace Aspects. And every Season, you get one more. And Solace Aspects are *Free Aspects*, which means they don't count toward your enemies' total tags.

Bad Aspects

Let's spend a moment talking about bad Aspects—and I don't mean in the sense that they hurt your character. I mean they don't follow the guidelines for an Aspect. Let's take a look at some basic rules.

First, an Aspect should do *one thing*. That's it. Just *one thing*.

Second, that one thing should be in regards to a specific kind of risk.

And third, it should sound cool.

Okay, let's take a look at all of those. And, for the sake of example and clarity, I'll take a few bad Aspects and make them into good ones.

Bad Aspect: "I kill you in the face!"

Invoke: I kill people in the face.

Tag: I can only kill people in the face.

Compel: Make me kill people in the face.

Okay, well, it's got the cool going on in the title. Pretty extreme. Then again, the ven like extreme. So, the name may have a certain kind of Style, but the Aspect itself needs work. Mainly, it's both too general and too specific at the same time. Yeah, that's a pretty big feat, but there it is.

First off, it's too specific. I mean, I would accept someone being a great swordsman as an Aspect, but just killing people in the face is too specific. At the same time, it's also too general. I mean, it allows you to get away with killing people with a single roll. No wagers, no nothing. That's a bit easy. So, no. You can't have this Aspect. But, let's talk about how to change it to make it a good Aspect.

First, I sit down with the player and talk with him about what he wants to accomplish with his character. He tells me the Aspect comes from the idea that he wants his character to murder with Style. Okay, well, murder is definitely "in genre." But it's also a mechanic. In order to kill another character with a single blow, you have to make a whole lot of wagers. Having an Aspect that dodges that particular rule is cheating the system and we don't want that.

Instead, I explain to him that wagers are the way he really wants to go. Wagers allow him to narrate what happens in a fight. True, he'll need a lot of wagers to accomplish what he's looking for, but that comes with having the appropriate Virtues, Aspects and other traits.

So, instead of "I kill you in the face," how about something a bit more stylish and less specific. How about something like "This is going to leave a scar?" Or perhaps something like "Deadly with a blade?" Both of those point toward where the player wants to go. Both are also pretty specific. They also don't point directly to the outcome, which is my chief problem with "I kill you in the face."

Bad Aspect: "I rule!"

Invoke: Invoked whenever I take a risk.

Tag: I am too awesome to notice mundane people.

Compel: I must do awesome things.

Okay, this one is just silly. (And I really got it in playtest.) This is just someone looking for bonus dice in every risk he takes. Bad form. Try again from scratch.

Bad Aspect: My Mother's Diaries

Invoke: When I use my mother's advice from her diaries.

Tag: Anyone who knew my mother can anticipate my next move.

Compel: Anyone who knew my mother can manipulate my motives.

So, this was one of mine. One of Shara's. Yeah, I made a bad Aspect. Early in playtest, I figured out that Aspects were very easy to abuse. This particular one I could invoke for just about any risk. So, I decided to change it a bit.

First, I decided that Shara's mum was good at keeping secrets. (Thus, the secret diaries.) No-one really knew her. Nobody really knew what she was up to. So, instead of mom's diaries giving me bonus dice under just about any situation, I figured I could invoke it for the purposes of discovering other people's secrets. Shara discovered mom's diaries, after all. They symbolize her ability to see through people's masks and get right to the heart of the matter.

At the same time, I thought about the tag and compel. While they seem pretty general, they are actually pretty specific. I'm kind of safe with "people who knew my mom." She's dead and long gone. So, what I do is talk to the Narrator. I tell him about the Aspect and let him know that this is me inviting trouble. Also, remember that one of the plotlines I've outlined for Shara is finding out who killed her mother. So, the deeper into the mystery she goes, the more people she'll meet who knew her mom.

Yeah. I'm asking for trouble.

I tell the Narrator that and he's cool with it. If he had said, "No, that's a bit too specific," I would have conceded. After all, it is. But the Narrator assures me he has a plan. I fully expect Shara's plans to come crashing down at exactly the wrong moment… because of my Aspect.

So, Shara's Aspect looks a little more like this.

Invoke: When trying to learn other people's secrets.

Tag: Anyone who knew my mother can anticipate my next move.

Compel: Anyone who knew my mother can manipulate my motives.

Bad Aspect: Strong

Invoke: Bonus dice when trying to lift, tear, rip or do other feats of strength

Tag: I do not know my own strength.

Compel: Sometimes too strong for his own good.

This one is tricky. Obviously, the Strength Virtue already covers this ground, but the compel is interesting. I recommended taking an Aspect called "Large." You can find it in the sample Aspects below.

Bad Aspect: Obsessed Sorcerer

Invoke: Bonus dice when using sorcery.

Tag: Too weak for physical risks.

Compel: I want to learn more about sorcery and will ditch other plans to learn it.

The only problem with this Aspect is that players don't roll dice when using sorcery. Either you know a Ritual or you don't. The fix here is getting the player to change the invoke and keep the compel. Otherwise, I dig it. It allows me to throw hurdles in the player's way. Also, the player is telling me, right on his character sheet, exactly the kind of game he wants to play. He wants to discover new sorceries. That's cool. I did the same thing with Shara. And if he can figure out a way to add a tag, I'll let him.

Invoke: Bonus dice for recognizing artifacts from the sorcerer-kings.

Tag: Too weak for physical risks.

Compel: I want to learn more about sorcery and will ditch other plans to learn it.

Okay, one last bad Aspect.

Bad Aspect: Duty to My Liege

Invoke: When protecting my liege, I get bonus dice.

Tag: When taking risks that are not protecting my liege while my liege is in danger.

Compel: I have to stop what I'm doing to protect my liege.

This one almost makes it. It's real close. The tag and compel are neat, but the invoke is too general. Remember: Aspects should cover a single kind of action. "Protecting my liege" can be interpreted a bunch of different ways, so I ask the player to narrow it down.

How about "When standing by my liege's side, protecting him from harm, I get bonus dice?" That's pretty specific and it does what she wants. It gives her bonus dice to protect your liege lord. Also, she can't use it when she's killing assassins or orks out in the countryside who aren't even close to her liege. After all, she is protecting her lord… indirectly.

She decides she wants to change the name now that we've changed the Aspect. She picks, "I stand by my liege." We change the invoke and now we've got a working Aspect.

Making Aspects work is an important part of the game, but don't make it a buzz kill. A cool Aspect can make all the difference in the way a player looks at his character. Just remember the guidelines.

An Aspect should do *one thing*. That's it. Just *one thing*.

That one thing should be in regards to a specific kind of risk.

And, it should sound cool.

Making Your Own Aspects

Making new Aspects is pretty easy: just pick an adjective and you're on your way. "Clever," "Witty," and "Unobtrusive" could make great Aspects. Also, think of the *one thing* you want to make sure your character is good at. The *one thing* he'll be remembered for. Swordsmanship, seduction, witty banter, whatever. Of course, that *one thing* is your invoke. Now, think of a weakness to go along with your strength. It doesn't have to be directly related to it. A good way to think of a weakness is to remember the ven never do anything halfway. They don't just turn their guitars to 11; they turn their guitars to 23. (Usually, I try to think of the exact *opposite* of my Aspect's invoke.) That weakness is your tag. Finally, what kind of behavior would be encouraged by having such a strength? If you're a great swordsman, you're probably proud and like to brag about it. If you are an irresistible temptress, you probably have a difficult time resisting the temptation of luring men or women away from their lovers. If you are cunning, it's probably difficult for you to trust others—you know how easy it is to deceive and you don't want to end up being a sucker.

Invoke, tag, compel.

Sample Aspects

Listed below are a chuck ton of Aspects to choose from. You can pick any of these or make up your own.

Academy Educated

Invoke: When called upon for knowledge-based risks.

Tag: Too bookish; doesn't know the "real world" from the "book world."

Compel: Fascinated by the unknown; eager to learn.

The ven celebrate all intellectual endeavors, and in their academies, students are taught the seven great Arts: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. With this knowledge, they create haunting poetry, heartbreaking Operas, and tragic plays. Of course, they also use this knowledge to study the universe around them, calculating the distance of stars, forecasting weather, and inventing tools to help them in their daily lives. Art is the beginning of understanding, the first step on the road to Wisdom.

Athlete

Invoke: When making physical risks involving tumbling, jumping, etc.

Tag: Spent too much time in physical training, not enough time in books.

Compel: Needs to compete, always risking reputation.

Physical training is part of any young noble's life. In fact, it nearly dominates every moment of his life. The mind must be rigorously trained, but so must the body if he is to survive the life awaiting him in court. He is taught gymnastics and calisthenics to keep his body physically fit, trains in long distance running, sprinting and climbing. A whole body is the perfect complement to a sophisticated mind.

Bureaucrat

Invoke: When navigating the dangerous waters of ven law.

Tag: Cannot think outside the box; limited creative thinking.

Compel: Too concerned with the "correct way" of doing things.

When it began, the bureaucracy was small and required little effort to understand. Now, it is a massive industry all unto itself. People spend years learning its ins and outs, its loopholes and traps. With this knowledge, you can bypass all of that and get what you need when you need it.

Chance-Taker

Invoke: When taking a particularly risky action with a high probability of failure.

Tag: Opponents get bonus dice when I have to take time to make decisions.

Compel: Feels compelled to always take dangerous risks.

Ah, the impetuous recklessness of youth...

Court Gossip

Invoke: When trying to pry private information in a "friendly conversation."

Tag: Lets slip too much information herself.

Compel: Likes to talk about inappropriate things at inappropriate times.

Rumors and unspoken truths are part and parcel of the ven courts. What is *not* being said is far more important than what *is* being said. The ven are trained to pick up even the slightest nuance—the smallest wince, blink or grimace—and know exactly what it means.

Compel, Invoke, Tag, What?

Some folks find the three elements of an Aspect kind of confusing. Let me take another opportunity to clear this up.

An Aspect's Invoke gives you dice for a specific kind of risk.

An Aspect's Tag gives your opponent dice for a specific kind of risk.

And an Aspect's Compel gives you a Style Point under a specific circumstance.

There. That should clear things up.

House Family Names

For a bit of fun, I went through the five most prominent family Names and made Aspects out of them.

Now, you don't have to take your own Family Name as an Aspect, but it was a fun exercise for me when I was making sample Aspects and I thought you might learn something about the families and about Aspects at the same time.

Likewise, you can make a house rule saying anyone under the shadow of a House must take the House Aspect. You may even decide it is a Free Aspect.

Burghe (Bear)

The family Name of the Bear means "Alone, we stand together." The original ven word meant "hill" or "high place" or "high fortress." It came to mean anyone who lived in such a place, such as the families who adopted the crest of the Bear.

If you are Blooded of the Bear, you can *invoke* this Aspect when you have to fight alone against many. The Bear teach their children how to stand alone, calling upon the ancient blood in their veins, the blood of their ancestors, the blood that makes them stronger than any other House in Shanri. "Together, we stand alone." The lone Bear is never alone. His ancestors stand with him.

Your Name can also be *tagged* for dice by others when trickery or deceit is involved. The Bear have a reputation for being simple, but it's more complicated than that. The Bear teaches straightforward honesty and integrity. Virtues built into the Bear's character. The Blooded of the Bear expect others to act as they do… and it traps them every time.

Your Name can also be *compelled*. Because the Bear are so adamant they don't need help, they have a bit of a difficult time asking for it. If you are Blooded of the Bear, anyone can compel your Aspect to prevent you from asking for assistance, even when you really need it.

Dolt

Tag: You just aren't very clever, are you? Can be tagged whenever someone is trying to outsmart you.

Compel: Used when another character wants you to act like a clod.

Dolt is a special kind of Aspect I reserve for players who just don't get the hint. When putting Bad Form on their heads doesn't make the point. When they've gone far enough that I have to act like a jerk to correct them.

Here it is. Dolt.

And yes, I've used it. Don't think I haven't.

Home-Wrecker

Invoke: You gain three bonus dice when flirting or seducing married men/women.

Tag: You have difficulty seducing and flirting with unmarried Romantic interests. Your opponent gains two bonus dice if she knows this tag.

Compel: If another player (or the GM) compels your Aspect, you must flirt with/try to seduce a married Romantic interest.

The player who chose this Aspect played it to the hilt, compelling himself almost every game—flirting with every married woman he could find. Of course, he met his match when the Marquessa Allentroit—married to his own liege—showed the same Aspect.

Honest Eyes

Invoke: When trying to convince another he's trying to tell the truth.

Tag: When he's trying to tell a lie.

Compel: Used when the character is faced with the opportunity to lie; he just can't find it in his heart to do it.

Pretty self-explanatory, but I like how the player turned this into both a strong advantage and a powerful disadvantage.

Ikhalu's Kiss

Invoke: When using a knife.

Tag: A wrathful opponent makes mistakes.

Compel: Is a little too eager to call Revenge.

Sometimes, actions must be taken that are beyond the pale. The ven do not deny this. In fact, they embrace it. When a ven declares Revenge (in the appropriate and acceptable way), the burden of the law is lifted from his shoulders. Of course, the burden of the law is lifted from his target's shoulders as well. All is fair once Revenge is declared, and remains fair until it is settled.

I Pull the Strings

Invoke: Three bonus dice for getting someone to do something I want

Tag: The strings pull back: two bonus dice if someone calls me on it or notices

Compel: Must meddle in some affair

Some characters avoid the spotlight, preferring to remain the shadows. This character gains bonus dice when attempting to convince others to accomplish his own goals. It's easy enough to convince someone to do what they want, but a little harder to convince them to do what you want. In the meantime, if someone figures out your conniving ways, they can tag your Aspect for bonus dice. Finally, you can be compelled when you see an opportunity to manipulate some weak-willed fool to do your bidding.

Steele (Elk)

The family Name of the Elk means "I have never surrendered." It comes from the ven word meaning "adamant" or "enduring." The families bearing the crest of the Elk eventually adopted the Name, earning their reputation as "those who would not compromise."

If you are Blooded of the Elk, you can *invoke* this Aspect whenever you are making a deal or a bargain where you are expected to give something in exchange for something else. In these situations, you always have the advantage.

Another may *tag* your Name when you are trying to win someone's trust. The Blooded of the Elk is not well known for its generosity or magnanimous nature. They never do anything unless it profits them in some way.

Finally, your Name can also be *compelled*. Whenever you *can* gain advantage, you will take it. The curse of the Elk is their ambition and they do not keep it a secret.

Thorne (Falcon)

The family Name of the Falcon means "wild land" or "place of trees." The Falcon have always been associated with what the ven consider the most uncivilized of places, earning them the reputation of being both Courageous and uncultured.

If you are Blooded of the Falcon, you can *invoke* your Name for any risk involving knowledge of the wild places of Shanri. You've been there, you've seen them, you know their secrets.

Another may *tag* your Name when in social situations regarding your lack of sophistication. Your uncouth demeanor, your lack of etiquette, your misunderstanding of the delicacies of culture. Whether you have these traits or not, your blood carries that reputation and it can be used against you.

Finally, your Name can be *compelled*. Whenever you are put into a situation where you play out the "civilized barbarian" role, the curse of your Blood is too powerful to ignore. You are what you are and no self-righteous, pompous city boy is going to make you look the fool. If he doesn't understand your ways, you aren't going to be the one to teach him.

Kind-Hearted

Invoke: When trying to prove compassion to another, to prove her sincerity.

Tag: This Aspect can be tagged when the subject needs to make a violent act. She just can't put her whole heart into it.

Compel: Compelled to even show enemies the softer side of her heart.

This is a *dangerous* Aspect. I love it.

Large or Small

Invoke: Gain bonus dice when size matters.

Tag: Your opponent gains bonus dice when size matters.

Compel: You lose an opportunity when size matters.

This one is also pretty self-explanatory.

"Love the Shoes."

Invoke: When making an impression using compliments on other people's fashion choices.

Tag: Feels uncomfortable with those who aren't dressed properly.

Compel: Has to comment on someone's fashion sense, even when it may get her in trouble.

This was a fun one. A player wanted a character who really knew fashion and made a huge deal out of it at parties. We always laughed when she got started because nothing in the world could stop her.

Meticulous

Invoke: When you have the time and resources to do a job the right way, you get bonus dice.

Tag: Cannot do things quickly; needs the time to do it right.

Compel: When the character has to act spontaneously, he has to slow things down and make sure they're done the right way. Pretty self-explanatory.

Old Sword

Invoke: The character gains bonus dice when in fights involving more than one opponent.

Tag: Your opponent may tag this Aspect to call on the many scars you have from previous violence.

Compel: You've seen enough blood.

This character has been through many battles, seen too much violence. He knows how to handle himself in a fight, but he generally tries to avoid them now. His battle scars are heavy and he cannot hold his sword as he once did… but that's still better than all those whelps out there trying to prove something.

Politically Voracious Wife

Invoke: When the relationship is useful in a political way

Tag: If someone drops her name on me

Compel: Gets involved in political matters over his head

In every ven marriage, there is the dominant and the submissive. The benefit of being the submissive is you don't have to worry about political machinations. The disadvantage is you aren't in control of anything. Your wife, in this circumstance, is the power on the throne. When she's around, she gives you strength. She gives you confidence.

Yvarai (Fox)

The distinctly foreign Name of the Blooded of the Fox has been commented on by ven historians. Unlike other families, the Fox's Name has become synonymous with their heraldry rather than the other way around. "Yvarai" has come to mean "fox," even eclipsing the original ven word for the creature.

If you are Blooded of the Fox, you can *invoke* your Name for any risk involving seduction. Both physical and social. You just know how to play on others' desires and make them work to your advantage.

Another may *tag* your Name for advantage for the same purposes. The Fox are hedonists of the highest order, relishing pleasure above all other things. Nothing is easier than tempting a Fox.

Finally, your Name can be *compelled*. For all the ease they find in the temptation of others, the Fox are notoriously easy to distract. Compelling your Aspect pushes you away from your current obsession to another in the blink of an eye. It's just that easy.

Mwrr (Serpent)

This very old word comes from the language of the sorcerer-kings. The Blooded of the Serpent claim their lineage served the high priests of the sorcerer-kings in the dark times, and thus their intimate connection with all forbidden things. The word supposedly means "servant of the undergod," although only the Serpent would know for certain.

If you are Blooded of the Serpent, your Name can be *invoked* when trying to discover secrets. The Serpent are masters of secrecy and no box stayed locked long in their hands.

Your Name can also be *tagged*. To say the Serpent are studious is an understatement. Perhaps they could be described as "ruthlessly recluse." Yeah, that's a bit better. That means they never have time to keep up with other pursuits such as Romance or fashion or even the local news. Anyone can tag your Name to gain bonus dice on any risk against you involving something other than books and knowledge.

Finally, your Name can also be *compelled*. The Serpent seem to relish their shadowy reputation, almost cultivating it for effect even when it isn't entirely advantageous. Players can compel your Name, forcing you to enforce your already cryptic reputation.

The Queen of Thieves

Invoke: Invoke this Aspect when performing a shadowy task, "Here's a trick Old Dreda taught me." Get some information about Alverado, get information directly from Panasta.

Tag: Your rough edges show when you try to speak like a true noble.

Compel: You know, that necklace Lady Peacock is wearing looks awfully nice…

This is a fun one. A player wanted to take an ally as an Aspect. He wrote her up and everything. Andrea Daldin is known in the streets of the ven capital as "the Queen of Thieves." At some point, she took the character under her wing and taught him some of what he knows. Not all of it. Just enough.

The Righteous Fury of Youth

Invoke: Bonus dice when someone challenges my honor.

Tag: Can be tagged when character is driven to rage.

Compel: Drive the character to rage.

This is an Aspect just begging to be messed with. Good form on the player who chose it. They've given others the opportunity to take advantage of a serious gap in character integrity. No advantage at all.

Rivalry

Invoke: Gain three bonus dice against a particular enemy.

Tag: Your opponents gain two bonus dice in all other risks because you are so focused on your enemy.

Compel: Hurt your rival.

The character has a rival who he wants to defeat in some fashion. While this Aspect may help with the rivalry, the rival himself is likely to cause problems.

The Road is My Home

Invoke: Knows how to get from here to there.

Tag: Uncomfortable in "civilized" situations.

Compel: "I've stayed here too long."

Outside the city, Shanri is waiting. Waiting with claws and teeth and wily eyes. To travel outside the protection of the city requires a specific knowledge, a specific set of skills. Hunting, trapping, moving through the wilderness without leaving a trace. These are the skills of the Road. And without them, you might as well stay home.

Self-Destructive

Invoke: When taking a risk that is both stupid and dangerous.

Tag: Another player may tag this Aspect when performing a dangerous risk (such as fighting) against the character.

Compel: The Narrator may compel this Aspect to keep the character from taking the safe path in favor of something much more risky.

For whatever reason, the character seeks his own destruction, though he is unwilling to take direct action to do something about it. Instead, he throws himself wholeheartedly into dangerous situations in the hopes that this time will be his last.

Adrente (Wolf)

As odd as it may sound, the word "adrente" comes from the ven word for "shepherd." The Adrente family were shepherds many centuries ago, but they rose up from the fields and became one of the most powerful families in all Shanri. Thus, the "sheep herder" insult some ven throw at the Blooded of the Wolf. Usually the last insult they ever throw.

If you are Blooded of the Wolf, you can *invoke* your Name to add bonus dice to any risk involving direct and physical conflict. Yes, this is the only Name that adds directly to the corresponding Virtue. All the others complement each other in some way. Don't start a fight with a Wolf. However, the Wolf only gains two dice for invoking his Name rather than three. See below for the reason why.

Your Name can also be *tagged*. Actually, I'm lying. It can't be tagged. Adrente is the only family Name that cannot be tagged. Obsessed with strategy and tactics, the Wolf destroy any disadvantage they can find within themselves. Cold and calculating, they never allow themselves a single moment of weakness. This means that when they invoke their name, they only get two dice rather than three.

Finally, your Name can also be *compelled*. Not only are the Wolf obsessed with advantage, they are also obsessed with honor. (You can probably see where this is going.) The Wolf can be compelled to defend his honor, even when it puts him at a disadvantage. He will not stand for insults. He will not stand for betrayal. Sword in hand, he demands satisfaction, regardless of the consequences. His Blood will not allow otherwise.

Strange Intuition

Invoke: You gain three bonus dice when trying to sense dangerous situations.

Tag: You're jumpy, always on edge. Another player or the Narrator may spend a Style Point to gain two bonus dice against you when concentration or focus are necessary for your success.

Compel: You never sit still. There's always something wrong. Another player or the Narrator may spend a Style Point to make you fidget, get up and walk around or otherwise mistrust a situation.

The ven really don't write about "psychic powers" in a positive way. They did not see precognition as a "gift." Those who can tell the future are cursed. *T'vill tama*: no rest for the wicked.

Talia's Eyes are Upon Me

Invoke: Knows the rules of Romance.

Tag: Is a little too vulnerable to the right word at the right time.

Compel: Romance has to end if another has the opportunity to begin.

Lingering looks, a subtle flirtation, an invitation to dance. Like every Aspect of ven culture, romance is highly ritualized, full of pitfalls waiting those who try to enter the game without understanding the rules.

Treacherous

Invoke: A player might invoke this Aspect to lie, spy or generally connive.

Tag: Your opponent may tag this Aspect when you are trying to act trustworthy.

Compel: The Narrator might invoke this to: Incite suspicious reactions from NPCs, especially when the character is telling the truth. Offer opportunities to stab comrades in the back.

The character has a knack for betrayal. He's the one who shows up on the movie screen and everyone watching knows that he's the one who's going to whisper lies in the king's ear and try to seduce the naive princess. Betrayal comes easily to the character, and while he may be steadfast and true in the end, it would be so easy not to be.

Vendetta

Invoke: Bonus dice when directly confronting (NPC).

Tag: Knows someone is after him and it hangs over him like a shadow.

Compel: Keep looking over your shoulder.

Someone has declared Revenge on you, looking to settle the vendetta. And they'll be wearing scarlet.

Well-Known

Invoke: Your fame can influence others, giving you an advantage in some social situations. You gain three bonus dice when using your fame to influence others.

Tag: It's difficult to be innocuous when you're so famous. When you try to hide your identity from someone, they can tag this Aspect for two bonus dice to uncover your identity.

Compel: Fame is a flame that must be fed at all times. Whenever the opportunity to increase your fame crosses your path, another player or the Narrator may spend a Style Point to force you to take advantage of that opportunity.

Fame walks hand-in-hand with fortune… at least, that's how the story goes. Fame is always a double-edged sword (as seen by the Aspect's tag and compel), but if you can take advantage of the benefits—while dodging the snares—you'll do well.

Well-Mannered

Invoke: Knows the courtly system of manners like the back of her hand.

Tag: Pauses when rudeness shows up in its party dress.

Compel: Will not break the rules of etiquette.

Knowing the right thing to say at the right time is important in the courts. A well-placed compliment or appropriate courtesy can win all sorts of favors. Knowing the rules also means knowing when you can break them to the best advantage, but abusing the delicate rules of etiquette can prove most disastrous. You must take care.

Introducing New Aspects

One of the things you can do in a scene is *introduce* a new Aspect, giving it to a character or a scene. Others can tag and compel that Aspect depending on how you construct it.

Giving an Aspect to the Scene

You can spend two Style Points to give the scene an Aspect the characters in the scene can tag for two dice.

My favorite example of this is a common situation. A fight scene in the middle of a stables. In the middle of the night. One of the ven involved grabs a lantern and throws it into the dry hay, setting the place on fire.

As soon as that happens, that player spends two Style Points and introduces a new Aspect for the scene. The Aspect is "On fire!"

The scene/room now has an Aspect any player can tag for two bonus dice. (Because tagging an Aspect always gets you two bonus dice.) Of course, tagging an Aspect also costs you a Style Point, but the first player to tag the new Aspect gets to do it for free.

Charm is a unique gift.
If you have it, you have need of nothing else.
If you don't, it doesn't matter what you have.
– VIRTUES

The foolish are tricked by wit while the wise use it to make fools.
– *LESSONS*

I'll say that again, just in case you missed it. If someone else introduces an Aspect to the scene and you're the first one to tag it, you get bonus dice without spending a Style Point. Anyone who follows your example has to spend a Style Point to refresh the Aspect. There's a reward for setting trends.

Now, how would you use an Aspect that's been set upon the scene? That's easy. Let's use the "On Fire!" example above.

Shara's in that fight, her sword in hand, her dress drawn up around her knees. Two assassins have caught her off-guard in the stables. She grabs one of the lanterns and crashes it against the dry hay, setting the room on fire.

While Shara's doing that, I spend two Style Points and make the scene "On Fire!" This is an Aspect anyone can use to get bonus dice, but like all Aspects, it has to be appropriate to the risk. I tell the Narrator, "It's appropriate because I want to get away. The fire is between me and the assassins, so it gives me a better chance to do that."

The Narrator agrees. So, when it comes time to take that getting away risk, I tag the scene, giving me two bonus dice for the roll.

Giving scenes Aspects is pretty easy. Spend your Style and you're on your way. Of course, you have to be reacting to something that's happened to change the scene or you have to take some kind of action to create the situation. Using the above example, I couldn't just set the room on fire, someone had to take an action that did it. The acting player has the first opportunity to introduce the Aspect.

If another player uses a wager to define an element in the scene, another player can spend two Style Points to make that element an Aspect.

Introducing an Aspect is not considered an action (see *Violence*), but you can only introduce an Aspect on your beat. The Aspect only lasts for the duration of the scene. After that, it's gone.

Losing Style

Turning down a duel always means a loss of Style equal to your rank in title.

If a Baron turns down a duel, he loses one Style.

If a Count turns down a duel, he loses two Style.

If a Marquis turns down a duel, he loses three Style.

If a Duke turns down a duel, he loses four Style.

Throwing Insult: Giving Aspects to Other Characters

You can also give other characters temporary Aspects. You do this by throwing an Insult.

Men do not fear to offend a lover; they fear to offend a murderer.

The Sword isn't the only weapon available to a ven.

Insult is just as powerful as the Sword if the ven knows how to use it properly. A stinging insult can last for months—even years. Even unto Solace.

The ven love Insult so much, they've made a game of it. And you'd better know the rules. Unlike a duel of swords, Insult calls upon the ven's abilities to create stinging invectives and barbed abuse. This calls for Beauty, not Prowess.

Dav'ty nonnon, or "throwing an Insult," follows a specific procedure. Like you didn't know that already. The Insult Game takes place in three steps.

Step One: Gather Dice

Get your dice together. You know the drill.

Step Two: Declare Insult

First things first. An Insult (as opposed to an insult) occurs when a ven objects to a comment, innuendo or gesture made at him suggesting something less than honorable about his character or reputation. This is when someone drops a quiet line that makes everyone else snicker. Except one.

Now, the ven are insulting each other all the time. We're not talking about that. We're not talking about insult, we're talking about Insult. If you don't know the difference, that's okay. It's something that has to be put on you before you understand.

If you find yourself the target of an Insult, you can ask the question, "*Sanna ʒava*?"

"Are you sincere?"

Your friend now has the option to say "I am," or "I am not."

If he confirms his sincerity ("I am"), the game begins.

If he denies it ("I am not"), he has to lose Style.

So now, let's use two terms to make things clear.

We have two people involved here. The Insulted (the *ʒan*) and the Insulter (the *ʒav*).

Step Three: Throwing Insults

Once the Insulter confirms that he does indeed mean what he says, the duel begins.

The Insulted begins the game. He's been wronged, so he returns the insult.

Then, the Insulter retorts. Then, the Insulter, then the Insulted. Back and forth until someone says, "Enough."

Here's how the game works.

The Insulted throws an Insult at his attacker and puts forward a wager.

Then, the Insulter throws an Insult back at the defender and puts forward a wager.

This goes back and forth with each participant adding wagers. At each turn, either of the duelists may add a wager or call, "Enough." A duelist cannot throw an insult *and* call Enough. He may do one or the other.

STEP FOUR: ROLLING

As soon as one duelist calls "Enough," the duelists make a contested Beauty risk. No more wagers, though. You've already determined the wagers.

Both duelists make their rolls (minus the predetermined wagers) and find the winner and the loser. The winner gives the loser an Insult equal to the rank of his wagers.

Insulted

If you've been Insulted, you carry the Insult: a Free Aspect any ven can tag. It's also public. Everybody knows it.

The insult must be specific, like an Aspect. It must cover *one thing*. One element of your character. "Cowardly," is a good one. So is "Weak-Willed." "Gullible" is another, as is "Cuckold."

My personal favorite is "Dolt."

The dice a ven gets for tagging your Insult is equal to the wagers your opponent made in the game.

An Insult loses one rank per Season (at the end of Winter). That means a rank 4 Insult that carries four dice lasts four Seasons.

DISCOVERING ASPECTS

In order to tag or compel an Aspect, you have to know the tag and compel. That means you have to *discover* the Aspect. Tricky. The ven keep their secrets well, and Aspects are a direct line to tapping into those secrets.

If a character wants to discover another character's Aspect, he first has to see that Aspect in some way. He must watch it invoked, tagged or compelled. Then, he has to spend a Style Point and make a contested Cunning risk with the target character.

If he is successful, he knows that element of the Aspect. If he saw it tagged, he knows the tag. If he sees the compel, he knows the compel. If he saw the invoke, he knows the invoke. The Style Point is spent. Gone.

If a character ever fails to discover an element of an Aspect, the target character (the who's hiding the Aspect) gains a Style Point. After all, it's cool to keep secrets.

AND FINALLY…

If you're pining for something familiar, here are some Aspects you may recognize.

Ushalaven

Ushalaven. The best translation I could find is "mountain men." Ven who cast away the trappings of society, retreat into the wasteland, and live among the orks. *Ushalaven*. Mountain men. Barbarians. Legends whisper of a veiled House who retreated from society out of shame for their failure, but we don't speak of such things.

At the time of the game, ushalaven have become something of a legend among the ven. The cultured find them quaint novelties. Conversation pieces. Those who are wise in the wicked ways of the world know it takes a peculiar kind of Courage to go out into the wilderness and live among the orks. The vain and self-centered just focus on the way the mountain men smell.

Invoke: You may invoke this Aspect for any risks involving survival in the wilderness.

Tag: Because you distain culture so much, others can use its nuance against you in social situations.

Compel: You hate culture. You hate its invisible rules, you hate its sideways manners, you hate its petty machinations. You avoid it at all costs.

Tavala

Tavala is a difficult word to translate, but I've found "juggler" to be appropriate. The word carries many connotations. In early Europe, the term meant "traveling entertainer." I like the visual pun. Juggling multiple talents. Improvisational actor, singer, musician. Bard.

Tavala prefer the Road to the courts, seeking adventures among the common people. Not all of them, of course, but the traditional *tavala* is just that. Trading songs for his supper. Most students of ven academies dream of such a life. Out on the Road, facing danger with just their wits, their voice, and a mandolin. Soon enough, all *tavala* find their way to society. Wanderlust is a fine passion, but as a ven grows older, he longs for those things all ven seek. Land and power.

Invoke: You are a skilled entertainer, capable of inspiring the hearts and minds of other ven with songs and stories.

Tag: Because a juggler has no ties, no responsibilities, when he tries to assert some authority, others can use his "freedom" against him. "What does it matter to you, *juggler*?"

Title

Title? Oh, yes. It's harder for a Baron to insult a Duke and easier for a Duke to insult a Baron. When you gather dice for the contested Beauty risk, add one die per rank of title.

You can also use the table below to determine how much Style you lose when you turn down a duel.

Title	Style Lost	Bonus Dice
Baron	1	1d
Count	2	2d
Marquis	3	3d
Duke	4	4d

The Heinig Defense

During playtest, the Mighty Mighty Jess Heinig came up with a brilliant pair of Aspects. "I Love My Wife," coupled with "…and My Wife Loves Me."

Now, some Narrators may see this as a kind of safety precaution. Protecting himself against drama. If he's in love with his wife and his wife is in love with him, how in the world can that not be min-max tweak wankerism?

I'll tell you why. Because Jess is a game designer himself, a great Narrator, and a brilliant player. Most importantly, Jess knows *exactly* the kind of games I run. He came up with the phrase "The Wick Social Meatgrinder." Throwing players into difficult social situations that violence doesn't solve. In fact, violence just makes them worse.

What Jess handed me was a seven course feast on silver platters, complete with those nifty glass toppers that let you see the food inside. Because those two Aspects let me screw with Jess's character in ways other Aspects don't.

To quote Jess himself:

"I liked using these Aspects because they tell the Narrator that I'm not interested in playing out how my character's spouse betrays my character, but rather the notion that my character's spouse is also automatically involved in and at risk for anything dramatic that happens to my character!

'If you involve my wife, you involve me.'

'Cross me, and we will have words. Cross my wife, and we will have swords.'

"It is perhaps inaccurate to say that I love my wife, since Love and Revenge are so close. How could I ever seek Revenge against one who would never wrong me? My wife and I have fidelis*: We are loyal to one another even unto Solace and beyond."*

Jess's Baron is in love with his wife. That means he'll do anything to protect her. His wife? Same thing. Throw one of them in the pot, the other jumps in with a length of rope and a life preserver, no matter what the temperature is.

These two Aspects also communicate to me what kind of stories Jess wants for his character. And this gives me so many ideas what to do, all I can do is thank him.

And I do that by putting his name in the book.

Compel: In ven literature, tavala are your typical short-attention span characters. So used to juggling their skills, they just can't keep their attention on one thing for too long.

Q'val

There are ven who devote their entire lives to the suaven. Throwing away title and obligation, they spend their days and nights maintaining shrines and temples, helping others discover the mysteries of the Invisible World. In our own time, we may have called them "priests." Or perhaps even "monks."

Ven culture recognizes such a sacrifice, giving the *q'val* a kind of respect. They have rejected cultural demands to perform a vital function. Without the q'val, most shrines would fall to the treacheries of time.

Q'val usually travel in groups, expecting charity for their service. Their expectations are often fulfilled. Nobles grant great generosity to the q'val: they know their own shrines may one day fall unattended. When nobles go on spiritual quests, they usually employ q'val to come with them, providing advice and teaching the proper meditative techniques necessary to commune with the suaven.

Invoke: The q'val have a great deal of knowledge regarding all the suaven, knowing the proper rituals and sacrifices.

Tag: In ven literature, the q'val are often portrayed with eyes of two colors, representing their lives in both worlds. Two feet in both worlds. In other words, you overlook details.

Compel: The q'val feel compelled to protect the shrines and temples of the suaven.

Talashan

The unblooded have many secrets. One of those secrets is the *talashan*. Speaker to the Soil. I can say no more.

Senvu

The word means "swordsman." (Literally, "I carry the Sword.") It is a word held with high esteem. You've already seen this Aspect earlier in the book. You know the deal. Swordsman. Bodyguard. Warrior.

Invoke: You invoke this Aspect when you want bonus dice when using a sword.

Even More Aspects

Here's a bunch of words and phrases you can use to build your own Aspects.

Cat's Eyes	Implacable
Compassionate Heart	Imposing Stare
Dangerous Servant	Inconspicuous
Devastating Glance	Insatiable Desire
Fast Fingers	Invisible Hand
Flatterer	Lying Sack of *Phull*
Forbidden Tastes	Midnight Eyes
Gentle Touch	A Nose for Trouble
Ghost Step	Ruthless Heart
Great Profile	Shadowed Glare
I Need No Sword	The Secret Kiss
If I Can't Have His Love, I'll Have His Lands	Unconventional Genius
	Watchful

Tag: Other players (and the Narrator) can tag this Aspect to gain bonus dice when fighting against you. The tag represents a weakness in your fighting Style. You decide your overhead strike leaves a severe opening in your defenses. If someone figures out your weakness, they can tag this Aspect.

Compel: Finally, your Aspect limits your character's behavior in some way. This Aspect gives you a particular code of honor. Your code of honor means you will always risk your own life to protect others, or perhaps to protect those you have sworn to protect.

RAJAN

All ven revere Jonan Drax—the suaven of the Law—but only those who show true devotion are allowed to participate in the secret rituals of his Great Temple. Only those who show true devotion. They are led through dark corridors, blindfolded, until they reach the inner sanctum of the Temple….

Unfortunately, we have no further details on the secret rituals of Jonan Drax. But we do know the outcome. Their skin is tattooed with sacred Vows, transforming the devotee, changing his life forever. He is one of the *rajan*. Keepers of the Law. A paladin.

Invoke: You seek to maintain not only the letter of the Law, but the spirit of it as well, and when you invoke this Aspect, you gain three bonus dice when doing so.

Tag: You have taken a sacred Vow to never break the Law. When you do so, you feel the weight of that Vow, making every movement seem like trying to swim through stone.

Compel: You must uphold the Law… even when it means endangering your own life.

SENVADA

So many tragic stories about the ven looking too deeply into their own history. Picking the path of sorcery will bring you Doom. You know this. You've been warned. You don't care.

Good for you.

They are called *senvada*. Those who use sorcery. Oath breakers. Warlocks. Wizards.

Invoke: You gain three bonus dice when researching new sorceries or making Wisdom/Cunning risks regarding sorcery and the sorcerer-kings.

Tag: Working with sorcery has made you a bit unsavory. Creepy. Making it difficult for you to charm or seduce others.

Compel: Once you've tasted the forbidden knowledge of the sorcerer-kings, you can never get enough.

DALADA

Out concept of theft would seem strange to the ven. "What's mine is mine." If you hold it, it is yours. But *taking* what is not yours to begin with... that's where the skill lies. Picking pockets, opening locks, climbing walls. These are skills all the Blooded know. Essential for survival.

Dalada. One who takes what already belongs to him. Criminal. Thief.

Invoke: You get three bonus dice when using stealth to steal something from someone else.

Tag: Because you use stealth—sidestepping direct conflict—you aren't as skilled in honorable challenges. An opponent gains two dice when you face him in a straight-up fight.

Compel: "It must be mine!"

Every heart contains a thousand chambers, each chamber holds a secret word.

Tell me your most sacred word, my love. And with my body wrapped around yours, I'll say it a thousand, thousand times.

The Great and Terrible Life of Shara Yvarai

May 14th,
Much of the surviving artifacts of ~~daily~~ daily use are of beautiful and surprisingly strong crystal.

The pitcher has a snake emblem. It would be a mistake to assign a christian iconography to such a symbol. I believe that the snake is a symbol, to the ven, of wisdom and knowledge. Given to their scholars and learned teachers as a high honor.

The decanter sketched here was problematic. One of my staff became violently ill when coming into contact with the viscous fluid that still clung to the inside after all this time. Somehow, whatever the decanter held, turned rancid in the eons separating us from the ven epoch. .S



How do you think this relates to the spider symbolism we found in the southwest dig?

.J

Poison

The ven word is *ilsyrr*. "The quiet death."

Poisons are omnipresent in ven literature, but the ven extend their definition beyond toxins and venoms. Far beyond.

Snake venom. Opium. Wine. But we'll get to that in a moment.

"Hush, my beloved. I have one last kiss for you."
— *The Great and Tragic Life of Shara Yvarai*

The Quiet Death

One of the most common forms of murder in ven opera and pillow books is poison. The temptation to create an elaborate system for venoms is tempting…

Actually, it isn't. Not even in the slightest.

Poison kills you. That's what it does. No risk. No rolling dice. If you ingest it, if it's injected into your system, you are going to die. Nobody makes a "saving throw" against arsenic. Or cyanide. A drop of mercury. Or a particularly nasty spider venom. Nobody.

In ven literature, this is particularly true. Poison spells death. In all the reference materials I have, there is not a single mention of any hero or heroine who survives poison. Not one. It may take them a week to die, but they die.

Poison has an intention. That intention is to kill you. So, here's the game system.

If you get poisoned, you die.

Poison for Wimps

Okay, so you're not that ruthless. You're not that cruel.

(Why are you playing *this* game?)

Here's Poison for Wimps. Enjoy.

The ven know five poisons. Well, they know and trust five poisons. They don't fiddle with venoms or toxins that just make you sick. Poison is for murder. Not sickness.

With that in mind, let's spend a moment talking about how to make and use poisons.

Making a poison is a Season Action. The ven know many kinds of poison, but the "big five" are the ones we'll be using in the game. Other poisons just aren't toxic enough to affect ven biology.

Making poison costs a Season Action. You'll read about that in the forthcoming *Seasons* chapter. Using poison is

"Is there really no Virtue for using poison?"

Creative players may figure out a way to justify Beauty, Strength, or even Courage. But the ven will have to come up with an additional step. A distraction. Convoluted and contrived. But the simple risk of slipping poison into an enemy's cup without being seen—and any other risk of such nature—requires a Virtue unavailable to the ven. You'll just have to demonstrate patience.

usually pretty risky. After all, getting caught means you get killed—unless you are under the shadow of Revenge, of course.

Dropping poison into a cup, without being seen, isn't covered by any of the Virtues. Waiting for the precise moment to drop a venomous liquid into your enemy's cup, just at that right moment when nobody is looking. Waiting… waiting…

If only there was some kind of "patience" Virtue. That would cover it nicely. Unfortunately, the ven don't have that Virtue, so any ven undertaking a risk involving using poison cannot call upon any Virtues for that risk. Unless she sweet talks an enemy into drinking the poison. That would be Beauty. Or perhaps throwing the poison into someone's eyes. That would be Strength. Fighting a duel with a poisoned blade would certainly call on Prowess. Creative players may even find a way to work in Courage. But sneaking poison into a cup isn't Cunning or Beauty or Strength. It would require some other Virtue not listed in this book.

Of course, a ven can invoke an Aspect to gain dice for the risk. He may even tag his enemy's Aspect. Calling upon Ikhalu, the patron saint of Revenge, is also suitable, as is any other suaven who may be appropriate to the risk.

Making Poison

Chapter Nine talks about how to make poison as a Season Action and how to make yourself immune to poison in the same manner.

Making Poison requires a Season Action. Use the Poison Resource (see *Seasons*). Until you refine the Poison Resource into a particular kind of poison (see below), it will not be potent enough to affect the ven biology. With your Season Action, you determine what kind of poison you'll have.

All poison spoils at the end of the Year (at the end of the Winter Phase).

Meanwhile, the ven immune system is pretty remarkable. So remarkable, we know they were taking small doses of poison to make themselves immune to the stuff. If you want your character to be immune to one of the big five poisons (you'll meet them below), you may do so with a Season Action.

You can make yourself immune to one of the big five poisons with a Season Action. If you are immune to a particular poison, you are immune to it. No risk, no dice. Immunity. If you aren't immune to a poison, you die. No risk, no dice. Death.

Immunity only lasts for one Season. You can only be immune to three of the five poisons; ven biology can't sustain more than that.

Ven biology is such that most venoms and toxins do not affect them. A few are potent enough to make him stumble or perhaps even knock him on his backside. But the ven explicitly list five poisons powerful enough to kill. Ven scholars have done their research in this field, isolating the symptoms and sources, discovering exactly what these famous poisons are. I'll save you the work and list them here for your convenience.

Arsenic: The Emerald Waste

The ven originally used arsenic as a dye, but quickly discovered its toxicity, and turned the powder to less cosmetic means. Since then, the ven have developed arsenic into a thin, white powder. Tasteless and odorless, it absorbs into liquid quickly, leaving no residue. Despite its new appearance, arsenic's name remains.

Once poisoned, the victim's skin turns pale. Headaches. Vomiting and retching. A complete failure of the digestive system follows. Horrible stomach pains. Sparkling red eyes. Death comes within hours.

Arsenic must be ingested, but it can be fed to animals, and even after cooking, any ven who eats the poisoned animal will suffer the effects.

Cyanide: The Crimson Gasp

Made from fruit seeds, cyanide appears as a grey or brown powder that smells like almonds. The ven originally used it as a flavoring powder as lower dosages caused giddiness and a severe lack of judgment. Further experimentation lead to its current usage.

Cyanide poisoning shuts down the body's ability to process oxygen, causing the victim to helplessly gasp for breath as his brain slowly dies of asphyxiation. After death, the blood takes on a tell-tale cherry red color.

Cyanide may be ingested or inhaled.

Hemlock: Fox's Revenge

The hemlock plant is beautiful to look upon. Pure white, spotted with blue, red and purple. "Fox's Revenge," indeed. Different stories attribute the origin of hemlock's name. We may never know the truth, but they all make lovely stories.

Almost the entire plant is poisonous, but which part depends on which part of the year. The roots are poisonous during winter and fall, but the leaves find their venom in the spring. Once poisoned, the victim's body begins to slow down, exhibiting symptoms of Solace. The limbs grow heavy, the body cannot move. Pain as the muscles shut down. Eventually, the victim's lungs cease and she dies the kind of slow, agonizing, beautiful death that only a Fox can provide.

Hemlock must be ingested.

Oleander: Ikhalu's Milk

The ven know the entire oleander plant is toxic, but they rely solely on the sap—the white, milky sap—when seeking Revenge. Ikhalu's milk must be ingested, but once it is, the effects are immediate and fatal.

Ikhalu's milk forces the heart to beat at a staggering and irregular pace, causing the entire body to shut down. Irregular and violent blood flow. Almost immediate death.

Ikhalu's milk cannot be hidden well. It is sticky and thick. It does not mix well with other liquids. It must be ingested. But while the other poisons listed here provide a painful death within minutes or hours, oleander is the only poison of the five that causes almost immediate death to its subject.

(Note: this is not true of humans, but for whatever reason, oleander is immediately fatal to the ven.)

Strychnine: The Spectre Dance

Of all the poisons listed here, strychnine is, by far, the most dramatic. Introduced into the system, the victim immediately begins suffering seizures of a most violent sort. His limbs flail, his head and neck thrash. His screams. Introduced into the body through ingestion, the victim appears as if he is suffering from a mad, vicious dance with invisible beasts.

The spectre dance.

There is nothing subtle about strychnine. Its effects are immediate and obvious. The spectre dance is used by those who wish to make a point. It is the poison hammer. "Let it be known."

Lesser Poisons

Other poisons can also affect the ven. Venoms and toxins, drawn from all over Shanri, can infect the bloodstream, all but debilitating. But in the literature, these poisons do not kill but weaken the ven to the point where he can be killed.

Ven law recognizes poison and deals with it succinctly. Murder is murder. A debilitating poison allows an enemy to take advantage. Two different things. So, using the "big five" is a crime punishable by death but using a lesser poison is clever tactics.

Lesser poisons, such as venoms and other toxins, give you the Aspect "Poisoned," which can be compelled and tagged for two dice as usual.

The poison makes your limbs stiff and wracks your body with pains. The tag is good for any risk that would be affected by your poisoned state.

The compel forces you to stop whatever you are doing, buckle with pain, and fail any risk you may have to take. You can take an action, but no risk.

The Poisoned Aspect disappears at the end of the day, or at the end of the scene if the poisoned character spends a style point.

Shutha: Narcotics

Another kind of poison.

Another kind of violence. Self-inflicted violence. Killing yourself to live.

The ven call them *shutha*. Roughly translated as "death's little kisses." The ven know what narcotics do to them. They know the dangers. The ven just don't care.

In the literature, there are many mentions of narcotics. Of course, the ven do not associate this activity with vice. Not in a real way. The narcotics listed in the literature are powerful and dangerous, a tool the sorcerer-kings used them to keep the ven docile and tame. Needless to say, this adds weight to the act of using them. The ven who are strong enough to overcome the leash and those who are not.

Strength and weakness.

Brewing

Making narcotics is a Season Action. The action provides a supply that can sustain one ven for a Season or all the guests at one party.

When making the drug, you must determine its Potency. This is a Wisdom risk. Standard target number. Success brews a Potency 1 narcotic with each wager improving the Potency by one rank. No ven may produce a narcotic with Potency higher than his Wisdom.

An Apothecary Vassal may also produce narcotics, but he may not produce any narcotic with a Potency greater than his own rank.

A Small Caveat

I felt some reluctance adding narcotics to the game. The stigma in our own culture always raises questions. But narcotics are an active part of the literature and the ven often used them to illustrate a character's moral strength or weakness, so here they are, in all their glorious tragedy.

To be clear: some realworld drugs are illegal and dangerous (although some of the legal ones are just as dangerous as the illegal ones). It is not my intention to encourage others to break the law. Only ingest or inject drugs the government allows.

Also, for the record, I should state the only drugs I ingest are those prescribed by a doctor or pharmacist. And my Eternal Enemy Caffeine, although I'm trying to get that last one out of my system.

Trying.

Use

In accordance with the literature, the ven use of drugs is extraordinary. What I mean is, it's amazing how many drugs they actually take. An entire race of Hunter Thompsons.

Not all ven use narcotics. Some view them as a dangerous indulgence. We call these ven "*poolha*."

Bashful. A complimentary insult.

Ingesting a drug gives the ven in question an Aspect. The Aspect shares the same name as the narcotic he has ingested. For example, if your ven sips the Dreaming Tea, he gains the Aspect, "The Dreaming Tea," along with its invoke, tag and compel.

The invoke gains a number of bonus dice gained from using the narcotic.

The tag gains a number of dice equal to the narcotic's Potency.

Remember: Potency is limited by the Wisdom of the one who made it.

The influence of the narcotic lasts a number of hours equal to its Potency.

See the listed narcotics below for the benefits (and consequences).

Addiction

The temptation exists to make the use of narcotics sexy. No consequences. But that's not how the ven saw them and that's not how they work in the pillow books, plays and Operas, so that's now how they'll work here.

So, when your ven takes drugs, he may suffer addiction. Roll a number of dice equal to the Virtue affected by the drug while your Narrator rolls a number of dice equal to the Potency.

If you roll higher than the Narrator, the ven is not addicted.

If the Narrator rolls equal to or higher than the player, the ven is addicted. His addiction becomes an Aspect at the rank of the Potency.

If your ven becomes addicted to a narcotic, he suffers the tag and compel of the narcotic even when he is not enjoying the benefit. In other words, even when you aren't on the drug, you still get the downside.

Recovery

We've already talked about how fast the ven heal. One of the reasons they feel so confident about using drugs is because of their ability to overcome them.

The addiction Aspect fades in much the same way an Injury fades: one rank per Season. When the addiction reaches rank 0, the ven is free from the Aspect. If he indulges in the drug while he still suffers from addiction, his Aspect automatically increases to the rank of the Potency of the new drug.

For example, Shara has been drinking too much Foxwine. She's developed an addiction to the substance: rank 3.

One Season goes by. Rank 2.

Another Season. Rank 1.

But near the end of that Season, she uses another dose of Foxwine, Potency 3. Her addiction Aspect automatically increases to rank 3 because she indulged in Potency 3 Foxwine.

The Narcotics

Listed below are four of the more popular drugs in ven literature. There are more, but most gain only a brief mention.

Attar of Poppies (1 herbs, 1 spices)

A thick, aromatic oil derived from poppy blossoms and seeds. When burned, it produces an unctuous sweet smoke, bringing a sense of euphoria. The drug also causes the user to suffer from "dreamless sleep," a kind of walking trance. When they do sleep, addicts usually suffer terrible nightmares, preventing any rest.

Invoke: Gain a number of dice equal to half the Potency (round up) in any test involving resisting or enduring physical or emotional pain or duress.

Tag: Gain a number of dice equal to the Potency for lack of focus or energy.

Compel: Lack of motivation, sleepy drifting in and out of consciousness.

Icefire (1 herbs, 1 poison)

A combination of rare nuts and carefully denatured oleander, Icefire is one of the most dangerous narcotics. Prepared incorrectly, it can be deadly. Nonetheless, it is popular in polite society… especially among the more martially minded.

Icefire numbs the pain of injury, and gives ven a powerful, if violent, vitality in the face of even grievous wounds. Few ven will socialize with regular users of Icefire, however, due to their occasional murderous rages. Powerfully addicting, withdrawal from Icefire wracks the body with shooting pains, and plagues their sleep with nightmares. Many ven never escape an addiction to Icefire, even with the benefit of their extraordinary metabolisms. Because of this, many lords have outlawed Icefire in their domains.

Invoke: Gain a number of dice equal to the drug's Potency whenever one of your wounds is tagged.

Tag: Your rage is reckless and easy to avoid. Your enemies can tag this drug for a number of dice equal to half its Potency.

Compel: Other players can tag this drug to drive you to a sudden blinding rage.

Foxwine (1 herbs, 1 wine)

A dark, resinous liquid, foxwine (*yvasha*) is usually served mixed with wine. Foxwine is the most social of the drugs popular in ven culture, lowering inhibitions and making ven both intoxicated and vulnerable to suggestion. It is a favorite libation at parties where the hostess wants to encourage an entertaining and agreeable atmosphere. While not strongly addictive, foxwine "hangover" can drive ven to distraction with feelings of boredom and ennui. Many tales are told of young ven and the lengths and ends they go to for entertainment after their first encounter with foxwine.

Invoke: Gain a number of dice for any Courage risk equal to half the drug's Potency.

Tag: Your enemies can tag this drug for two bonus dice when society demands you act proper and demure.

Compel: Any player can compel you to perform drunken antics while you are under the effects of this drug.

The Silken Veil (1 herbs)

A favorite of the more daring Elk, the Silken Veil (*italthala*) is a chalky white oil. When burned, it produces a fine opaque smoke which is inhaled by the user. Users of the drug claims it heightens perceptions. *Q'thala*. "Part the veil." Regular users also report they need only sleep one hour a night… if at all.

Invoke: Gain a number of dice equal to half the drug's Potency for appropriate Cunning risks (heightened perceptions).

Tag: You are wound up too tight. Difficult to keep focus. Your opponents gain two dice against you while on this drug for appropriate risks.

Compel: Any player can compel this drug, causing you to dramatically over-react to surprises.

Love poisons the heart. Makes us weak. Makes us sick.

And the only cure for our malady is that which caused it in the first place.

The Great and Terrible Life of Shara Yvarai

ven Opera often speaks of "taking the black". This example of armour and sword was recovered from inside a large vessel filled with honey, w wonderful preserver. Presumably to hide it.

Taking the black was some kind of ritual that was frown upon, but seemed to be quite prevalent in ven literature. The ven were a superstitious culture, and dark magics were quite feared. Taking the black was probably a precursor to dark sorceries.

The sword is very important to the ven. Similar to the Japanese samurai's worship of their swords.

The significance of a "black" blade is pretty evident.

S.

The sword's runes read "Ikhalu." A name? A place? Uncertain at this time.

J.



Revenge

In ven literature, the Law is always an intricate part of conflict. The ven have a procedure for doing *everything*, including Revenge. Procedure, ritual, manners. In fact, the ven word that is commonly translated as "Law" better translates as "the appropriate step."

I am no hero. I am the villain in every man's tragedy.
— Count Kether, *The Great and Tragic Life of Shara Yvarai*

Pallentarro.

For when things have gone too far, the ven know procedure must be followed. The appropriate step.

As was mentioned before, there is no word for "justice" in the ven language. The closest we get is *vrente*. Revenge.

Declaring Revenge is no simple matter. It must be considered carefully, despite the seething emotions pounding in the passionate ven heart. This chapter teaches you how to declare Revenge. The correct circumstances. The proper rituals. The consequences. The bitter consequences.

But before we can get there, we must first take a look at ven Law. For it is violation of the Law that gives a ven the right to ask for Revenge.

This chapter is all about Revenge. How the ven cause it, how they deal with it, and the consequences. We'll be talking about ven Law, about its enactment, procedure and consequences. We'll talk about violence—both vulgar and sublime—and we'll spend a moment talking about what happens when the ven *break* the Law. Yes, that includes a look at the inevitable crime of warfare.

Weapon or Tool?

For the ven, the only *weapon* is the Sword. Everything else is a *tool*. Spears, bows, hammers, whatever. Everything else is a tool.

If you face an enemy and you have a Sword and your enemy does not, your enemy has the Aspect "Tool." You may tag it for two bonus dice.

This may only be done in face-to-face combat. If someone fires a bow at you from 300 yards away, you may not invoke the Tool Aspect.

The Seven Laws

All of ven Law springs from the Code of Jonan Drax. When the Empire of the sorcerer-kings fell, he was among those who dragged the ven from under the ruins. He and his seven *rajan* (the word best translates to "holy warrior," or "paladin") gathered the ven together and built the beginnings of ven society.

His Code—a philosophy his followers embraced—was adopted by the early Senate as a standard for the Law. All ven follow his Code. Or, at the very least, pretend to.



The First Law: The Law Binds All

No ven is above the Law. This is the First Law, reminding proud, vain ven that no matter what their cunning, plots or rank, no ven may claim immunity to the Laws Jonan Drax gave.

The Second Law: No Ven May Commit Murder

Killing another ven is the most foul act a ven can commit. The Second Law deals with this. Remember, the ven don't believe in souls. Murdering another is robbing that ven of Solace and whatever may follow. This is the greatest crime.

The Third Law: What You Own is Yours

The ven tradition of ownership is pretty simple. If you own it, it is yours. Even if you just took it from another ven's hands. If he did not want it, he wouldn't have given it to you. This also creates a complication in issues of trust. "Hold this for me," carries a whole new set of connotations now, doesn't it?

The Fourth Law: You Own Your Promises

The Fourth Law seems to be a follow-up on the Third. The ven are very careful about making a promise. Unlike our own culture, "being a flake" is a crime.

If a ven does not say the words "I promise," he is not bound by anything else he says.

The Fifth Law: No Ven Will Practice Sorcery

The Fifth Law is the one the ven ignore. All of them. Well, nearly all. There are a few exceptions in the literature, but otherwise, nearly every ven breaks this Law.

The Sixth Law: No Ven Will Make War

Again, as evidenced by what we know of ven history, the Fifth Law was something the ven did not truly respect. They voiced respect for the Law, but in practice, secret armies are everywhere. Most Dukes keep secret armies to raid the fields and farms of their enemies.

The Seventh Law: Let the Punishment Fit the Crime

Finally, the Seventh Law, giving the ven a guide for setting punishment for those who break the other six. Like everything else in their lives, the punishment must be appropriate.

Ven Hypocrisy

Before we go any further, we should probably talk a little bit about this. Anyone remotely familiar with ven culture how they flagrantly ignored their own Laws. And while this may sound hypocritical to a modern audience, I assure you, it isn't such a foreign idea.

For example, let's talk about our own traffic Laws.

You never break the speed limit, do you?

You never make improper turns.

You always make a full and complete stop in an empty intersection.

Don't you?

Ten thousand years from now, some archaeologist will look back at 21st Century America and take a look at those Laws. Then, he'll make an assumption. Everyone followed them. Nobody ever broke the Laws regulating the speed at which we drive on freeways, side streets and highways. And those who did were viewed as criminals. Like thieves. And, because he's an expert, everyone will believe him.

Of course, we know better.

Another example. Lying.

Lying is always wrong.

I have never told a lie. Not once.

And if I did, it was for the right reasons.

And if it was for the wrong reasons, it really didn't hurt anybody, did it?

No, I've never ever told a lie. Not once.

Americans make a big deal about the virtue of honesty. We say we want honest politicians. We say we want honest police. We say we only deal with those who never lie.

Yeah. Right.

Lying isn't a crime, but it ώ a major cultural value. Honesty. Unfortunately, 90% of the population are, at the very least, occasionally dishonest.

And the other ten percent? They're lying about it.

Marriage is an important pillar of our culture. A sacred institution.

And sixty percent of marriages in America fail.

We hate murder and drug use and crime. Despise it. And organized crime is the worst. Degenerate scum who take advantage of our loose and liberal Laws. And *The Sopranos* is one of the most watched shows on TV and *The Godfather* is one of the "greatest movies ever made.

And don't get me started on "gangsta rap."

We have plenty of our own double standards. Plenty. Once you acknowledge that, "ven hypocrisy" is a lot easier to understand.

The First Law: You All Are Bound by the Law

If a man spills your cup, no Revenge will ever fill it back to the brim.

No ven is above the Law. Set clearly, right up front, making all ven equal citizens.

Well, not exactly.

Since the First Law was cast—and Drax fell into Solace—the Law refers to two different kinds of citizens, bound by very different Laws. The Blooded and the unblooded.

Traditions passed by the Senate since Drax's passing make it very clear that these two castes are divided. The Blooded may wield weapons. The unblooded may not. The Blooded own land. The unblooded do not.

All are bound by the Law, but the Law is not equal for all.

So, for a list of the differences between Blooded and unblooded…

Ownership

The Blooded own land. The unblooded do not. In fact, the Blooded own the people born on the land. They are property. Like your lamp or your rug. And like property, you may treat them as you wish. You can treat them well or you can treat them poorly. As the Blooded, it is your right to do so.

Good doggie. Want a biscuit?

Weapons

Only the Blooded may hold a Sword. Spears and bows are tools to deal with orks. A peasant with a spear is a questionable offense. Some nobles allow the unblooded to own spears so they can protect themselves from orks. Others do not.

Bows are another matter. Again, a hunting tool. But the Blooded consider the bow to be the only noble tool. Less than a weapon, more than a tool. Again, up to you how your peasants arm themselves. But no Swords. Never.

Crimes Against the Blooded

If a member of the noble class commits a crime against another member of the noble class, a Jury of Peers (other Blooded) is called. Trial, decision, punishment. More on that later.

If one of the unblooded commits a crime against the Blooded, he is killed. You may, if you wish, demonstrate mercy. Please note, it is not one of the Virtues on your character sheet.

Crimes Against the unblooded

No such thing.

If you are not one of the Blooded, you are someone else's property. That means if a noble slaps you around, your only recourse is to complain to your liege that one of the Blooded has abused his property. That's you. His property.

Some property is valuable. A good horse, a Sword, a handsome cloak.

Some property is not valuable. You.

Make yourself valuable.

Now, a noble may bring complaint before a Jury that his property was abused. This is a valid complaint. A petty complaint, but valid nonetheless. The complaint is Insult. You'll find below how to deal with that.

Poison

When a ven noble declares High Revenge, another weapon becomes available to him. A weapon declared illegal under all other circumstances. A shameful weapon. A deadly weapon. *Sysh'venda.* The patient kiss. Poison.

You can find out about these in the *Poison* chapter.

The Second Law: You Will Not Commit Murder

Notice it doesn't say anything about violence in general. Just murder.

While there are many Laws the ven seem to ignore (or find clever ways to clip), this one is almost always taken seriously. Murder is the most foul crime. Listed second. Robbing a ven of Solace. Remember, the ven do not believe in a soul. No afterlife. No eternal promise after death. Only the stirring sleep.

Committing murder is a high crime, but I've read various accounts of punishment. Most often, the punishment is death. But then again, I've found accounts where the punishment is banishment or a permanent crippling. Revenge. We'll talk about that in a moment.

So, violence is pretty much okay. No harm, no foul. But there is an issue of damaging someone else's possessions. Yeah, we're going to talk about that next.

The Third Law: What You Own is Yours

We've already covered the fact that the ven own each other. At least, as far as the Law is concerned, everyone belongs to someone. Even a Baron is a vassal to some Duke somewhere. Injuring the Baron is an Insult to the Duke. Damaging his property. Remember that.

But the Third Law dictates what you own is yours. That means if you hold it, it belongs to you. A noble puts a glass down on the table. If someone picks up the glass and claims it as his own, and nobody disputes the claim, the glass is his.

Set down your wife and you just might lose her.

This is a tricky Law. Ven have to make a valid claim to own something, be it a cap or a Sword or a Barony. He has to demonstrate the thing belongs to him without any legitimate claims to the contrary. This often falls under the question: "Can you hold it?"

In order to prove his possession, a ven must prove he can keep his claim. In other words, if someone tries to take it from him and fails, he proves the item in question belongs to him. The ven who failed? She proves it does not belong to her.

People prove to be a different case under this Law. Everyone belongs to someone. Injuring a vassal throws an Insult at the owner. We'll deal with Insult below.

The Fourth Law: You Own Every Promise

The Fourth Law handles promises. The ven are very careful what they Promise because such things are bound by Law. Punishable offenses.

Yes, in ven culture, "being a flake" is against the Law.

Ven do not make Promises they cannot keep. Saying "I Promise" binds you to keep that Promise. Ven typically create contracts recording the Promise. Not always bound by sorcery—the Law takes care of that—but ven contracts sealed with sorcerous Blood are all over the literature. Punished by the Senate and punished by sorcery.

Promises are rituals, sacred agreements. Violating a Promise throws an Insult at the system itself. The typical punishment is wearing the black for a year and a day. We'll talk about that in a moment.

The Fifth Law: You Will Not Practice Sorcery

More evidence that prohibition just doesn't work.

The Fifth Law clearly forbids the use of sorcery. And the ven are clearly ignoring it. Clearly. No question about it. How do they skirt the issue? By keeping it out of sight.

As far as the ven are concerned, as long as it *looks like* nobody's using sorcery, then nobody's using sorcery. As long as nobody does something that brings the issue up in public, we don't have to address it in public, and that means nobody is using sorcery.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Any blatant use of sorcery is a crime. For example, breaking a Blood contract burns the word "Traitor" on your forehead for a year and a day. Obviously, that ven is using sorcery. He may as well wear the black for a year and a day to help him hide his scar.

There's also the presence of Blood Swords: sorcerous weapons that give Swordsmen unnatural advantages. The ven have a curious attitude toward these weapons. Since everyone wears them, you may as well, too. After all, what's that Serpent going to do? Call you on wearing a Blood Sword while his own Swordsman wears one?

Keep it out of public view and you'll be fine. Make a spectacle of yourself and you'll have a problem.

The Sixth Law: You Will Not Raise Armies for the Purpose of War

The Sixth Law not only forbids making war, but also the raising of armies. No armies. But the ven have found a way around this particular Law. After all, it doesn't say anything at all about personal guard.

The Senate has decreed keeping a militia to protect yourself, your family, and your property is entirely appropriate. Because your people qualify as "property," this means you can hire and train ven to maintain the security of your lands. Not an army, but a personal guard.

Of course, ven nobles interpret this Law as loosely as possible, giving them as much advantage as they can hold. Secret armies are all the rage during this period of ven history, and the making of secret wars between Houses are the stuff of opera. Wars never acknowledged outside the valley they are fought, never spoken of by the soldiers who fight them. Only in hidden journals are these stories recorded. Private feuds between great ven. Silent. Bloody. Forgotten.

If the Senate catches a noble with a secret army, the Senate declares his lands forfeit. "Fair Game." Any who can claim them may do so. If any noble gets too powerful, his lands too vast, his eyes too greedy, the Senate have been known to declare Fair Game on his lands, just to knock him down to size.

Just to ensure no High King.

The Seventh Law: The Penalty Will Fit the Crime

For the ven, the Seventh Law is the most open to interpretation. Jonan Drax left behind no system of recompense or reprieve. Instead, he gave the ven a different kind of legal system. A system unconcerned with impartiality or fairness. A system that validated Revenge.

Because the Seventh Law deals almost exclusively with the Jury, let's jump in to that subject right now.

Hospitality: The Missing Law

Some ven scholars believe in a "Missing Law." This comes from a discrepancy in two important documents. Most ven literature, such as *The Great and Tragic Life of Shara Yvarai*, list Seven Laws (as above), but a few works, such as *The Comedy of Licenteus Burghe* list Eight Laws. Speculation on what that Law may be is ripe among ven scholars, but so far, we have no evidence for its existence except for a listing that may be nothing more than a typo.

Most scholars agree the Missing Law may be something to do with Hospitality. Others speculate it could be *There Shall be No High King*. Seeing these two ven traditions are so important and regarded with such reverence, it makes sense Either one would make a fine Eighth Law. If you like, go ahead and include it in your game. I won't tell anyone.

The Jury

All legal matters are determined by Jury: an old tradition established by Jonan Drax centuries ago. Drax's Jury allows immediate decisions in matters of the Law. If three or more nobles are present, a Jury can be formed to *kvir tam* ("make the Law").

When a matter of Injury or Insult rises among the Blooded, a Jury is called. The Jury must be made up of at least three nobles—one of which must be from a House not affiliated with the parties involved. In other words, if a Fox calls Insult against a Bear, one of the Jury must be from a House that is neither Fox nor Bear.

The Jury hears initial complaints and then decides if further mediation is necessary. If the majority of the Jury votes in the negative, the case is dismissed. If the majority of the Jury agrees an issue of Insult or Injury is valid, the proceedings continue.

The Jury hears arguments from both sides then makes their decision. The Jury's decision is final. Arguing or bickering is bad form. Don't try it.

Because Senators make up Juries and because a Jury's authority derives from the Senate, ignoring a Jury's decision is throwing an Insult at the Senate. Bad form. You've just Insulted *every* Senator, telling him his authority means nothing.

Wearing the black. You'll find out what that means in a moment.

Another point of order. Both parties must be present in order for a Jury to take place. That's why most Juries are called immediately upon the Insult. At most social gatherings, a Jury is chosen before the gathering—usually made up of the most powerful nobles present—out of foreknowledge that any gathering of ven requires a Jury by the end of the night. It is his home, the host decides the

Jury. Those selected are given the highest honor by the host of the gathering. This is out of gratitude for the insufferable and undesirable job of dismissing frivolous claims and debating difficult ones.

Also, if the host forms an even-numbered Jury, he quietly communicates to the Jury that he wants a split decision. The Jury may or may not follow his silent recommendation at their own discretion.

Yes, those of you who pay attention noticed that because the host of a Party usually chooses who will be the Jury for the night, the Jury is usually someone the host knows. Don't start something you can't finish in someone else's house.

If a Jury decides Injury, Insult or True Pain are worthy claims, they then decide on the proper recourse.

Insult, Injury and True Pain

The ven recognize three Offenses: Insult, Injury and True Pain.

For Insult, a Jury will usually require the Insulting party make some sort of recompense to the Insulted party. This involves a surrender of something minor. Resources are the standard payment. Food, stone, iron, spices. These are the things a noble must surrender for an Insult.

For Injury, such payment is not sufficient. The stain of dishonor may only be cleansed with my enemy's Blood. In that case, the Jury declares a Duel. Alternatively, a ven may demand the Offender "wear the Black" for a year and a day.

A simple, but nuanced system. Fortunately, we have a guide.

Cleaning up Ven Law

I feel the temptation.

Looking through ven Law, I see the loopholes. I see the oversights. I see all the mistakes they made.

I feel the temptation to clean it up. But I won't.

These are the Laws the ven lived with and changing the Laws changes the ven. I think the loopholes and the oversights provide us a clear lens allowing us to look at the ven without revision. I'm going to be true to them. Warts and all. I think they'd appreciate that.

Besides, ambiguity and confusion lead to conflict, and conflict leads to story. Look at all the drama over America's immigration problem. This problem is caused by confusing and ambiguous Law. Clear, clean, simple, unambiguous Laws would remove those opportunities. Remove stories. So, I'm going to leave them alone so you can take advantage of them. I thought you'd appreciate that.

The Swordsman

Their hands are bound together, palm to palm. The injured party is given a knife. He puts the knife through the palms of the bound hands. He speaks the words. And Revenge begins.
— The Swordsman

The ven are hot-Blooded creatures, driven by passions and desires they cannot control. So, to curb this incessant need for Bloodshed, the ven have a ritual to allow for the proper use of violence. Violence as necessity. Violence as Art. To create that Art, one must know the rules. The Rituals. The proper forms. Fortunately for the ven, we have a guide.

The Swordsman: A Practical Guide to the Art of the Blade is a small book making clear the Senate's overly complicated and convoluted rules for the Duel. Over the last two hundred years, the ven have continued to manipulate the system, creating a labyrinth of Laws. *The Swordsman* makes these procedures clear, starting with causes—both just and otherwise—and moving on to Ritual. As the author of the work writes:

> *Before all other considerations, my sense of clarity in this matter bears the greatest weight. If the matter of violence is not made simple and straightforward, we are lost.*

We are not animals. We must approach every Aspect of our lives, even violence, with a civilized mind.
- Virtues

The only thing that separates us from the rest of nature is that we know we are animals.
- Lessons

The Duel

If the Jury finds Revenge is appropriate, Injury or Insult may only be settled by a duel.

The ven are civilized creatures. They agree upon a set of Laws, and abide by those Laws, surrendering certain civil liberties in exchange for safety. Without this mutual agreement, the ven would be no better than orks. Nobles are the keepers of civilization, the watershed against that chaos. Even so, there comes a time when words and rhetoric fail, and when they do, the only recourse is violence.

The noble caste recognizes this, and recognizes a citizen's right to defend his honor, and defend it with Blood, if necessary. Violence is a part of ven culture, but if arms must be taken up, they will be taken up with a mind toward Art. Two opponents, each with the same weapon, facing off to prove or disprove a claim of dishonor. This is the purpose of ritual violence: to address the necessity of aggression in a civilized culture.

A formal duel is a serious affair for all involved. Even if a duel is set for first Blood, accidents happen. It is more than just a test of skill, but a test of honor for both parties. A most serious matter, indeed. One might even say, "deadly serious."

Three Offenses

Ven Law states a duel can only brought about by three causes or "Offenses." Taking directly from *The Swordsman*:

Offense. Frankly, my translation here is a tad weak. The original ven word is seventeen syllables long and literally translates as:

The moment my integrity has been so stained that it may only be cleansed with my enemy's Blood.

I hope you'll pardon me if I use "Offense."

The anonymous Author goes on to discuss what exactly constitutes an offense to one's honor. He defines three "offenses" as valid arguments for grievance. The first is *vala*: *Insult*. The second *valana*: *Injury*. The third is *tavalana*: *True Pain*. Each calls for a specific duel with its own rules and outcome.

Insult

"Insult" is publicly questioning another noble's honor. Calling him a liar, an adulterer, a welcher or a thief is cause for the claim of Insult. According to *The Swordsman*, Insult cannot be claimed without a witness willing to testify to the Insult before a Jury. This is why so many nobles couch their Insults in word plays and innuendo, thus avoiding a duel.

Now, to make myself clear, we're talking about using the word "liar." Like I said above, innuendo is not Insult, nor is it to be the cause of a duel. It is perhaps a cause for Game of Insults (see *Risk* for that particular kind of duel), but now we're talking about openly questioning another noble's honesty.

By the way, challenging someone to a duel because you've lost a Game of Insults is bad form. You agreed to consequences of the Game when you joined. Don't make me look like a jerk for having to tell you something you should already know.

If a man so finds himself in a position where his honor is questioned, it is true that he may consider himself under Offense.
—The Swordsman

"Insulting a man's honor—chiefly by questioning it—is the least serious of Offenses. Calling him a liar is the highest of these low Offenses. Insinuation is one thing. Exclamation another."
The Swordsman

Why is the system so lethal?

Because the literature is lethal and the point of this game is to emulate ven literature.

Look, if you want to adopt a hit point system where your character can take a knife in the eye, an arrow in the groin, lose an arm, burn a leg to a cinder but can still swing a Sword without any penalty, there are plenty of other roleplaying games that let you do that.

This isn't one of them.

Injury

"Injuring a man inflicts an Injury that leaves a scar on his person, his livelihood or his heart."
THE SWORDSMAN

"Injury" is a more serious crime, one that results in a physical, spiritual, or financial scar. The wording of *The Swordsman* is ambiguous, a fact many nobles have used to make claim to Injury. Like a claim of Insult, it must be brought before a Jury to decide the validity of the claim. The discovery of an illicit affair is the most common cause for a claim of Injury: a loss of honor and reputation.

True Pain

"Some injuries cannot be healed by words. Only Blood."
THE SWORDSMAN

Finally, "True Pain" is reserved for Offenses that cannot be undone. In other words, injuries that cause permanent and irreparable damage. This is the rarest of all three duels as most juries try to avoid declaring them. But in the most extreme cases, such injuries can only be settled with a duel to the death.

PROCEDURE

Once the Insult or Injury has been made, the offended party must make a claim within two days of the incident. (From *The Swordsman:* "to prevent any meddlesome voices from fanning dying fires.")

The Injured party writes a letter to his liege, declaring his intent for Revenge. Once the letter is in his hands, the liege lord announces proper Revenge has been declared and gathers the Jury. This is important: a noble cannot declare Revenge for himself. His liege must do so for him. A wronged noble must gain permission from his liege to declare Revenge. If he doesn't get it, he can go higher up the order, appealing to higher ranking nobles in his House. If no claim is made, the assumption is that no Insult or Injury has taken place.

If the offended party does make a claim, all further details are handled by "seconds." A second is a trusted friend or relative who speaks for and supports a noble engaged in a duel. *The Swordsman* forbids both parties any further contact until the duel proper, allowing time for their tempers to cool.

The Jury's Decision

As I said above, the Jury then hears arguments from both sides: the accuser and the accused. If the Jury decides an Insult or Injury has taken place, procedure may continue. If not, that's it. It's over. All over. Except for the crying. And don't do that in public. Bad form.

Apologies

Once the jury agrees on the crimes, both seconds draft a letter of apology for the offending party to sign. For example, Lord A and Lady B find themselves in the middle of a duel. A jury approves a claim of Injury, finding that Lord A's questioning Lady B's faithfulness to her husband is good cause for such a claim. Lord A is the offending party, Lady B is the offended party. The duel is set to occur in one week.

Do limbs grow back?

No. In fact, maiming an enemy seems to be a greater Insult than killing him.

Missing eye, missing fingers, missing legs. These things do not grow back. They become Scars for your enemies to tag.

The Lord and Lady's seconds prepare a letter of apology. The seconds work together to write the letter, hoping to make both parties happy with their draft. Lord A's second insists on language saying that his dear Lord has realized that perhaps Lady B's temper got the better of her judgment and she overreacted to the Lord's playful word choices. Meanwhile, Lady B's second insists on wording that notes perhaps Lord A could have been more careful with his words and he did not intentionally mean to say she was an unfaithful whore.

When the seconds reach what they believe to be an acceptable draft, the seconds make three copies: one for the offended party, one for the offending party, and one for public notice. The offending party signs all three.

The offending noble can refuse to sign a letter of apology, thus ensuring a duel. The offended noble may also refuse to send a letter of apology, although this is not proper and may be seen as bad form.

If a letter of apology is not signed by the time of the duel, the duel must go forward. If the letter is signed (all three copies), the duel is canceled.

Arranging the Duel

If apology won't settle the matter, all that's left is Bloodshed. The seconds meet to arrange the details of the duel. There are many factors to discuss, including time and place, weapons used, distance of stance, and the seriousness of the duel itself.

The Swordsman demands the offending party be given the right to choose the weapons while the offended party chooses the time and place. The seconds carry the demands and details of the duelists, sometimes making multiple meetings to finalize the particulars. Seconds use this minutia as leverage to either arrange for an apology (thus, dodging the duel) or to further enrage the other duelist (thus, ensuring Bloodshed).

In the middle of a fight, what if my intention changes?

All too often, in the middle of a fight, you have to change your intention. Circumstances change quickly. What you *intended* to do becomes impossible, improbable or inconsequential.

Changing your intention is free, but you still have to lose a number of dice equal to your Strike Bid. So, if you start off a beat wanting to put your Sword through someone and that someone has taken off, you can do something else instead, but those three dice you bid at the beginning of the beat are still deducted from your die pool regardless of what you change your intention to.

Choice of weapons is important and the primary concern of the seconds. Typically, the offending party brings weapons to the site of the duel while the offended party chooses which of the matched weapons to use. Of course, the only honorable weapon to use here is the Sword, but many nobles keep multiple sets of matched Swords for just such an occasion. Some nobles even bring three or four sets to a duel. Again, while the offending party brings the weapons, the offended party gets his first choice of which weapon he shall use. Weapons must be identical to ensure a fair contest between the duelists. The offended party may waive his rights to "fair weapons," allowing the offender to bring whatever weapon he likes to the duel.

Time and place are also important. Just as the offender has choice of weapons, the offended has choice of time and place. Duels usually occur just before dawn as the sun is rising, but not blinding. Noon is also a prime time for duels. Midnight is reserved for duels not approved by a jury, usually fought under a full moon to provide ample light for the duelists.

Finally, the seconds discuss distance of stance. This is how many steps lie between the duelists when the duel begins. This can also be an important factor, depending on the weapons employed in the duel.

A Ritual of Violence

When the duelists finally meet on the field (having not seen each other since the whole affair began), weapons are chosen and the distance is taken. This is the last opportunity for apology.

In matters of Insult, an apology may be made before the duel begins. The offender may make an apology, offering the offended party the opportunity to end the affair before Bloodshed occurs. If the offended party accepts, letters are signed and the matter is settled.

In matters of Injury, no apology can be offered until Blood is spilled. Whether that's first Blood or a duel to Injury is up to the duelists.

Duel to the Touch

In the case of minor Insults, a duel to the touch may be appropriate. Both duelists stand a few steps apart and at the drop of a handkerchief, they draw Swords quickly, trying to gain the first hit against his opponent. The duelist striking first is declared the winner and the affair is ended.

A duel to the touch is rare, usually insisted upon by the elders of a family who don't wish to see their young relatives killed in a senseless affair of honor. One duelist called this a "lady's duel." He was subsequently Blooded and beaten by a woman duelist who overheard him and decided it was a matter of honor to defend her Insulted gender.

Why don't weapons add to my dice?

Ask yourself this question:

Is Vin Diesel's character Riddick most lethal with...

a) a knife

b) a Sword

c) a pistol

d) his bare hands, or

e) I'd rather not fight him at all, thank you very much

Never forget the Riddle of Steel.

Duel to Blood

Also known as a "Blood duel," duels to Blood are used to settle serious matters of Insult. Claims of Insult are resolved when one of the duelist is wounded to bleeding. This is the most common form of dueling, the others reserved for more serious affairs of honor.

Does a level 2 personal guard give 20 dice in mass murder (20 ven) or 1 die?

A rank 2 Personal Guard gives you 2 dice to roll. One die per rank.

Duel to Injury

More serious matters of honor call for a duel to Injury. The duel proceeds until one opponent is Blooded (as above). He is then allowed the opportunity to apologize (the offending party) or claim satisfaction (the offended party). An apology or concession ends the matter. If no apology or concession is given, the duel continues, breaking with each Blooding. The offer of concession or apology is made again, and if none is made, the duel continues. If a duelist cannot continue for his wounds, the duel is over and the matter is finished.

How Do I Gain Ikhalu's Favor?

Pray.

An adventure.

Seek his followers.

If you are worthy, he will find you.

Duel to the Death

If a matter is so serious as to demand death, a noble must seek to prove a claim of True Pain. True, there are instances of these kinds of duels, but if the matter has gone this far, High Revenge is really the only solution. The Hate. You'll learn about it below.

Throwing Insult

As you may have noticed, the most common legal problem for a Jury is determining whether or not someone has thrown an Insult. You can find the mechanics for throwing Insults in the *Aspects* chapter (under *Giving Aspects to Other Characters*).

When a plot has been given poetry, a duel is not enough. A Hate. The holy and sacred declaration of Revenge.
— The Swordsman

Why don't the Injure and Defend mechanic increase or decrease Injuries?

That would be double jeopardy. The Injure mechanic already gives you bonus dice for an attack. That gives you more dice to wager and since wagers already equal bonus Injury ranks, each die you get to attack would equal *two* possible Injury ranks.

Likewise, the Defend Maneuver gives you bonus dice to protect against an attack. If those ranks also caused a reduction in Injury, each die would be worth *two dice*.

After the Duel

Once the duel is over, the matter is settled. No further claims from the duel or its outcome may be made. The seconds are present to ensure a fair fight and prevent dishonorable actions. If they are honorable men, it is assumed the duel ended fairly.

Revenge for a friend killed or wounded in a duel is forbidden. Both men agreed to enter into honorable violence and accept the consequences as honorable men. Plans of unjust revenge are dishonorable, left for men of lesser stature and spirit.

The Hate: When Blood is Not Enough

There are circumstances when a duel will not satisfy honor. When an Injury is so egregious, simple combat will not heal the wound. An elaborate plan to discredit and dishonor. A beloved friend proves to be a treacherous enemy.

I have to emphasize again that the Hate is something too powerful for trivial use. In his entire life, a ven may declare High Revenge once. Perhaps twice. But, as the boy who cried wolf has taught us, one who abuses privilege too often finds himself in dire consequences. In the four volumes of Shara's adventures, I found two instances of her declaring High Revenge. Granted, we no longer have Volume 3, but Volume 4 makes no reference to High Revenge in its summation of the tale so far.

A noble who declares High Revenge at every slight will find himself cut off from others. Bad form.

To undertake High Revenge, a noble must go through the following steps.

The Letter

First, he must write a letter, in his own Blood, describing both "the cause and the cure." This is ven poetry for

1. what caused the Hate, and
2. what will bring the Hate to an end.

Second, he must bring this letter to his liege. Written permission. If a noble has no liege, he must find a higher ranked noble from his own House to sign the document. In his own Blood. This seals the document.

If a liege refuses to sign the document, High Revenge cannot proceed.

If I assert an Aspect during a Duel, will it last the whole Duel or do I need to refresh it each beat?

Every time you use an invoke after the first, you need to refresh it. So, yes, if you invoke an Aspect twice in a duel, you need to spend a Style Point the second time to refresh it.

Announcement

Next, to inform the Senate. As is tradition, a ven must wear something red. A rose, a scarf, a handkerchief. The declaration is read before the members of the Senate (the Law states at least half the members must be present) and the Senate chooses five members to judge the validity of the Revenge. At least three of the five members must vote in the positive to legitimize the Revenge.

If the Senate decides the case is invalid, the issue is over. There is no appeal.

If the matter decides the case is valid, all involved follow a strict procedure:

- First, the council of five declare how long the Revenge will last. One week, two months, a lifetime. The offended party can ask for a period of time, but it is up to the council of five to decide.
- Second, both parties must spill Blood on the document. Yes, this is a public use of sorcery. One of the few instances when sorcery is legal. You'll find out why in a moment.
- Third, both parties are given one week to prepare. Just seven days.
- Fourth, the Senate announces the High Revenge to the general public.

The Path of Blood

Now, the High Revenge has begun. And what's so special about that?

Well, to begin with, during the time of High Revenge, both parties must identify themselves by wearing red. A red rose, red handkerchief, etc. Just like above.

While the Revenge is active, no Laws apply to the two under its shadow. No Laws. None.

Nothing must stand in the path of the Hate. Nothing must stand in the way of rightful High Revenge.

Anyone who interferes in a Revenge—protecting one of the parties, giving shelter, aid, comfort, whatever—becomes part of the Revenge. They do not gain any of the benefits, but lose any legal recourse from Injury that may befall them because of their interference.

In other words, if you meddle in someone else's business, you lose all legal rights and they gain the right to kill you on sight.

Another detail. While under the shadow of Revenge, neither ven can wear a Sword. No personal guard. No armies.

Two ven, two daggers and their Hate.

The Revenge continues until the time runs out or one of the two is dead.

If time expires and the Revenge has not been fulfilled, the affair is over. It may never be mentioned again. Done. Finished. Over.

Hold a grudge? Bad form.

Try to use it as leverage? Bad form.

Use it to gain advantage? Bad form.

Once Revenge is over, it is over. Done. Finished. Over. No further Revenge may be called upon the survivor. The issue is at an end.

Wearing the Black

There is another option to Blood. The only punishment in ven society. *Shunta van a vera*. Wearing the black.

If a ven breaks a contract or cannot fulfill a Promise, he must wear the black.

Veiled. Shamed. Ostracized.

If you have caused Injury or Insult, you may be forced to wear the black. The Insulted or Injured party informs your liege and your liege makes the order.

This is the only time a ven wears black. The color of shame. While you wear the black, no noble will speak to you. Your lands are held by the Senate. Your title, suspended. Still one of the Blooded, but not one of the Blooded.

Wearing the black is a symbol of shame. You must wear the color to mark your status. You cannot make Promises. Your lands gone, you must live on the charity of others.

Or try slumming.

Others may try holding your lands in safeguard until your veil is lifted… but who are you going to trust with your lands?

Go on. I'm sure you can find someone.

Gaming the Duel

Now that you know *why* duels are fought, let's you and me talk about *how* they are fought.

Beats

First, a duel is fought in a series of *beats*. Each beat, one of the duelists is the *aggressor* and the other is the *defender*. The duelists trade back and forth… unless a switch in momentum occurs. A Maneuver striking the opponent off guard. We'll get to that later. First, let's go through the duel step-by-step.

Step 0: Announce Intention

Like all other risks, the first thing to do is announce your intention.

If your opponent has been taken by surprise, he has no intention. He may not roll dice.

That's right. If you've surprised your opponent, he gets no dice. Right about now you want to know how to surprise your opponent, don't you? It's a contested Cunning risk.

If you've snuck up on someone and they have no clue you are there, you may start this system immediately. Your opponent may not gather dice.

Step 1: Gather Dice

Each duelist (always and only two of them) gathers together whatever dice they can. Usually Prowess plus any Aspects the duelists can invoke and tag. Players should double check with the Narrator, as usual, for rulings on invoking and tagging Aspects that may or not be appropriate to the circumstance.

Quick, but Important Note

This system is used for any violence between two individuals. Even if the situation is an ambush, if two individuals face each other, use the dueling system below. For violence between three or more ven (and/or orks), use *Mass Murder*, below.

Example

Shara has stumbled into a duel. This is something she does not want to do. Not yet, anyway. She faces off against her opponent and I have to figure out how many dice she has.

Her Prowess is 3. That's three dice. Not a lot to play with. Shara also has an Aspect I want to invoke: "I know how to hurt you." The Narrator tells me that's fair. Someone is going to get hurt after all. I get three dice from my Aspect, giving me a total of 6 dice:

Shara's Sword also provides bonus dice. Two bonus dice, to be exact. So, I call on those bonus dice as well. Now, I have 8 dice total.

Prowess	3
Aspect	3
Sword	2
Total	8

So, for this part of the duel, Shara and I have eight dice to play with. Okay, let's see what happens next.

Example

With those eight dice, it's time to figure out how important it is for me to get the first strike. I know I want to use at least four dice for the risk (to beat the 10). That leaves me two. The more dice I have, the more wagers I can make, the more Style I can get. Of course, if I lose the bid, I lose the dice. I waste the dice, in fact. Bidding dice to go second. I'd better make sure I don't do that.

So, I decide I'll put two dice into the Strike Bid. My opponent reveals one die. I get lucky. I get to pick whether I go first or second. I pick first. I have six dice left for the duel.

Step 2: Strike Bid

Time to determine which duelist makes the first move. Not necessarily the most successful hit, but the first one. And sometimes, that's all you need.

With all those dice in hand, each player secretly sets aside a number of them, depending on how important it is for him to get the first strike. This is called the *Strike Bid*. Both players reveal their Strike Bid at the same time. The player who sets aside the most dice for the Strike Bid has the option to go first or second.

Dice set aside for the Strike Bid cannot be used for the rest of the beat.

In the event of a tie, the character with the highest Prowess goes first. If you still have a tie, each player may bid Style. Whoever bids the most Style goes first.

Example

Shara won the Strike Bid, so she has the option to go first. She takes it. I announce, "I want to slice your leg, just above the knee."

My opponent, looking to counter that, says, "I want to parry, putting your blade out of my way."

We've both announced our intentions. Now, it's time to see who is right and who bleeds.

Step 3: Intent

Each duelist declares his intent, starting with the duelist who won the Strike Bid. The duelists trade strikes, back and forth, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.

This step starts with the first duelist declaring a risk. He states his intention clearly. "I want to stab your wrist," "I want to cut your thumb," or "I want to cut across your brow, just above the eyes." Say it loud and say it proud. No room for the timid here.

The first duelist declares his intent and then the second duelist responds, declaring his own intentions with clarity and pride. His intention could be "I want to parry your worthless excuse of a lunge," or "I want to bend sideways, leaving you open for a counterattack," or even "I want to spin out of the range of your blade."

The declarations are important. They set the standard for what happens next. Setting the baseline for following actions.

Step 4: Risk

Both duelists make their wagers secretly. Then, each rolls their remaining dice.

Both duelists check to see if they roll at least 10. If either of them fails to roll at least a 10, the ven completely fails at her declaration. *Complete Failure*. Complete Failure means you can't use *any* of your wagers.

If both duelists succeed in rolling at least 10, see which rolled higher.

The duelist who rolled higher succeeds in his intent. He is the victor. He has Privilege. You get to use all your wagers.

The one who rolled lower is the defeated. He can only use half his wagers, round up.

So, again.

If you didn't roll 10 or better, you have Complete Failure. No wagers.

If you roll 10 or better, and you roll better than your opponent, you are the victor and have Privilege. You get to use all your wagers.

If you roll 10 or better, and you roll less than your opponent, you are the defeated. You get to use only half your wagers, rounded up.

Step 5: Consequences

This is when the bleeding happens.

A successful attack means the victor may apply all his wagers against the defeated who may only use half his wagers, rounded up.

In some cases, the victor may be the defender. If the defender rolls higher than the attacker, the defender gets all his wagers and the attacker only gets half of hers.

Whoever rolls higher is the victor and he gains Privilege.

If the attacker is the victor…

… he has Privilege and may use the Injure Maneuver against his opponent. Or, he may not. He has privilege, so he may decide his attack fails. He may also throw his wagers into the attack, adding one rank of Injury for every wager.

Success equals a rank 1 Injury. You may also apply any and all wagers you made against the defender. Each additional wager adds to the rank of the Injury.

If the defender is the victor…

… he has Privilege and has successfully stopped the attacker from causing an Injury. Or, he may not. Because he has privilege, he decides what actually happens. He may choose to take the Injury.

Follow-Through

After a successful attack or defend, whoever has Privilege has the first opportunity to spend wagers. This means the victor may try using a Maneuver. (Wait for it…)

Remember that. The *victor* has Privilege. He says whether or not the attack was successful and he decides who spends their first wager.

Duels & Mass Murder

Blood, Blood, Blood. That's what you get in the books, plays and Operas. Blood.

While the ven seem obsessed with violence, I should probably also note the obsession with Ritual trumps all that. Violence can *only* take place in a proper way. The duel. And the rules for that particular ritual can be found in a little book called *The Swordsman: A Practical Guide to the Art of the Blade.*

In noble society, noble murder is treated in the harshest possible way. Unauthorized, unsanctioned murder has only one punishment: death.

Meanwhile, warfare between the ven is extremely rare. They simply do not have the resources to maintain armies. At least, armies as we think of them. A ven army may be as many as fifty men. No armor. Shields, perhaps. Spears, Swords, bows and horses. But armor? Only a coward would wear armor. Besides, at the rate the ven heal, it's no wonder they never developed the technology of self preservation.

Like the feudal Japanese, the ven discarded technological advancements in warfare. They viewed these "advancements" as vulgar, unsubtle. Without Style or nuance. Disgusting.

Orks use spears and shields. No ven would ever disgrace his hand with such a weapon. That's why house guards—armed with spears to counteract any uppity noble's Sword—wear the black and cover their faces with masks. Hiding their shame.

No, it must be the Duel where men make violence. Sophisticated. Subtle. Artful. Anything else is just barbaric.

The ven word for "warfare" is *blush'vennan*. I've translated it here as "mass murder." The ven despised warfare. They saw it as wasteful. If asked to participate in such a crude activity, a ven was within his rights to call Insult. How much food it took to support an army. How much damage such an army would do. And dying on a battlefield? A nameless death. Cut down from behind without ever seeing the eyes of your murderer?

No, no. This is not honor. Nothing more than a waste of Blood.

Duels. Ritual violence between two willing ven.

Mass Murder. Unsophisticated violence between three or more ven.

And so, in honor of the ven attitude toward violence, we have two systems to handle such matters. The Duel and Mass Murder.

Injury

The ven get hurt, just like us. They feel pain, just like us. They die from Injury, just like us. The ven are just a little tougher, that's all. But they can still be killed. Just takes a little more effort.

When your character takes an Injury, that Injury has a rank. The rank indicates how severe the Injury is. You can have multiple Injuries. A cut above the eyes, a sprained ankle, even a missing hand.

Injury 1 and Injury 2 are *flesh wounds*. A sliver of pain. Just a distraction. Any Injury 1 or 2 heals in an equal number of days. Rank 1 and rank 2 Injuries both heal one rank per day. The next morning, a rank 2 Injury becomes a rank 1 Injury and a rank 1 Injury heals completely.

Injury 3 and Injury 4 are *crippling wounds*. A deep, piercing wound through the chest. A missing digit. An ear torn from the side of the head. A blinded eye. Rank 3 and 4 Injuries heal one rank per Season. At the beginning of next Season, a rank 3 Injury becomes a rank 2 Injury, a rank 2 Injury becomes a rank 1 Injury, and a rank 1 Injury heals completely.

Injury 5 is a *mortal wound*. Any ven who takes an Injury 5 is automatically knocked to the ground, helpless. He cannot protect himself. A single action by a ruthless enemy will kill him. A ven with a mortal wound is helpless for the rest of the adventure. The character can take no risk without spending a Style Point. He may still take actions, but no risks. Rank 5 Injuries heal one rank per Season.

Injury 5 can also leave a Scar. See *Scars* just below for more information.

Injuries as Tags

This is important. *You never lose dice because of Injury.* Your opponent can tag an Injury for bonus dice, but you always get your full pool of dice whenever you take a risk.

The ven are just that tough.

However, as I mentioned elsewhere, Injuries are Free Aspects: your enemies can tag them for bonus dice against you. Your enemy can tag an Injury for a number of dice equal to the Injury. A rank 2 Injury gives an enemy two dice. A rank 3 Injury gives your opponent three dice. You get the picture.

Injuries are like Aspects. The first time an enemy tags an Injury, it's free; from there on in, anyone who tags your Injury (for the rest of the game session) must spend a Style Point to do so.

Opera vs. Drama

I'd like to address something here. The rules above, I believe, accurately reflect the kinds of Bloodshed we'd seen in ven Opera… but they do not reflect the kind of Bloodshed we'd see in ven theater.

If you'd like your games with a bit more ruthless violence, adjust one rule and you'll have what you need.

A rank 5 Injury usually forces the Injured ven to spend a Style Point for any risks, although he can take actions well enough. In a game using the drama rules for violence, I suggest changing that. I'd suggest a rank 5 Injury crippling the ven to such an extent that he can take no risks at all and must spend Style Points to take any action. This debilitating rule lasts until the following morning where the usual Opera violence rules come into play (Style for risks, not actions).

I leave it up to you.

Scars

Whenever your ven takes an Injury 5, the ven who gave it to him can spend five Style Points and give your ven a Scar. A permanent Injury.

Scars are Injuries that just won't go away. They become Aspects that anyone can tag or compel. A limp, a missing eye, a crooked finger. The tag is worth 2 dice. The compel limits your ven's physical capabilities in some way.

Scars never heal.

So, the next time you give another ven an Injury 5, spend five Style Points.

Twist that blade a little deeper.

Vassals and Injury

Vassals are just like other ven. If they get hurt, they get Injured.

Okay, they aren't like *your* ven. They aren't that hard. Because Vassals represent background characters, they are not as tough or resilient as full-fledged characters. So, use these rules instead.

A Vassal may take an Injury equal to her rank. Thus, a rank 2 Maid can take a rank 2 Injury before she falls down. A rank 3 Spy Master can take a rank 3 Injury before he falls down.

Healing for groups of Vassals is the same for any other ven. One Season per rank of Injury.

Death

Taking a rank 5 Injury does not kill your character, but it does make her *helpless*. She can take an action, but any risk requires a Style Point. If you don't have a Style Point, you cannot take risks.

If you want to kill a helpless character, you may do so by taking an action and spending a Style Point. A helpless character cannot defend herself against this action: you gain an automatic success.

Death robs you of your chance for Solace. Don't lie down for it lightly.

Surprise

If you catch another ven off guard, you have the advantage of *surprise*.

A surprised character gets no dice to roll at all. None.

How do you catch someone by surprise? Use Cunning to make sure they don't see you, don't hear you creeping up on them, don't smell your perfume… you get the idea.

Again, if someone doesn't know you are there, you have *surprise*, and they use no dice. Use it wisely.

The Death Monologue

Every character deserves a Death Monologue. When a character receives the killing blow, she gets a few moments to say or do something important.

Reveal a secret…

Give an important object…

Tell that ven you've loved so long the one thing you never told him…

One thing. That's all you get. No matter what happens between the killing blow and reaching the murdered ven, the ven gets the Death Monologue.

One thing. Make it count.

Maneuvers

When you get into a fight, you can perform two Basic Maneuvers: Injure and Defend. Injure represents an intent to cause harm and Defend represents the intent to get out of harm's way.

The ven may also use *Advanced Maneuvers*, giving them more options during a fight. Advanced Maneuvers take an entire Season to learn. I'll put the advanced Maneuvers here so all Maneuvers are in the same place, but if you want to *learn* those Maneuvers, try looking them up in the Seasons chapter.

I'll say this in the *Seasons* chapter, but its worth saying here, too. You can use a Season Action to teach another ven a Maneuver. You can only teach up to the rank you know, so you can't teach someone how to Parry unless you have at least one rank of that Maneuver. The instructor spends the Season Action, not the pupil.

Each Maneuver has a few qualifiers.

A Basic Maneuver can be performed by anyone.

An aggressor Maneuver may only be used by the attacking ven. A defender may only use a defender Maneuver.

Using Maneuvers

Each Maneuver gives express times for when it may be used. For example, most Maneuvers may be used after a successful or unsuccessful attack or in lieu of an attack.

Advanced Maneuvers always cost at least one wager.

For example, a ven tries to attack Shara. The dice roll and Shara comes up the defeated. She considers using a Parry. Looking at the Parry Maneuver, I see it says, "Use after a successful Injure has been used against you." Because Defend failed, the Injure Maneuver was successful. I spend a wager and use Parry, reducing the rank of the Injury.

Using a Maneuver opens up the possibility of other Maneuvers. Parry opens up Riposte, for example.

Also, many Maneuvers replace the basic attack Maneuver (Injure). You may use Bash, Disarm or other attack Maneuvers instead of the Basic Maneuver, Injure.

Maneuver Ranks

Every ven character begins play with Injure at rank 1. Characters must purchase Defend.

As a Season Action, you may increase your rank in a Maneuver. This increases your ven's capabilities with that Maneuver as well as providing a few nifty extras.

Also, you should notice that all the Advanced Maneuvers have Prerequisites. You must fulfill these before you can spend a Season Action to learn the new Maneuver.

You may not have more than three ranks in any single Maneuver.

Injure (basic; aggressor; causes Injury)

If you put the hurt on your opponent, you deliver an *Injury*. Successfully hitting your opponent causes an Injury equal to your ranks in this Maneuver. Each wager you add to that increases the Injury's rank.

So, if your ven has a rank 1 Injure and add two wagers to a successful hit, you've given your opponent an Injury 3. (One rank for the Maneuver and two additional ranks for your two wagers. That's a total of 3.)

The bigger an Injury, the better it is for you, the worse it is for your opponent.

Because *you* are the author of your own success or failure, you may assign an Injury of lesser rank if you wish when you strike a successful blow. In other words, you don't have to apply *all* your wagers when you hit your enemy. You may, if you wish, "pull you punch," assigning one or two or even none of your wagers.

Defend (basic; defender; reduce Injury)

If the defender rolls higher than the attacker, the defender is the victor and the attacker is the defeated. The defender can then successfully parry the attacker's attempt at harm.

Using Defend subtracts ranks of Injury in the case of a successful hit. In other words, even if your opponent gets a successful hit, subtract your ranks in Defend from the Injury rank he gives you.

Advanced Maneuvers

All of the *Maneuvers* below cost 2 wagers to execute. Each also costs one Season Action to learn and has additional requirements. Get studying.

You may only use any Advanced Maneuver a number of times per Duel or Mass Murder equal to the Maneuver's rank.

Bash (defender/attacker; 2 wagers)

Requisite: Injure 3, Strength (you may not use this Maneuver if you have Strength as a weakness)

Throwing your weight behind your Sword, you hope to throw your opponent off balance. Both you and your opponent roll Strength plus any appropriate Aspects (sorry: no wagers). If either of you do not make the risk (roll 10 or higher), you fall to the ground. The higher roll steals the momentum and may make an immediate attack against his fallen foe.

Bind (defender/attacker; 2 wagers)

Requisite: Parry 3

You may wish to lock your opponent's blade with your own. This ends any further Maneuvers for the beat and both duelists transfer any remaining wagers into Style.

Disarm (attacker; 2 wagers)

Requisite: Parry 3, Beauty (you may not use this Maneuver if you have Beauty as a weakness)

Instead of causing Injury, your successful attack removes your opponent's weapon or tool from his hands.

Dodge (defender; 4 wagers)

Requisite: Parry 3

Dodge completely cancels any attack Maneuver. It costs 4 wagers: more than any other Maneuver. Dodge cannot be cancelled by any other Maneuver.

Parry (defender; 2 wagers)

Requisite: Defend 3

Parry completely cancels Blind, Called Shot, Injure, and Riposte.

Maneuver represents a last moment flailing about to reduce the effect of a potentially fatal blow. You cannot use this Maneuver without a Sword or dagger. Reduce the rank of an Injury by your rank in this Maneuver. You may use Parry a number of times per Duel or Mass Murder equal to the Maneuver's rank.

Feint (attacker; 2 wagers)

Requisite: Parry 3, Cunning (you may not use this Maneuver if you have Cunning as a weakness)

After a successful attack, you may declare a Feint instead of Injure. Feint turns your opponent's attention to the wrong direction, throwing your opponent's guard off guard, giving you an opportunity during the next beat.

Declaring a Feint gives you a number of Style Points equal to your Prowess. These Style Points can only be used in the next beat.

Lunge (attacker; 2 wagers)

Requisite: Injure 3, Courage (you may not use this Maneuver if you have Courage as a weakness)

A lunge is a dangerous Maneuver, but if effective, can be devastating. A ven without Courage cannot make a lunge. Making a lunge requires two wagers. The duelist adds his Courage to the Injury rank. So, that's one automatic rank for success plus the duelist's Courage, plus any additional wagers he wishes to add.

The drawback of the Lunge Maneuver: you may not spend any further wagers that beat. Not to attack, not to defend yourself. You may use Lunge a number of times per Duel or Mass Murder scene equal to the Maneuver's rank.

Press (attacker; 2 wagers)

Requisite: two rank 3 Advanced Maneuvers, Prowess (you may not use this Maneuver if you have Prowess as a weakness)

Press cancels the Recover and Parry Maneuvers.

Pushing your opponent further, you make an immediate second attack after a successful Injure Maneuver. Spend a number of Style Points up to your Prowess. The Points you spend equal the rank of the Injury you inflict. Your second attack may be thwarted by Maneuvers that cancel or modify Injure (Parry, Dodge, etc.).

Recover (defender; 3 wagers)

Requisite: Dodge 3, Wisdom (you may not use this Maneuver if you have Wisdom as a weakness)

Knowing your enemy's ways, you can cancel his advantage. The Recover Maneuver cancels the Bash, Disarm and Feint Maneuvers.

Futali

Ransom

An old tradition from the dark days. Before the Senate, before the Houses. Ransom. Holding a noble for a price. *Futali*.

If a noble is ever captured outside his lands, he can be held ransom until the price is paid. His House can decide to pay the ransom in exchange for his life or refuse to pay it, granting the holding noble the right to do as he likes to his captive.

If a noble is captured, he falls under the same Laws as those who lose control of their possessions. If you don't have the strength to protect yourself, you don't deserve protection.

Futali is the polite way of asking, "Do you want this back?" Refusing to pay is the polite way of saying, "No."

Riposte (defender; 2 wagers)

Requisite: Parry 3

After a Parry, the defender can spend two wagers and try a Riposte. A Riposte is a quick counterattack made by the defender. The defender now becomes the attacker and may make an attack against his opponent with his remaining wagers. The attacker may only defend with his own remaining wagers.

If the attack is successful or if it fails, a Riposte does not count as an attack. The duelist making a riposte does so at the end of the attacker's beat, giving him first attack in the following beat.

A Riposte may be Parried… and the Riposte returned.

Sap (attacker; 1 wager)

Requisite: Injure 3

This Maneuver may only be used with *surprise* (see above). If you can strike an opponent when he does not know you are present, you may spend one wager to knock him unconscious. There's really no reason to gain additional ranks in this Maneuver: once you know how do it, you know how to do it.

Step (attacker/defender; 1 wager)

Requisite: None

You may, if you wish, use a wager to step toward or away from your opponent. If you are at least one step away, your opponent must spend a wager to step toward you in order to attack.

Grappling

Grappling Maneuvers rely on Strength rather than Prowess. Like the weapon Maneuvers, there are two basic and a few advanced grapples.

Punch (basic; attacker; cause Injury)

If your punch is successful, you cause an Injury 1. You must spend wagers to increase the Injury's rank, but the maximum rank an Injury from a Punch can have is equal to the attacker's Strength.

Block (basic; defender; gain Style)

Block is an unarmed attempt to defend against an attack. If successful against another unarmed attack, the Block denies any Injury. If used against a weapon or tool, the Block reduces the Injury by one rank.

Advanced Maneuvers

Remember: Advanced Maneuvers require a Season Action to learn.

Grab (attacker; 2 wagers)

Prerequisite: Punch 3

I've listed this Maneuver first because no others can happen until this one goes off successfully.

Instead of Punch, you can try to Grab your opponent. Once she has been grabbed, she is immobilized and cannot take any risk that does not involve dealing with you.

A ven can break a Grab by making a successful contested Strength risk against the ven who grabbed him. This is a risk and it is the only risk he can take until he successfully breaks the Grab.

Squeeze (Attacker/Defender; 2 wagers)

Prerequisite: Grab 3

Squeeze may only be used after a successful Grab.

Once you have Grabbed your opponent, you can try to cause real Injury. Squeezing your opponent is risky, but can cause serious Injury.

Both your and your opponent make a contested risk. The winner keeps all his wagers, as usual, and the loser keeps half. The victor causes an Injury equal to the wagers he made minus the wagers the defeated made. Remember: the defender can be the victor and the attacker can be the defeated. Wrestling can turn just that quick.

The victor can choose to break the Grab rather than cause Injury.

Throw (Attacker; 2 wagers)

Prerequisite: Grab 3

Throw may only be used after a successful Grab.

You can attempt to throw your opponent, causing no Injury itself, but perhaps putting your opponent in greater risk of Injury. You know, like throwing them off a cliff.

Mass Murder

Finally, let us speak of the most vulgar kind of violence. A desperate kind of violence reserved for those without character, class or Courage. Those who do not have the sophistication or Cunning to understand that violence is an Art. Those who deserve nothing less than drowning in a pool of ork Blood.

A mass of bodies throwing violence at each other. Iron and muscle, sweat and blood. Clamor and alarum. And in the end, there will be bodies bleeding their lives away.

This is *blush'vennan*. Mass Murder..

No one is ever ready for war. When you delay conflict, you give your enemy more time to prepare.

Whenever groups of ven need to settle their differences with violence—anywhere from five to twenty-five to twenty-five thousand to fifty thousand ven—the Narrator calls for the Mass Murder rules.

Mass Murder handles any acts of violence that are not duels. If you have three combatants, use Mass Murder. If you have three thirty, use Mass Murder. If you have three thousand, use Mass Murder.

One Big Contested Risk

Mass murder is just that. One big contested risk. Everyone follows the same steps.

1) Pick a Side

Everybody picks a side. Us vs. Them. Us vs. Them vs. Them vs. Them.

You may choose "Me" as a side. Good luck.

2) Pick a Leader

Each side picks a Leader.

3) Gather Advantage

Now, we gather dice. Each side gets a pool of dice. Only the Leader can add his Name, Prowess, aspects, etc. Each additional ven on his side adds one die. That's it. Just one die.

Vassal Bands—such as your Spy Network, Personal Guard and Roadmen—add one die per rank. Thus, a rank 3 Personal Guard adds three dice, a rank 2 Spy Network adds two dice, etc.

4) Wagers

When the Leaders have their total dice, each Leader secretly makes wagers.

5) Roll

All Leaders roll.

The victor (whoever rolled highest) keeps all his wagers.

The defeated (every side who rolled lesser than the victor, including sides who may be allied with the victor) lose half their wagers.

Orkish Violence

You've heard ths before, but I think talking about it again here gives us a little perspective on the difference in ven culture between *violence* and *murder*.

Our own word "monster" carries a lot of weight. You could be talking about a vampire, werewolf or some unspeakable horror no language can communicate. "Monster." It can mean almost anything.

The ven word for "monster" is *ork*. (The Old English language inherited this word from the ven.) For the ven, it means "not ven." So, anything that is not ven is "ork." Ork could mean a vampire, werewolf or some unspeakable horror no language can communicate. "Ork." It can mean almost anything. Including the act of ganging up on a single combatant. Ven perform violence in a ritualistic, respectful manner. Orks gang up and murder you.

Thus, the Mass Murder rules are used for such "ork behavior."

Treachery

You may, if you like, use your opportunity to cause harm to the other side to cause harm to one of your own. The same rules apply. Any ven (or ork) you target gains a rank 5 Injury, even if that target is on your own side.

How many Injuries can I have before I drop?

You can have as many Injuries as you want. Really. The ven are tough. They're robust. They can take it. Your character can have three 1 Injuries, five 2 Injuries, one 3 Injury, four 4 Injuries... so long as he doesn't have a single 5 Injury, he can keep going.

I designed the system this way to reflect the way ven heroes and heroines act in the operas and pillow books of the time. They seem to acquire all kinds of Injuries—appearing as walking, bleeding wounds—until that one hit comes along that throws them to the ground.

6) Murder

The victor goes first.

a) He selects one ven on his side,

b) spends a wager, and

c) gives a rank 5 Injury to any ven or ork involved in the fight scene. Even one on his own side.

Each ven on each side may only act once. That is, the Leader cannot spend a wager and have you attack one enemy, then spend a second wager and have you attack another. The only circumstance you *can* attack twice is in the circumstance of a Suaven Blessing. Specifically, a Wolf suaven Blessing, "Teeth and Claws." See the *Suaven* chapter for more information.

If you are targeted for murder, you may spend two Style Points to use a Maneuver. Usually this will be either Dodge or Parry. You cannot use the Basic Maneuver "Defend." You must use Dodge or Parry.

If a targeted ven uses a Maneuver to Dodge the murder, the selected ven may spend two Style Points to make a countering Maneuver. This continues as usual until one side can no longer counter. The loser gets a rank 5 Injury.

7) End of the Scene

When all the wagers are spent, the scene is over. Any side has the opportunity to surrender. The surrender may be accepted or denied. If accepted, that side is removed from the scene. If denied, they must continue to participate.

Ven with rank 5 Injuries are one step away from death. A single action kills them. Not even a risk. Just an action. Any Leader may spend a wager to murder that ven.

If any side does not surrender, go back to Step 1 and start over again. If a character cannot contribute to the scene (she has a rank 5 Injury), she cannot contribute a die to the Leader.

Vassals

Your Vassals can participate in Mass Murder if they like. They become Injured and must recover just like any other ven, but they can protect you when you need it most, and during Mass Murder, that's when you need them most.

Is a Rank 8 army (really big, I think) only 80 ven?

Yes. Ven armies are notoriously small. They just don't have the resources to maintain large armies.

Vassals and Injury

A Vassal may take a single Injury 5 before falling down, just like everyone else, however, Vassal Bands break this rule. The Personal Guard, Roadmen, Spy Network and Secret Army.

Can More than Two Ven be Involved in a Revenge?

The answer is no. Two ven. One declaration. That's it.

These three Vassals represent groups of individuals, and as such, may take more Injuries than a single Vassal. When groups of Vassals (the three mentioned above) take an Injury 5, instead of falling down, they lose one rank. When a group of Vassals reaches rank 0, they fall down.

As mentioned above, healing for groups of Vassals is the same for any other ven. One Season per rank of Injury.

The Loyal Vassal

Also, a Vassal may take an Injury for you when you are targeted for Injury.

Your own Personal Guard may take any Injuries targeted at you. The Spy Network may take Injuries for their own liege or for their Spy Master.

The Roadmen may take Injuries for their own liege or for their Master of the Road.

Finally, a liege's Swordsman may take Injuries targeted at his liege, or by spending two wagers, can take Injuries for any ven on his side.

If a Vassal knows Maneuvers, he may use them, but doing so requires a Style Point from the Vassal.

The Point of It All

This mechanic kills characters. It should. I designed it this way for three reasons.

The first was to make these kinds of scenes lethal, dirty, messy, and chaotic.

The second was to make it fast.

The third was to discourage this kind of thing.

War

"The only language orks understand. The language of pain."
— Baron Xenos, Blooded of the Falcon

First, it's illegal.

Second, in the operas and pillow books, it happens all the time.

If you encounter a scenario where hundreds of ven face each other with the intention of murder, use the same system as Mass Murder.

Secret Armies

In the *Seasons* chapter, you will learn how to raise a Secret Army. While Personal Guard may be used to protect yourself and your lands, a Secret Army's sole purpose is to wage war. Each Secret Army counts as an additional Vassal and use the same rules we talked about under Mass Murder.

Unlike other Vassals, a Secret Army's rank is not limited to rank 3. Instead, a Secret Army's rank can be as high as the number of Farms you own in your Domain. If you have five Farms, your Secret Army may be as large as rank 5. Farm ranks do not count toward the rank of your Secret Army—only the number of Farms. Again, if you have five Farms, your Secret Army's rank can be up to rank 5.

Because an Army's rank is so high, it is difficult to dispatch. Each rank 5 Injury inflicted to the Army decreases its rank by one, but a rank 5 Army will outlast a rank 3 Personal Guard most days of the week.

Each character may have only one Secret Army.

General

You may assign a General to lead your Secret Army. A General is an NPC and may have Virtues, Aspects and Advanced Maneuvers just like every other ven. Because he is an NPC, your General may decide not to join your side during Mass Murder and lead your troops independently.

This could be a good or bad thing, depending on the circumstances.

Fire

If your ven want to use fire as a weapon, follow these rules.

Striking an opponent with a torch or a lantern, catching on fire causes an initial rank 1 Injury. Each beat thereafter, the Injury aggravates itself one rank. When the fire causes a rank 5 Injury, the victim falls down, incapacitated. If the fire is not put out in the next beat, he loses his life.

The initial Injury can be increased with wagers. Obviously, at this point, we're talking about using a torch or a lantern or a burning piece of wood as a tool to cause such an Injury.

A successful hit with such a tool initiates the flame and wagers can increase the initial rank of the fire, but the ven must spend two wagers per rank.

Using such a clumsy, awkward, ignoble tool to bring the end of a fellow ven. Bad form.

Unless, of course, they are so ignoble, they deserve such an end…

Spear and Shield

Ven guards, the ones who wear all black and keep their faces hidden by gold masks, employ a different kind of fighting Style the ven call "spear and shield."

(The ven word for this Style is *thuaka*, a vulgar term that comes from the ven phrase *thuakatan ѧen,* or "you aren't good enough for the Sword.")

While most ven find the use of thuaka disgusting, when the thuakaven ("spearmen") work together to disarm a Swordsman, they can be very effective.

The Patron Saint of Revenge

One last thing.

The *ѧuaven* Ikhalu. The patron saint of Revenge. He has no temple. He has no priests. His body, resting in Solace. Hidden. Only those who revere him most. His black-robed priests.

Those who have no other recourse, those who have no choice… they seek Ikhalu's Blessing for Revenge.

Prostrate, begging for his Blessing. Waiting for the call.

Some spend months. Years. Waiting. Just waiting for a whisper.

Only a few hear him. Only the righteous. The desperate are cast away. The desperate become the hopeless.

If granted Ikhalu's Blessing, no ven can deny the right of Revenge. No ven. No baron, no duke, no count, no senator. No father, no son, no daughter, no husband, no wife.

Wearing Ikhalu's mark—the black eyes reflecting the Hate that swims in their Blood—shows the truth.

"I belong to him who whispered Revenge to me."

No one dares deny Ikhalu.

Bearing the Spear

Some ven feel a fitting punishment for Revenge is "bearing the spear," a true symbol of shame, and a non-violent way to resolve Revenge.

The offended ven can demand the one who offended him wear the black, put on a mask, and become a bodyguard. The assignment lasts as long as the Jury decides is appropriate.

While some may see this as foolish—making a bodyguard out of someone who may want to kill you—it does fall under the "keep your allies close and your enemies closer" mindset the ven seem to keep. What a better way to keep tabs on someone who offended you than throwing them in with your personal guard? Surrounded by armed ven completely devoted to you, what chance does the fool have?

Here are a couple of lovely wedding rings. Obviously made to bind two royal and noble Houses together. In this case, obviously, Elk and Wolf.

One inscription is to Halia, the other is to Segur. Name sof a ven couple who's story is almost lost to the depths of time. The rings are made from some strange metal I have not identified yet. Similar to silver but much more robust.

We have found other sets of rings... but these are the most exquisite. We are puzzl3ed by the commonality of finding pairs of rings together. One would expect them to be found singularly, perhaps in burial situations.

S.

I believe your translation of "marriage" may be incorrect. The word "vrente" is also used in the documents we found in the chest. Combining the two, I believe the word carries a connotation of "unhealth" or "sickness." I do not believe the rings have to do with a wedding, but perhaps, some kind of primitive healing ritual?

J.



Romance

In the minds of the ven, "love" is a dangerous thing, making you act against your own best interests, against your family, against your friends. It is a kind of loyalty that your superiors cannot control. Remember: the word the ven use for "love" is the same word they use for "revenge." *Vrentae.* Dangerous obsession.

> Other people's wives are like other people's children. Fun to play with, fun to hold, fun to tickle and fun to tease. But as soon as they start crying, you can hand them back.
>
> — Count Kether, *The Great and Tragic Life of Shara Yvarai*

Like Revenge, Romance is deadly. It's only asking for trouble. You know how things will go when you get involved in a Romance. The heat of passion makes you stupid. Makes you ill. You feel sick when your lover isn't around and when she is around, you feel giddy. How can this be anything but dangerous?

Ven scholars denounce Romance for these reasons. Of course, that doesn't stop Romance. In fact, making it forbidden just fans the flames.

But where do these ideas come from? They come from Shanri's first true lovers. Avreda and Ylvayne.

Avreda and Ylvayne

Romantic notions started nearly three hundred years ago, inspired by the tales of a particular Baron and Baroness. Avreda, Baron of Tyme, and Ylvayne, Baroness of Dren, were drawn to each other the moment their eyes met. She was older, married to a man falling into the deep sleep of Solace. He was a composer, hungry for inspiration. They spent a winter together in the Duchy of Pathrena, and while there, they fell deeply in love.

Avreda composed his first great opera that winter, dedicating it to "My Winter Rose." The veiled Romance between the two was obvious to any who sat in attendance and it scandalized both of them. They denied any wrong-doing, the Baroness swearing everlasting loyalty to her husband, but few believed her. The way she looked at him. The way she wrote about his music. It was obvious she was deeply and passionately in love. A crime of adultery by any account.

Through love,
we find strength.

By love,
we find courage.

When brought to court, she admitted her love for the young composer, but refused to admit consummating the affair. A clever move on her part, knowing that the actual crime she was accused of was adultery. The court's judgment: "Adultery is a crime; love is not."

Ylvayne was acquitted and half the Senate cheered. A new idea had taken root in the ven consciousness: a separation of the ideas of love and marriage.

That year, nearly three hundred volumes were published, plays were written, and operas performed, all advocating the virtues of love. Husbands were drawn as grim and dour monsters, old men marrying young women, trapping them in gilded cages. Then, along comes The Lover: young, robust, creative, and ready to save the poor, suffering wife from the trap of marriage. Of course, none of these books, plays or operas contained any sex. The law was clear: Romance is legal, sex is not. But that would also change.

Return of the Winter Rose

Ten years after his first Winter Rose opera was performed, Avreda composed a sequel. The hero and heroine, both much older, reunited after many years of separation. The affair, once thought dead and forgotten, awakened once again. And this time, the lovers consummated their affair.

Once again, Avreda's opera scandalized Shanri, but this time, it was he, not the Baroness, who was brought before a Jury. The husband made a claim of True Pain: another ven trying to steal his wife, trying to steal his lands. He presented the opera's libretto as evidence and the courts waited to see what defense Avreda would take. The Baron's defense surprised the world.

He announced that he was guilty as charged. Guilty of subverting the public's idea of marriage, guilty of encouraging love, and guilty of being helplessly in love with Ylvayne. But he refused to admit the play had anything to do with reality. "We have never consumated our love," he confessed. "And I shall die with that shame."

Avreda confessed to his crimes and Ylvayne's husband undertook his Revenge. Avreda did not defend himself. He was publicly whipped, castrated, and then hung by the neck until he was dead. His body was then burned until nothing remained.

Ylvayne never attended the trial nor his execution.

The day after his execution, her husband found Ylvayne dead by her own hand. Poison. Legend says she left behind a letter, but that he destroyed it after reading it.

Avreda confessed his own honesty at the trial would help liberate Shanri from the prison of marriage. To a certain extent, it did. Romance has become an undeniable part of ven culture, despite those who would see it castrated, hanged, and burned as its champion was. But there is no definitive vision of love or Romance. Instead, plays, books and operas continue to debate its meaning and purpose in ven life. And, of course, the ven call any such work that explores the meaning of love a *vrentaða*. A Romance.

The Courts of Love

In the beginning, these affairs were completely chaste—a kiss was a daring gift, and if discovered, could lead to banishment, or even death. Then, as the concept of courtly Romance became more popular, the lady's rewards became more… rewarding.

Eventually, romantic sentiments overcame the power of tradition, and we have the beginnings of what we have now: flirting and courtship as tests to finding your one true love. But in the world of the ven, love is still a dangerous philosophy, practiced at risk, in secret, away from the eyes of those who would ruin the greatest game ever created.

And, perhaps true to their character, the ven began holding courts to determine if an affair was true or folly. They judged the truth of love through anonymous stories told by semi-anonymous nobles. *Vrenðata*.

Many of the early *vrentaða* were expressions of romantic theories. What is love? What is the proper procedure for lovers? When has a man gone too far in expressing his love?

Almost all Romances take place "once upon a time," in a semi-fictional, semi-historical Shanri with veiled names and circumstances. Most of the time, only slightly veiled. (Sometimes not veiled at all.) Either way, these stories tell of lords and ladies playing elaborate Romance games. Some end well, but most end in tragedy, reflecting the view of this new idea. In the courts (and in the Senate) the ven openly discussed the stories, debating the nature of love and its place in the world. All the discussions were theoretical, of course. These stories were never about real people, but only fictional lords and ladies and their fictional adventures. Never did poets or playwrights use real people as models for their adventures. No, nay, never.

A gathering of ladies and gentlemen seeking the answer to a timeless question—these are the Courts of Love. Like a Jury (see the *Revenge* chapter), a Court is made up of an odd number of ven nobles. Most Juries are exclusively female, although there are

exceptions. Ven come before the Jury for the purpose of telling the tale of their Romances, revealing an opinion on the nature of Love. When all the stories are done, the Jury decides on which stories reveal Truth and Beauty and which stories do not. The authors are revered and often published by the hostess of the party.

Every court has its own opinions, its own rules. With this attitude, Romance has evolved into a kind of game, with lovers finding ways of openly declaring their love in complicated codes. The courts were completely distracted by the elaborate games, trying to identify couples by their riddles.

The Kiss

Yet another word for poison: *sysh'venda*. "The patient kiss." A venom that infects you. Makes your limbs weak. Makes your heart pound. Blurs your vision. Disables your judgment.

The kiss. Undoes the best of us. Destroys the weak. Enfeebles the strong.

A poison that can only be cured by the cause.

The Woman Who Invented Love

Fifty years ago, a young married woman named Shoshana Yvarai (Duchess of Ivdrava), bored with her husband's constant absence, began a kind of game that has endured to the current day. She gathered together several women—married, single, widowed—and sat down to discuss an important topic.

Love.

Is it weakness? Is it poison? Does it make us stronger? Is it virtuous? Is it vicious? Is it a supernatural force?

The ladies gathered to discuss the matter, exploring various explanations for the passion in their hearts. A passion that could betray any vow, any Promise.

The ladies also shared their own romantic experiences… under the guise of stories. Lady Vantala tells the tale of a certain ven Marquise named… Lady Alatnava. She begins an affair with her husband's Master Spy. A quite innocent affair. She allows him to kiss her on the back of the neck. The whole thing begins when her husband was away and the Spy Master foiled an assassination on the dear Lady. Of course, she had to end the affair. She did so with a tearful letter and a final kiss.

These slightly anonymous stories became quite popular in Lady Shoshana's court. So popular, in fact, major favors were granted to attend her "Spring Social." Ven nobles from all over Shanri gathering to tell puzzle stories about their winter affairs. Of course, no men were invited. No men… until Danton Adrente, that is.

Baron Req'in, Danton Adrente was a Wolf in every sense of the word. As soon as she saw him, Lady Shoshana knew she had to have him. But try as she might, he refused at every request. It wasn't until his winter stay at her husband's request that she finally broke down his defenses.

Of course, this could only end in tears.

The Romance began with a quiet intensity and fully bloomed shortly thereafter. A red rose with poison thorns. The Lady's obsession with the Baron led to her announcement that men could be invited to her Spring Social—to accommodate her new lover's curiosity.

The size of the Spring Social doubled, and with the inclusion of men, even greater care had to be taken to ensure anonymity. The puzzles and riddles lovers used to hide their identities became increasingly sophisticated… but not *too* sophisticated. After all, it is bad form to provide a pseudonym without *any* clue to the person's real identity.

Even after her passing into Solace, the Lady's court still continues. Every Spring court has a Court of Roses provided by the host of the Party or a trusted friend. Masks are sometimes provided to the lovers as well as the carefully coded pseudonyms.

But the greatest Court of Love is still held in the Lady's castle. While she has passed into Solace, her daughter—the new Lady Ivdrada—stands in her stead. All lovers seek to attend the Court for the opportunity to share stories and possibly learn the identities of Shanri's greatest lovers.

"Isn't this all adultery?"

As long as no sex is involved, the answer to that question is a definite "No."

Well, maybe. Ah, actually, yes. Perhaps.

Years ago, the Senate passed a law that they thought would put an end to Romance once and for all. It explicitly forbid any endangerment of dynastic lineage. If dynastic lineage is not endangered—in other words, as long as there's no chance of a bastard child—most consider courtly love a harmless pastime.

There are others, however, who view such activities as spurious at least, and in extreme cases, dangerous. In the romantic ballads, the husband is often referred to as "the jealous one," the villain standing in the way of true love.

Romance causes men and women to doubt the authenticity and authority of their marriages, putting a dangerous strain on this all-important social contract. Defenders of Romance argue love is just as important as marriage. A vital relationship marriage can not provide. Love is choice. Marriage is force. A debate that continues even to this day.

She steps into the room and every set of eyes turns her way. Krav stands behind her, to the left, like a shadow of muscle and iron. It's the first night she's worn the sword belt. Their eyes fall a little lower than usual.

The silence breaks. Conversations resume. An older woman approaches, smiling wide and friendly.

"Lady Shara," she says, and they touch fingertips. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Only the suaven themselves could keep me from one of your parties, Duchess."

More pleasantries are passed, and one by one, they approach, giving their regards. Most only touch her fingertips, the most polite greeting. A few allow her fingers to rest in their palm. The most daring give a gentle squeeze. She remembers their faces and their names: those who dare an invitation to Romance.

THE GAME OF LOVE

In Shanri, every court views Romance differently. Approving of some, disapproving of others. A Romance is born out of impulse, lives through the energy of immediacy, and fades when the fires burn too low. Let's take a look at how a Romance is born, lives, and eventually dies.

ALTA

It commences with a glance, a single look. If the glance lingers for more than a breath, something has happened. A chance for Romance.

Traditionally, it is the man's role to initiate Romance, approaching with hints and signals. The woman, then, must either encourage his flirtations or discourage them, letting him know her intentions. In the time of this game, however, a few bold women take the initiative, sending out the signals to prospective lovers, disregarding both tradition and consequence. For the purposes of example, we shall use the less traditional approach, demonstrating there is no rule saying a woman cannot initiate a Romance.

All signs of Romance must be subtle, a gesture of respect to the institution of marriage. Those who do not show such respect, flaunting their affairs, show contempt for the institution, and thus, contempt for all married persons, courting the possibility of Insult… and a duel.

Traditionally, if a woman accepted a man's offer of Romance, she determined how far the affair would go and to what degree she tested her lover's devotion. After all, she must know his affection is true, and not just some randy brute looking for a roll between the sheets. However, the Game has escalated since then, becoming more of a competition. A double-edged sword. Both lovers set tasks for each other, seeking that most sublime reward: "*alta*."

A rough translation comes to "thank you," although it is more delicate, more respectful. Think of someone doing you a favor that you did not ask for. Think of the way you would say the words. That's the context.

The degree of *alta* depends on the test, the lovers, and the court. For some courts, an appropriate reward is a piece of clothing, a lock of hair or even a kiss on the back of the hand.

The Rules of Romance

Here they are: the rules of love.

Characters may participate in the Game of Love. If a character's weakness is Beauty, he is severely handicapped, unprepared for the delicate rules and pitfalls that await him. He is encouraged to study first (get some Aspects) before playing.

One at a Time, Boys

An important rule. Unless another rule says otherwise, you may have only one Romance at a time.

Just one.

The First Game

A Romance begins with a flirtation, a test of wits to see if a potential lover has the required skill. This is called "The First Game." The flirtatious banter begins and continues in a kind of sing-song, with each contestant trying to keep up with the beat of the conversation. The loser is the first to miss a beat. The winner sets the level of the tasks for the Romance.

Now, for our example, let's watch Lady Shara as she sees a potential lover and approaches…

Shara knows his name, this man standing close to the fire. The man with eyes like the fire, with black hair spilling over his shoulders. His sleek frame, his thin hips. His name is Zsanosz, Count Kether, and he is the prize of the court. She approaches him, touching his hand. Her fingers close over his, and she squeezes. She meets his eyes and smiles. The Game has begun.

Seven Kisses

As a demonstration of respect and the gradual progress of Romance, the ven write about "the seven kisses."

There are many kinds of kisses, each more intimate than the last. The courts of love determine what kisses are appropriate and which are considered "too romantic." The first kiss is to the hand, on the fingertips. The second kiss is to the wrist; kissing the inside of the wrist is considered a more intimate reward. The third kiss is to the inside of the hand. The fourth is to the chest, just at the breast bone. The fifth kiss is to the neck, just under the chin. The sixth kiss is to the nape of the neck, just under the hairline. Finally, the last kiss. To the lips.

The delivery of each kiss is also important, and a matter for debate. Some courts insist the kiss be what is called a "quiet kiss," delivered with closed lips. The "willing kiss" involves lips and tongue. Finally, the "cruel kiss" uses teeth.

INITIATING THE ROMANCE

To initiate the First Game, Shara must make a Beauty risk. As usual, the target number is 10. I can add any appropriate Aspects or other bonuses. Make wagers as usual. Also, because this is a roleplaying game, I should probably describe *how* Shara tries to initiate the Romance and not just rely on my dice. Who knows? The Narrator may even give me a Style point.

If I roll successfully, I describe Shara's initiation of a Romance; if I fail, the Narrator describes it. Either of us can decide on success or failure for Shara—that's a separate decision from the roll. Remember: the roll determines who gets to say yes or no.

(Remember the consequences of *privilege*. If I fail the roll, it's up to the Narrator to decide if she's failed or succeeded. If I had failed the roll, the Narrator could say that Shara *did* successfully initiate a Romance, even though she might have botched it. A failed roll equalling the beginning of a bad Romance.)

With a successful invitation, Zsanosz now has the option to reciprocate. If he does not, he politely declines with the proper compliment. That's the end of that.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

If he chooses to reciprocate, Zsanosz makes a Beauty risk of his own, wagers and everything. Here's the trick. He *must* make at least as many wagers as she does. He can make more, but he cannot make less.

If the roll fails, his response is out of time, bad form, or not equal to her flirtation.

"I see you carry a sword," Zsanosz says to Shara. "Can you use it?"

"As well as any man," she replies. Then, her gaze lowers to his hips where his own sword rests. "Can you use yours?"

"As well as any woman," he says.

Now, if he *meets* Shara's wagers, the Romance can begin.

RAISING THE STAKES

Zsanosz can meet Shara's wagers, allowing the Romance to begin, or he can *increase* the number of wagers, increasing the Romance's potential.

If Zsanosz increases the number of wagers, he must still hit the TN to be successful. If he is successful, it becomes Shara's turn.

Now, she can either match his raises or increase them *again*, furthering the potential for Romance.

This continues with each character either meeting the challenge or raising the stakes. At any time, one of the potential lovers may meet the challenge, allowing the Romance to begin. But increasing the wagers increases the potential of the Romance. Each retort increases the wagers.

The Game continues, with both Shara and Zsanosz testing each other's verbal skills until one of them fails. In this case, Shara misses the roll…

Predator & Prey

If a character misses his roll, his wit stumbles, he has spoken out of time, fumbled his response, or has failed in some other way. This establishes the winner of the exchange. The implied premise is that the loser must prove their worth to the winner.

In this case, the loser is called "the Predator" and the winner is called "the Prey." The winner has won the right to be pursued while the loser must prove her worth by keeping up with her prey.

The connotations of these words should help you understand the nature of a ven Romance.

Potential

Once you've determined the Predator and Prey, it's time to determine the Romance's Potential.

First, take all the wagers the Prey made. Remember, the Prey is the winner.

Second, the Predator ditches half her wagers as usual.

Third, add both the Predator and Prey's wagers together. The total sets the *Potential* of the Romance. The Potential is the number of Seasons the Romance can last. A rank 3 Romance lasts three Seasons. A rank 5 Romance lasts five Seasons.

"I've heard many women have trained with that blade," she says, reaching forward, touching the pommel. "I hope it hasn't gone dull from over use."

"Quite the opposite," he says, looking down at her. "And the quality of the blade is only one factor." He touches her fingers resting on his pommel. "The fingers are the true test of a swordsman."

His fingers touch hers and a little gasp escapes her lips. She misses a single beat, and the first round of the Game is over. She breaks away, withdrawing her hand quickly. "Perhaps you are not ready for my training," he tells her.

"Perhaps," she whispers.

"Perhaps I need to see your skills first."

She looks up. "A test?" she asks.

He smiles. "A test."

Aspect: Romance (Lover's Name)

Invoke: You may invoke this Aspect to gain a number of dice equal to the Romance's rank whenever you are performing a task assigned by your lover. You may only have one task at a time. If you cannot accomplish a task—or if you lover wants to assign a different task before you've accomplished the fist—your lover can change the task... and the Romance's Potential loses one rank.

Tag: Others can take advantage of your feelings, gaining two dice when you are put in the position of having to act against your paramour.

Compel: Your Romance can also be compelled, forcing you to protect the Romance. Not necessarily your lover, but the Romance.

Because a new Romance has more dice than an older Romance, doesn't that mean players will want to end an old Romance to get the better dice from the new one?

Yes. Oh, yes.

For example, Shara's last roll—her failed roll—had six wagers. Because Shara lost, she loses half her wagers, rounded up. That gives her three wagers.

Zsanosz's last roll was five wagers.

Three (Shara) plus five (Zsanosz) is eight. A rank 8 Romance that could last up to eight Seasons.

REWARDS

Once you've won yourself a Romance, go ahead and add it to your character sheet.

A Romance acts like an Aspect. It has an invoke, tag and compel. Like a trait, Romances also have ranks. Your Romance is also a *Free Aspect*, meaning it does not count toward the one tag or compel per risk.

A Romance begins at a rank equal to half the Romance's Potential, rounded up. Whenever you invoke the Aspect, add the Romance's rank to the dice you roll.

For example, Shara's Romance with Count Kether is a rank 8 Romance. When Shara invokes the Romance to add to her dice in a risk, she gains four dice. That's the Romance's rank, divided by two, round up.

Remember, Romances act as *Free Aspects* for both the tag and invoke. Naturally, lovers can invoke their Romance Aspects for bonus dice. But Romance Aspects can also be tagged by other characters… if they know about the Romance, that is.

Note the special rule under the Romance Aspect's invoke. It's important.

LOVER'S LEAP

Another advantage. You may, if you wish, spend a Style point when your lover takes an Injury to step in front of her, taking the Injury on yourself. You cannot use any defenses to block or cancel the Injury. You take it. Like a lover should.

As long as you are in sight of your lover, you may take the Lover's Leap. You push your way through the scene. Nothing can stand in your way.

Nothing can stand in your way.

Tasks

Okay, we saw how a Romance gets started, so now let's look at how it works.

Because Shara lost the First Game, she is the Predator and Zsanosz is the Prey. The Prey has the right to set a task to his Predator to prove her worthiness.

Zsanosz sets a task for Shara. If she does not accomplish the task, the Romance suffers. The Potential loses one rank.

If Shara accomplishes the task, the Game continues, this time with roles reversed. Since she has proven her own worth, it's time for him to prove his.

The Predator becomes the Prey.

Setting the first task also sets the pace of the Romance. Giving your Predator simple tasks means you have little regard for their skill. It could also mean you want to test their abilities before giving them a *real* task. Finally, it could also mean you want to build the tension of the Romance.

Connotations are important.

On the other hand, giving your lover a difficult task right out the gate means you either have a great deal of confidence in their ability or none at all.

Connotations are important.

Beginning tasks are usually simple favors. A woman may drop a fan, look at the prospective lover and ask him to retrieve it for her. Likewise, most men ask for a drink from the cask or ask for the lady to locate a misplaced glove.

Of course, experienced lovers may not waste time with such simple tasks…

"That man," he says, pointing across the room. Shara looks. A bloated beast of a man from a minor house.

"I see him."

"He carries a sword."

Shara nods, understanding. "I see." She bows slightly and retreats, crossing the room, her hand resting on the sword at her side. The noble sees her at the very last minute, just before her hand slaps his face and she takes her defensive stance. He draws his own blade and the duel begins.

A few thrusts and parries pass, everyone holds their breath, and when it's done, there's blood on the floor. He's holding his wrist, looking at her, his sword on the marble with his blood.

She walks back across the floor, her heels clicking on the marble. The blood on her blade drips behind her. She steps up to him, holds the sword out before her… and with a dramatic pause, drops it, clattering loud on the marble floor.

"I dropped my blade," she says. "Would you mind picking it up?"

His eyes never leave hers. "Of course," he says, kneeling down, his hand on the pommel of the blade. "Most women would have dropped a handkerchief," he says.

She almost laughs. "'Most women.'"

A lover must take care when assigning a task. If her task is too simple, she's implying she doesn't have much confidence in her lover's ability to perform. If the task is too difficult, she's setting him up for failure, implying she isn't interested in playing anymore.

A beginning task should be simple, but relative to the skill of the lover. If uncertain, keep the task to something that can be accomplished quickly.

As the affair continues, the tests become more demanding. This also tests the lovers in another way—putting them in situations requiring them to acknowledge each other in a public way.

Bad form.

Of course, you must be clever enough to do it without bringing attention to yourself.

Good form.

If a lover is successful in his task, he's awarded *alta*. *Alta* depends on many factors, including the lovers involved, the court where the game takes place, and the degree of difficulty of the task. At the beginning of an affair, *alta* can be a small gift ("Oh, no. You can keep the handkerchief.") or the right to use a kiss as a greeting. A kiss on the hand, of course. As the tasks become more difficult, the *alta* also becomes more rewarding.

Each lover continues to trade challenges, the Romance becoming more serious with each test. Gifts become touches, touches become kisses, kisses become caresses. Most Romances end here, with both parties unwilling to take the next step. It's a threshold that turns the Romance from a flirtatious game into a treasonous crime.

THE FIRE GROWS, THE FIRE DIES…

Nothing lasts forever. And the brighter a flame burns, the shorter it lasts.

When a Romance begins, it grows. At the end of each Season (after the Romance begins), the Romance Aspect gains one rank, adding more dice to risks.

Romance Aspects continue growing until they reach their Potential (see above), then they *lose* one rank per Season until the Romance reaches rank zero.

Also, if no *alta* is granted by either lover in a Season, the Romance loses *two* ranks.

Ending the Affair

Sooner or later, a Romance must end. That's the way of things. A Romance begins with the heat and intensity of spring; moves into the long, lazy warmth of summer; but then slides into the chilly days and nights of autumn; and finally succumbs to the bitter cold of winter.

All Romances end in tears. No exception. While there are degrees of heart-break, no Romance ends well.

Not one.

The most honorable way to end an affair is to accomplish a task and not ask for *alta*. This informs your lover the affair has run its course and cannot continue. By refusing *alta*, you have accomplished her request and graciously bow out of gaining the fruits of your labor.

The second honorable way of ending the affair is by not assigning a task. Once again, you feel the affair has gone far enough and any *alta* granted by a further task would be inappropriate for the Romance.

Finally, you can end the affair poorly. There are many ways to do this, but here are two examples.

First, there's ending the affair by refusing to grant *alta*. This can earn the lover a new Aspect: *vazhna* ("savage"). The Aspect's rank is equal to half the Romance's Potential, rounded up. A *vazhna* is one not to be trusted: an animal driven solely by desires. Of course, that title attracts as many lovers as it does drive them away.

And the most abrupt (and rude) way to end the affair is a public display of scorn or choosing the favor of another over your lover's favor. Not only does this end the affair and perhaps the *Vazhna* Aspect, but it may bring bloodshed to your household.

Most husbands or wives try to ignore a spouse's Romance, but no one ever takes kindly to a lover who so shames their marriage by ending a Romance poorly. Such behavior is a fair and legal cause for a duel.

Aspect: Vaszhna (Savage Lover)

When a ven ends a Romance in an awful way—a public way, a disgraceful way—the Court of Love may grant her the Aspect *Vaszhna*. If the Court decides such a fate, she must wear the Aspect for a year and a day. She must wear a black rose to show her shame. A veil if her crime is particularly vicious.

Invoke: No invoke.

Tag: Another may tag this Aspect to gain two bonus dice against you in matters of Romance.

Compel: Another player or the Narrator may compel this Aspect, forcing you to act in a cruel, heartless manner toward lovers and even the idea of Romance.

Can I Have a Romance with My Wife?

This is tricky. Not true to the source material. Romance and marriage are two different entities at odds with each other. I like the idea of a husband and wife who truly love each other… but they *must* be the exception that proves the rule. The more it happens, the less special it is.

But I agree with the player who asked this question. A marriage with a Romance. The Romance begins, blossoms, fades and dies. Then, the Heart-Broken Aspect. Years later, the Romance begins again…

That's neat. But it *must* be the exception.

Aspect: Heartbroken

Padana

You will hurt the one who hurt you. Yes, you will. You will make him feel the pain you feel. You will make him beg the way you want to beg. Make him whisper your name and ask for your mercy. Yes, you will.

Yes, you will.

Invoke: Gain a number of bonus dice equal to half the Potential of the Romance (rounded up) for the purposes of hurting the one who hurt you.

Tag: Opponents gain two bonus dice when using your anger and hatred against you.

Compel: Hurt the one who hurt you. Give up whatever you are doing and hurt him.

Hurt him.

Punish him.

Make him beg.

Make him plead.

Make him wish he never left you.

Make the ones he loves hurt.

Make them beg.

Punish them.

All the world has to pay for your pain.

Heartbreak

Whenever a love affair ends, there are always two: the one who leaves and the one who is left behind. The one who is left behind gains the *Heartbroken* Aspect. (The ven word is *padana*. Translation: "hurt beyond healing.") The Aspect has a rank (bonus dice) equal to half the Romance's potential, rounded up. It loses one rank per Season until it is finally gone.

A Heartbroken ven can start a new Romance, but that Romance's rank cannot be equal to or higher than the Heartbroken Aspect. In other words, if your Heartbroken Aspect is rank 4 (you roll four dice for the invoke), your current Romance cannot be higher than rank 3. It isn't until the heartbreak fades that your Romance can move forward.

And remember, you can only start one Romance at a time. That is, unless, you find some other rule that supercedes this one.

Dangerous Liaisons

By the strictest definition, adultery is engaging in activity that could cause an illegitimate heir. Until that line is crossed, all of this romantic talk is relatively harmless as far as most nobles are concerned.

Most.

But once that line *is* crossed, it ceases being a Romance and becomes a *Liaison*. The Romance has become a danger to the marriage. Most ven understand this and end a Romance before it gets that far. Others, however, are so caught up in the passion of the affair, the lovers are willing to risk anything—even their lives—to continue to the passionate conclusion.

Go ahead and erase the word Romance on your sheet and write in the new word. *Liaison*. Lovers discovered in such a compromising position risk much. They risk loss of reputation, loss of status and—depending on the severity of the court—loss of life.

A Liaison may begin as soon as the Romance reaches its Potential—reaches its romantic peak. There is only so much satisfaction to be gained from flirting: someone finally crosses the line. So, the Romance reaches its potential, but instead of *decreasing* next Season, it *remains* at its Potential. No longer a Romance, but a Liaison.

As long as the Liaison is maintained by the lovers (I don't need to tell you how that works, do I?), the Romance remains at its Potential, giving bonus dice for the Liaison's invoke equal to half its rank.

Of course, being discovered in a liaison is dangerous. So dangerous, it could mean a duel of honor. A duel to the Blood. A duel to the death. Participating in a Liaison is grounds for a claim of Injury from the spouses of the lovers. See *Revenge* for more details.

Clearing Up Questions

In case I'm being too subtle, let me be perfectly clear about one thing.

The only way to maintain a Romance at its potential is with sex.

There. That ought to clear up at least one question on the FAQ.



Here is an interesting piece, mostly intact. There is a bar that circles the globe, that shows winter, spring, summer and fall. Then there are twelve very curious symbols, seven on the "day side" and five on the "night side". The day side is fairly explanatory, Wind, Earth, Water, Fire, Wood.

Then there seems to be an odd symbol that translations of other happenstances can best be summed up as "Nothingness". Then the sword symbol is often translated as "Purpose".

The Night side is a bit more difficult, an eye seems to represent "Animal", the stars are easy, "Cosmos", the hatched torso comes across as "Soul" or "Spirit". The odd elipses represents "Attraction", and the stylized arrow seems to be "time".

.S

Once again, you assume too much. Chinese symbolism on a ven artifact? I think not. The five symbols may be months, days or even something like animals. The damage on the artifact makes proper translation too difficult. Your other translations are equally reckless. "Purpose?" Honestly, I do not understand your method here.

The Sword is a powerful ven symbol, but "purpose" falls far ouside the ven character. J.

Seasons

Time is an important element in *Houses of the Blooded*. It moves forward at a terrible pace, never hesitating, never resting. The passage of time gives characters the chance to grow, to practice, to become more than what they are. Time also brings them closer to the inevitable doom of Solace. Unlike other games—where the characters are perpetually stuck at the vague age of "about 25," never growing older, the passage of time never ravaging their youth—in Houses of the Blooded, days, months, and years click by.

The ven measure the year in much the same way we do, dividing the year into four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter. (You may note the ven year begins in spring rather than winter.) In the game, you too will count the passing of the seasons, noting how things change with time.

A season lasts approximately ninety days. During that time, characters may find enough opportunity for one or two stories, possibly even three. But when does a season begin and when does it end? And how much can characters do in a season? Let's answer those questions one at a time.

In this chapter, we'll learn about *Season Actions*: long-term goals your character puts into motion at the beginning of the Season that pay off at the end of the Season. Spying on other nobles, growing crops, mining for metals and stone, preparing exquisite items of fine Art. All of these things require time. More time than is allowed in a single adventure. Days, weeks and months of toil, labor, blood and sweat go into a Season Action. Great effort for great deeds. To represent the long-term strategies and subtle maneuvers of ven politics (as represented in the pillow books), we have this chapter.

Seasons. The invisible battle behind the shadows. The unspoken war.

The Passage of Time

The Season Record Sheet

At the end of this book is a Season Record Sheet. Please feel free to photocopy it and use it to keep track of your Season Actions, harvest, etc.

When you first sit down to play *Houses of the Blooded*, with everybody around the table, character sheets, dice and refreshments ready, the Season has begun. In other words, the first adventure begins the first Season. We'll assume you'll be starting with Spring. Remember: you have ninety days before the end of the season. That leaves you with plenty of time to get a lot done.

Each Season, the Narrator prepares a number of *stories* (otherwise known as "adventures"). A story, of course, is a fictional tale with a beginning, middle, and an end that the characters take part in—for better or worse. The *Narrator* chapter has more information on building stories.

Characters cannot participate in more than 3 stories per Season. Upkeep of lands and other downtime actions demand attention. If the players take up too much time with stories, the Narrator may determine they cannot spend time handling other important activities.

Regions

Regions make up the bulk of this chapter. In order to understand how the Season system works, we should really spend a moment or two talking about Regions.

As a ven noble, you own land. Specifically, you own Provinces. Each Province is made up by ten Regions. Each Region represents an unspecified quantity of land.

(I like abstract. Gives players room to be creative with their stuff. If you want to be more precise, there are a ton of other games with similar systems that deal with specifics. Use those.)

A Region could be a mountain range, a stretch of plains, a series of farms, hills, coastline, etc. An unspecified quantity of land. This lets you, the player, define what your Regions look like, how big they are, and where they are actually located in your Domain. Abstract.

Regions have a lot of distinctions, giving you a bit more to work with when you try to define them. Not *that* abstract.

- Regions are either wild or civilized.
- Each Region also has a specific geographic type: Forest, Plains, Mountains, etc.
- Like other traits, each Region has a rank.
- And, finally, Regions have Loyalty and Security.

Civilized & Wild

Your Domain has both *civilized* and *wild* Regions.

A civilized Region represents a tract of land you've domesticated. It has tax collectors, roads, population and some sort of protection. Wild Regions, on the other hand, are still held by orks. No ven dare go there unarmed.

The Regions you identified as yours at the beginning of character creation are those you've spent time turning from wild Regions to civilized Regions. The orks have been driven back and your people can do the work you need them doing. A wild Region, on the other hand, does not have enough people to bring you much, if any, benefit at all. Wild Regions are of no use to you. They must become civilized before you can truly add them to your Domain. They still belong to you, but until you take some time to hack out the wilderness, put in some tax collectors and roads, that land will remain inaccessible.

Region Type

Once you have mapped out the territory, gotten rid of the bandit barons and orks infesting your rightful estate, and get some culture down to the people, you can claim the Region as civilized. Of course, then you have to choose what that Region's best options for survival are, and that means picking out its Region type. This is usually designated by what kind of geographical features are dominant in the Region. For example, a mountainous Region would be prime for metal and stone mining. A Region close to the shoreline would be excellent for trade. Farmland, of course, is great for setting up farms. So, when you free a Region from the anarchic orkish tyranny, it's time to decide what kind of Region it is.

Rank

Like virtues, Regions have ranks. A Region's rank may be anywhere from 1 to 3; the higher the number, the better the Region. A Region's rank can be increased with Season Actions. Thus, Forest 1 (rank 1 Forest) is not as efficient as a Forest 3 (rank 3 Forest).

Also, a Region may only have a number of Holdings (we're getting to that) equal to its rank. So, a Forest 1 may only have a single holding, but a Forest 3 may have up to three.

Name

Finally, every Region should also have a name. I'm not going to force you to name your Regions, but if you don't, you'll look awfully silly when someone at a party asks you for your Region's name and you say, "Oh, Region number four."

Bad form.

List of Regions

Here's that list of Regions from the *Character* chapter again, so you don't need to go skimming back and forth.

Castle: Urban. Doesn't produce anything, but it is the center of your governing power. A Caslte is a Region—just like a Farm, Forest or Plains—and follows all the rules for normal Regions. Building a Castle costs three Lumber, three Stone and one Season Action.

Regions

Type	Location	Produces
Castle	Urban	Nothing: Nobles live here
City	Urban	Goods
Farm	Rural	Food or Industry
Forest	Rural	Food or Lumber
Hills	Rural	Metals or Lumber
Mountain	Rural	Metals or Stone
Plains	Rural	Wine or Spices (Luxuries)
Ruin	N/A	Special Bonus
Shoreline	Rural	Trade
Swamp	Rural	Herbs and Poisons
Village	Urban	Goods

City: Urban. The bigger version of a Village. Produces Goods.

Farm: Rural. Produces either Food or Industry.

Forest: Rural. Produces either Food or Lumber.

Hills: Rural. Produces either Metals or Lumber.

Mountain: Rural. Produces either Metals or Stone.

Plains: Rural. Produces either Wine or Spices (two kinds of Luxury).

Ruin: Provides special bonus (see *Ruins* below).

Shoreline: Rural. Produces Trade.

Swamp: Rural. Produces either Herbs or Poisons.

Village: Urban. Produces Goods.

Titles

At character creation, your character is a baron or baroness, in command of a single Province. But as your power and influence grow, you will find yourself in charge of multiple Provinces, increasing your Domain.

Of course, as we learned in Chapter 1, a noble's title is based on the number of nobles who have sworn fealty to him. (The ven call this "under the shadow.") So, let's take a look at those titles again and how they interact with Domains. Let's start from the bottom and work our way up.

- In order to gain the rank of Knight, a humble ven must perform noble acts and deeds in the name of a noble. Once made Knight, a Baron sets him the task of protecting a Region or more of land. One or more Regions, but not a Province. So, up to nine Regions for a Knight.
- A Baron rules a barony with at least three Knights under his shadow.
- A Count rules a county with at least three Barons under his shadow.
- A Marquis rules a mark with at least three Counts under his shadow.
- Finally, a Duke rules a duchy with at least three Marquesses under his shadow.

Because of your character's land, he gains the appropriate title. If your character owns three Provinces, he's a Count. If he owns two, he's a Baron.

Of course, your character can assign ranks lower than his own to other nobles… in exchange for favors. Barons can make knights, counts can make barons, a marquis can make counts and a duke can make marquesses.

As far as these rules are concerned, a character has full powers of his title. And, like we talked about in Chapter 1, a noble under the command of a liege owes his liege full subjugation. A liege can order his subjects as he sees fit or as they fall under the agreement between the liege and his subject.

Giving a title to another character—NPC or PC—requires a Season Action. If you want to remove a title, that also requires a Season Action. We'll detail Season Actions in a moment.

If you have a title, you have the full powers of that title. That also means you can create other nobles to assist you in governing your lands. Barons can make knights, counts can make barons, and so on up the line. What you get in exchange for making someone a knight or a baron or a marquis is between you and them. Get your diplomacy hat on.

THE SEASON

Now that we understand Regions and Provinces, let's talk about the slow progression of time.

Like we talked about before, the ven measure time in Seasons. Spring, Summer, Autumn, Solace (Winter). When you first sit down to play the game, you should start in the Spring Season. You'll play one or two adventures, then move on to the Summer Season. Then Autumn, then Winter, then back to Spring. Circles, circles, circles. Four Seasons constitute a Year and at the end of the Year, your character ages.

That's how the Seasons work. The slow and inevitable crawl of time.

Now, each Season is broken down into four phases:

1. Planning
2. Trouble
3. Action
4. Harvest

Let's take a look at each one in turn.

PHASE 1: PLANNING

For the first phase, you must decide what your Regions will be doing with their time. You write down orders for each Region, telling them what you want to grow or produce over the next few months. Here's how you plan it out.

Special Note:

Character Creation Exception

At character creation, you begin with one Resource from each Region that can produce Resources. Your Swamp gives you one Poison or Herbs. Your Farm gives you one Industry or Food. Your Mountain gives you one Metals or Stone. One Resource from each Province that can make Resources.

Regions

Each Region can take a number of different actions.

1: Resources

Order your people to produce their appropriate Resources. Because most of the Regions can grow two different kinds of Resources, you must order which one you want produced. For example, Mountains can produce both Stone and Metals. You must decide which Resource you want each Mountain Region to produce.

2: Production

The Village and City Regions have the ability to produce Goods. If a City or Village has the appropriate Resources, they can make weapons, clothing, delicacies, or just about anything else your imagination can muster. But your Villages and Cities need Resources to do it, which means they use the Resources you have on hand to make this Season's Goods. That means you can't use *this* Season's Resources for *this* Season's production. You haven't harvested the raw materials yet. That's Phase 4.

3: Other Actions

Because of Vassals or Holdings, some Regions can take special actions. Special actions do not interfere with Production or making Resources… generally. There are a few exceptions, so make sure you read about them.

Region Trouble Table

Region	Trouble
Castle	1
City	3
Farm	1
Forest	2
Hills	1
Mountain	2
Plains	2
Shoreline	1
Swamp	2
Village	2

Phase 2: Trouble

Next, determine what kind of Trouble has sprung up in your Domain. This takes a couple of steps.

Each Region in your Provinces creates a certain amount of Trouble. Use the Region Trouble Table located above.

Region by Region, roll a number of dice for each Region equal to the amount of Trouble. For example, rolling Trouble for a Farm is just one die while rolling Trouble for a City is three dice.

Roll your dice. If any dice roll a 1, that Region is *Troubled* and remains so until the Trouble is quelled.

Any Troubled Region provides no Resources, produces no Goods, or gives any other benefit until the Trouble is quelled.

You cannot build Holdings or take any actions—other than Quell Trouble—in a Troubled Region.

If you do not resolve the Trouble in your Regions, that Trouble spreads. At the beginning of the Trouble Phase, if any of your Regions are Troubled, roll an additional die for all the Regions in that Province. Swamps roll 3 dice, Shorelines roll 2 dice, Forests roll 3 dice, etc. All Regions continue rolling an additional die until you begin a Season with no Troubled Regions.

PHASE 3: ACTIONS

Next, it is time for you to take some action.

Every Season, you can take a number of "Season Actions." You can use your Season Action for the following tasks.

1. Build a Holding: Make your Regions better places by building important structures
2. Compose Opera
3. Craft Goods
4. Create Art
5. Explore a Region: Open up a Region previously unavailable to you
6. Hire a Vassal: Bring on some new hands to help you maintain your Domain
7. Make a New Contact: Make more potential backstabbers
8. Personal Training: Make yourself a better leader
9. Quell Trouble: Get rid of pesky brigands, orks and other bothers
10. Region Development: Improve a Region's work rate
11. Research Sorcery: Gain more illegal knowledge
12. Transport Resources & Goods: Move around valuables
13. Vassal Training: Give your followers more skills

An action represents a long-term goal your character has set in motion. It may even take more than one Season to accomplish.

Your Actions

Your character gets *one free action* per Season. Then, bonus actions.

Your character gets a number of bonus actions equal to your character's Cunning divided by 2, rounded up.

For example, Shara's Cunning is 3. She gets one free Season Action plus a number of bonus actions equal to her Cunning divided by 2, rounding up. Shara's Cunning is 3, so she gets 2 bonus actions. See the chart below if you don't want to do the math. (And Bad Form for being so lazy.)

Cunning	Bonus Actions
1	1
2	1
3	2
4	2
5	3

Vassals, Allies & The Wedding Bonus

Some Vassals can do bonus actions for you. Really. Look for the Vassals later in this chapter for what they can do. They can quell troubles, boost production, increase harvest. All kinds of things.

You have a number of Vassals at your command. Spies, craftsmen, sheriffs. Each Vassal can take a single action of his own, but Vassals are much more limited than you. You're super cool. Them, not so much. I mean, your Vassals do rock, but not in the same way you do.

Each Season, each Vassal can take a number of actions equal to her rank. A rank 1 Vassal can take one Action, a rank 2 Vassal can take 2 Actions, and a rank 3 Vassal can take 3 Actions. See the list of Vassals below for exactly what your people can do for you.

Also, if you wish, another character can take actions in your Domain. He can send his own Vassals to perform their actions or even take on the action himself. It costs an *additional* action to help another noble in his Domain.

An important exception to this rule. That's your spouse. If you have a spouse (husband or wife), your spouse can spend actions for you in your Domain as if he or she was you. Yes, she can do anything you can do.

This is "the Wedding Bonus." And for all you unmarried dukes, barons, and earls, I have a bit of advice for you. Go get hitched.

Stories

Now while all these Seasonal actions are going off, you and your noble circle are taking care of business in other arenas. Possibly a week at a neighboring noble's castle, possibly hunting orks in your troubled mines, possibly trying to get the Lady D'Avergnalle's secret diaries so you can blackmail her out of a yearly tribute of spice and wine. These events, these adventures, are called *Stories*.

Each Season, your character gets to participate in up to three Stories. Those familiar with roleplaying games call them "adventures." I guess I could have called them adventures, too, but I wanted to use a term that was more accurate. A story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Resolution. I like that. So, I'm using "story."

Each character gets up to three Stories per Season. That's about enough time. Maybe a little too much, maybe a little too little. Maybe just enough to make you worry you're not getting enough done. I hope so. That means I'm doing my job.

Your Narrator may determine that some Stories may take an entire Season to complete. Or maybe you can get in a whole series of really short Stories. What it comes down to is that there's never enough time to get everything you want done.

Phase 4: Harvest

Harvest represents the gathering of resources from the beginning of the Season. This is where all your plans pay off. Anything you planned on during the last Season comes to fruition in the Harvest phase. Each part of the Harvest phase occurs in a specific order, so pay attention.

Collect Resources

First things first. You can now use all the Resources and Production from *the beginning of the* Season.

Most Regions produce at least one Resource. It could be Food or Metals or Spices or something else. Add up all your Resources generated by Regions.

Once you've determined how many Resources you have, you can add them to your Castle Stores. This protects them from rotting away at the end of the Year. Each Castle can hold a certain amount of Resources. A Small Castle (like yours) can hold three. A Large Castle can hold six. A Grand Castle can hold nine. Any Resources you harvest for the Season that you do not use by the end of the Year (through production, storage or trade) are lost. They rot away or otherwise become useless.

Improvement

Second thing. Personal Improvement (see "Actions," below) occurs *after* you collect Resources.

This Season, you decided to use one of your actions to make yourself a better leader. You identified one of the things on your sheet you wanted to improve and you set yourself to improving it. That's great. This is the time you get to erase the old and busted number and write down the new hotness.

This is also the part where anything else you improved—Regions, Vassals, etc.—gets upgraded. So, if you set your Spy Master to training or built a shrine or explored a wild Region, all of that hard work pays off now.

Espionage

Finally, this is also when all your spies come home to roost. Espionage actions are the last actions to resolve each Season.

Resources

Regions provide Resources, but how do you use them?

Each Resource has special uses. Let's take a look at each one.

Food: Your Vassals need to eat. If you can't even feed your Vassals, there's no way you can keep followers. Food is the prime Resource: it keeps the whole system running. Without Food, your entire Domain falls apart.

Herbs: Herbs are used for Sorcery. Without Herbs, your character cannot use any Sorcerous rituals.

Industry: Industry represents bolts of cloth, leather tanning, knitting, weaving and all the other things that make clothing. Without Industry, your ability to make Goods is severely limited. Without Goods, your ability to bank additional Style decreases dramatically.

Lumber: Along with Stone, Lumber is essential in constructing Holdings, your Castle and expanding your Domain. Without it, your Provinces cannot grow.

Luxuries: The two Luxury Resources—Spices and Wine—make your people happy. They increase Loyalty of both your Regions and your Vassals. Luxuries count *double* for increasing the Loyalty of Vassals.

Metals: You need Metals to make weapons for yourself and your Vassals. Without Metal, you cannot maintain the upkeep on certain Personal Guards and Swordsmen. Also, certain Goods cannot be completed without Metals.

Poison: Poisons are used for discreet murder. Poison is also used to make antidotes to protect you against the assassination attempts of others.

Stone: Stone is essential for building Holdings. Without Stone, your Provinces cannot benefit from Temples, Wineries, or Universities.

Trade: A Region with Trade may change one Resource for another. This is its Season Action. Changing Metals for Wines, Poison for Stone, etc. Because this is the Region's Season Action, you must use pre-existing Resources: Resources from a previous Season. Also, you cannot use the traded Resource *this* Season, but must wait for *next* Season. Trade is not a Resource and cannot be stored.

Actions

Here is the complete list of everything your character can do as a Season Action. Pay close attention. This is worth half of your final grade.

Build a Holding (Stone and Lumber)

You may use one of your own actions to build a Holding. Holdings are special buildings that modify a Region. You can build Shrines, Way Stations and other structures that modify one of your Regions.

Making Holdings

Holdings require one Lumber and one Stone. Each Holding also requires two Seasons to complete.

A Region may only have one Holding under construction at a time. Also, no more than one Season Action may be devoted to any Holding. That means you can't rush a Holding by throwing actions at it.

For example, Shara wants to build a Library. The Library requires one Lumber, one Stone, and two Seasons. Shara has 3 Season Actions, but she can only devote one of them at a time to a specific Holding. That means she has to use two Seasons to build her Library.

Meanwhile, Shara also wants an Opera House. Again, she can only use one Season Action per Season to build her Opera House, but because she's building both an Opera House and a Library, she can spend one Season Action per Holding.

Number of Holdings

A Region may only have a number of Holdings equal to its rank. For example, a Shoreline 1 may only have a Port, but a Shoreline 3 may have a Port, Shrine and Way Station. Also, Regions may not have more than one kind of a Holding. For example, that same Shoreline 3 can have a Port, Shrine and Way Station, but it can't have two Ports. Only one of each kind of Holding per Region.

Art Gallery (Castle)

Benefit: An Art Gallery adds one rank to any Art you create. It allows you to throw showings of great Art. See *The Party*, below.

Dam (Plains, Forest, Farm, Hills, Shoreline, Swamp)

Benefit: Region can now produce Food. Thus, building a Dam on a Plains allows that Region to produce Wine, Spices and Food. If Region currently produces Food, it may produce 1 additional Food per Season.

Game Reserve (Forest)

Benefit: Your Forest produces one extra Food per Season. You may also hold Hunts. See *The Party*, below.

Garden (Castle)

Benefit: Once per Season, you can use your Garden to add two dice to a Beauty-based risk. A Province may have only one Garden.

Garrison (any Urban Region)

Benefit: Increases Security by 1. Roll one less die for Trouble in this Region (minimum 0).

Gymnasium (Castle)

Benefit: Once per Season, you can use your Gymnasium to add two dice to a Strength-based risk. A Province may have only one Gymnasium. You may only add two dice to any roll this way.

Marketplace (City)

Benefit: Building a Marketplace makes it easier for your people to get the things they need. The City may now produce Trade (change one Resource for another).

Mine (Mountains or Hills Only)

Benefit: Mines make it easier for your people to produce Metals and Stone. Any Region with a Mine may produce an extra Metal or Stone per Season. If your Region produces Metal, it produces two Metal. If it produces Stone, it produces two Stone.

Opera House (City or Castle)

Benefit: The great and grand Art. You may sponsor Operas. See *Compose Opera* below for more information.

Port (Shoreline or City)

Benefit: Ports make it easier for you to trade with other nobles. Once per Season, your Port provides you with a free Season Action to trade Resources with another noble.

Road (any Rural Region)

Benefit: Roads connect your Regions together, making it easier for your Vassals to get back and forth. Roll one less die for Trouble in this Region (minimum 0).

School of Etiquette (any urban Region)

Benefit: Once per Season, you can use your School of Etiquette to add two dice to a Cunning-based risk. A Province may have only one School of Etiquette. You may only add two dice to any roll this way.

Shrine (any Region)

Benefit: Building a Shrine to a particular suaven increases the people's knowledge of that dreaming ven. When you build a Shrine, you must specify a Suaven and have a Relic of that Suaven. When you call upon that suaven for a risk, you never need to spend Style to do so. Relic listed in the requirements for this Holding does not add to the number of actions needed to build it, but you must find the Relic to build the shrine. See *Suaven* for more on Relics.

Silo (Farm)

Benefit: You can store up to 3 Resources in a silo.

Stadium (City)

Benefit: Stadiums provide your people with entertainment, making them happy and keeping their minds away from their miserable lives. Increase your Province's Loyalty by 1.

Swordsman Academy (any urban Region)

Benefit: Once per Season, you can use your Swordsman Academy to add two dice to a Prowess-based risk. A Province may have only one Swordsman Academy. You may only add two dice to any roll this way.

Temple (any urban Region)

Requires: To build a Temple in a Region, you must first have a Shrine there for at least one Year. It must also be built in an urban Region (Village, Town or City).

Benefit: Constructing a Temple for one of the Suaven not only makes your people happy, but also provides you with valuable insight from the invisible world. The Temple increases your Region's Loyalty by 2 (replacing the Shrine's benefit). Also, as one of your Season Actions, you may visit the Temple. For each Temple you build, increase your Devotion to that Suaven by one rank (maximum 5).

Theater (any urban Region)

Benefit: You may now sponsor Plays. See *The Play* below for more information.

University (any urban Region)

Benefit: Once per Season, you can use your University to add two dice to a Wisdom-based risk. A Province may have only one University. You may only add two dice to any roll this way.

Warehouse (City)

Benefit: You may store up to 5 Resources in a Warehouse.

Winery (Plains)

Benefit: Once per Season, you can use your Winery to add two dice to a Courage-based risk. A Province may have only one Winery. You may only add two dice to any roll this way.

Conquer a Region

You may, as a Season Action, attempt to conquer an enemy's Region. You do this in the following way.

First, you must spend an Espionage Action to look at your enemy's Regions. You can see a number of your enemy's Regions equal to the rank of your Spy Network. A rank 1 Spy Network can use a Season Action to look at one Region. A rank 3 Spy Network can use one Season Action to look at three Regions.

Looking at Regions gives you the following information:

- The Region's rank.
- The Region's Improvements.
- If any Vassals are in the Region.

Even if you can accomplish this through roleplaying (an adventure/story), you still need to spend a Season Action to do it. Your Spies need the information, need to bribe the right officials, need to put everything in place. Because this requires a Season Action, you must use your *next* Season's Action for the next step.

Second, you must send your Personal Guard in to the Region and occupy it. Every Season your Guard spends in that Region, that Region's Loyalty diminishes by a number of ranks equal to the Personal Guard's rank. So, a rank 2 Personal Guard destroys two ranks of Loyalty per Season. While you occupy the Region, neither of you can use that Region for any Season Actions. Cannot command it to make Resources, cannot use it to store Resources, cannot use it for Trade, cannot use it to make Items, cannot do *anything* while your Personal Guard is there. All he can do is send in his own Personal Guard to kick them out.

Only one Personal Guard may be in any Region at any time. If a second Personal Guard tries to invade a Region (a Season Action), the two Guards roll a number of dice equal to their rank. Whichever Guard rolls higher wins and the loser is kicked out. The loser also forfeits one rank because of casualties.

When I say only one Personal Guard may remain in a Region at a time, that includes your own Personal Guard as well. You cannot send two Guards to conquer a Region. However, I should point out that a Secret Army can perform any Season Actions a Personal Guard may perform and does not count as a Personal Guard.

Finally, when the Region's Loyalty rank equals zero, that Region is yours. It begins with a Loyalty rank equal to the rank of your Personal Guard. It becomes the first Region in a new Province.

Remember: Spy Networks cannot use the Assassinate Vassal Season Action on a Vassal Band. This means they cannot Assassinate Personal Guard, Roadmen, or Spy Networks. They *can* sabotage Season Actions that increase the rank of those Vassals.

The Swordmaker

Of course, the most noble Craft of all is the making of the only weapon noble enough to grace the hand of a ven. Swordmakers are a distinguished class in Shanri. Set above all other Craftsmen, the Swordmaker, the King of his kind.

When making the weapon, a Swordmaker's wagers can increase the rank of the weapon, providing two important bonuses.

First, a ven can bank style in the Sword, a number of style points equal to the rank of the weapon.

Second, during a duel, a ven gains a number of bonus dice equal to the rank of the weapon. But there's a catch here.

No ven noble would ever dirty his hands with labor, but a few study alchemy and blacksmithing just to have the Wisdom to recognize a good Swordmaker from a Master.

Craft Goods

(Goods are not Art. They are beautiful, but they are not Beauty. Still, they follow the same rules for Art (below), so I've included them here as a kind of "bastard child" of Art.)

Craft. That incredible hat. That magnificent sword. Those shoes!

Goods are useful items such as boots and hats. Utility. Something that may be used.

Nobody uses Art.

Thus, making Goods is for lesser folk, and not for the likes of ven nobility. Delegated to the Villages and Cities of Shanri, there are precious few ven nobles who even know how these things get made. However, since *someone* has to be making all of this for the ven, might as well include the rules.

Note: usually, Villages and Cities will be making Goods. Pretty easy. The Villages spend Season Actions and the Goods get made. But there's always the possibility of a Vassal becoming an NPC, and that provides the opportunity for dice rolling.

Beautiful items bank Style. Keeping these items around allow you to bank Style into them. That hat. That sword. And yes, those shoes. One Style per rank.

Goods are handy because you can carry them with you. That means you can carry the Style with you. That rank 3 hat banks three Style. That rank 2 cloak banks two Style. And those rank 5 Shoes… you get the point.

But fashion is fickle and it's ever so easy to overdo it. So, be careful. You can only wear a number of Goods equal to your Beauty.

Create Art

One of the primary long-term goals of just about any ven is the creation of Truth. A lasting and telling statement about the condition of life. A tribute and memorial to your own existence.

Art.

The purpose of Art is to demonstrate the sublime: that which cannot be communicated by language alone. The ven call this *ylthalir*. "That which cannot be said, only touched for a moment."

When your ven makes Art, he undertakes a long and arduous journey toward ylthalir. A number of Season Actions resulting in something exquisite.

There are many kinds of Art to explore. Music, Painting, Sculpture, Poetry, Drama, Pillow Books. And, of course, Opera.

Creating Art is a Season Action, and while the different kinds of Art have different effects on you and those who view it, all Art is created the same way. Endurance, patience, dedication, passion.

Here's how to make enduring acts of Beauty, step-by-step.

Step 1: The Risk of Creation

Art requires Beauty. It's a Beauty risk which means if Beauty is your weakness, you will have to work harder to create anything of substance.

First, declare your Season Action. "Create Art."

Second, gather one Resource appropriate to your Art. Sculpture requires Stone or Metals. A carving requires Lumber. A Banquet requires Food. (Yes, Banquets are Art. If you disagree, you haven't been to a proper Banquet. Bad for you.)

If you cannot think of an appropriate Resource, use a Luxury. After all, Wine seduces the muse.

Third, make a Beauty risk against the standard target number, 10. Use any Aspects or other bonuses you can muster. If you like, you may make wagers. Wagers increase the Potential of your Art. We'll discuss that in a moment.

If you make the risk, you've created rank 1 Art. A rank 1 statue or a rank 1 poem or rank 1 opera.

If you do not make the risk, you have failed. Failed to create something of lasting truth, failed to capture the inspiration that gripped you. Failed.

You may try again next Season.

Step 2: Refining the Sketch

Art begins as an idea. A rough idea. The fevered Artist responding to the first fires of inspiration. His fingers still smoldering from it, he rushes to create, to capture the initial heat.

A successful Beauty risk and Season Action create rank 1 Art. A sketch. An idea, put down on paper. Unrefined but still inspired. Still a work of Beauty.

But now it is time to refine that initial rush of creativity. To add depth. To add meaning. To add Beauty.

While you have a rank 1 Art, your wagers determine the Art's *Potential*. This is how many ranks it can have if you refine it further with additional Season Actions.

You may make a number of *additional* Season Actions to your Art, each one increasing the rank of the Art. You may only spend one Season Action per Season on a work of Art. You can't rush genius.

Each additional rank also requires an additional Resource. Again, use Resources appropriate to the Art.

You may not increase Art beyond its Potential. If you made three wagers to make a sculpture, the highest rank your sculpture can be is 4. One rank for the initial success of defeating the target number and three more ranks for the wagers you made.

Step 3: The Reveal

Finally, when your Art is finished, it is time to show it off.

You can show off Art at any social event, but you really want to show it off at the biggest, most audacious event you can find. You'll see why in a moment.

When you first reveal your Art—the formal showing—you get a number of Style Points equal to your Art plus the rank of the Party. So, if you were to show off your rank 4 statue at a rank 3 Party, you gain a total of seven Style Points.

Also, Art can bank Style equal to its rank. Again, your rank 4 statue can bank 4 Style Points. These Style Points may only be used by the ven who owns the Art.

Another bonus. Art should always inspire others, driving their own passions, inspiring their own desires. You may give your Art an Aspect. Any Aspect you like. Those who view your Art may spend a Style point to gain that Aspect. The invoke for the Aspect gives any who give up a Style gives them a number of bonus dice equal to the rank of the Art. Again, for your rank 4 statue, you could say the statue is meant to inspire courage, and as such, any who look upon it may gain a free Aspect called "Dauntless." The Aspect gives them

4 bonus dice whenever they must make a Courage risk against orks. The Aspect loses one die per Season. Also, a ven cannot be inspired by the same Art twice.

Finally, when you reveal your Art, you gain a bonus as well. Your Art gives you a number of bonus dice equal to its own rank. These bonus dice may be used in any risk involving your honor, honesty or reputation. Fame. This bonus decreases by one die per Season.

A little Cunning, hidden by the veil of timid weakness, is all I need to fell my enemy.

Compose Opera

Creating a lasting Opera is the goal of all artists. Like other works of Art, composing an Opera takes time and Resources.

Each Season you spend writing an Opera requires a Luxury, one other Resource, and a Season Action.

A successful Opera focuses on one or more of the Seven Fools (remember them?). Write a one paragraph description of your Opera (if you want to write more, nobody is stopping you), but be sure to include which of the Seven Fools are the key characters of the Opera.

Every rank of the Opera allows one of the Fools to be a key character. Anyone who sees the Opera can spend a Style point to take the *free Aspect* of one of those key characters, listed below. The Aspect loses one rank per Season.

You gain a number of bonus dice for these Aspects equal to the rank of the Opera. As usual, the tag is worth two dice.

The Actress

The Actress rises up through ven society through some sort of Art. She comes from humble beginnings, but convinced by the praise of others, she loses sight of those beginnings.

Invoke: You gain bonus dice when lying about your intentions.

Tag: Another ven gains bonus dice when confronting you in public.

Compel: Another ven can make you act in a way that draws attention to yourself.

The Dowager Duchess

The Dowager Duchess is a woman (or man) who is advanced in age, but refuses to acknowledge the inevitable grasp of Solace. She acts like a young woman until the cruel truth of the world comes knocking on her door, and finding her unprepared, she faces death, losing the sleep of Solace forever.

Invoke: You gain bonus dice when flirting with younger ven, convincing them of their own vanity.

Tag: Younger ven (of your own gender) gain bonus dice when competing with you for another ven's affection.

Compel: Another ven can make you flirt or make promises to handsome young men or women, depending on your own tastes.

Hide your ambition. A secret blade is always more dangerous than one worn on the belt.

The Husband

The Husband is often portrayed as the neglectful spouse. He is often male, although he has been portrayed as female on rare occasions (and equally rare success). His undoing is underestimating his wife's (or husband's) desires for independence and happiness.

Invoke: You are driven by ambition, and as such, gain bonus dice when you are trying to convince others to assist you in expanding your own Domain.

Tag: Without knowledge of how to relate to others, except in terms of your own ambition, another ven can tag this Aspect to gain bonus dice on any risk that does not involve increasing your lands or power.

Compel: Another ven can make you choose your own ambitions over friends or family.

The Rake

The Rake is unmarried, either male or female, looking to rise through society through romantic conquests. His undoing is his own shallow heart and misunderstanding of the sacredness of love.

Invoke: Gain bonus dice whenever you are attempting to seduce ven already in a marriage or a Romance.

Tag: You have no interest in a Romance that is not in some way a challenge. Another gains bonus dice by tagging this Aspect when you are dealing with a ven who is not already romantically involved.

Compel: You must have her! You must! Another ven can spend a Style point to compel you to chase married or otherwise romantically linked ven.

The Swordsman

His prowess unmatched, he walks the streets of Shanri unafraid, taking all challenges. This is the Swordsman. Arrogant, and proud of it, he refuses apology, demanding the sword answer all threats to his honor. All of which, of course, lead to his undoing.

Invoke: Gain bonus dice in any duel.

Tag: You overlook that you do not want to see. Another ven can spend a Style point to gain bonus dice when trying to deceive you… especially when that deception encourages your already bloated ego.

Compel: Another ven can spend a Style point to make you refuse to apologize or otherwise back down.

The Wife

The Wife is demanding, selfish and proud; the things that allowed her to reach the pinnacle of society. Unfortunately, these same qualities are her undoing.

Invoke: Organization is the key to your success. Gain bonus dice when organizing others.

Tag: Vanity is your weakness. Another can spend a Style point to tag this Aspect, drawing on your vanity. They gain bonus dice when trying to convince you of your own brilliance.

Compel: You must control any situation that influences your life. Another ven can spend a Style point to make you try to command a situation even if it is only marginally related to you.

The Wise Man

The character of the Wise Man is one of the least popular subjects in ven opera. Of all the Fools, his tragedy seems the most difficult to make compelling to a ven audience. Most Artists see the Wise Man as a challenge, attempting to make this character into high Art. Most fail. Neglected for decades, it seemed the Seventh Fool would fall from grace… until one Artist succeeded to such a degree, all his following work was said to pale in comparison.

Invoke: You gain bonus dice whenever you are giving advice or teaching another ven a lesson.

Tag: While you have a great deal of experience in books and Art, your "real world" experience is limited. Another can tag this Aspect to gain bonus dice in physical risks.

Compel: You feel a need to involve yourself in any mystery. Another ven can compel you to investigate even the most dangerous situations as long as you feel you have something to learn from it.

Explore

You may, if you choose, expand your Domain beyond its borders by exploring the uncharted archipelagos of Shanri. There are many lands the ven know nothing about. Conquering these lands is an opportunity for adventure, discovery and knowledge. And, of course, Resources.

Conquering Your Own Domain

First, before you can explore outside your own Domain, you must first bring your own under control. You cannot explore *outside* your own Domain until you have completely explored all ten Regions of your starting Province. Once all ten Regions are brought under heel, you may begin exploring outside your beginning Province.

When you created your character, you started off with a number of explored Regions. Mountains, Plains, etc. You may have as many as seven, eight or even nine Regions explored, but until you have all ten, you cannot explore outside your starting Province.

As we talked about above, wild Regions have no infrastructure, no taxation, and no means for you to draw income and resources. By using one of your actions, you lead a brave band of personal guard down to that Region and set it straight, converting it from a wild Region to a civilized Region.

The outcome of this action allows you to determine the Region's type, turning a wild Region into Farmland, Mountains, Plains, or whatever suits your fancy. (Not a Village, City or Castle. You have to build those.) The effects of this action take place in the Harvest.

Expanding Your Domain

You can also explore outside your own Domain, expanding from one Province to two, from two to three, from three onward. Exploring outside your Domain requires a Season Action.

You may only explore outside your Domain once you have ten Regions under your command. Ten Regions = one Province.

Regions outside your Domain can be fortified and improved, but you only gain a second Province once you explore ten additional Regions. At least one of those Regions must be a Castle. Building a Castle costs three Lumber, three Stone and one Season Action. So, building a Castle is exactly like exploring a new Region, except it costs you Lumber and Stone on top of your Season Action.

Once you have twenty Regions (two Provinces, two Castles), you can begin expanding into your third Province. Each new Province requires at least one Castle to be considered a complete Province.

Exploring Ruins

Ven can find Artifacts and Rituals in the Ruins of the sorcerer-kings. Once per Season, a band of brave ven can venture into a Ruin in search of trinkets and other baubles left behind by that doomed race.

Only a PC may explore Ruins. He may bring NPCs and Vassals along with him, but he must do it himself. For the rules on finding Artifacts and Rituals, see the *Sorcery* chapter.

You will never know your own Strength until you test it.

Hire a Vassal

You can also hire a Vassal: an individual (or group) that helps you rule your land effectively and efficiently.

Vassals require upkeep. That is, at the end of each Year, you have to pay them or they leave your service. Payment comes in the form of Resources. You must pay each Vassal at least one Food per Year. Additional Resources pay for the Vassal's Loyalty. The more you pay the Vassal, the less likely that Vassal will leave you for a bribe. See *Bribing Vassals* in Espionage Actions later in this chapter.

Vassals can also take Season Actions. These actions are very limited, however, and sometimes involve an element of risk. In other words, sending someone else to do something you should be doing yourself.

Like Virtues, your Vassals also have ranks. The greater a Vassal's rank, the more capable he is. When you hire a Vassal, he begins your service at rank 1. If you want to increase your Vassal's rank, see *Vassal Training* Action below.

MAKE A NEW CONTACT

Your ven can make a new Contact from a character he met from one of his adventures. This requires a Season Action.

Contacts give you three important advantages.

First, you gain one free Season Action in a Contact's Domain and may use it as if the Domain was your own. You may only spend one Season Action per Contact per Season in this way.

Second, protecting a Contact gives you two bonus dice for risks. You have to spend a Style Point to get this advantage.

Finally, you may spend Style Points to refresh a Contact's Aspects.

Vassals cannot make Contacts. No, I do not mean player characters who happen to own land from bigger nobles. I mean Spy Networks, Heralds, Maids and other Vassal types.

PERSONAL TRAINING

Personal Training allows you to add elements to your character sheet.

You may use a Season Action to learn an Advanced Maneuver (see *Revenge*).

I said this in the *Revenge* chapter, but it's worth saying here, too. You can use a Season Action to teach another ven a Maneuver. You can only teach up to the rank you know, so you can't teach someone how to Parry unless you have at least one rank of that Maneuver. The instructor spends the Season Action, not the pupil. (If you find yourself in the position of teaching other ven Advanced Maneuvers, you'd better make sure it is someone you can trust and you'd better make *damn* sure you get a favor out of it.)

You can also spend a Season Action to add an Aspect to your sheet.

Each Phase has a number of Aspects you gain for entering that Phase. Two for Spring, three for Summer, four for Autumn, five for Winter.

You may learn a number of additional Aspects equal to your Wisdom divided by two, rounded up. No Wisdom? No bonus Aspects.

QUELL TROUBLE

You can also spend a Season Action to quell trouble in one of your Regions. Spending your action in this way gets rid of all the trouble. All of it.

Remember, if you begin a Season with any Troubled Regions, roll an additional die to determine Trouble in all other Regions in that Province. Swamps roll 3 dice, Plains roll 3 dice, Farms roll 2 dice, etc. Also, you can take no Action in a Troubled Region other than Quell Trouble.

Region Development

You can also spend a Season Action developing a Region. If you develop a wild Region, you get to assign a type to that Region (Forest, Plains, Mountains, etc.), but you cannot gain any benefit from that action until it is fully developed. That happens, of course, during the Harvest Phase of next Season when it becomes a rank 1 Region.

Developing a civilized Region increases that Region's rank by one. You cannot increase any Region's rank by more than one rank per Season.

Villages and Cities require special attention, so they get their own section just a little bit further down the line.

Research Sorcery

Researching sorcery requires a Season Action and 1 Herbs. See *Sorcery* for more information on how you can learn sorcerous Rituals.

Transport Resources & Goods

You may also use a Season Action to transport Resources and Goods to other Domains or to other Provinces within your Domain.

Transporting Resources and Goods to other Domains costs one Season Action.

Transporting Resources and Goods within your own Domain, but between Provinces also costs a Season Action.

You may, as a free action that does not count against your normal Season Actions, transport one Resource or Goods to a Contact. One Resources/Goods per Contact per Season. If you have three Contacts, you can move three Goods/Resources this way.

Vassal Training

You can also spend a Season Action improving one of your Vassal's abilities. If you spend a Season Action on one of your Vassals, that Vassal's rank increases by one. A Vassal's rank may not be increased beyond three.

Increasing a Vassal's rank costs a number of Season Actions equal to the Vassal's next rank. Thus, increasing a Vassal's rank from 1 to 2 costs two Season Actions. Increasing your Vassal's rank from 2 to 3 costs three Season actions. You may only put one Season Action to increasing a Vassal's rank per Season. In other words, you cannot spend one Season Action to increase your Vassal's rank, then have your Seneschal do the same. One Season Action per Season.

VILLAGES & CITIES

Metropolitan areas like villages and cities require a little more attention than standard Regions. So, let's take a look at them.

Villages

Like other Regions, you can spend a Season Action to establish a Village. You need to spend one Season Action to do so; also, 1 Lumber and 1 Stone. A Village is a small community of farmers, craftsmen and tradesmen, usually located near a river or another large body of water. As a Region, Villages are responsible for *Production*: turning Resources into Goods.

Turning Resources into Goods usually only takes one Season. Because Actions take place before Harvest, you can only use the Resources you harvested *last Season* to produce Goods *this Season*. Any Goods produced this Season will be "harvested" as usual at the end of the Season.

Like other Regions, Villages have ranks. Rank 1 Villages can only make simple Goods. As the Village increases in rank, it can create more sophisticated and stylish Goods.

A rank 1 Village has one Craftsman. He can produce one Good per Season. A rank 2 Village/Craftsman can create two rank 1 Goods per Season. He can also spend two Seasons to make one rank 2 Good. A rank 3 Village/Craftsman can create three rank 1 Goods or spend two Seasons making one rank 2 Good or spend three Seasons making one rank 3 Good.

The rank of a Village is also indicative of its size. A rank 3 Village is much larger than a rank 1 Village. As the Village grows, the Craftsman grows. Whenever the Village gains a rank, its Craftsman gains a rank as well.

A Village's size is also the limit on how good your Craftsmen are. You cannot have a rank 3 Craftsman in a rank 2 Village, for example. The size of the Village is the top rank of the Craftsman in that Village.

A Village may only have one Craftsman.

Growing a Village takes one Season. It also requires one Lumber and one Stone. You can use a Season Action to increase the size of the Village or the Village can use its own Season Action to increase its size. If a Village grows, it can do nothing else but grow. No production. The Village is considered "grown" at the end of the Season.

A Village cannot grow larger than rank 3. To grow further means the Village becomes a City.

Cities

A City is a great asset to any lord. Much more productive than any Village, a City is the first true sign of high culture.

To create a City, you must transform a rank 3 Village into a sprawling metropolis. This requires 3 Lumber, 3 Stone and 3 Luxuries. The changeover takes place at the end of the Season.

Cities are automatically assumed to be rank 4. A City may have as many Craftsmen as ranks, although it cannot have more than one Craftsman per rank. In other words, a City may only have one rank 4 Craftsman, one rank 3 Craftsman, one rank 2 Craftsman, and one rank 1 Craftsman. All of them may take individual Season Actions, changing Resources into Goods.

If you wish, you can also hire a Mayor for your City. The Mayor requires one Food per Year. Mayors can be bribed, but they can also use Season Actions to quell Troubles. And Cities cause a lot of Trouble (as seen on the chart above).

A City can also have a Port and Warehouses. Ports create Trade, allowing the Port Master to change one Resource into any other Resource as a Season Action and a Warehouse allows you to store 5 Resources at the end of the Year.

Vassals

Vassals represent other (lesser) ven who serve you and help further your goals. Most nobles expect some sort of vow or promise of loyalty from a Vassal, but not all. Those who do not, we call them "fools."

By the way, if you want to create special titles for your Vassals, go ahead and do so. Just remember: the ven veil everything in pleasant titles. An Apothecary is more likely to hold the title "Master of Flowers" than "Poison Master," for example.

(I'm personally fond of "High Lord Protector" myself.)

Of course, some ven can't help but make a spectacle of themselves. Just beware the consequences.

Vassal Bands & Master Vassals

Before we begin, we should mention two "special" kinds of Vassals: Bands and Masters.

A Vassal Band is a group of ven working together to perform a job. Vassals like your Roadmen, Spy Network and Personal Guard are Band Vassals.

Master Vassals, on the other hand, are particular ven who have risen through the ranks, proving themselves above all others. These are Master Vassals. Master Vassals are NPCs, fully equipped with complete character sheets: Virtues, Aspects and the rest. You may only hire a Master Vassal after fulfilling the listed requirements.

As a rule, Spy Networks and Spy Masters may not use the "Assassinate Vassal" Espionage Action on Vassal Bands. Likewise, Master Vassals may not be bribed with the "Bribe Vassal" Espionage Action.

VASSAL RANK

Each Vassal begins at rank 1, however, through training (Vassal Training), you can increase your Vassal's rank to rank 2 and even up to rank 3.

At rank 1, your Vassal has one Aspect. You can choose this Aspect; I highly recommend choosing an Aspect appropriate to your Vassal's duties. At rank 2, she has two Aspects. At rank 3, she has three Aspects. Then, finally, when you spend that last Season Action, your Vassal becomes a full-fledged NPC.

Artisan

Creates Art to decorate your home and inspire your fellow ven. See *Create Art* Season Action below.

There are many different kinds of Artisans, each a specialist in his own field. You must pick a specific area of expertise for each Artisan.

Apothecary

Your apothecary creates potions and poisons, treatments and toxins. He uses his Season Action to create one dose of Poison or one dose of Narcotics. He can alternatively use his Season Action to make you immune to one Poison.

Caravan

The caravan moves Resources from place to place, dodging Trouble whenever they can.

Your caravan may use their Season Action to move Resources.

Court Scholar

Deals with all supernatural threats to your Domain, counters any belligerent sorcery, and makes sure no (other) sorcerers practice their illegal craft in your lands.

Your court scholar may use his Season Action to research a new sorcerous ritual. He may research a number of rituals equal to his rank. See *Sorcery* for more information.

Craftsman

A Craftsman can create Goods. The rank of the Craftsman determines the quality of the item. In other words, the Craftsman's rank equals the Quality of the Item.

Craftsmen are part of Villages and Cities. Every Village has one Craftsman equal to the rank of the Village.

You may, if you wish, hire a Craftsman to work in your Castle. You may only have one Craftsman in your Castle. His rank cannot be higher than the rank of the Castle.

See *Cities and Villages* for more information.

General (Master Vassal)

A General leads Secret Armies. Of course, you would never think of violating the law and raising such a thing, now would you?

When your Secret Army reaches rank 3, you may spend a Season action to train a General: an NPC to lead your troops. Your General is an NPC and may have Virtues, Aspects and Advanced Maneuvers just like every other ven.

See *Violence* and *Conquer* (below) for more information.

Herald

Notifies your people of your will and news of the day. Also delivers propaganda—I mean "messages"—to your neighbors.

Your herald may use his Season Action to raise the Loyalty of any Region by one rank. He may not increase any Region's Loyalty by more than one rank per Season.

Your Herald can also make an attempt to lower a neighbor's Loyalty by one rank. Roll your Herald's rank in a contested risk against the current Loyalty of the foreign Region's Loyalty. If your Herald rolls greater than the Region, its Loyalty goes down by one rank.

Maid/Valet

Stands by your side and helps you with mundane tasks.

Women have maids. Men have valets. And they let you bank Style. Like a walking Item of Quality. Your maid/valet's rank equals the number of Style Points you can bank in them.

As long as your Maid/Valet is in the same Castle or Region as you, you can draw from the Style they bank. They don't need to be next to you all the time.

When a Maid or Valet becomes an NPC, they can still bank Style for you (up to three), but they gain the added benefit of having character sheets.

Master of the Road (Master Vassal)

When you increase a rank 3 Roadmen to the status of NPC, you gain a Master of the Road.

The Master of the Road is a full-fledged NPC with Virtues and Aspects. The Master of the Road deals with orks and other rural bothers in your Domain. Your master of the road may use his Season Actions to quell any trouble in one rural Region.

He can also perform the Explore Regions Season Action for you, assisting in expanding your Domain.

Master Spy (Master Vassal)

When you increase a rank 3 Spy Network to the status of NPC, you gain a Spy Master.

The Spy Master is an NPC, complete with Virtues and Aspects. He may add to your Spy Network's Espionage Actions as a character. See *Espionage Actions* for more information.

Mayor

You need a City before you can have a Mayor.

Your Mayor quells trouble in a City. He can also store 2 Resources per rank when the Winter comes. Thus, a rank 2 Mayor can store up to 4 Resources at the end of the Year.

Personal Guard (Band Vassal)

Personal Guard increase your personal safety.

Like the Spy Network and Roadmen, your Personal Guard come in packs of ten. Each rank of Personal Guard counts as ten guards dedicated to your safety. This provides you with ten ven willing to die to protect you, but it also provides you a degree of safety during Mass Murder scenes.

Personal Guard may learn Advanced Maneuvers. You may train them as you would train any other ven. Personal Guard may also use their own Season Action to learn a Maneuver.

Roadmen (Band Vassal)

Roadmen (knights) wander the countryside solving problems and quelling trouble.

Like the Spy Network and Personal Guard, Roadmen come in packs of ten. Each rank increases their number by another ten.

Secret Army (Band Vassal)

Make no mistake. Raising an army in Shanri is illegal. A threat to all other nobles. If caught, you may be forced to wear the black for a very, very long time. Perhaps even executed. But, if you like playing close to the edge, here you go.

Every Province may have one Secret Army. Like other Vassals, your Army begins at rank 1 and can gain in rank with Season Actions. Only you or your Seneschal may train your Army. Of course, your spouse as well. An Army may only have a rank equal to the number of Farms in your Province.

Each Season, you must choose a Region where you hide your Secret Army. If an enemy performs an Espionage Action on your selected Region, they may very well find your Army. Evidence of such an army could lead to your character's death.

Like other Group Vassals, once your Secret Army reaches rank 3, you spend one more Season action to hire a General to lead them.

Secret Armies can take any Season Action your Personal Guard can take.

Each Province may have only one Secret Army. See the *Violence* chapter and *Conquer Region* for more.

Seneschal (Master Vassal)

When you increase a rank 3 Staff to the status of NPC, you gain a Seneschal.

Your Seneschal can use his Season Action to quell trouble anywhere in your Domain. He may also use his Season Action to increase the rank of any of your Vassals. Finally, your Seneschal may also increase the ranks of your Regions.

Sheriff

Maintains law and order in your Domain.

Your sheriff can use a Season Action to quell trouble in any urban Region in your Domain. He gains a number of Season Actions equal to his rank.

Spouse

Your Spouse is not really a Vassal—try ordering around your real life significant other and find out what happens—but the Spouse is listed here for reference. A Spouse can take *any* action a character can; 1 Action per Season. He grows in strength and competence like any other Vassal.

Spy Network (Band Vassal)

Increases the security of your own Domain and helps "investigate" other Domains.

Like the Roadmen and Personal Guard, your Spy Network comes in a pack of ten spies. Every rank increases their number by ten.

Your spy network can perform Espionage Actions. See *Espionage* below for more information. Your spy network gains a number of actions equal to their rank.

Staff (Band Vassal)

Staff maintain your Castle, make sure everything is put in its proper place. Your butler, maids, cooks, and other lesser servants fall under this Vassal.

If you have Staff, you never have Trouble in your Castle.

Also, they assist you in throwing Parties. You can only throw a Party with a rank equal to your Staff's rank. See *Parties*, below, for more information.

PCs as Vassals

If you like, you can assign other PCs as your Vassals. Of course, this probably requires some blood and signatures. Doing so is a Season Action.

By holding that Title, the player ven gains one bonus Season Action which may only be used in your own Domain and may only be used to fulfill his duties. In other words, if you assign the Title of Master of the Road to another player ven, he gains one bonus Season Action he may use to quell Trouble in your Domain or explore an a new Region.

You must fulfill the qualifications for the Title in order to bestow it. In other words, you still need a rank 3 Spy Network to have a Master Spy.

Swordsman (Master Vassal)

When you increase a rank 3 Personal Guard to the status of NPC, you gain a Swordsman.

Your Swordsman is an NPC, complete with Virtues and Aspects, and may take Season Actions to assist your Personal Guard. He can also accept duels for you. See *Violence* for more information on duels.

Your Swordsman can use his Season Action to add to the Security of you or any of your other Vassals. He adds a number of Security ranks equal to his Prowess. See *Security*, below.

Finally, a swordsman can teach you a Maneuver as a Season Action. He may not teach you more than one Maneuver per Season.

Turning Vassals into NPCs

When you first create a Vassal, he's little more than dice. He probably has a name, but other than that specific detail, you may know absolutely nothing about him.

You can change that.

The highest rank a Vassal can have is 3. No more. But you can turn a rank 3 Vassal into a full-fledged NPC with Virtues, Aspects, and everything. You'll be using Season Actions to do it, and like most things, you can only spend one Season Action per Season developing your Vassal. Here's how you do it.

First, you need a rank 3 Vassal. He should probably have a name. No, scratch that. You *can't* make him an NPC without a name. That'd be silly.

Second, spend a Season Action to make him an NPC. Once he's an NPC, he has Virtues and Aspects and everything else you have. You know, like personal ambition.

A Vassal has a number of Season Actions just like you do. He has one Season Action, plus bonus Actions based on his Cunning. Finally, because he has a Title (Master Spy, Master of the Road, etc.), he has one free Season Action that may only used to fulfill his duties in your Domain.

Loyalty

Loyalty is how much your people trust you. The higher your Domain's Loyalty, the more faithful your followers are and the more they are willing to do for you when it counts. The higher your Domain's Loyalty, the more efficient it becomes.

Your Domain's Loyalty depends on your actions as its liege. If you treat it fairly, your Domain's Loyalty stays steady. If you act like a despot, your Domain's Loyalty decreases. If you treat your people better than expected, your Domain's Loyalty will increase.

Your Domain's starting Loyalty is 1.

Your Vassals also have Loyalty. Paying them well keeps them close to you. Treating them without the respect they believe they deserve turns them into Traitors.

We'll discuss both kinds of Loyalty below.

Sharing Vassals

Or, "My Wife, the Master Spy."

This came up in one of the playtest sessions. One player had a Vassal (a Master Spy) and another player wanted to marry the Vassal. The question arose: is the Vassal a Spy Master or a Wife? Or both?

Generally, a Vassal should belong to only one player… unless the other player is using bribes to lure the Vassal away from the first player.

Luxuries

Luxuries are the key to Loyalty.

You may use Luxury Items (Spices and Wine) to increase the Loyalty of your Domain. You may, as a Season Action, give a Province as much Spices and Wine as you can, thus throwing luxury on your people, thus increasing their love of you, thus increasing your Domain's Loyalty. There are two ways to do this. You can give Luxuries to Regions or to an entire Province.

Giving three Luxuries to a Province increases the Province's Loyalty by one rank.

Giving one Luxury to a Region increases the Region's Loyalty by three ranks.

5 Loyalty

If any of your Regions reaches 5 Loyalty, it produces one free Resource at the end of the Season. Of course, this must be a Resource the Region can normally produce, but it does not have to be the same Resource it is already producing this Season.

Coastal Regions produce one extra Food.

Castles, Cities, and Villages produce one extra Luxury.

If at least half the Regions in a Province have 5 Loyalty, your people love you so much, Espionage Actions against you lose effectiveness. Your Province's Security increases by one rank.

10 LOYALTY

If any of your Regions reaches 10 Loyalty, it produces two free Resources. Same rules as above. To be clear, a 10 Loyalty Region produces a total of two free Resources (not three).

If at least half the Regions in a Province reach 10 Loyalty, your Province's Security increases by two ranks. (That's one additional rank on top of the 5 Loyalty bonus.)

VASSAL LOYALTY

Your Vassals also have Loyalty. Their base Loyalty is equal to the Vassal's rank. Thus, if you have a rank 2 Vassal, that Vassal's Loyalty is 2.

NPC Vassals do not have Loyalty. Because they are "characters," their motivations are driven by plot, not by systems.

As long as you pay a Vassal his Yearly due (usually at least one Food), his Loyalty will remain equal to his rank. If you give a Vassal gifts (Luxuries), you can increase that Loyalty. If you give a Vassal one Luxury, her Loyalty increases by one. Additional Luxuries increase the Vassal's Loyalty by one rank per Luxury.

Seducing Vassals away from their masters is an Espionage Action, covered below.

ESPIONAGE

Certain Vassals—your Spy Network and the Master Spy—are capable of *Espionage Actions*. These allow you to spy upon and sabotage other Domains. Espionage actions are dangerous. You can easily lose your Vassal if they are caught, or worse, have your Vassal turn on you, becoming a traitor in your midst.

To be clear: you cannot perform Espionage Actions without a Spy Network. And remember: if you don't have a Spy Network, you can't have a Master Spy.

ESTABLISHING ESPIONAGE ACTION RANK

Espionage Actions are usually handled by your Spy Network, creating an Espionage Action with a rank equal to the rank of your Spy Network. For example, a rank 2 Spy Network generates a rank 2 Espionage Action. But three characters may also perform Espionage Actions in your Domain: you, your Spouse, and your Spy Master.

You, your Spouse or your Spy Master may also use their Season Action to aid your Spy Network in sneaky undertakings. When player characters and NPCs participate in

Espionage Actions, add your Cunning to the Spy Network's rank to generate the rank of the Espionage Action.

A character with a rank 4 Cunning creates a rank 4 Espionage Action. If the character has Aspects or other bonuses that are appropriate, he may add them to the rank of the Action.

For example, if your character has a 3 Cunning and you aid your Rank 2 Spy Network in an Espionage Action (using your own Season Action to do so), you generate a total rank of 5. 3 Cunning + 2 Spy Network = 5.

Just to be clear: using your Season Action to assist your Spy Network does not replace your Spy Network's Season Action. Adding your own Cunning to an Espionage Action costs you your Season Action and your Spy Network's Season Action, costing a total of 2 Actions; one from both you and your Spy Network.

From now on in this chapter, when I refer to a PC or NPC adding to an Espionage Action, I'll use "The Spy Master" to indicate that. By "The Spy Master," I really mean you, your Spouse or your Master Spy.

Only one Spy Master and one Spy Network per Espionage Action. Too many spies and you get them stumbling all over each other. It's the dark clothing, you know.

Default Security Rank

A Province's Security rank is equal to the rank of the Spy Network assigned to that Province. For example, if you have a rank 3 Spy Network, the Security rank for your Province is 3. This is free. Your Spy Network does not have to take any action to establish this default Security rating.

Also, you may only have *one* Spy Network operating per Province.

If you do not have a Spy Network, the Security of your Province is zero.

Your Spy Network may spend one of its actions to increase the Security of your Province by its own rank for the Season.

For example, Lady Shara's Spy Network (the Dranna Crew) is rank 2. Her Province has a default Security rank of 2. If her Spy Network spends one of its Actions to increase the Security of Shara's Province, the Province's Security goes from 2 to 4. Her Spy Network's Season Action adds its own rank to the Security of the Province, effectively doubling it for the Season.

Cunning shows us the faults of others.

Wisdom shows us the faults within ourselves.

Loyalty and Security

When your Province's Loyalty reaches rank 5, the Province's Security increases one rank. Thus, if your Security is rank 2 (because your Spy Network is rank 2), and your Loyalty is rank 5, your Security increases to 3.

Although Loyalty increases the Security of a Province, it *does not* increase the Spy Network's rank. So, let's look at an example of that.

Shara's Spy Network is rank 2. The Security of her Province is also rank 2.

She manages to increase her Loyalty of all Regions to rank 5. That means her Security increases to rank 3. Her Spy Network is still rank 2, so if the Spy Network spends one of its Season Actions to increase the Security, it still increases the Security of the Province by 2.

So, Security 3 (2+1).

Spy Network adds its rank to 3, making the Security of the Province a 5, not 6.

Just to make it clear, the Loyalty bonus increases the Province's Security rank, not your Spy Network's rank.

Spying on Foreign Provinces

In order to accomplish any Espionage Action against a foreign Province, your Spy Network must overcome the Security of the foreign Province. To do that, your Spy Network must make a contested risk against the Security of the foreign Domain.

Your Spy Network rolls a number of dice equal to its rank. The Province rolls a number of dice equal to its Security.

If your Spy Network defeats the Security of the Province, you gain the information you sought.

If your Spy Network does not defeat the Security of the Province, they learn nothing.

And remember, **The Spy Master** adds his own Cunning to any attempts to spy on Domains, but he must use his own Season Action to do so. For example, if a 2 Spy Network and a 2 Spy Master attempt an Espionage Action on a foreign Province, the action rolls four dice instead of just two.

Espionage Actions

Listed below are all the Espionage Actions available to your spies. Read through them carefully and don't get too excited. Remember, your enemies can do anything you can do… and can probably do it better.

Timing

You submit an Espionage Action during the Action Phase. That's Phase 3. The result of successful Espionage actions occurs at the end of the Season, during Phase 4: Harvest.

Assassinate Vassal

Straight out killing another Domain's Vassal is dangerous work that can only be accomplished by a coordinated effort between the Spy Network and the Spy Master. Assassination is a Season Action that requires four contested risks.

Both the Spy Master and the Spy Network spend a Season Action. Then, undertake the four contested risks.

- First, you must determine the location of the Vassal. This requires an Espionage Action against the Security of the Province.
- Second, if the spying action is successful, the Master Spy (not the Spy Network) can make an assassination attempt. This requires another contested risk against the Security of the Province.
- Third, the Master Spy must make a contested risk against the rank of the Vassal. Vassal rolls his rank, Spy Master rolls Cunning (plus bonuses). If the Spy Master wins, the Vassal dies. If the Vassal wins, the Vassal survives.
- Fourth, the Spy Master must escape. He must make one last contested risk against the Security of the Domain, but this time, he must do so as if the local Spy Network has used their action to Increase Security. Again, if he succeeds, he escapes. If he does not, he is captured.

By the way, just in case you're wondering, you cannot use a Season Action to assassinate another player character. That's phoning it in. No Style. Bad form. You have to do that kind of work yourself.

Bribe Vassal

You can also woo away Vassals from your enemy's Domains. You must give the Vassal a number of Luxuries equal to at least *double* the Vassal's rank.

Roll the rank of the Espionage Action against the rank of the Vassal.

If the Vassal rolls higher, he remains Loyal. If the Spy Network rolls higher, the Vassal's Loyalty decreases by one rank. Any Vassal with a 0 Loyalty is a Traitor.

You must bribe the Vassal with a number of Luxuries equal to at least double his rank. Each additional Luxury adds one rank of Loyalty lost or 1 bonus die to the attempt.

Now, let's talk about "Traitors."

If you make an enemy's Vassal a Traitor, you have a few options.

You can choose to steal a Traitor, making him one of your own Vassals in your own Domain, or you may choose to leave him where he is, acting as a double agent.

As a double agent, you get to see all Season Actions your enemy gives that Vassal. For example, if you make a Traitor of your enemy's Court Scholar, you get to see all the actions the Court Scholar has been ordered to make.

NPC Vassals cannot be bribed by a Season Action, but can be bribed as part of a Story.

Cause Trouble

You can use your Espionage Action to sabotage another Domain's Resource production. You do this by causing Trouble.

Like most Espionage Actions, your Spy Network rolls against the Province's Security to do so. If successful, the Region is in Trouble.

Increase Security

(We've talked about this up above, but it's good to have it listed with the Espionage Actions as well.)

A Spy Network can increase the Security of a Province. If you decide to have your Spy Network increase Security, add the Spy Network's rank to the current Security rank.

Only one Spy Network may be assigned to a Province (they just get in each other's way; this is called "The Too Many Ninjas Rule").

The Master Spy may spend his own Season Action to add his Cunning to the Province's Security as well. Both the Spy Network and Spy Master may take this action, adding both ranks to the Province's Security.

Increasing Security has an additional benefit. If any Espionage Actions fail while you have used your Increase Security action, there is a chance the spies will be caught.

Any Spy Networks or Master Spies who fail an Espionage Action while Increase Security is in effect must make an Escape Risk. They must roll against the Security Rank of the Province *again*.

If the Spy succeeds, he escapes, but his rank is decreased by one.

If the Spy fails, he is captured and the presiding liege of the land may do with the Spy as he sees fit.

If an NPC is captured, he is also at the mercy of the lord who captured him. Most Blooded ven will not be killed—that's just bad form—but instead will be ransomed back to their own lord. See *Revenge* for more information about this ven tradition.

Widsom is the only shield against Cunning. Be watchful and ready for the knife is never seen until too late.

Interrogation

You may also choose to investigate your own Vassals. Why would you do this? Because they may be Traitors, of course! (See *Bribe Vassal*, above). Spying on your own Vassals is not a contested risk: you roll no dice and are automatically successful.

As an Espionage Action, the Spy Network/Master Spy may investigate a number of Vassals equal to his Cunning.

When you spy on your Vassals, you automatically know any of the ones you name in the Action have turned Traitor.

Once you've discovered a Traitor, you must eliminate the Traitor. Treason is a crime, after all. Spying? Not a crime. Treason? Oh, hell yeah.

Death to all treasonous scum! An assassinated Traitor is replaced with a similar Vassal at one rank lower than the Traitor. Thus, a rank 3 Herald who has turned Traitor and assassinated for his crime will be replaced by a rank 2 Herald.

If you kill a Master Vassal (Spy Master, Seneschal, etc.), you must spend a Season Action to train a new Master Vassal.

Sabotage a Holding

You may also choose to sabotage Holdings in rival Domains. To do so, you must know the Holding exists or is under construction. You cannot blindly send in a Spy to sabotage something you do not know is there. Thus, in order to perform Sabotage, you must have successfully performed an Espionage action that informs you the Holding actually exists.

If successful, this Espionage Action destroys the Holding completely, even if it is still under construction.

The Cunning man plays the Fool, always allowing his enemy to see what he wants him to see.

Spying on Regions

You may choose to use your Spy Network to spy on foreign Regions. If successful, you discover a number of the following facts equal to your Spy Network's rank:

- what Resources the Region is producing this Season
- what Holdings the Region has (complete or under construction)
- the Security of that Region
- the Loyalty of that Region
- if the Region holds a Secret Army

You choose. You may learn a number of the above facts equal to the rank of your Spy Network. If your Spy Master participates in the action, you may add his Cunning to the rank of the Action.

Spying on People

You may also choose to use your Spy Network to investigate people from other Domains. This includes player characters, Vassals and NPCs. If successful, you find out:

- what Season Actions the character made this Season, or
- one of the character's invokes, tags, or compels, or
- discover the rank of one of the target's Virtues

You only get one regardless of your Spy Network's rank or your Master Spy's Cunning.

Tyrant

Blood from a turnip? That's easy. You just need the right vise.

This is an Espionage Action only a Spy Master can perform. You may, if you wish, crush the hopes and dreams of your people, forcing them to work beyond normal means. You may squeeze a number of Regions equal to one plus your Cunning, forcing each Region to produce an additional Resource, but those Regions' Loyalty automatically lowers to 1.

Conquer

When danger comes to call, the Courageous man smiles and embraces it like a long lost friend.

You are a noble. A ven noble. Ambitious to a fault. You cannot be satisfied with the small parcel of land you currently have. You must have more. Expand. Conquer. Thrive.

If you want to conquer an enemy's Region, you must do so in a series of steps.

First, knock an enemy Region's Loyalty to zero.

Second, use your Personal Guard's and/or Secret Army's actions to occupy the Province. If his own Personal Guard is currenty in the Region you want to conquer, you must make a contested roll to knock them out. Rank vs. Rank.

Make a contested risk: his Personal Guard's rank vs. your Persona Guard's rank. Whoever rolls higher wins. A tie means the Region is still contested. The loser is knocked out of the Region and loses one rank.

Remember: only one Personal Guard may occupy a Region at a time. The enemy Personal Guard is trying to knock yours out. If they fail, yours remains and the Region is yours. Also, Secret Armies do not count as Personal Guard, so they may augment your Personal Guard if you wish. Your opponent may also use his Secret Army to augment his own Personal Guard.

At the beginning of next Season, if your Guard is still stationed in the Region, it is yours and the Region has a Loyalty equal to the Personal Guard stationed there. Your Personal Guard may take no action the following Season: they're too busy maintaining safety. Once that Season passes, the Guard may leave.

Thus, if you conquer a Region in Spring, you must remain there all Spring and Summer, leaving in the Autumn.

If your enemy uses his Spy Network to determine your forces are actually an Army rather than Personal Guard, the consequences could be dire. You may also use your own spies to determine if any Armies are used.

End of the Year

Another important date. The End of the Year.

And, oh yeah, you should know something. Winter sucks.

The winters in Shanri are awful. Cold and terrible. Almost vengeful. As if Winter was Shanri's opportunity to rid itself of the ven. Ah, but Spring will come soon.

Soon…

In Winter, the ven mark the end of the Year by looking back at their accomplishments and defeats. And throwing outrageous parties.

But more importantly, each and every one of them take one more step toward Solace.

Age

On your character sheet, you'll find a space for Age. When you created your character, you were instructed to roll one d6 and write that number there. It is the end of the Year. Time to add to that total.

At the End of the Year, each ven rolls one d6 and adds those Age Points to his Age.

When your ven's Age reaches 60 Points or higher, your character advances to the next Phase of his life. Spring to Summer, Summer to Autumn, Autumn to Winter, Winter… to Solace.

Once you reach 60 or higher, erase that total. You now have zero Age Points. At the end of next Year, roll 1d6 and write down your roll in that spot.

Sex & Children

Okay, since we're talking about long term plans, we have to talk about children.

Any sexual encounter between a male and female ven presents the opportunity for pregnancy at the end of the Season.

The players involved both roll a die. If both roll a 1-2, 3-4, or 5-6, the woman gets pregnant. That is, if both players roll a 1 or 2; or if both players roll a 3 or 4; or if both players roll a 5 or 6. That makes a 33% chance of intercourse resulting in pregnancy. Two ven can also use a Season Action (one for each) to produce offspring. That way, you don't have to roll.

Pregnancy lasts one Season. That's it. Three months after the act, you've got bouncing baby ven. Also, the mother adds one die of Age Points to her character sheet. And don't they grow up fast? Ven children grow quick enough, but in their literature, the ven take quite the liberty with a child's age. It seems just a few short years after they are born,

children are running around on both feet. A few years after that, they're as old as teenagers, getting in trouble with their elders, joining the vast political games.

This is a literary device, of course. A cheat. An excuse to get the kids involved as fast as possible. But it may have also been a function of the sorcerer-kings wanting their slave race to grow quickly so they could get to work right away. Whatever the case may be, this game is dedicated to presenting the ven as they appear in their literature, and not in the light of historical fact. And so, in accordance with keeping to that tradition, the rules for children growing up will do just that.

Assume children age at double the rate human children do. That is, in two years, a ven child will be the equivalent of a four-year old. At six years, twelve. At eight years, sixteen.

At the age of sixteen, the character can enter play as a rank 1 Vassal, Son or Daughter. Make the usual rolls for Age as a ven adult, outlined in the section above.

A Child (rank 1 Vassal) has one Season Action. He can take any Action you can—just like a Spouse. But, he's still a rank 1 Vassal. He needs training to become an NPC. Children train just like all other Vassals. One Season at a time. As soon as your Child Vassal becomes an NPC, he gains Virtues, Aspects and everything else. Even his own Vassals. All he's missing is land of his own.

And who do you think will give it to him?

Loyalty

After Winter, in the new Year, the Loyalty of each Province drops by 1d3 ranks. Roll 1d6 and divide the result by two (round up). All your Regions lose this much Loyalty.

Spoilage

At the end of the Year, you may move all your unspent Resources into storage. Your Castle, Silos, Mayor and Warehouses all store Resources.

Any Resources you cannot store are lost: they were used to repair existing structures during the harsh Winter, used for bribes, stolen or spoiled. Either way, they are gone.

The Winter Parties

At the end of each Year, the Houses throw parties. A way to spend all the excess Resources they've gathered and prepare for the cold embrace of Winter.

Each House throws its own party, but who throws the parties are always a subject of politics. Will Duke Willer throw this Year's party? His party last Year was *amazing*, but Count Kether's initiations are breath-taking!

Phase to Phase

When your character passes to a new Age Phase (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Solace), he has a few choices to make.

Name

You may, if you like, change your Public Name. Changing who you are. Changing your Destiny. Taking on a new path. You can never change your Secret Name.

Aspects

When you move to a new Phase, you also gain new Aspects.

Spring to Summer: gain two Aspects

Summer to Autumn: gain one new Aspect and one Solace Aspect.

Autumn to Winter: gain one new Aspect and two new Solace Aspects.

Contacts

You also get to make a new Contact. Choose any ven you like.

Friends

At the end of a Phase, you may choose a single Contact to become a Friend.

A Friend is one step above a Contact, someone whom you trust… to a certain degree. Remember, the ven word for "friend" literally translates as "the one who can hurt me."

Having a Friend gives you a significant advantage. When making a contested risk with a Friend, if your Friend is the victor, you are not considered defeated. This means you always keep all your wagers when rolling a contested roll with a Friend, as long as one of you is the victor.

Having a Friend also gives you a significant disadvantage. Whenever he takes any risk that may endanger you or your relationship, he gains three bonus dice.

Solace

Winter Phase. You've reached 60 Age points at the End of the Year. Time for your character to enter Solace. You can find out more about this event, and becoming a suaven, in the *Suaven* chapter.

Althua: The Party

In our own language, "party" is a little word. Perhaps a better word could be "event." "Occurrence." "Occasion." But "party" somehow seems too small. The ven word, "althua" has two meanings. One is what we're talking about. Gathering, get-together, festivity. But the word has another meaning.

Althua. Where romance begins and revenge ends.

Every Season, ven throw parties. They throw small, private parties and huge raucous, indulgent bashes. Food, drink, sex, dancing, flirting, singing, sex, hunting, duels, bloodshed, sex, revenge.

Throwing parties is a significant affair for the ven. Most last at least a week, sometimes stretching even longer. The greatest parties were said to last an entire Season, although we may have to attribute those to the ven habit of extravagant exaggeration.

As a Story, your character can throw an *althua*. There are a few benefits to do so and a few benefits for others to attend.

First, we have to determine the rank of your Party. Party rank, of course, is the degree of size, sophistication and Style you can summon for your guests.

The Staff

The size of your Party depends on your Staff and their ability to feed your guests.

You may only throw a Party equal to the rank of your Castle's Staff. Rank 1 Staff, rank 1 Party. Rank 2 Staff, rank 2 Party. You get the idea. The maximum size for a party is rank 3 unless you have a Seneschal. Then, and only then, can you throw a rank 4 Party.

You can *only* throw a rank 5 Party if your Beauty is rank 4 or higher and you have a Seneschal.

The Banquet

Ven Parties are notorious for their debauchery, so in order to maintain that level of decadence, you had better be able to feed them. This depends on the Banquet.

Banquets are a special kind of Art. And, like I said before, if you don't think food is Art, you've never really eaten anything but McDonalds.

Creating a Banquet for guests is not a Season Action. It is part of preparation for a Party.

He who speaks of the Virtue of moderation hasn't the Courage to embrace joy.

The Banquet requires Food, Wine and Spices. You need all three. A combination of these three gives you a rank 1 Banquet. A rank 1 Banquet can feed your guests for one night. Rank 2 can feed them for two nights. Rank 3 for three nights. You see where this is going.

So, your Banquet determines the length of your Party and your Staff determines the size. The length of your Party is important because it tells you how many Events you can have (see below).

GIFTS

In order to attend a Party, every noble guest must bring a Gift.

The Gift must be a physical object. While you may make a Gift of a song (a thoroughly honorable Gift), the guest must present the host with a physical copy.

The Gift must be of equal rank to the Party. No more and no less. Rank 2 Party, rank 2 Gift. Presenting a smaller Gift is an insult to the host, showing a level of contempt, saying "You don't deserve a bigger Gift." Presenting a Gift of more value also insults the host, showing a level of condescension, saying "Your Party is too small for the likes of me."

So, if you are going to throw a Party, make sure you announce it well ahead of time. Most Parties are thrown in the Winter, but announced in the Spring, giving nobles the opportunity to create beautiful Gifts worthy of the host's hospitality. Other Parties are regular affairs, occurring at the same time every Year, so nobles can plan ahead and provide the most suitable gift for the host.

TRADE

First and foremost, going to a Party allows you to trade freely with anyone at the Party. Usually, shipping Resources costs Season Actions. If you're at a Party, you can trade freely a number of Resources with other ven equal to the rank of the Party. That is, you can swap up to five Resources with other ven, depending on the Party's rank. Rank 1 Party, one Resource. Rank 3 Party, three Resources.

Romance

Parties are great places to begin Romances. So great, in fact, you get a huge bonus for doing so.

When you begin a Romance at a Party, add the Party's rank to the Romance's potential. For example, if you begin a rank 3 Romance with another ven at a rank 3 Party, add three to the Romance, making it a rank 6 Romance.

You can read more about Romance in its appropriate chapter.

Duels and Revenge

While most ven have to wait for the Senate to declare Revenge or sanction duels, ven law allows for such activities at "any significant gathering of nobles." Yes, that means Parties.

If at least six nobles are gathered in one place, one for each House, they may make an ad hoc Senate, providing the jury for any duels or declarations of Revenge.

Events

A host must entertain his guests, so every Party needs Events.

An Event is a significant happening at the Party. A hunt, an opera, a play, games of chance, debuts of great works of Art. You may have a number of Events at your Party equal to the rank of the Party.

Listed below are the most common Events at Parties and the benefit for your ven if she should choose to attend. All Events have a Prerequisite: something you need in your Castle before you can schedule such an Event.

Also, you may only have one event per day. So, if you have a one night Party, you can only have one Event.

Art Show

Prerequisite: Art Gallery (Holding)

Revealing new Art at Parties is a huge affair. It gives the artist an opportunity to show his Art for the first time for a huge audience, giving him the opportunity for a massive amount of Style. See *Create Art* above for more info.

The Hunt

Prerequisite: Game Reserve (Holding)

Going out on Hunts is a popular pastime for the ven. Of course, nobles don't go out on their own: they bring Personal Guard with them just in case the party *does* run into orks. While on the Hunt, and for the rest of the Party, any ven gain the Aspect "Hunter." Any ven can spend a Style point to keep the Aspect for a number of Seasons equal to the Party's rank.

Hunter (Free Aspect)

Invoke: gain three dice when tracking an enemy or bringing down an enemy you've tracked.

Tag: no tag

Compel: no compel

The Opera

Prerequisite: Opera House (Holding)

The great and grand most sacred and holy Art. Holding an Opera at your Castle is the pinnacle of all Events. Of course, you need someone to *write* an Opera, and then you need an Opera House to put on the Event. But all that is more than worth it.

Like Art (above), Operas give those who see them Aspects and give the composer Style Points equal to the rank of the Opera and the rank of the Party. See *Compose Opera* above for more info.

The Wager

Prerequisite: rank 2 Castle

Like most other things, the ven don't gamble, they Gamble. Make Wagers. A Wager is a bet between two or more ven on a (seemingly) random outcome. Wagers made between ven are only legally binding if made under the shadow of at least three ven from different Houses. At least one of the three must be from a House uninvolved in the Wager. Winning such a Wager not only gets you what you bet against the other ven, but also a number of Style Points equal to the rank of the Party.

While this may seem like a trivial affair, the ven do not see it as such. A wager isn't just a bet. It's a Wager. Two nobles putting their reputations on the line for a matter of opinion. Oftentimes, nobles will arrange such Events with the host, scheduling the Wager in advance. Only one Wager may be made per night. Making a second or a third only cheapens the ritual.

Ruins

A special kind of Region, Ruins provide the ven with a source of danger, a test of true Courage. They provide no Resource but Adventure. No reward but the forbidden secrets of the sorcerer-kings.

Each time your ven explore a Ruin, it increases by one rank. Once a Ruin reaches rank 3, either you, your Spouse or your Seneschal can spend a Season Action to convert it into a normal Region (Forest, Plains, Mountains, etc.) or it can be converted into a Puzzle House.

The Puzzle House

A Puzzle House provides no Resources for you, but it does add one rank to any Parties you throw there. Puzzle Houses can hold any rank of Party, even rank 5 Parties.

A Puzzle House is difficult to navigate, requiring a contested Wisdom risk against the House. The House always rolls six dice for the risk. Ven roll against the House as soon as they try exploring its twisting, turning halls.

If the ven wins the roll, he may use his wagers to remember how to get to specific rooms. The House loses half its wagers, but may use those wagers to force the ven to get lost in the halls during a Story. This means the House can force the ven to any room it chooses, regardless of the ven's intention.

If the House wins, the same rules apply above, but reversed. The ven loses half his wagers, but may use them to remember how to get to specific rooms he visits and the House can use its wagers to force the ven to get lost in the halls.

Season Bonuses

Each Season provides a specific kind of bonus for your ven. Here they are.

Spring

All Romances created in Spring gain a one rank bonus. Any Art created in Spring gains one additional rank of Potential.

Summer

One Region per Province makes an additional Resource.

Autumn

All PC nobles gain one additional Season Action.

Winter

All Regions roll one additional die of Trouble. Winter sucks.

Common Questions

Can I make my Province all Plains? Or all Forests? Or even all Ruins?

Of course, but you will suffer the consequences. It's best to have a wide variety of Resources to provide you with enough Food and Stone and Lumber so you can take full advantage of the system.

Can I have more than one Personal Guard? Or more than one Seneschal?

Generally, you may only have one kind of Vassal per Province. For example, you can only have one Master of the Road, one Spy Master, one Seneschal per Province. Increasing the rank of your Spy Network, Personal Guard and Roadmen gives you more of that kind of Vassal, and assigning them multiple Season Actions represents dividing up your Vassals into separate groups to do separate things.

Do I have to feed my wife?

No, you don't have to feed your Spouse. The system assumes she gets fed at the same table you do. On the other hand, your Spouse can be bribed, so consider whether or not you want to Spice up that Food.

Does my Castle have Loyalty?

Yes, your Castle is just like any other Region. It has both Loyalty and Security.

Can two nobles live in the same Castle?

No. If you have two Barons or Counts or even Dukes living in the same Province, they each need a separate Castle.

Can I upgrade Art?

Specifically, the question is, "Can I turn a rank 1 Art into a rank 2 Art?" The answer is, "No." This is called "Lucasism." The overwhelming desire to keep tinkering and tinkering with a masterpiece until you "get it right."

Bad form.

I find those who tweak existing Art to "make it better" only make it worse.

Han shot first.

Can my Seneschal hire a Seneschal?

No. One Seneschal per Province.

And don't do that again.

Can my other Vassals have Vassals?

I assume your Vassals *do* have folks who help them do their jobs. So, no, your Vassals don't need Vassals because they have vassals.

If you want your Seneschal to have a Personal Guard of his own, make him an NPC so he can own Vassals.

What if I hire a Vassal, don't pay him, and just hire another one to replace him? Don't I save Food that way?

Yes, you save Food that way. You also never get anything other than a rank 1 Vassal while everybody else's Vassals are moving toward NPCs. You're going to be having a lot of trouble with your 1 Spy Network going against an NPC with Cunning, Aspects, Suaven and other bonuses.

If I'm a Count or a Marquis, can I assign a Baron to my home Province?

Certainly, but you still need a place to live. You need a Castle to provide you a base of operations. Remember, no two nobles can live in the same Castle at the same time.

Why does Winter suck?

Because it does. I don't know, I didn't make it that way.

Ok, yes, I did. I guess I'll explain why.

Remember, the word the ven gave to the world around them means "the Enemy." That's what "Shanri" means. The ven really believed the world was sentient and out to get them. Winter was the world's last ditch effort, spending all Year mustering up for those three dark months, just so it could throw misery and death at the ven. All the misery and death it could save through the Year.

Winter sucks because the game is about recreating ven literature. Ven literature is explicit on winter. It is the time when most ven die. Thus, Winter sucks.

Can Vassals and NPCs have Style Points?

No and yes.

Vassals do not have Style Points. They're just numbers on a sheet. They may have names, but they're still just Vassals, not important enough for Virtues or anything else.

NPCs are just like your ven. They have Aspects and Virtues and everything else. That includes Style Points.

This raises another question…

Can I give NPCs Style Points?

Of course you can. If an NPC (the Narrator) does something cool, you can give that NPC Style Points.

And yes, that even means NPCs you hate. Good form.

Can I Use Season Actions during an Adventure?

Yes. Save a Season Action or two. If you run into a situation where another noble needs help, you can use your own Season Action to assist.

Of course, that means your new best friend owes you a favor. Make sure to get it in blood.

Can My Spouse Train Me?

Yes! Your wife can make you a better husband. Good form.

Isn't Exploring Easier than Conquering?

Yes, it is. But conquering an enemy's Region accomplishes two things.

First, conquering an enemy's Region gives you a fortified, expanded and developed Region. If you are going to conquer an enemy's Region, don't take something from him that he can get back with one Season Action. Don't take that little rank 1 Farm, go after the rank 3 Farm with the Silo. Exploring a new Region gives you a rank 1 Region completely free of any improvements. Conquering an enemy's Region gives you something bigger, better and more useful.

Second, conquering an enemy's Region hurts him. He spent all those Season Actions building up that Region to where it is today. Now, he's going to have to go after you to get it back. After all, he can't really complain about it can he? Bad form, cry baby.

Where's the Armor?

The ven don't wear it. I've found *no reference* to armor in any ven literature. Not even a reference showing a ven character mocking another ven for his cowardice—his fear of death.

No armor.

Can We Roleplay Conquering Regions?

You certainly can. Use the Mass Murder rules.

Can I hand my Goods and Art down to my heirs?

Of course you can! That's the whole point!

Can my Wife and I both have our Personal Guard with us?

In *Conquering Regions*, I mentioned that only one Personal Guard may occupy a Region at a time. This is only in the case of Conquering a Region. For story purposes, if you want to bring your Guard with you, feel free to do so. I won't limit you that way.

But for Conquering Regions, only one Guard can hold a Region at a time.

What is Industry?

Industry is cloth, silk, wool, leather and all the other materials we use to turn into clothing. You cannot make clothing without Industry. You also cannot make tapestries, rugs, carpets and anything else that demands cloth or its cousins. Industry is often consumed as the resource required for making both Craft and some types of Art.

What Good Are Friends?

A player asked me, "Having a Friend doesn't seem like that big a deal. Keeping all my dice in contested risks? When would I do that except when I'm trying to kill him (or he's trying to kill me?)"

All risks involving two or more ven are *contested risks*… even when the ven are working together. Let's say you and your friend are trying to lift a heavy rock blocking the exit to

a Ruin. You both roll and one of you is the victor, even though both of you are working together. That means only one of you gets to keep all his wagers. With a Friend, *both of you* get to keep *all* your wagers.

That's what a friend is good for. Especially when you two are trying to kill each other.

Does a conquered region add to a Province I have or a new one?

Either actually, unless your Province already has ten Regions. You cannot add more Regions to a Province with ten.

Can I split a Province in half and add to each by exploring/conquest?

No. Once a Province has ten Regions, it is set.

Is my Spouse an NPC at game start?

No. Your Spouse is a rank 1 Vassal, just like your others. You may choose to spend three of your five points to move him closer to being an NPC if you like.

If I make someone an NPC, do I choose his stats?

Frankly, that's really up to you and the Narrator. When I run the game, I take suggestions from the player, but I create the NPC. I let the player say Three Things about the NPC and if it's important, I also let them state what the highest Virtue is and what the weakness is. Additional details may cost Style Points.

Can My Character have Multiple Titles?

Yes. You may one title—Baron, Duke, Marquis—and a number of additional titles equal to your Wisdom.

What do I do if I don't like province management?

Don't do it. Hire someone else to do it for you. That can be an NPC (the Narrator) or another ven. What a trusting soul you are.



Our luck was with us upon this discovery. The key was in the lock, allowing us to glimpse inside with no damage to the box. The knife was found resting on brass box. Inside was some kind of scribing tool, and sheets of beaten copper with words that seem to indicate serious contracts of loyalty and fealty.

We need a metalurgic test on the sheets. I do not think this is copper. Notify Dr. Sorensen at the Physics Department. I'd like his feedback on this. J.

Sorcery

We don't know when the ven began using sorcery. Official records do not give us any clues. It is clear that, since the Fall, ven leaders have expressly forbidden use of sorcery by any of their subjects under penalty of death. Of course, this did little to hinder ven nobles' research of the topic.

Destroy your adversaries lest they deliver tales of your Cunning, spoiling your secret weapons for future enemies.

The earliest histories always make mention of the House of the Serpent's deep association with sorcery. From the very beginning, journals and other records make note of "the sorcerous serpents." The Senate records do note that almost two hundred years after the founding of the body, various members—often associated either directly or indirectly with the House of the Serpent—made attempts to make any use of sorcery illegal. While this may seem contradictory, it only adds to the Serpent's strength as a House. For the Serpent, the cat was already out of the bag: nearly every member of the House was well associated with the rituals of the sorcerer-kings. Making the art illegal would only strengthen their position.

Since then, use of sorcerous rituals pervades almost every court in Shanri, although it is still considered a crime on the streets and in the fields. In fact, it is still considered a crime *anywhere*, but the dark art has become so commonplace among the nobility, any condemnation of it would only point out one's own hypocrisy. Blood Swords everywhere—carried by almost every swordsman. Nobles use Blood oaths to maintain alliances between Houses. Espionage indulge in various sorcerous tools every day. If any noble was to dare accuse another of using sorcery, he had better have his hands clean of Blood.

Needless to say, some Houses keep such a minor noble around for just such a happenstance: a young ven who has never cast a ritual, never been the target of a ritual, and never makes use of any Blooded tools. In the current social climate, however, this is incredibly dangerous. Not utilizing the benefits of Blood magic puts one at a significant disadvantage. However, it also keeps a ven's conscience clear when he makes an accusation of sorcery.

Rituals

Using Blood magic is not difficult. You need three things: knowledge of the ritual, sacred herbs, and enough Blood to make the ritual work. If a noble knows the proper ritual, he can perform it. All he needs then are the Blood and herbs.

Each ritual listed below has a specific description detailing exactly how the ritual is performed and the requirements to perform it correctly. Any deviation from these requirements causes the ritual to fail. There is no standard for rituals: all of them are very different. Each one makes different demands. Like the ven researching them, you must learn the ritual itself to master it.

Casting a ritual requires some Blood which takes the form of an Injury on your character sheet. Ritual also requires Herbs harvested from your Season Actions. One Resource per ritual.

A ven character may learn any ritual as a Season Action. Unless it states otherwise, learning a ritual takes one Season Action and one Herbs Resource. See *Seasons* for more information on that. Also, if you want your character to start the game with a particular ritual, you must spend 1 bonus point for each ritual you want to know.

The Blooding

This is the most sacred of all rituals: bringing a ven into the ranks of the Blooded. All Houses have a different version of this ritual, an elaborate ceremony involving costumes, mystery plays, and all the esoteric symbolism the ven can summon.

(Unfortunately, our information on these rituals is sparse, but recent findings in Ireland may shed some light on the subject.)

The ritual makes a ven part of the House. One of the Blooded. Recognized by the Senate, protected by Law. Also, the Virtue of his chosen House increases by one rank. (Starting characters already have this bonus. That's the "+1" you get after you assign your Virtues ranks, remember?) No ven may be Blooded to more than one House and once you are Blooded, you may not be Blooded to another.

The Circle

An old ritual originally associated with hedge wizards and wise women, the Blood circle creates a ward against hungry spirits. The ritual must be performed upon a door. The sorcerer cuts his hand or wrist and spills enough Blood to make a mark on the door. He then shuts the door behind him, locking it with his bloody hand, leaving some drops on the lock. As long as the door is not opened, nothing from the invisible world may enter. The ritual lasts until dawn.

The Corpse

While most rituals are in common use around Shanri, this ritual is not. Most sorcery use is an open secret, something everyone does and nobody talks about. This ritual is the exception. Many sorcerers know it, but few use it. Even the most corrupt and vile sorcerers hesitate in using this ritual for fear of the consequences.

The ritual requires a corpse. The corpse can be freshly dead or could be nearly devoured by decay. When Blood is spread over the corpse's lips—and the corpse must have lips—it reanimates, a creature bound by the sorcerer's will. The creature may be almost any species. A dog, a cat, a mouse. As long as the creature has lips, it can be a target for this ritual.

At this point, the author would like to make it clearly known that he is very aware that the ven have lips.

Needless to say, the more corrupted the body, the more disturbing the creature, the more obvious the act. Freshly killed corpses can be used, but they still give off a disturbing aura. Something is wrong. Seriously wrong. Hiding the true nature of the thing is impossible. As soon as any Blooded ven looks upon it, he knows what it is.

As I said above, using this ritual is a serious breach of etiquette. The more dilapidated the corpse, the more serious the crime. Freshly killed corpses are frowned upon. Rotting flesh walking through a party is cause for Revenge. Especially if it happens to be someone's cousin.The ven like to pretend sorcery is illegal, keeping its use behind closed doors. Using this ritual is clear indication that sorcery is in the room.

The Corpse is a rank 6 ork. It has the following Ork Traits: Blind Spot, Claws, Fangs, Muscle, Regeneration and Rhino Hide.

You don't know what this means, but your Narrator does.

The Corpse lasts for one Season. Then, it collapses in a sickening pile of Blood and bones.

The Curse

A Blood Curse requires only one sorcerer and one target. The target must be within sight and must be able to hear the sorcerer. The sorcerer cuts his skin, letting his Blood flow. He takes one Injury ("severe cut") at least. He may take as many as five Injuries before the curse kills him.

The curse puts an Aspect on the target. The rank of the Aspect is equal to the number of Injuries the sorcerer is willing to take. Yes, this ritual can kill you. The Aspect must specify a thing the subject must or must not do and begin with the phrase "You will always" or

"You will never." For example, the following curses are appropriate:

- "You will never sleep in the same bed twice."
- "You will always lie to the ones you love."
- "You will never hold your father's sword again."
- "You will always betray your family."

Whenever the target goes against a "You will never" curse, those that oppose him may tag that Aspect, gaining dice as appropriate. Whenever the subject follows the dictates of a "You will always" curse, he may invoke that Aspect for bonus dice as appropriate.

For example, a character with the "You will always lie to the ones you love" Blood Curse lies to his brother about a delicate affair (sleeping with his brother's wife). "No, brother," he says. "We have never lain together." Following the dictates of his curse, he gains bonus dice.

As another example, a character with the "You will never sleep in the same bed twice" Blood Curse decides to ignore his restriction and do as he wishes, sleeping in the same bed two nights in a row. As soon as he does, his curse becomes a free Aspect that others may tag.

A Blood Curse may only be removed by the sorcerer himself or by a blood relative of the sorcerer (father, mother, son or daughter). It must be removed voluntarily and not under any kind of duress.

The Eye

This ritual is known only by the House of the Serpent. Those outside the House who have used it in the presence of the Blooded of the Serpent usually find themselves at mysterious ends.

This ritual requires only a bit of Blood, a few drops. The sorcerer makes his cut, chanting the words of the ritual as he does, placing his wounded hand over his own left eye. Blood oozes into the eye, making it red. The sorcerer may now look upon any individual and see if he is using any Blood rituals or carrying any Orichalcum items. No test is involved.

The ritual lasts for one night, and all the while, the left eye remains a deep crimson: no pupil, no iris. Just Blood red.

The Familiar

Rumors of this ritual among the Blooded of the Bear were rampant in the courts. It was not until two generations ago that evidence of its use finally found the light of day.

The ritual bonds an animal to the sorcerer, making the beast a companion for life. The animal must be fed the sorcerer's Blood (usually mixed with milk) when it is an infant. As the beast grows, at least one Injury's worth of Blood ("cut hand" or "cut wrist") is fed for one Season. When the beast matures, the Blood merges the sorcerer's soul with the animal, creating a powerful bond.

The sorcerer always knows the location and general emotional state of the beast.

While they cannot communicate directly, the beast can share what it has seen with the sorcerer. It may share one day's worth of sight and hearing. It cannot communicate language—animals cannot understand ven language.

If the beast is ever killed, the sorcerer receives a rank 3 Injury: "Lost Familiar."

The Mirror

Making a Blood Mirror requires an ornate and intricate mirror. The mirror must be made from Orichalcum. Making a Blood Mirror requires three Seasons of work.

When finished, the sorcerer can use the Blood Mirror to spy on others. He must gain something personal from the individual he wishes to spy upon. It could be a page from a diary, a comb, a glove, or any other object that belongs to the target. The sorcerer holds the item and bleeds onto the mirror. He may observe his target until dawn.

Blood Mirrors qualify as Artifacts. See *Artifacts* below for more information.

The Oath

This ritual is one of the most ubiquitous in ven literature. A piece of parchment, a cup, a knife, a quill. Words are written on the parchment.

Powerful words. Promises. Punishments.

All provide Blood for the cup, dipping the quill and signing their names. All ven who sign receive a rank 3 Injury. The Injury must be made with an Orichalcum knife.

All three names. Family, Public, and Secret.

All ven signing the Oath make a promise to abide by its edicts. They gain benefits for doing so.

- You may spend a Style Point for three bonus dice if you are protecting another ven who signed the Oath.

Can I tag the "Traitor" tattoo burned on my enemy's forehead?

Sure! That's a great idea. It is worth two bonus dice.

- You may spend a Style Point to know the emotional state of someone within your Oath. A reply of "nothing" indicates the ven is dead, and "Solace" indicates… you know.
- You may spend a Style Point to know the general direction and distance of someone within your Oath.

While the Oath of Fellowship is a powerful tool, it also bears a heavy cost. If you ever betray any member of the circle, the Oath is broken for all of you. Also, the word "traitor" burns onto your forehead for a year and a day. Within that time, you may make no Oaths.

The Oath may be written in such a way that it lasts a specific amount of time or until a specific goal is reached. "The Oath expires in five years," or "The Oath expires when we all become Dukes."

Orichalcum

Orichalcum is a metal made with the Blood of the ven. Using a specific ritual—outlined in The Sword, above—mixing ven Blood with a particular amalgam of metals. If completed properly, the result is the "golden iron." Orichalcum.

To create Orichalcum, you must first gain two Metals Resources. Silver and gold. It also requires a rank 3 Injury. The Blood does not necessarily have to come from the sorcerer. Then, you must spend a Season Action. Once all that's accomplished, you have created one Resource of Orichalcum. Orichalcum is just like any other Resources and can be traded as you see fit. See the Seasons chapter for more information on Resources and Season Actions.

Many sorcerous Artifacts are made from Orichalcum.

The ritual to create Orichalcum is not known to most ven. This ritual cannot be learned with a Season Action or during character creation. It must be learned through an Adventure. Teaching another ven the ritual for creating Orichalcum is… well, there's really no reason to do it. Imagine finding a magic word that turns you invisible. You can keep it to yourself or you can share it with someone else. If you share it with someone else, that means someone else can walk around invisible. You're not the only one.

Who would you trust with your magic word? Remember, the only box that can hold a secret is a coffin. If you gave the secret to someone, chances are they'll give the secret to someone else. Someone they can trust.

Someone you don't know.

That's why the ven never give away the secret of Orichalcum. Never. No nay never.

Giving away the secret of Orichalcum is not foolish, not even bad form. It's just plain stupid. So stupid, in fact, I've got a rule for it.

Anyone who simply gives away the ritual to create Orichalcum gets the Aspect "Dolt." You can find it in the *Aspects* chapter.

The Puppet

If you know the full name of another ven, you may perform this ritual. (Remember: peasants do not have secret names.) A slice on your hand, a slice on their hand. Mixing Blood. Your body falls limp and helpless while you possess the body of your target.

If your own body is injured, you immediately return to your flesh. If your own body is killed, your spirit is trapped in the body of your target.

The mind of your target is subdued by your superior will (amplified by the ritual). The ritual lasts until sunrise.

The Quill

The Bloody Quill is used most often by the House of the Falcon. Rumor has it the ritual was developed by a Falcon, although the House historians deny this claim. The ritual requires a few drops of Blood be dropped into an inkwell. The ink in the well must be fresh. The sorcerer recites the ritual as the Blood drops and as a quill stirs the ink and Blood together. While the ritual is active (until dawn), anyone writing with the quill cannot write a lie. If the inkwell is spilled, the ritual ends.

The Rose

This ritual was developed by a Fox sorcerer many generations ago. The sorcerer uses a rose—any rose will do—to perform the ritual. He cuts his hand or wrist, bleeds a few drops onto the petals, and places the rose on a table. As many as four may sit at the table. As long as they sit at the table, anyone not sitting at the table hears nothing but gibberish sing-song from those sitting at it. The ritual lasts until dawn, until the rose is removed, or if someone leaves the table.

The Sword

The Sword Ritual requires at least one Season to perform. The sorcerer must have at least one Orichalcum Resource (see the Orichalcum Ritual, above), and either employ a blacksmith or be a blacksmith himself for this ritual to succeed. To be a blacksmith himself,

Aspect: Blacksmith

Invoke: Three bonus dice when working at a forge.

Tag: Social stigma to nobles. Common, dirty work. Opponents gain two bonus dice in social situations.

Compel: Interested in learning new techniques and knowledge of iron working.

he must have the Blacksmith Aspect.

The sorcerer and blacksmith work together for at least one Season forging the sword. The sorcerer's Blood is used in the process, requiring one rank 1 Injury ("cut hand" or "cut wrist") per Season. The Blood is mixed with the iron as it is red hot, the sorcerer chanting as the blacksmith does his work. The Blood need not be of the sorcerer; he may make the sword for another, but doing so requires the presence of the eventual recipient of the sword.

When the work is done, the Blood Sword is ready. It is a powerful weapon, bonded to the source of the blood used in the ritual. Only the ven who is the source of the Blood gains the benefits of the Sword (although sometimes children may wield a parent's weapon). It is said Blood Swords sing to their wielders. Others say using a Blood Sword is like dancing with a brilliant partner. When using his Blood Sword, the wielder gains a number of bonus dice equal to the number of Seasons used to prepare it. A Blood Sword may not have more ranks than the Wisdom of the sorcerer who made it.

A Blood Sword can cut through iron, stone and even marble. It may only be broken by another Blood Sword. Breaking through iron with a Blood Sword requires 3 wagers. Breaking through stone requires 4 wagers. Breaking through marble requires 5 wagers. Breaking another Blood Sword also requires 5 wagers.

When a Blood Sword is broken, it bleeds like an open wound. Those who have watched such an event felt a profound sense of sorrow and some have even claimed to hear weeping.

Bloodswords qualify as Artifacts. See *Artifacts* below for more information.

The Twins

In ven culture, certain physical features identify a character as a villain. Red hair, pale skin, grey eyes. The more features a character has, the more villainous the character is. But there is one "physical feature" that truly sets a character apart from the rest. Despicable. Unredeemable. Terrible.

Twins.

A ritual known to only a few and utilized by even less. A pregnant ven woman gives birth to a single child and only a single child. No more. Of course, the literature also mentions a forbidden ritual… Blood, pain, other bodily fluids… I should say no more.

If a ven uses the Twins ritual, they will indeed give birth to twins. Twins is an Aspect the children take on.

Twins also have another advantage: they do not need to spend Style Points to kibitz to each other. (See *Player* for more info on the Kibitzing Rule.)

Aspect: Twins

Invoke: you gain three bonus dice when protecting your twin.

Tag: because of the stigma surrounding twins, others gain two bonus dice for any social risk against you.

Compel: act creepy, villainous, and otherwise untrustworthy.

The Tulpa

One of the most dangerous rituals known by the ven, it creates a shape-changing creature of limited intelligence and ability, a creature that can take the form of any ven. It can speak simple words and phrases, but demonstrates no "personality" or "character." On closer inspection, ven may notice small "errors" in demeanor. It doesn't have all of its fingers or perhaps the teeth are crooked. But to anyone who is not paying close attention, the tulpa will give the impression of the actual ven it happens to be copying.

Creating a tulpa requires time and a few particular objects. First, you must have a personal item of the ven you wish to mimic. By "personal item," I mean you need something they have owned for at least a year. It could also be hair, Blood, or some other part of their anatomy. Then, you perform the ritual. Blood is necessary. Enough to cause a rank 2 Injury. That creates a tulpa that not only looks like the ven you want to mimic but also believes it *is* the ven you want to mimic. The ritual takes about an hour to perform. The tulpa lasts until sunrise.

The Vendetta

A very dangerous ritual, the vendetta is also the oldest. The ritual requires two participants: the sorcerer and another. A knife tastes the Blood of both and then each subject puts his hand on the knife, making a promise to kill the other. Once completed, the ritual gives each participant an Aspect: "Vendetta (X)" where "X" is the name of the person whom you owe a Vendetta. This Aspect can be invoked for three bonus dice, but only for actions that lead to the death of the other. Also, the subjects of the ritual always know where the other is and what emotional state he is in. He also becomes aware of all his enemy's Aspects.

If a Season passes and the vendetta has not been fulfilled, both participants receive a rank 1 Injury, "Vendetta Pains." They begin as a low ache near the heart, a constant reminder that the vow has not been fulfilled. If another Season passes, the Aspect gains another rank. This continues until the vendetta has been fulfilled.

Mimic Artifact

You may choose to have a Ritual that mimics one of the benefits of an Artifact (see below). Like other Rituals, they require Blood (at least one Injury worth). The benefit for these Rituals will only last until dawn.

Artifacts

Most ven seek Artifacts from the ruins of the sorcerer-kings. Such items give a ven power, prestige and influence. The noble caste finances groups of ven brave enough to dare the ork-haunted ruins, hoping they'll return with such items.

Not all return.

A small party of ven crawling through an ancient ruin. The smell of ork everywhere. Darkness. Stench.

But the torches reveal a glimmer on the wall. An ancient sword, covered in dust and cobwebs. A blackglass mirror, miraculously intact. A piece of fabric, shimmering in the moonlight. *Tylvarae*.

These are *Artifacts*, pieces of history thought long buried with the secrets of the sorcerer-kings, recovered by the ven. In ven literature, these things are spoken of with awe and reverence. And more than a little fear. Artifacts are not things to be trifled with.

Consider stumbling across an atomic bomb. You don't know how it works. You don't know what might set it off. You don't know if the shielding leaks. You don't know anything. Sure, you now have access to power—unspeakable power—but you really don't know what to do with it. How it works. What you shouldn't do. No clue at all. This is the sensation the ven feel as they stumble across the Artifacts of the sorcerer-kings. Objects of power great and terrible. Unknown.

After all, one of these things blew up the world.

These rules present you with the ability to build your own Artifacts. Some of them are simple. Magical tools left behind by their enigmatic creators. But others… who knows what they may be.

These Artifacts are all different. Different qualities, different shapes, different capabilities. Each is a puzzle, waiting to be unlocked. Some are traps.

Scratch that. Most are traps.

Many Artifacts also seem to have minds of their own, whispering to the ven who holds them. And no matter the ven, using an Artifact always—*always*—brings doom and ruin to the hand that wields it.

Finding Artifacts and Rituals

Ven can find Artifacts in the Ruins of the sorcerer-kings. Once per Season, a band of brave ven can venture into a Ruin in search of trinkets and other baubles left behind by that doomed race.

Exploring a Ruin costs a Season Action or an Adventure. If a single ven uses his Season Action to find an Artifact, he closes out that Ruin for any further exploration that Season. No other ven can explore that Ruin.

While exploring the Ruin, the ven pick up various objects and scrolls they hope will turn out to be something important. Most of what they pick up is pure junk, but every once in a while, they stumble across something sorcerous. They drag these findings home, do research, and discover which ones are ancient rubbish and which are pure power.

For those pure power Artifacts and Rituals, we have Artifact Points.

Each Ruin produces a number of Artifact Points per Season equal to the Ruin's rank. Thus, a 1 Ruin produces 1 Artifact Point per Season. A 3 Ruin produces three Artifact points per Season. After a rank 3 Ruin has been explored, no more Artifacts can be found there. Used up, vanquished, conquered, explored.

A single ven adventuring in a Ruin as a Season Action gains a number of Ruin points equal to the rank of the Ruin. He uses these to create an Artifact of his choosing.

If a group of ven uses one of their Adventures to go exploring a Ruin, multiply the rank of the Ruin by two. That's how many Artifact points the Ruin produces.

Thus, if one ven uses his Season Action to go hunting for Rituals and Artifacts in a rank 2 Ruin, he gains two Artifact Points. If a group of ven go hunting for Artifacts in a rank 2 Ruin as a Story, they can discover up to 4 Artifact Points.

The players decide how to divide up the Artifact Points which they can spend as they see fit.

Research

You have Artifact Points. You want to know how to spend them. Here's how. You do *research*.

As you search through the Ruins of the sorcerer-kings, you will find objects that may or may not be of any value. An old Sword. A glass eye. A cloak. These objects may or may not have any worth. Pick them up. You never know. Bring them home and do some research. Find out if they are worth anything.

As a player, while your character is in the Ruins, you may spend a Style Point to "discover" an item. You get to name it. A Sword, a glass eye, a cloak. Whatever you like. Then, you bring it home and use a Season Action to research each item you find.

After your little escapade, you and the other players divvy up your Artifact Points. You use these Artifact Points in your research. You are, in essence, gambling with your Artifact Points. Here's how it works.

Researching an Artifact or a Ritual is a Season Action, requiring a Wisdom risk. You may make wagers. Privilege indicates you have found an Artifact worth one *Potential*. Your wagers give the Artifact additional Potential. Potential equals how many Values you can assign to the Artifact. Values equal power. Each Value listed below increases the potency of your Artifact… but also increases the danger.

You may assign a Value to your Artifact. The cost is one of your Artifact Points. You may only assign a number of Values equal to the Potential of the Artifact.

You cannot assign Values to an Artifact with additional research. Assigning Values is a one-time offer. Once you've assigned the Values, the Artifact is defined for all time.

Each Ruin only has a certain number of Artifact Points. If your ven uses his Season Action to hunt for Artifacts, he still has to make a Wisdom risk to determine how many Values the Artifact has.

Artifact Example

Because Wisdom is Shara's weakness, she can't really do much with Artifacts.

Yeah. Weaknesses suck.

Instead, we'll use someone else. Another ven with a rank 4 Wisdom. Some Serpent with a "Sorcerer-King Scholar" Aspect, giving him three more dice for such risks. That's seven dice.

Our nameless Serpent has spent an adventure searching through a terrible ruin with his companions. Together, they looted a rank 3 Ruin, giving them a total of six Artifact Points. They divide up the points equally with each ven getting two Artifact Points.

Our Serpent has two Artifact Points. During the raid, he spends a Style Point to find a red ruby. A fabulous prize. But is it sorcerous? He spends a Season Action (a different one from the one he spent to search the Ruin) to find out.

He has seven dice for this Wisdom risk. He could roll four dice and set aside three for Potential, but because he only has two Artifact Points, he can only assign the Artifact two Values. So, he decides to roll six dice and leave the last one for an additional Value.

Lucky him. He rolls an eleven on six dice. He gets Privilege and he can assign one Value to the Artifact. He gets an additional Value for his one wager. Our lucky Snake looks at the list of Values below and begins rubbing his hands, relishing the choices.

DOOM!

In addition to Values, each Artifact also has a Doom.

Doom represents the inevitable ruin that follows those using the Artifacts of the sorcerer-kings. In all the stories, anyone who picks up one of these things gets whacked by the fate hammer. Even the ven recognize hubris, and in ven literature, meddling in the affairs of the sorcerer-kings is the very definition of dangerous pride.

If a ven has an Artifact, the Narrator may, at his discretion, declare "DOOM!" He does so after a roll made by a ven owning an Artifact. The roll the player just made is a 9, regardless of his true roll or any other modifiers. Comes up just a little short. Just not enough.

(I recommend pointing at the doomed individual and in your scariest voice, declare the "DOOOOOOOM!")

After the Doom comes to pass, the Artifact still operates as usual. The Artifact's Doom may only be invoked once per Phase (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Solace).

Do Bloodswords and Mirrors give me a DOOM?

Oh yeah. You betchya.

Values

Each Value gives an Artifact a "special ability." I've tried to use examples of Artifacts from ven literature, but my sources were far and few between. Ven Artifacts do not feel like traditional "magic items." They do not *act* like traditional "magic items." They are terrifying. They demand Blood.

Sometimes, they whisper. Sometimes, they sing.

Here is a list of the Values I found in my own research. You may find other Values in works not available to me, but I highly recommend a sincere attempt to keep to the feel and style of the pillow books and operas. This isn't Harry Potter. This isn't Jack Vance. This is Blood. And by the gallons.

Buying Artifacts with Bonus Points

If you'd like your character to begin the game with an Artifact, you can spend Bonus Points to do so. An Artifact costs one Bonus Point per rank. Thus, a rank 2 Artifact costs two of your five Bonus Points.

Aspect

The Artifact gives the user a Free Aspect. An Artifact 1 gives the user one bonus die for this Aspect. Artifact 2, two bonus dice. You know the drill. The Artifact may also give the user a tag and compel, but you won't know it until it is too late.

Drink

Many Artifacts are known to have a thirst for ven Blood, providing benefits for the ven who quench that thirst. This Artifact provides bonus dice in exchange for Injury. Every rank of Injury gives your ven a bonus die for a specific kind of risk. Fighting, wooing lovers, seeing the unseen. But these bonus dice don't last. Once you use a bonus die, it is gone until a new Injury is made.

You may not Injure multiple victims to gain extra bonus dice. And be sure to remember what you were created for, little ven. Altars of Blood, throats cut, lives stolen to empower the Rituals of the sorcerer-kings.

Remember that.

Are there any Artifacts that give bonuses to my ven's Virtues? No. That would allow people to ignore weaknesses. Can't do that.

Face of Shadows

In most stories featuring an Artifact of this kind, the ven has an item that makes others forget his identity. They simply cannot remember who he was once he leaves their presence. You must spend a Style Point to activate the Artifact. A Style Point for each ven you want to forget you when you leave. The ven do not forget what happened when you were in their presence, they just forget who you were.

Farsight

"Farsight." *Achala*. The ability to see deep into the world. Farsight is dangerous: the ven are not ever sure if they're seeing the future, the past or the present. Or even a possible future. Or even a possible past.

Artifacts with *achala* are usually mirrors, although other forms also show up in the literature. Ven bleed on the mirrors and look. What they see is often disturbing, seldom comforting, and always full of Doom.

Like Visions from the suaven (see *The Suaven* for more information), the information gained can liberate or damn a ven, locking him in to a destiny he desires or fears.

The mechanics for Farsight are identical to Visions from the suaven. I'll put them here as well for ease of use.

The ven makes a Wisdom risk. If he is successful, he gains a Vision from the Artifact. Just like a contested risk, the Artifact and the ven trade wagers, modifying the Vision as they go. Here's the process, step-by-step.

Step 1: Success. The ven succeeds his Wisdom risk.

Step 2: The Vision. The Artifact (Narrator) sets up the first fact about the Vision.

Step 3: Wagers. The ven and Artifact

begin using wagers to modify the Vision, trading off one at a time.

Think of it this way: the ven asks the Artifact a question (succeeds his Wisdom risk). The Artifact answers it (sets up the base Vision). Then the ven and Artifact modify the Vision with wagers.

The Artifact gains a number of wagers equal to its rank. Thus, a 3 Artifact has three wagers to modify the Vision.

And remember: these are wagers. They establish truth. But what Visions show the ven don't always come true the way the ven think they do. And Visions from Artifacts almost always lead to Doom.

Key

Many stories involve an item that acts as a kind of key. It opens doors locked by the sorcerer-kings. Touching the key to the door unlocks Shanri's deepest and most dangerous mysteries.

Leech

This Artifact allows you to steal Style Points others use in your presence. If another ven spends a Style Point to tag or compel Aspects, you may take that Style Point instead. You may add this Value to an Artifact up to three times. The Artifact may hold a number of Style Points equal to the rank of this Value. In other words, if the Artifact has this Value twice, it may hold two Style Points.

Heart of (Flame/Ice)

The Artifact protects you from either the effects of fire or freezing temperatures (but not both). Spend a Style Point to eliminate any Injury received by flame or cold.

Seductive

Some Artifacts give the ven in question an irresistible allure that cannot be explained. This particular Artifact allows the ven to target other ven with the Aspect "You want me." The Aspect has an invoke, tag and a compel.

You may only strike one ven at a time with this Value. If you strike another, the first is free from its effects.

Sharp

This Artifact is usually a weapon, but not always so. The ven are quite clever at turning tools into weapons. A knife, a sword. A hairpin. Whatever shape it takes, this Artifact gives Injuries that do not heal normally. No medicine, no amount of time. Any Injury caused by this Artifact takes an entire Year to heal just one rank.

Subtle

Tales of Artifacts that disappear in the folds of cloaks are common in ven literature. "Subtle." *Sava*.

You Want Me

Invoke: You gain three dice on any risk that directly puts you in a better light with the owner of this Artifact.

Tag: Another ven can tag this Aspect to gain two dice against any risk you take that does not involve somehow winning the favor of your paramour.

Compel: You must go to the owner of the Artifact and make an attempt to win their favor.

An Artifact with this Value can be hidden without any chance of finding it. Gone. But it must be hidden. It doesn't just disappear. Up the sleeve, down the corset, in the folds of your cloak. It must be hidden. And once hidden, always hidden.

Swift

The Artifact gives you an arcane swiftness that defies all the ven know. Spend a Style Point. The Artifact adds three dice to your strike bid. You cannot use those dice in your risk; they only count toward the strike bid.

Terror

The Artifact causes Terror. Spend a Style Point and your Artifact projects Terror at one ven or ork. The base Terror is 3, plus one additional rank of Terror per additional Style Point you spend.

Vampire

This Artifact always appears in the form of a weapon. Specifically, a weapon that can draw Blood. If you inflict a rank 5 Injury on an opponent, spend a Style Point. You now steal one of your opponent's Aspects for the rest of the Season. If you know the name of an Aspect and one of its elements (invoke, tag or compel), you can steal it. Otherwise, your victim picks the Aspect.

Vulgar

Some Artifacts provide a benefit so… well, there really isn't any other proper word, is there? Vulgar.

This Artifact allows you to use one of the Ork Traits listed in the Narrator chapter. Claws, Fangs, Scales. All sorts of… vulgar things. Spend a Style Point and you can use the Ork Trait until sunrise.

Excuse me now. I have to go take a bath in bleach.

Watchful

This Artifact watches. Usually a skull or an eye or some other symbolically important object, it watches a room and whispers what it sees to its owner. It sees everything in the room. Spend a Style Point and bleed a rank 1 Injury for every hour you wish the object to watch.

Whispers

This Artifact whispers to its owner. Sometimes telling lies, sometimes telling truth. Spend a Style Point and gain a rank

1 Injury to discover the invoke, tag, or compel from the Aspects of one other ven. You must know the ven's Public and Family Name. If you know the ven's Secret Name, you can know the entire Aspect. You may only target one particular ven per Season.

Wicked

This Artifact almost always appears as a weapon of some kind. When you perform a successful strike against an opponent, spend a Style Point. You always deliver an extra rank of Injury with every successful strike.

Why is having a slew of Artifacts a bad idea?

In the literature, an Artifact is the author's way of telling the reader, "This character is in trouble. And it's only a matter of time before everything goes bad."

A skillful Narrator will wait for the right time to hit you with your DOOM! He'll cultivate a villain for months. Picking away at your ambitions, your desires. He'll screw with you and screw with you and screw with you until you can't take it anymore and then you'll challenge him to a duel. With your cool Blood Sword. Because you'll want every advantage you can get.

And then, you'll know why having a slew of Artifact is a bad idea.

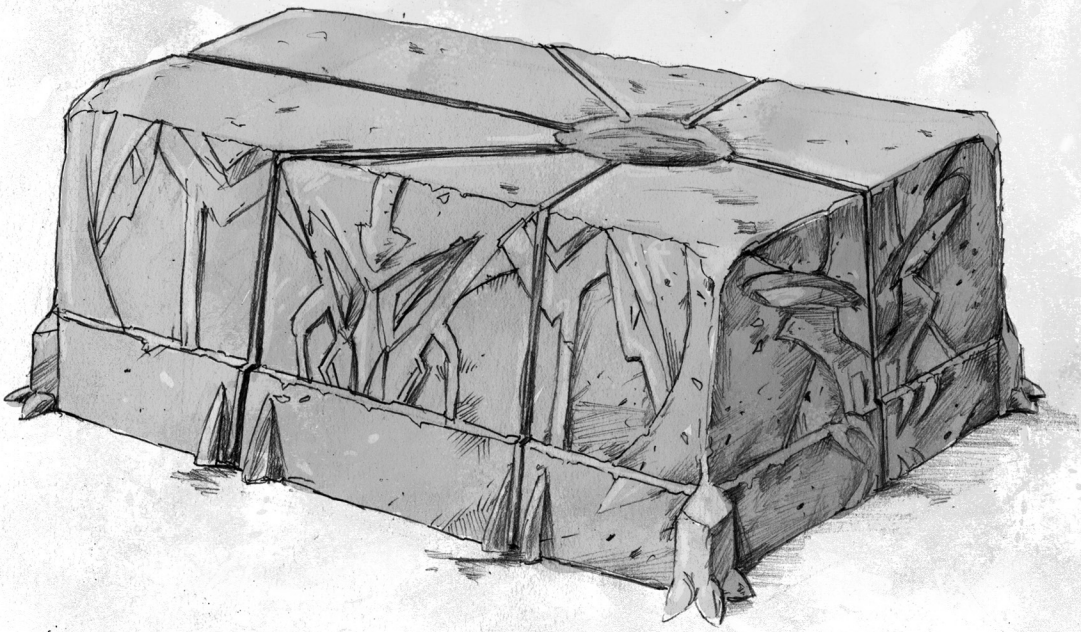
A rather repugnant architectural block was found deep in the furthest, back cave. I fear that it's purpose was barbaric and cruel. I am a stunned that a culture of such high breeding, arts and literature would have this kind of relic created. Maybe it is not ven, but a nother culture's? That it was captured, as a spoil of war, to show the ven's moral superiority?

The art stylings are very different than other finds we have discovered. Yes. I'm convinced that this was another concurrent, more barbaric culture than the ven struggled against from time to time.

S.

Please confirm: we understand the chamber may be hollow. Is that correct?

J.



Suaven

The ven do not die of old age. Instead, their bodies slow down, their Blood cools, and a thick, cobweb-like substance called *altrua* oozes from their skin. Over the years, the ven fall into a state they call *Solace*. Eventually, the entire body goes into hibernation, wrapped up in *altrua*. Asleep. And dreaming.

Youth gifts us with Strength and Beauty.

Old age gifts us with Wisdom and Cunning.

The ven believe the mind of a ven in Solace is still aware. In fact, while in Solace, the ven mind becomes incredibly powerful, capable of transmitting thoughts and visions to those of kindred Blood and spirit. The ven receive these visions while dreaming themselves, but they can also learn how to place their minds into an altered state capable of receiving the messages while awake.

Those who slumber in Solace are called Suaven: the dreaming ven. Revered by their Houses, the equivalent of our own patron saints. The ven pray to them at Shrines, collect artifacts from their lives, and maintain the sleeping body. While the Suaven is protected within his altrua shroud, he is not invulnerable. Altrua is particularly susceptible to fire and many Suaven have been lost in such a way.

The Suaven are far from equal and not all are universally regarded. The worship of some Suaven is small: they are only honored by their families. Other Suaven, however, have Temples in every city on Shanri. Their names are only whispered with hushed reverence or sung with open throats, and feared by every sensible ven.

While families or Houses regard the Suaven as demi-gods, some ven find a kind of communion with a particular Suaven not of his own House. An Elk bonding with a Serpent Suaven. A Fox bonding with a Bear Suaven. These things are not uncommon.

In order to gain a deeper understanding and to make the bond between them stronger, many ven join mystery cults devoted to the Suaven. Temples devoted to some of the more popular Suaven in every major city. Priests and ceremonies revealed only to the most faithful.

If a ven chooses one particular Suaven over all others, he calls it *sa-Suaven* ("most holy").

The Invisible Dancers

In ven literature, the Suaven are the one force the ven cannot control. Invisible, intangible and esoteric, the Suaven remain mysterious. Ambiguous.

But the ven write of the profound relationships they have with the Suaven. Visions. Dreams. Nightmares. Sometimes, even miracles.

So, how does a roleplaying game attempt to make rules for forces so subtle and invisible that they might not even exist? Here's my attempt.

First, we have to remove player control from the Suaven. Completely. No Style Points, no wagers. The Suaven are the only element of Shanri beyond the players' reach. They cannot influence the Suaven. Cannot define the Suaven. Cannot control the Suaven.

All they can do is give their Devotion.

Again. Players cannot use Style Points or wagers to define the Suaven. The Suaven are beyond definition. Beyond the vulgar and mundane manipulations of mortals. Only the Narrator can say anything true about the Suaven.

All the Suaven are different. What is true of one is most likely not true of another. Some are revered while others are worshipped. Some have Temples and others have perhaps one or two Shrines. A few Suaven have even been forgotten, lost in the catacombs under the thriving metropolis.

They wait, sending visions to those who might hear, hoping one day they will be rediscovered.

And then there are the *fashuva*: the fell ones. Suaven so evil, even whispering their names is dangerous. We shall not speak of them here, lest they hear us. Even mentioning them could call their attention. We shall say no more.

Devotion

There are precious few moments when the ven pray. Prayer requires humility. An admission of powerlessness. Admitting weakness. The ven don't do that very well, but when they do it, when they kneel and call upon the Suaven, they do it as only the ven can.

With Style.

On bended knee. Tears streaming down their cheeks. Or a haughty pride flashing in their eyes. A wicked grin. A knife. Pain. A scream. Blood, Blood, Blood.

Nobody does humility like the ven.

And to simulate that humility, we use Devotion.

On your character sheet, you have spaces for the Suaven your character has chosen to revere. You have five Devotion Points to allocate to Suaven. The more points you give a Suaven, the more it will be a part of your character's life. Look through the Suaven listed below and decide how much Devotion you want to give to each one. Each rank of Devotion brings you closer to that Suaven. You cannot start the game with more than 3 ranks of Devotion for any Suaven.

Each Suaven has a number of Blessings. These are the esoteric secrets given by the Suaven to his devoted followers… if they prove their Devotion. You can only learn secrets by joining the appropriate mystery cults. In order to do that, you have to prove your Devotion. The Suaven don't like *urdagha*: "convenient faithful." And trust me: they can tell.

You may have Devotion to multiple Suaven. Thus, you may have Blessings from multiple Suaven. You may have a number of Blessings from a Suaven equal to your Devotion to that Suaven.

Remember: you can never have more than five total ranks of Devotion for any and all Suaven.

For example, Shara shows Devotion to two Suaven: Talia, the Sacred Harlot (rank 2) and Falvren Dyr, the Bloody Wolf (rank 1). Because she may have a total of five points of Devotion, she may only have two more points.

Two Methods of Blessing

Because the Suaven should remain out of the players' hands, here's an option for you.

Instead of the players picking their Blessings, the Narrator picks which Blessings the players get. The ven appeals to the Suaven and the Suaven gives them the Blessings it feels are appropriate.

Your choice.

Ranks of Faith

As a character's Devotion increases, his relationship to that Suaven also increases, bestowing greater gifts upon the faithful. A follower must prove himself worthy of the Suaven's Blessings, performing actions that will win your favorite Suaven's favor.

Devotion 1: Faithful

If a character has Devotion 1 to a Suaven, he is known as one of the *faithful*. He has no particular relationship with the Suaven, only a passing interest.

Devotion 2: Devotee

At Devotion 2, the character is a devoted follower. He is given respect by his fellow acolytes and assists in the ceremonies. He is trusted with further duties and responsibilities… and gains more of the benefits.

Devotion 3: Acolyte

At Devotion 3, the cult invites the character into the secret circles of the faith, initiated into the secret rites of the cult. This is the beginning of a deeper understanding of the Suaven. While a ven may hold many saints in high regard, at this level of Devotion, members of the cult begin to expect a certain degree of exclusivity.

Devotion 4: Anointed

Anointed characters are no longer initiates of the Suaven's mysteries; their understanding and attunement to the Suaven is deep and intuitive. There is a powerful bond between the character and the Suaven that cannot be expressed with language alone. The character receives waking visions and can feel the presence of the Suaven wherever he goes. He teaches younger initiates the secrets of the mystery cult and seldom holds Devotion for another Suaven. And by seldom, I mean, "It had better be a secret."

Devotion 5: Priest

At this level of Devotion, the character holds no other Suaven in esteem. In other words, he has zero Devotion invested in any other Suaven. It is at this level that the deepest secrets are understood. The character's connection to the Suaven is as a parent and child. There is a danger in this degree of Devotion, however, because the ven who show such fidelity often seem distanced from others, speak in arcane riddles, and often enter Solace sooner than normal. But it is at this level of Devotion that the most powerful Blessings are revealed: for some, a small risk to run.

Gaining Devotion

Gaining Devotion is a Season action. You must spend one Season action to increase your Devotion to any Suaven. This information can also be found in the *Season* chapter.

Increasing Devotion from rank 1 to rank 2 requires only a single Season action and a sacrifice of at least one Resource. Roll one die. If the die rolls even, the Suaven finds favor with your sacrifice. Your Devotion increases to rank 2. If the die rolls odd, the fickle spirit has been offended somehow. You gain nothing.

Additional sacrifices add dice to your roll. If even a single die rolls even, your Devotion increases one rank. Each Luxury Resource gives you two dice. A Luxury does not count as two Resources, it only counts as one Resource that gives you two dice.

Increasing Devotion from rank 2 to rank 3 is done in a similar manner. This time, you must sacrifice at least *two* Resources. And again, one Luxury does not count as two Resources, it only counts as one Resource that gives you two dice.

Increasing Devotion from rank 3 to rank 4 is something else altogether. Yes, it requires *three* Resources (at least). It also requires an Adventure given to you by the devoted of your Suaven. The adventure usually involves building a Shrine or protecting a Shrine for a Season, writing an opera about her life, or some other activity promoting the good news of your Suaven.

Increasing Devotion from rank 4 to rank 5… now we're talking serious trouble. This is entry into the mystery cult. Through the initiation rites, through the trials, through the rituals. The secret wisdom. The final gift.

Yeah, this requires an Adventure. At least. A relic. Build a Temple. Prove your fidelity. Undying love. Prove it with Blood.

Blessings and Wrath

The Suaven bestow Blessings on those that serve them well. Attend to their Shrines and Temples, help fellow devotees, act against their enemies.

The Suaven bestow Wrath on those who betray them.

Blessings and Wrath take many forms. Mysterious omens and prophesies. Miraculous occurrences. Relics from the past. All of these are represented in the game. You can find them under each of the Greater Suaven, detailed below.

Dividing Devotion

Any ven may only hold so much Devotion for each Suaven. That limit is *five*. You may only ever have a total of five ranks of Devotion for any and all Suaven. A couple of examples:

1, 2, 2. Good

1, 1, 1, 1, 1. Good

1, 4. Good

2, 2, 2. Bad

3, 2, 2. Bad

Five. That's your limit. Five ranks of Devotion for the Suaven. Nothing more.

If you want to increase your Devotion for a Suaven and you already have five ranks allocated, you have to drop your Devotion to one of the Suaven to increase your Devotion for another.

Make your punishments sudden and severe.
Let your blessings drip like the winter sap.
Sweet and slow.

The Greater Suaven

Ashalim Avendi

House: Blooded of the Falcon

Favored Virtue: Courage

Titles: Master of the Road, Falcon's Friend, the Beggar Brigand.

"Thank Avendi for small favors, for his wrath is never so small."

Symbol

The symbols most associated with Ashalim Avendi are the bow and white roses. Avendi chose the bow over the sword as his chosen weapon. Because of him, the ven regard the bow as a sacred tool. Still not a weapon, but the only sacred tool.

Blessings

The Name of the Storm
The Cloak Deceiveous
The Ironwood Bow
I am the Land
The Sacred Tool

Avendi's Blessings serve those who travel the Road, usually appearing as simple luck. Clever trickster. It was always said he was one of Lady Fortune's greatest knights. Avendi provides for his followers, but such Blessings are not without a price. Avendi only blesses those who realize their fortunes are easily lost and those who assist others who have lost their own good luck. A toss of a coin to a beggar, assisting a helpless lady in distress, or even helping an old woman across the road are small prices to pay for Avendi's Blessings.

In the opera and theater houses, Ashalim Avendi typically appears as an old, blind man, although he has many disguises. One story tells of a rich man who was accosted by a poor, blind churl sitting on the side of the road. The rich man shook his purse of coins at the poor man, mocking his poverty and ill fortune. The beggar smiled and said, "What you give is what you get." Of course, later in the play, the beggar turns out to be the Master of the Road and the rich man ends up blind and begging at the city gate.

Ashalim Avendi was one of the first roadmen, given the title by a Blooded baron keen to ride on the young hero's growing popularity. Eventually, Avendi was recognized by higher lords for his skill, prowess, and Devotion. He was made Baron Avendi, Lord of Valdendon, and married to a noble woman. His wife, Blooded of the Serpent, performed the Blooding ritual herself. Her father, a Duke under the shadow of a sorcerous reputation, arranged for the marriage. Presumably, he did so to help clear his own name, but Avendi's conscience eventually eclipsed the sorcerer's ambition. The Duke died with an arrow in his eye and Avendi claimed his lands, declaring himself the Grand Duke of the House of the Falcon.

Ashalim Avendi's legacy followed those who joined his House. He became the Suaven of the Road, protecting those who could not protect themselves. He rests in his Great Home in the Western Reaches. Those who visit his Shrine will find it guarded by roadmen. His bow rests with his body, unstrung. It is said no ven can string it. It is said…

Falvren Dyr

House: Blooded of the Wolf

Favored Virtue: Prowess

Titles: swordsman, old one-eye, the crimson cloak

The ven portray Falvren Dyr as a large man with flowing red hair. His ancient armor shines like the sun, his blade carved from the moon. On his shield is the head of the Darkness, a creature he slew in personal combat. His body seems to be made of scars.

Dyr's followers espouse a life of self-reliance. Dyr despises those who petition him with prayer. Rather, he blesses those who survive on their own wits, cunning, and strength. Dyr only drops his hand to protect those who show courage and prowess in battle; he never assists those who ask for it. A Suaven who doesn't like being relied upon, worshiped by those who don't like relying on anyone. It's a perfect fit.

Symbols

Dyr's symbol is the Sword and red roses. Plain, simple, elegant.

Blessings

I am the Weapon

The Sacrifice Strike

Teeth and Claws

Tool or Weapon

Your Fear is My Ally

Gaining one of Falvren Dyr's Blessings is always a tricky task; he despises those who ask for help and rely on others for strength. Therefore, "prayers" to the Lord of Battle sound more like curses and boasts than petitions of humility.

"I don't need your help, One Eye! Stay out of the way!"

Manna Renay

"All the world is her child."

House: Blooded of the Bear

Favored Virtue: Strength

Titles: Holy Mother, Protector, the Green Lady

Hospitality is a powerful concept in ven culture, personified by the figure of Manna Renay. Temples dedicated to "the Mother of Us All" can be found in every city, Shrines in every home. She has many faces. Revered matriarch. Protector. Healer. Keeper of hearth Wisdom. Each House views Manna Renay differently, but the House she claims as her own is the Bear.

For the ven, Manna Renay set the standards for how a House is run. Recognized as the family's first great matriarch, the entire structure of a House was based on her own. Butlers, cooks, maids and seneschals still follow her advice, passed on through oral tradition, recorded in the famous book, *House and Home*. Alongside the proper methods of cooking and cleaning, she also spelled out the rules of hospitality still followed by the ven today.

Blessings bestowed by the Sacred Mother protect those who respect the concepts of manners and hospitality. Those who revere her bring her beloved flower, the acacia, to her holiest Temple. Architects and those who cut and work stone also call upon her for favor and wisdom. It was she who sponsored the stoneworkers, building Temples and castles all across Shanri.

Relics associated with Manna Renay include her notebook, a handkerchief, and a broken broom handle. (Some whisper the broom handle was broken over the head of a disrespectful servant.)

Her compassion and wisdom protect a home from threats both visible and invisible. Those who know her secrets, who listen to her dreams, learn the high holy whispers of hospitality.

Symbol

Renay's symbol is the holly wreath ornamented with mistletoe.

Blessings

Bear's Hospitality
Circle of Protection
Hearthward
I Brought the Bear
Mother's Children

Manna Renay's miracles are subtle and powerful. Her devotees teach the delicate arts of manners. Those who revere her find allies among the guardian animals and may speak their secret language. Children are most often witness to her divine interventions as she looks out for them – especially orphans.

Talten Steele

House: Blooded of the Elk

Favored Virtue: Cunning

Titles: the Iron Heart, Winter's Promise, the Ruthless

Talten Steele stands alone in the House of the Elk. A mountain of a man, standing a head above his brothers and sisters, he fought for the right to inherit his father's lands, leaving Bloodshed and tears behind him. It was he who first flew the banner that would eventually adorn the Senate: the Crest of the Elk.

He wore reputation like a crown. Those who plotted against him disappeared and those who aided him flourished. He was a Duke by the age of nineteen and an Archduke by the time he was twenty-five. His lands were unmatched in all of Shanri… and then it all went wrong.

Many operas have been written about the fall of Talten Steele, but none so stirring, so moving as *The Autumn*. A deceptively simple title, but a profoundly disturbing work. After establishing the largest domain in all of Shanri, after dispatching all his enemies, after consolidating the Senate's power under his thumb… Steele lost his heart to a woman. The widow of his deadliest enemy. She beguiled him. Entranced him.

And very slowly, she began a delicate and beautiful Revenge.

Demonstrating the patience of a spider, she unmade everything he had built. Turned allies into enemies. Disrupted his trade. Sabotaged his every plan. But her greatest Revenge was at the end.

When she left him, he was on his knees, begging her not to leave. She did not need to kill him. She made Talten Steele beg. That was enough.

Months of long solitude followed. Living off the charity of family—for he had no friends—he spent most of his life under the shadow of despair. But when Revenge finally found his own eyes, what followed was perhaps the most perfect example of vengeance in all of ven literature.

"Leave an enemy alive and he makes allies. Kill him and he makes a grave."

Symbol

Steele's symbol is the Elk, a crossed Sword and dagger behind the antlers. The Sword symbolizing the conquering Elk, the dagger representing the consequence of betrayal.

Blessings

The Coldest Heart

Even the Moon has a Dark Side

Never Again

The Promise

Moving the Pawn

Steele's Blessings represent his life. He never acted on his own, but bent the wills of others to accomplish his goals. His hands were always clean of Blood… until the very end.

Symbols

Talia's symbol is a mirror surrounded by roses. Any color will do.

Blessings

The Befuddling Kiss
The Black Kiss
The Enchanting Kiss
The Goodnight Kiss
The Most Subtle Weapon

Talia prefers the rigorous use of rituals and ordeals to make her followers stronger. While she will dip her hand occasionally to protect a particularly devoted follower, she generally lets them fight (and win) their own battles with cunning, skill, and charm. And kisses. Priestesses receive the Seven Kisses; powerful magics that have been known to enslave even the proudest Duke. While her Blessings are called kisses, the powers are actually invoked by any particular kind of contact.

Each kiss requires only a moment of contact and another vital element: the target's trust. Contact between the priestess and the target cannot be initiated by the priestess; the target himself must touch the priestess. The priestess may extend her hand, but the target must put his own hand in hers. Without this, she cannot invoke any of her powers.

If the target touches the priestess, she may then activate any of the effects at any time. It could be immediately or the following week or later that night, just as she invokes the power of the kiss within the current month. If the moon has passed through her phases and the priestess has not invoked the power of a kiss, she must re-invoke it with another touch.

TALIA YVARAI

House: Blooded of the Fox
Favored Virtue: Beauty
Titles: the Celestial Muse, Sacred Harlot, Keeper of Roses

Talia's Temples are exotic, unlike the Temples of other Suaven. Her priestesses (she accepts no priests) are beautiful, witty, and educated in the arts. All the arts. Yes, Talia's priestesses are skilled lovers, but they are also painters, poets, sculptors, and musicians (as well as composers). All artists revere Talia, seeing her as the archetypal muse of all muses. Talia's priestesses know the proper methods of preparing and eating elegant meals, the techniques of banter and debate, as well as the high holy art of love.

In return for their Devotion, the followers of Talia learn secret arts no other school or academy in the entire world knows. The use of Talia's Blessings for any mundane purpose is taboo.

"She is the Muse of All Muses, the Inspiration for All Beauty."

Tyan Bran

House: Blooded of the Serpent

Favored Virtue: Wisdom

Titles: Keeper of Secrets, the Blind One, Whisperer

His devotees call him "the Patient One," or "Tyane Bran, the Indefatigable." He is portrayed as a small man with long, well kept hair and diligent eyes, standing to the side of an event, watching from a distance. He is always watching, never acting. In the tales of the Patient One, even the smallest actions are viewed as monumental and full of meaning. He only chooses to act when it is most appropriate, when it is most necessary, when it is most effective.

His devoted follow his example, watching and listening, providing their knowledge when it is needed, acting only when it is most necessary. They despise what they view as "the corrupt world of temptation" preferring the world of thought and reason, the world of spontaneous and immediate action. Often taking up an ascetic lifestyle, the true devotees of Tyan Bran cast away all that distracts from pure thought. Pure reason. Pure truth.

Symbol

Bran's symbol is a white mask surrounded by blue roses.

Blessings

I Bear Wisdom's Price

A Moment of Insight

I've Forgotten More than You'll Ever Know

The Most Evident Truth

Wisdom's Clarity

Tyane Bran's miracles take the form of bursts of enlightenment and insight in those who revere him. They see connections between disparate facts, spot tiny details most miss and gain an awareness around them unparalleled by any other.

"Knowledge is the silent weapon."

Blessings

The Blessings listed below are given to those who are Devoted to a Suaven. You may choose any of the Blessings provided by your Suaven, but you may not have more Blessings than you have Devotion to that Suaven.

Each of the Suaven listed above is associated with a specific House. Falvren Dyr with the Wolf, Talia with the Fox, Ashalem Avendi with the Falcon.

For example, Shara's Devotion for Talia is rank 3. Talia's House is the Fox. Therefore, I can choose up to 3 Blessings from the House of the Fox.

Note that there are nine Blessings listed for each House. More than those given by the Suaven listed above. I've listed these additional Blessings so you may create your own Suaven and give them Blessings not bestowed by the Great Ones, listed above.

Remember: a ven cannot have more Blessings than his own Devotion.

All Blessings require at least one Style Point. Some require more, but no Blessing is free.

A Blessing may only be used once per Story. Once you've used it, you don't get to use it again until next time. Unless specifically stated in the Blessing itself, you cannot use Blessings during Season actions.

Finally, some Blessings are instantaneous while others have lasting affects. Unless specifically stated otherwise in the Blessing, all Blessings with lasting affects expire at dawn the next day.

Bear Blessings

Alone, We Stand Together

Only ven who are Blooded of the Bear may participate in this Blessing.

All Blooded of the Bear involved must spend one Style Point if they want the benefit of this Blessing. When making a competitive Strength roll (working together), the losers do not lose half their wagers, rounded up.

The total number of Blooded of the Bear who may participate in this Blessing is equal to the Devotion of the Bear performing the Blessing.

Bear's Hospitality

While most ven use the sorcerous ritual of a similar name, this particular Blessing acts in a very different way.

Marking the door with your own Blood, you gain a number of bonus dice in any risks equal to your Devotion divided by two (round up) as long as you remain in your own home. This Blessing lasts until dawn the next day.

Bear Crushes Serpent

Spend five Style Points after you have rolled dice in a Wisdom risk. Cancel your opponent's wagers in this Wisdom risk. Success and failure of the risk is unaffected, but only you can keep your wagers.

Circle of Protection

The ven must draw a circle on the ground with her own Blood to invoke this Blessing. Drawing a circle takes one action. The circle must be drawn on a solid surface. It cannot be drawn on gravel or sand or any surface that will not make a full circle with the ven's Blood. If the circle loses its integrity, the magic of the circle is broken. The ven must also know the true name of the person or persons inside the circle. All three names.

Once the circle is drawn, nothing may enter it. *Nothing*. No arrows, no fire, no swords, nothing. Nothing may damage the circle but the person inside and the ven who drew it. The circle lasts until dawn the next day.

Hearthward

When a ven writes sacred words on a door with her own Blood, no one may secretly enter. The ward warns the ven who used this ritual if anyone tries to enter the house without the owner's permission. As soon as any stranger of the house enters, the ven knows someone has violated the home and knows the intruder's true name. All three names. Once the ward is broken, it must be re-drawn.

I Brought the Bear

Spend a Style Point. You may spend two wagers in a row in one Strength-based contested risk.

Mother's Children

Spend a Style and boil a pot of soup with a personal item hanging over the hearth. This Blessing allows any Blooded of the Bear to find another. A boiling pot of soup and a personal item are all that's required. The Blessing must be performed at sunrise, for that's when lost children may be found.

If performed properly, a single spoonful of the soup gives the ven the general distance and direction of a missing family member. The subject cannot be a friend. They must be born under the shadow of the Bear.

No Fool

The Burghe once said, "You cannot be fooled without your own consent." Spend a Style Point and you can cancel the effects of a surprise (you roll no dice). But only for you, no one else.

Only My Fear Can Defeat Me

The relationship between the Bear and the Falcon is an old one. Stories of the Burghe and Talwyn Thorne often involve some sort of Romance, even if it is unrequited. What secrets the two shared is not known, except perhaps to the mystery cults of their followers. And even then, you can be sure, the two cults have very different versions of the same story.

You may not use this Blessing if Courage is your weakness.

Spend a Style Point before making a Strength risk. No ven may tag any of your Aspects or Injuries for that risk.

Elk Blessings

The Coldest Heart

Calling on Talten Steele's ruthlessness, not only are the Elk unmoved by sentiment, they are able to take advantage of those who are.

When another ven gains dice in a contested risk with you from a Romance or Art Aspect, you may spend a Style Point to cancel those dice.

Elk Outwits the Wolf

Spend five Style Points after you have rolled dice in a Prowess risk. Cancel your opponent's wagers in this Prowess risk. Success and failure of the risk is unaffected, but only you can keep your wagers.

Even the Moon has a Dark Side

A ven with the Blood of the Elk in his veins can turn even the greatest advantage to his own benefit.

Spend a Style Point and target a ven. You must be able to name the ven's Aspect (although you do not need to know the invoke, tag or compel). That ven cannot use the invoke for that Aspect until dawn the next day. The Aspect can still be tagged and compelled, but not invoked.

Shadow Blood

While the other Houses bicker and argue amongst themselves, no House is more united than the Elk. Bound by a tie stronger than sorcery, they are united across the waters, across the mountains, across the forests, across time.

With this Blessing, a ven can spend a Style Point to make any other ven a Contact. This grants the same benefits as a normal Contact, including Season action benefits.

If used during an adventure, the Blessing lasts until sunrise. If used during Season actions, the Blessing only lasts until the end of the Season.

Never Again

The story tells of Talten Steele and the Burghe, lost in the middle of the Wastelands with nothing but their Strength and Cunning to save them. What they learned from each other has been told many, many times. The lesson taught Steele that surrender does not begin in the body, it begins in the mind.

You cannot use this Blessing if Strength is your weakness.

If you lose a risk against another ven and that ven used an Aspect to gain dice, you can spend a Style Point and know either the tag or compel of that Aspect.

No Secret is Safe from Me

Cunning is the virtue of seeing the plan within the plan within the plan. And the Elk are the masters of that game. In ven literature, their ability to predict their opponent's moves sometimes borders on the supernatural.

When it comes time to make wagers in any contested risk, spend a Style Point. You may look at your opponent's wagers

before you make your own. Your opponent may not change his wagers after you've looked at them. You do not have to show your own wagers. You also cannot reveal your opponent's wagers to other ven.

The Vow

Only ven who are Blooded of the Elk may use this Blessing.

His voice drops. His hand, so hot. So strong. His eyes…

The Elk Promise is a well-known element of ven literature. A bond between two ven that cannot be broken without serious consequence. It is unique among the Elk, always described as "the Vow." A small ritual binding the Elk to his word.

Spend a Style Point and make a promise to another ven. That ven must now swear to keep the same promise. The same promise. Identical. Word for word.

If either ven breaks his promise, he loses all Style Points.

I Have Never Been Defeated

The key to winning the Great Game is always knowing your opponent's moves before he knows them himself.

Spend a Style Point. You may spend two wagers in a row in a contested Cunning risk.

Moving the Pawn

The Elk are most famous for being the power behind the throne. Their influence is subtle, only revealed when a trap has been sprung.

Spend a Style Point and give another ven a *Free Aspect*. The Aspect must be associated with a specific goal. Not a general goal, not an open-ended goal, but a specific task that has an end-state. A resolution.

"Murder Lady Chassel." This is good.

"Defend my Region." This is bad.

Murdering Lady Chassel has an end. The death of Lady Chassel. Defending your Region is bad because the job never ends.

The Aspect has an invoke worth a number of dice equal to 1 plus half your Cunning, rounded up. Thus, if your Cunning is 3, the bonus dice would be 1 + 2 = 3. If you can't do the math, check the "Bonus Season Actions" chart in the Seasons chapter. It's got it figured out for you.

The Aspect also has a tag. An enemy can gain two bonus dice when you aren't performing actions *directly related* to the assigned task.

The Aspect also has a compel. Anyone can spend a Style Point to force you back on the path of performing your task.

The Aspect remains a number of Seasons equal to the Devotion of the Elk who gave you the task, losing one die per Season. When the Aspect loses its last die, it is gone.

No ven may have this Blessing used upon him twice, either by the same ven or by two ven.

Falcon Blessings

Beast's Tongue

When invoking this Blessing, the ven drops Blood on the tongue of any animal. For the rest of the day (until the following dawn), he may communicate with that animal. The ven must convince the animal to drink some of her Blood. Any creature without a tongue cannot be the target of this ritual.

The Cloak Deceiveous

It is said the Old Falcon would wander through his villages under a subtle disguise, testing his Roadmen and other vassals. A trick he passed down to his daughter, Talwyn Thorne, which she used to gain political strength for her family.

This blessing requires a cloak and a Style Point. The ven may disguise himself in a general way: a soldier, guard, innkeeper, etc. The blessing causes any to look upon the blessed as if he naturally belonged to the scene. That is, if he is disguised as a guard in a castle, the other guards would look at him as if he was supposed to be where he was, doing what he was supposed to be doing. The Cloak Deceiveous only lasts until the disguised ven takes off the cloak or tells a lie. Once he tells a lie, the disguise is over.

The Falcon Knows no Fear

Spend five Style Points. You may replace Courage with any other Virtue for the next risk. You may not replace your weakness with Courage.

I am the Road

The Falcon know the people, they know the Road. While other Houses bicker and squabble over territory, only the Falcon truly know its Name. Only the Falcon know its secrets.

During Season actions, you may spend a Style Point to Quell Trouble in a number of Regions equal to your Courage. You may not perform the action in any noble's lands but your own, regardless of title or contacts or any other factors. Your lands alone.

The Ironwood Bow

Only ven who are Blooded of the Falcon may use this Blessing.

An old Blessing trusted only with the most esteemed Falcons. The Devoted goes forth into the world seeking a tree that has been struck by lightning. He retrieves a limb from that tree—a limb that has not touched the ground. Blood mingles with the wood producing a bow that hums in his hands and sings in his ears. Arrows from this bow may cause Injury to spectres and the user can also use Maneuvers (see *Violence*) with the bow.

The Name of the Storm

Spend a Style Point and whisper the Storm's true name. You are immune to the effects of the elements for one night. Anyone with you (a number of ven equal to your Courage) are also protected. Wind, rain, frigid cold, burning heat, whatever.

You may only use this Blessing if your character is Blooded of the Falcon. Even if another character hears the Storm's name, he cannot use this Blessing.

My Courage is Enough

There is no test of courage so true as facing the wrath of the Suaven.

Spend three Style Points when another ven tries to cancel your wagers with a Blessing. You may keep your wagers as usual.

Pain is Today, Honor is Forever

Pain is an illusion. It is a distraction. Pain is today. Honor is forever.

Spend a Style Point. You may cancel a tag against any of your Injuries as long as the Injury's rank is lower than your Courage.

The Sacred Tool

The steady hand, the unflinching eye. It takes more than just skill to use the Sacred Tool.

You cannot use this Blessing if Prowess is your weakness.

Spend a Style Point. When using a bow, you may add your Courage and Prowess together as your Virtue in the risk.

Fox Blessings

The Befuddling Kiss

When activated, this Blessing causes the subject to become confused and bewildered with an overwhelming tide of emotions. The subject gains an Aspect "Befuddled." The effects last until the next sunrise.

> *Aspect: Befuddled*
>
> **Tag:** Your opponent gains dice in any contested risk requiring your concentration or attention to details. The number of dice equals the Beauty of the Fox who kissed you.
>
> **Compel:** You seem confused, not able to communicate coherently, distracted by something... something... something beautiful.

The Black Kiss

Only ven who are Blooded of the Fox may use this Blessing.

The legendary Black Kiss is first seen in *The Great and Tragic Life of Shara Yvarai*. I've found other references to it, used under different circumstances. I'm using that work as the "definitive source" on the Kiss.

The ven's lips must be Bloody (either by her own Blood or another's) and she must know the true name of the target. Public, secret, family. She whispers his name, looking at him. The target ven must be in sight. She does not need to touch him to deliver the kiss, but… see the description below.

When she gives the Kiss, roll Beauty + Devotion (and any appropriate Aspects) whispering the target's name. Target Number 10. He receives an Injury 1, plus wagers. If she actually kisses him, use the same procedure but add her Beauty to the Injury rank.

The Enchanting Kiss

When activated, the ven can make the target feel the pangs of any emotion she deems fit—except love. It can be anger, jealousy, nervousness, or even heart-break, but none can cause a heart to feel untrue love… not even Talia herself.

This Kiss creates an Aspect that may be both tagged and compelled. "Jealousy," "heart-break," "envy," "greed," or any other appropriate emotion. The effects of this Kiss last until the next sunrise.

Fox Tricks the Elk

Spend five Style Points. Cancel all wagers in a Cunning risk made against you. Success and failure of the risk is unaffected, but both the victor and the defeated have no wagers.

A Fox's Eyes

More than any of the other Blooded, the Fox are trained from birth to love Art. Opera, painting, sculpture, theater. Art. And because of this, the Fox can look upon Art and see deep into the artist's mind...

Spend a Style Point when you become Inspired (see *Art*). You know one tag or compel from the artist's Aspects.

The Goodnight Kiss

My love. Sleep sweet. And dream only of me.

This Kiss sets the recipient to sleep until the next dawn. Nothing will wake him except a touch from the ven who originally kissed him.

The Invisible Tongue

The Blooded of the Fox are taught a secret language. A silent language. A language of subtlety and treachery. A language of promises that every heart understands.

Spend a Style Point. You may communicate silently to others with subtle body gestures and lilted accents in your voice. The person you are speaking to does not need to know the Invisible Tongue to understand your meaning.

The Most Subtle Weapon

Characters in the operas and pillow books also call it "the Most Secret Gift." We know very little about it. We know it is dangerous. Those who have survived it call it "the Subtle Weapon." A sacrilegious honor. Like all weapons, it can be turned against its wielder if she is not careful. It is never seen in the literature, but it is mentioned many, many times. And we only know one thing for certain.

It has something to do with sex.

Intoxicating, debilitating and addictive, ven return to the Temples of Talia again and again. Men and women. Seeking it. Wanting it. Blinded until they can have it again.

You cannot use this Blessing if Wisdom is your weakness.

Spend a Style Point in the trembling moment. Your lover can no longer spend Style Points unless you give him permission to do so. But he may now spend Style Points to *add dice* to any roll. One for one. He

may not spend more Style Points than you have Beauty.

This Blessing remains active for one Season. If it is not used by the end of the Season, it expires. When "delivered," the Blessing's effect remains on its target until the end of the Season.

Passion is Tamed with a Kiss

With a single kiss—a true kiss—the Fox can tame even the wildest ven.

A real kiss. Not just a touch. And with that, you give another ven the ability to deny a number of Aspect tags and/or compels equal to your Beauty. This Blessing only lasts until sunrise the next day.

Serpent Blessings

The Heart's Riddle Revealed

The ven can contemplate a person he knows or has knowledge of (the target cannot be a complete stranger). When the moment is over, the ven knows that person's motives exactly and his next immediate action. The ven may be in another town; distance is not an issue.

I Bear Wisdom's Price

The Serpent's motto is more true than most could ever realize.

You may spend one Style Point, instead of a Season action, to learn a Sorcery Ritual.

Like all Blessings, you may only do this once per Season.

A Moment of Insight

Moments of pure insight. Moments painful and powerful. Immobilized, in touch with eternity.

Spend a Style Point before spending a wager in a Wisdom-based risk. You may use two Wisdom wagers in a row.

I've Forgotten More than You'll Ever Know

For the Serpent, knowledge is not just a tool, but a weapon. As sharp and deadly as any sword.

Spend a Style Point if you lose a Wisdom risk. You may either spend your wager first or make your opponent spend his, regardless of what the other fool wants.

Serpent's Kiss

Only a ven who is Blooded of the Serpent may use this Blessing.

If the Serpent discovers he has been poisoned, he may spend a Style Point to negate the poison. Like all Blessings, this one may only be used once per Season.

Serpent Knows the Fox

Spend five Style Points after you have rolled dice in a Beauty risk. Cancel your opponent's wagers in this Beauty risk. Success and failure of the risk is unaffected, but only you can keep your wagers.

The Serpent's Glare

Ignorance is bliss. Wisdom is terror.

Tales of the aura of dread surrounding the Serpent fill ven pillow books. Why is the Serpent so feared? Because they know secrets. Every secret. Your secret.

Spend a Style Point when making an intimidation-based risk. Under normal circumstances, this would be a Beauty risk. After all, you are trying to inspire emotion in another ven. But in this circumstance, for the purposes of creating that overwhelming sense of foreboding, you may use Wisdom instead.

The Softest Spot

This Blessing requires one Style Point as the ven observes his target. On his next risk against that target (be it ven or or something else), the ven knows exactly where the weakness of an object or person lies. Even the weakness of an argument. Using this knowledge, he gains a number of free wagers equal to his Wisdom on his next risk against that target.

He can also reveal this weakness to another (watching a fight and shouting out the weakness to one opponent, for example), but the person he is communicating to does not have his complete understanding. Another ven can only gain half the devotee's Wisdom in wagers (round up).

Wisdom's Clarity

According to the literature, the ven are easily fooled and tricked. Of course, most of this is narrative convenience—miscommunication is the key to both comedy and tragedy—but we also have to take in consideration those overwhelming ven emotions, blinding any reason or logic. When a ven demonstrates emotionless logic, he shows himself as exceptional. Poisoned by the Serpent, his heart has turned black, cold and hard.

You cannot use this Blessing if Cunning is your weakness.

When another ven answers a question, spend a Style Point and invoke this Blessing. You can sense the truth or falsehood of the ven's statement. You cannot see through illusions or glamours, but you do know when someone is trying to lie to you. No risk involved.

WOLF BLESSINGS

The Beauty of Violence

There is sublime Art in mastering the Sword. Bloodshed for its own purpose is meaningless. The true Swordsman is not a butcher, he is an Artist.

You cannot use this Blessing if Beauty is your weakness.

When you convert wagers to Style Points in a Prowess risk, you convert them one wager per one Style (rather than two wagers per Style).

I am the Weapon

Only a ven who is Blooded of the Wolf may use this Blessing.

The name of this Blessing comes from an old Wolf proverb: "The Hand is the weapon, not the Sword."

Spend a Style Point to call any defensive Maneuver while unarmed. You must *know* the defensive Maneuver. You can't call Maneuvers you don't know. Bad form.

The Invisible Cannot be Touched

Ven literature is full of swordsmen, moving effortlessly, always where you never expect them, as if they could turn themselves invisible at the exact moment of the final strike.

If you have the Sword in your hand, you can spend a Style Point and cancel three ranks from any Injury inflicted against you.

The Sacrifice Strike

Wolves know their skill with the Sword will carry the day. They also know that sometimes, you must sacrifice a little to gain more.

Spend a Style Point and pick one opponent during the Gather Dice phase, before the Strike Bid, before any secret bids are made. Before you attack, you may deduct dice from your own pool to force your opponent to deduct dice from his pool, one for one.

The Subtle Hand

True masters of the Sword, the ven can use either hand, unlimited by such petty weaknesses. The ven call those who can use either hand with equal deadliness "Masters of the Subtle Hand."

Your ven has gained enough skill with a weapon that he may employ one in each hand. Spend a Style Point. Your ven gains two free wagers for any Prowess risk.

Teeth and Claws

It is said the wolf carries two weapons. His teeth and claws. In fact, the wolf carries three weapons. The third is his mind.

During Prowess risks, you may spend two wagers in a row. This Gift also allows you to use two Maneuvers in a row.

Tool or Weapon

The motto of the Wolf, a philosophy adopted by every ven. Wolf's lesson is simple, if you are willing to learn. The contest of life is the search for advantage.

Like other ven, you can spend Style Points to give the current scene an Aspect that others can tag. However, when you spend Style to give the scene a tag, you designate who may use it. You can designate a number of ven equal to your Prowess.

Your Fear is My Ally

The Blooded of the Wolf are trained from birth to sense the fear in their opponents. In their sweat, in their slightest movements, in their eyes.

During the strike bid, spend a Style Point. You may look at one opponent's strike bid before you bid dice yourself.

Wolf Downs the Elk

Spend five Style Points after you have rolled dice in a Cunning risk. Cancel your opponent's wagers in this Cunning risk. Success and failure of the risk are unaffected, but only you can keep your wagers.

BECOMING A SUAVEN

When a ven falls into Solace, he becomes a Suaven. One of the Dreaming.

When your character falls into Solace, he is no exception. His life as a ven is over, but his existence as a Suaven has only just begun.

Your character begins this existence as a rank 1 Suaven (Suaven 1). Entombed in the thick, milky substance that surrounds and protects him, his family and friends enshrine him, surrounding him with the objects that brought him pleasure in his life.

Meanwhile, you must decide on your Blessings. As a Suaven 1, you may have one Blessing to bestow upon your faithful. You may choose one Blessing from the appropriate House. For example, if your character is a Fox Suaven, you may choose one Blessing from the Fox Blessings, listed above.

THE SUAVEN OF…

First, you must choose a theme for your Suaven. This should be a word or phrase that best sums up the lessons and themes of your life. It could be "passion" or "swordsmanship" or "fair play" or even "backstabbing bastard."

Remember, the Suaven are like our own patron saints. The patron saint of lost causes, the patron saint of sailors, the patron saint of travel. Figure out your own Suaven's theme and write it down on the sheet.

SUAVEN RANKS

There are five ranks of Suaven: Family, Lesser, Minor, Greater, and Grand.

Family Suaven are revered by a specific family group. A family Suaven has one or more Shrines, but is not known outside of those who knew her in life.

Lesser Suaven have a bit more fame. They possess more Shrines and those who never met them have some passing knowledge of their lives.

Minor Suaven are recognized by most ven in a specific geographical region, even if the ven do not revere them. These Suaven have a reaching power over the lives of those who give them reverence.

Greater Suaven are almost omnipresent in Shanri, known all throughout the land. All ven grow up knowing their names, their symbols and their holidays.

Grand Suaven are those the ven fear to ignore. Their presence in every life, every day.

Finally, there is another kind of Suaven. The forbidden ones. The Fell Ones. We do not speak of them. Not now, not ever.

Your Ranks

Your character begins his experience as a Suaven at rank 1. Family Suaven. You have one Blessing chosen from the list above. You have one or two Shrines. Nothing to brag about.

You become a *Lesser* Suaven when a Shrine to your memory has been constructed in five different Domains. That is, five different nobles have spent Season actions to construct a Shrine in their respective Domains. Once that happens, you become a Suaven 2. A Lesser Suaven. Choose another Blessing to bestow upon your Devoted.

You become a *Minor* Suaven when five Shrines to your memory have been built in ten different Domains. You now have 3 Blessings to bestow upon your Devoted.

You become a *Greater* Suaven when a Temple to your memory has been built in ten different Domains. Remember, you cannot build a Temple in any Domain unless you already have ten Shrines in that Domain. You now have 4 Blessings to bestow upon your Devoted.

You become a *Grand* Suaven when a Temple to your memory has been built in ten different Domains. Remember, you cannot build a Temple in any Domain unless you already have ten Shrines in that Domain. You now have 5 Blessings to bestow upon your Devoted.

Suaven Points

Each Shrine and Temple raised in your name gives you Suaven Points. Use these points to bestow Blessings upon your followers and Wrath upon your enemies.

Every Season, every Shrine dedicated to you gives you one Suaven point.

Every Season, every Temple dedicated to you gives you five Suaven points.

When your followers revere you at your Shrines and Temples, you can give them Blessings. Each Blessing costs one Suaven point. You cannot give out more Blessings than you have Suaven points. Once they are gone, you cannot give out any more Blessings.

Wrath

You may, if you choose, throw your Wrath on those who violate your Shrines, Temples or devoted.

Dealing out Wrath costs more than blessing the faithful. Hitting a ven with your Wrath costs three points.

As a Suaven, you must determine an Aspect that best suits your Wrath. Yes, your Wrath is an Aspect that other ven can tag and compel. The tag gives your enemies a number of dice equal to half your Suaven rank, rounded up.

For example, if you are the rank 3 Suaven of the Duel, you can give a Wrathful Aspect that looks something like this:

> *Aspect: The Wrath of Me*
>
> **Tag:** Other ven can tag this Aspect to gain two dice (half of your Suaven rank, rounded up) when facing you in duels.
>
> **Compel:** Overwhelmed by a sense of dread and doom, you try to avoid duels whenever possible.

Again, hitting a ven with your Wrath costs three points. Your Wrath lasts one Season or until you feel the ven has reconciled with you over the offense, whichever is shorter.

Blessed Lady, Most Sacred Harlot,
Give me the secret to his heart.
Give me the secret to his heart.
Give me the secret to his heart.
And I swear, I will give him the secret to mine.

The Great and Terrible Life of Shara Yvarai

April 22nd

My poor sketch cannot convey the brilliance of this cameo. A delicate pinkish hue runs through startling white.

What kind of ivory is this? It is decidedly not elephant tusk.

What an exciting find!!

The first non-stylized representation of the ven form. What craftsmanship!!!

Notice the details, the slight curls on the back of the neck.

A marvelous find! momentous! The team is gay with excitement!!



As far as I can make it The translation is "shara". Which might be a title. But perhaps a name I think it is a name.

Unfortunately, the back description is marred. Could it be a dedication to someone? The bearer of this token of esteem from Shara herself?

S.

Clearly, this must be a forgery.

Not only does it not match the style of the period in question, but such a "gift" would be extremely inappropriate for a woman of her stature. The name "Shara" is also one used in fiction--clearly a pseudonym. If such a gift did exist, it would never have a false name--the giving of a name is a gift of sincere trust.

I'm sorry, but your "finding" is nothing more than another ruse.

I'm surprised you would be so fooled a second time.

Player

This chapter is for you, the player. We're going to talk about how to play the game. You already know the rules (if you read the rest of the book, that is), but now, we're going to talk about how to *use* those rules to get the most out of your game.

Beauty is Truth.
The creation of
Beauty is Art.

This chapter has specific advice on the *Houses* game system, but it also has a bunch of advice on how to use things like your Virtues, aspects and wagers to really milk the system for all it's worth.

But, it's also about troubleshooting. Making sure your game *works*. For many different reasons, it's difficult to keep a tabletop game together. Real life commitments, jobs, family, and that evil, vile temptress the MMORPG have stolen us from our first and truest love. It's hard enough to keep a game together. We shouldn't be sabotaging our own efforts. So, this section is for you, the player. How do you keep your game regular, exciting and fun. And free from nutty gamer drama.

Communication is the Key

You know, it feels silly writing this section, but all too often, I hear the same kind of talk from gamers at conventions and parties and stores. I get asked the same kinds of questions and usually give the same kinds of answers, and out of all those questions, it seems this one gets asked more than any other.

"Why do games always go off track?"

Well, in order to solve that problem, we usually have to ask the same questions. "Is the group communicating?" The typical answer is "No."

So, to curtail 90% of the problems gamers have, I'm giving you a lot of advice that seems simple, but in fact, is actually rather difficult. Communication is *hard*. But, if you use it effectively, you can keep your game running. Remember that. It'll come in handy later.

A Different Kind of Honor

Houses is a bit different than most traditional roleplaying games. With the system, players have a lot more control over the narrative, taking the reins and creating the story themselves. I've run entire sessions where, as the Narrator, I didn't say a word. Dice rolled, risks taken, clues discovered, lives lost… and I didn't say a word.

That's because the players have a lot of power in this game. As much power as the game master, if they want it. Now, why would I do a silly thing like that?

Because I trust you.

Most roleplaying games are designed with cheaters, wankers and munchkins in mind. Designers put guards in place to keep those people from abusing loopholes. After all, this is a roleplaying game. Loopholes exist. So, instead of putting so many limits on the players that they can't even breathe, I've done the opposite. I've put the power directly into your hands. Again, you may ask, why would I do such a thing?

Because I trust you.

I trust that you understand it isn't just the Narrator's job to make sure everybody's having fun. It's *everybody's* job to make sure everybody is having fun.

Whenever I find myself on the other side of the screen, as a player, I inevitably find myself playing the role of Pocket Narrator. That is, I engage other players in ways that get them to talk about their character. I put myself in a position where the other characters are in the spotlight, and I do whatever I can to make that moment fun.

The Pocket Narrator. Making sure other people are having fun.

Now sure, I enjoy my moment in the spotlight as much as everyone else, but it's my hope that if I spend extra time with the other players, when it comes their turn to do the same, they will. Why?

Because it's everybody's job to make sure everybody is having fun.

FINALLY...

Now sure, you can take these rules and run trucks through them. Find the best way to make your character better than everybody else's character. Overpower the session with your ego and take over the whole game. You can do that. Nobody's really stopping you. After all, the other players are your friends and they don't want to hurt your feelings.

But see, I'm not your friend. And I really don't give a crap about your feelings. So, I get to say this for them.

If you're gonna ruin everybody else's fun, go find yourself another game.

We're all adults here. Let's play like we are.

Okay, now that I've got that out of my system, on with the show!

The Diplomacy Curse

A tyrant of a game. A demon of a game. A ruthless bastard that demands blood. You must slit your wrist and give it what it wants. Demanding sacrifice every time you open the box.

Diplomacy is a game you should never play with your friends. It requires a level of mistrust most people are uncomfortable with, calling for degrees of betrayal any sane person would find reprehensible. A game every serious gamer should play at least once. At least. Because this is where grown-ups play.

There is a Curse on the game. I'm serious about this. No hyperbole, no exaggeration. No metaphor to illustrate my point. I mean, there is a real curse on the game. It destroys friendships. Wrecks marriages. Disrupts offices who decide to play it "on the side."

You cannot play *Diplomacy* "on the side."

It consumes your every waking moment. Pushes you beyond your ethical and moral limits.

You must win.

You must win.

YOU MUST WIN!!!

Because of all this, I refuse to play *Diplomacy* with my friends.

I love my friends and despite what I would like to believe, I know The Curse is stronger than any friendship. Stronger than any manmade bond. It laughs at my hubris and shows me, with ruthless precision, how wrong I am.

I will not play *Diplomacy* with my friends.

Now as to how all this relates to *Houses of the Blooded*…

I think games like *Vampire*, *L5R*, and *Houses* fall under the shadow of the Curse because the games require a level of mistrust most gamers just aren't comfortable with. Gamers already have an inbred quality of insecurity (no matter how small), and games like these pick at that. They find it like a chigger finds the soft part of your skin and it just starts digging. And it won't stop until it finds Blood.

So, as a player, I must warn you. *Houses* is a game that feeds on your insecurity and mistrust. You may not be comfortable with that. You may not have the Courage to face it.

You have been warned.

Devil and the Details

Gamers seem obsessed with details. They ask a general question, you give a general answer. They ask a more specific question, you give a more specific answer. Then, their questions start getting really small. Like fit in your pocket small. Here's an example.

Question: The ven seem to have very particular rules on matters of emotion. Why is that?
Answer: Because the ven know themselves. They know they're emotional creatures, so they come up with rules to guard against those emotions.

Follow-Up Question: If there are all these rules, and they have so many obvious loopholes, why don't the rules get broken all the time?

Answer: They *do* get broken all the time. That's the point. The ven break rules. Consequences lead to story.

Follow-follow-up Question: Is the cultural assumption that they'll get away with it, like a speed limit, or is it more of a personal thing?

Answer: GAAHHHHHH!!! WHY DOES ANYBODY DO ANYTHING!!!??!?!

Don't get caught up in the details. After all, wagers *make* details, remember?

Like I said above, there are a lot of ways to abuse the rules in just about any roleplaying game. This one is no exception. The difference is, I didn't spend a whole lot of time coming up with new rules to cover my ass.

See, I don't believe "good game design" is about fixing holes. Instead, good game design focuses on making the game fun to play, making sure every element of the game gives the players another tool.

Why do you think the Law is so vague? The rules for Revenge? The economy just doesn't work?

Huge gaping holes. Ven culture is full of them. Questions that aren't easy to answer. Nor *should* they be easy to answer. No clean cut yes or no. No clean cut right or wrong. No clean cut good or evil.

Our own culture is a great example. Take nearly any important issue in modern society. Show me the clear cut answer. Abortion. Immigration law. Taxes. Economy. The death penalty. Gay marriage. Okay, that one's pretty straight-forward, it's just that the people on the other side of the debate are ignorant and don't understand the real issues.

See how easy that is? How easy it is to make the issue simple and one-sided. But, frankly, it isn't. It isn't simple, clean-cut, or easy. It's hard. Messy. Ugly. And people are willing to fight for it. Each side convinced they are the Good Guys and those who oppose them are the True Heart of Evil.

* * *

Now, excuse me for a moment. I have to take what appears to be a tangential break, but in the end, this will all come back together. I promise.

I have a lot of historical reenactment friends. You know, the ones who study the Civil War or the Renaissance or Ancient Rome and write huge papers on the subject, create authentic costumes, build elaborate structures. All that kind of stuff. It's impressive. Their knowledge is extensive and they're a lot of fun to talk to.

But don't ever watch *Rome* with them. All they do is complain about how everything is *wrong*. Same thing with *Dune* fans. Watching the movie or the mini-series. All they do is complain how everything is *wrong*.

The purpose of Art is to remind us that we are not alone.

And in some cases, my friends are right. Inaccuracies, anachronisms. These things happen for a lot of reasons. But sometimes, they happen because my friends and the person doing the research on the show rely on different authorities.

I hear that capes are wrong. Well, maybe there were different styles of cape. After all, there are different cuts of t-shirts, right? There isn't just one single style of blue jeans or slacks or even khaki pants. Why should there be only one style of toga? Sure, we've only found one style or toga—or perhaps even two—but that doesn't mean there was only *one style of toga* in all of Ancient Rome. Right?

* * *

The point of that little sidewinder diatribe is this. We know next to *nothing* about the ven. We have no maps, no illustrations, very few written documents. What I've cobbled together here is only a smidgeon of what we do know. There's still more to be discovered. Universities have documents that have yet to be translated. (Like I'll ever get my hands on those.) And, honestly, I've made some stuff up.

I know, I know. It's an incredible confession, but it's true. I've made some stuff up. Now, before you ask, no, I'm not telling. Besides, unless you're a scholar, you won't know the difference between the facts, theories and the fiction.

I guess what I'm trying to say here is that there really is no canon. No real authority. This is a game of make believe. So, make believe. Add details. I have my own ideas about the ven, but they really shouldn't influence you anymore than you want.

How do the ven react to a situation? How does *anybody* react to a situation?

As each of us would, in our own way.

The ven are not carbon copies of each other. Each is an individual. Everyone responds as they would, given the circumstances, their own personality, their own experiences.

Make believe. Make the world. Make the ven.

The Blind Prophet

We have our own myths and legends about blind prophets. So do the ven. Children born blind—with white eyes—seem to have precognitive powers. Not all blind children, mind you, but a few.

Playing a blind ven seems to be popular among my players (as well as playing twins). Every Opera seems to have a blind soothsayer, dispensing wisdom to hubristic passersby who dismiss his prophecies.

I recommend against playing a blind ven; a prophet is more of a supporting character than a protagonist. But if you insist…

First, you need an Aspect.

Aspect: Blind

Invoke: Gain three dice for any Cunning or Wisdom risks involving perceiving future events. What you state is "true," just like any other risk. You must base your prediction on currently known facts. You cannot speculate. You may only invoke this Aspect once per Season.

Tag: Your opponents gain two dice for any risk involving your sight.

Compel: Another player or the Narrator can force you to fall, falter or otherwise be affected by your blindness.

Using Style

Let's spend a moment or two talking about using Style.

I've found Style to be one of the most useful mechanics I've ever bumped into. Whenever you want something in the game, offer to spend Style.

You want the Duke's daughter to notice you? Spend Style.

You want to find a purloined letter? Spend Style.

You want to add an Aspect to the scene or give a temporary Aspect to an NPC? Spend Style.

Style doesn't take the place of risks, but spending it can keep the game moving. Rolling dice slows things down and should only be done when necessary. In its place, spend Style. If you want something bad enough, you should be willing to spend enough Style to make it happen.

Sometimes, a tiny detail isn't worth a risk. Sometimes, all you need is a yes or no answer. You don't need wagers, you don't need additional facts. You just want to know something straight up.

Spend a style point. Spend a style point and decide for yourself. Here's an example.

Player asks me, "John, what's the ven attitude on gay marriage?"

I answer, "You tell me."

He spends a style point. "No," he says. "The ven aren't that liberal."

Of course, some players may insist on rolling so they can hoard style points. You know, rolling for each little detail so they can make a bunch of wagers and bank them for style.

"Does Lord Fabricast have a moustache? I'll make a Cunning risk with seven wagers!"

Bad form. Give me your style.

"Of course I meant…"

Another use of style points comes into play when you—not your character—has made an egregious error. Ven culture is a labyrinth of rules and it is easy to get lost, make wrong turns, hit dead ends.

If you have made an error—not your character, but you—the proper recourse is spend a style point and say, "Of course I meant…" or "Of course, I didn't mean…" or "Of course I wouldn't…"

You get the picture.

The Kibitzing Rule

The ven are portrayed as brilliant, scheming masterminds. Of course, not all of us fit that bill.

(Not all of *you*.)

In order for players to gain the kind of chess master brilliance exhibited by the ven, I've given you a significant advantage. The Kibitzing Rule.

When faced with a sticky predicament, other players can give you suggestions to help you think your way out.

If a player wants to kibitz a suggestion to you, she surrenders her Style Point. You may use the solution or you may not as you see fit.

The Subtle Art of Favors

Much of ven culture runs on favors. But how to get favors? Easy. You earn them.

A common misconception among young nobles is that power rests in Resources. Hah! No, my friend. Resources are the tools, not the weapon. The weapon is *action*. Season Actions.

When you need a favor, offer a Season Action. Yes, it cuts down on your own, but it puts another noble in your debt. (And make sure to get that debt written in blood.) Once he's in your debt, you can call on that favor any time you wish.

Here's how this works. Because he's in a bind and *needs* a Season Action, he isn't acting out of foresight, but desperation. When you call to pay back that favor, your own favor is acted upon with foresight. Let me give you a specific example.

You are at a Party and some dumb-witted noble has trouble with orks in his lands. "No problem, cousin," you tell him. "I'll just send my roadmen over there to take care of it."

Now your cousin owes you a favor. Get it in writing.

When you sit at a secret meeting and your fellow conspirators plot against your lover's brother, you go to that brother and let him know. "They plan to assassinate you tomorrow night. Poison in the wine."

Now he owes you a favor. Get it in writing.

Remember: the only box that can hold a secret is a coffin. Secrets are the true commerce of ven culture. If you know a secret, chances are someone else wants to know it. Use that to get favors.

Narrative Control

In most games, narrative control ends at the tip of your own character's nose. You don't have any authority, you don't have any *narrative control*, beyond your own character. Each player has narrative control over his own character and the Narrator has authority over the rest of the world.

In *Houses*, that's not true. Every player has a degree of narrative control, a certain amount of authorial authority. In other words, everybody gets a moment as game master.

If an NPC asks you a question about your background, you have the authority to say just about anything you want. Anything you say creates background for your character, but also creates facts about Shanri. If you talk about a dog you had as a child, that dog existed—and may still exist. In fact, you've also established the fact that the ven have domesticated dogs. (Not a "historical" fact, but who cares? It's your game, your ven, make up your own "history.") If you talk about your father, any detail you say exercises narrative control. Talk about your uncle, your mother's castle, your older brother's assassination. You've become the Narrator. You've become the author of the world.

Usually, in most roleplaying games, your degree of control ends there. You can't say anything true about another character because each player has final authority over his own character. In this game, that isn't necessarily true.

In this game, if you want final authorial control over your own character, you have to spend Style. You have to be open to the idea that other people's ideas about your own character may be just as valid as your own. Now, you have to trust me on this. I find that pretty difficult to swallow myself. I'm a control addict, clinging to the concept that I'm the only person who gets to say what's what about my own character. But, when I thought about it from a different perspective, things began to change.

I asked myself, "What if my character was just an NPC? Would I feel the same way?" I had to think about that a lot. I had to think about the way I treated my own NPCs.

NPCs are a staple of my own gaming style. NPCs are how I get players to care about a story. Players love my NPCs and hate my NPCs. (Nobody cares about a game because the ranged attack mechanic is cool.) They care about a game because they care about their characters and the best way to get players to care about their characters is to give them other characters to interact with.

I know, this sounds like it belongs in the Narrator section, and it does to a certain degree, but in this game—in *this* game—I'm trusting you, the players, to be the Narrator for a little while. Even if it's just for a moment. And I'm also advocating the concept that

every player *is* the Narrator to a certain degree. And that means every character in the game—even player characters—are NPCs. You have narrative control. And you have to be willing to use it. You also have to be willing to use it *responsibly*.

Before the game begins, the players should get together and talk about how much authorial control they want. Should wagers be able to affect PCs? To what degree? Find a comfort zone, a place where all the players are willing to say "Yes." If you don't feel comfortable with what's being said, be sure to say so. I'm assuming you're playing with your friends. You shouldn't feel awkward about speaking up and saying, "You know, I don't think I'll have fun with that."

But this little philosophy—that all characters are free to edit—can be challenging at first. It's not the most conventional way of handling narrative control, but give it a try. Start small and get more daring as you go. If it doesn't work out for you, change how much authority players get with wagers. There is no rule that says you can't. In fact, this whole section is a rule that says you can.

PS: When I said players really love and hate my NPCs, I wasn't exaggerating. In fact, one particular NPC is so hated by the LA group I used to play in, my buddy Rob wanted to fire him into the Sun. Unfortunately, Rob never got that chance. So, to make up for it, that particular NPC makes a cameo appearance in this game, just so Rob can get another shot at it.

Have fun, Rob.

NPCs and Style (The Player Version)

I've been struggling with this for a long time.

In all the games I run, there's usually a reward mechanic. Void Points, Drama Dice, Trouble. And now, with *Houses*, we have Style. The Narrator rewarding the players for throwing themselves into the game, for helping other players' enjoyment, for being Good People. Throw them a point. A game bonus. Just give it to them.

And in all the games I run, there's always that moment when everything goes right and the players gasp and the whole game stops because of some little twist I threw in. Some little surprise I'd been savoring. Something that knocks the players off their feet. And someone says, "Give John a style point!"

Unfortunately, that mechanic doesn't really work. You see, giving the Narrator a point... it just doesn't go anywhere. There's really no way for me to use it.

So, when I started writing *Houses*, I had a lot of goals. One of those goals was this:

"Have a mechanic that encourages the players to reward the Narrator."

This is what I came up with.

NPCs in *Houses of the Blooded* (and pretty much every roleplaying game) are like ghosts. They exist for a short while, then disappear. They touch the world, then vanish. Like trained monkeys, they do their little trick, make everyone laugh, then go back to the cage and everyone moves along, forgetting about them.

I don't want you to forget about my NPCs. I want the names of my NPCs burned on your brain. At least one of my NPCs is so hated, the players have vowed to kill him whenever they see him. Forget the consequences. Forget the costs. Just kill the bastard. Kill him so hard, the world hurts when it thinks about him. Likewise, there are NPCs the players absolutely adore. They would kill or die to protect them.

I work hard to make my NPCs as real—sometimes more real—than the players' characters. I work damn hard at it. And now I have a mechanic that lets the players help me out.

Whenever a player ends a scene with an NPC, and the player finds he really likes the NPC, he can give the NPC a style point. (Which is really giving the Narrator a style point via proxy.) The NPC can then use the style point just like a player character. Most importantly, he can deny compels, veto wagers, and use style points the same way the characters do.

Giving style to an NPC makes that NPC more real, both mechanically and metaphorically.

The Narrator has all the rules for this in his own chapter. But for now, all you need to know is this. If you like an NPC, or if you feel the Narrator is doing a great job playing the NPC, give that character a style point.

Talk to the Narrator

I can't say this enough. Communication is the key to a successful roleplaying group.

If you want to play a particular kind of game, tell the Narrator. If you don't want to play a particular kind of game, tell the Narrator.

I know of too many stories that end with a player walking away from a game because it wasn't what he wanted it to be. That's because he wasn't talking to the Narrator.

The Narrator is your friend. Not in a metaphorical way, but in a real way. It's your buddy. You've known him forever. *Talk to him*.

But, unfortunately, as much as I say this, you'll never do it, not unless there's a rule of some kind. So, I've given the Narrator a tool to help facilitate communication. It's in his section of the book and it gives you an in-game bonus when you use it, but you're not allowed to read that part of the book, so you'll have to try a different tactic.

You'll have to ask him about it.

The mistake fools make—believing the world trembles at their voice, cowers at their arrival.

The Colville Rule

My buddy Matt has a rule. When he plays a board game—or any game, for that matter—the assumption is the players are playing a friendly game. That is, if I make a mistake, I can ask, "Friendly game?" and if everyone agrees, I can take my move back.

The attitude of a friendly game is just that. It's friendly. Everyone at the table is friends. We're learning how the game works, we're trying different things, we're having fun. A friendly game. We're playing for the purpose to have fun. Win, yes, but have fun doing it.

But, if at any point I ask "Friendly game?" and someone says, "No," the rules change. Now, we're all playing to win. The difference between a friendly game and a not-friendly game is simple: two different goals.

Friendly Game: Playing with your friends is fun.

Cut-Throat Game: Winning is fun.

Both of these are true. They co-exist, are completely opposed to each other, and are both true. (Thank you R.A.W.)

You must, before you begin playing, ask this question. "Friendly Game or Cut-Throat Game?"

Friendly Game

Now, treachery in a friendly game is different, and in a lot of ways, it's more difficult. In a friendly game, treachery is all above board. As the rules already state: no notes, no secret meetings, none of that. Everyone announces their Virtues, aspects and everything else.

We trust each other to plot against our enemies and ourselves because we want a big, dramatic game full of intrigue and Romance and Revenge.

We assume our greatest enemy (one of the other player ven) will betray us, but because the player *sees* the betrayal (no secret meetings, remember), he can play into it. He knows the circumstances. He knows the poison is in the wine. He knows when he drinks it his enemy will mock him and kick him and laugh and laugh and laugh… and leave him choking to death. So the hidden servant can come out of the shadowed corner and save him.

In ven literature, vendettas last *forever*. Sometimes even for generations. It isn't until everything has gone *too far* that the matter must be settled by Swords. And even then, the children carry the matter into another generation.

The point of a Friendly Game is not to beat everyone else. The point is to illustrate a great and tragic life. To be a proper ven pillow book or opera, your character *must* die unfulfilled or pass into Solace at the worst possible moment… just when he was about to claim victory over his worst enemy, just when she was about to declare her love, just when he was about to admit his greatest crime… it all falls apart.

That's the point of the game. Tragedy. And I'm putting it in your hands. If you trust your friends to be your enemies and help you achieve that goal, then the Friendly Game is for you.

The Cut-Throat Game

Now, Cut-Throat Games (as I've decided to call them, using the ven style of capitalizing everything that's important) are usually very short-lived. The whole point is to knock off the other players and "win" by stealing their land. But a ven doesn't just steal your land. He steals your land, your children, your lover, and then watches you die slowly while he eats your food at your own table, pouring your wine and laughing in your face.

That's how the ven win.

So, if you want to play that way, feel free. Just go in with the understanding that it's pretty likely that you'll be the one lying on the ground, poisoned, getting laughed at. In a 6-person game, you have a one-in-six chance of winning. You'll probably lose. Go in with that understanding, and you'll come out the other end just fine.

I recommend making a character you don't care about. Don't become too emotionally invested. I know that sounds counterintuitive to why we enjoy roleplaying games, but it works out better this way. A character who is doomed to die.

Now, I have to admit… this kind of game is not for me. I don't just like my characters, I *love* my characters. I spend a whole lot of time and effort coming up with a character I like, and then even more time and effort fine tuning that character over the course of months.

And so, this particular kind of game doesn't really suit me. I do not enjoy it.

But, other people do. In fact, I know a few people who won't play a Friendly Game. They don't see the point. You play a game to win. Especially *this* kind of game. You play to win or you don't play at all.

That's what this is all about. The Cut-Throat Game.

A few table rules change here.

First, secret notes and meetings are back in. Secrecy is the key to a PvP game.

Second, players don't announce their Virtues and Aspects, but instead, just announce how many dice they can gather. Discovering your enemies' Virtues (and weakness), Aspects and Devotions suddenly becomes a vital part of the game.

Third, everyone signs an agreement. A Blood Oath. But, just don't use blood, okay? The agreement states the following:

> *This is a Cut-Throat Game. We agree all but one of our characters will probably die. We agree this is the experience we want to have and will not be whimpering, sobbing little babies about it if we lose.*
>
> *So say we all.*

With that understanding done, you can go on to treating your friends like your worst enemies. Good luck. And don't come crying to me when you lose.

Twins?

Yes, the ven do give birth to twins, but the event is highly inauspicious. Extremely rare. The literature suggests a ritual is involved.

Twins in ven literature are bad omens. Nothing but trouble. Even the well-intentioned twins (even more rare) always bring doom to those around them.

Typically, twins play some sort of evil or seductive influence in a story. They finish each other's thoughts, act together for a common cause (even when far apart) and otherwise fill the entire scene with a thick air of creepy dread and impending violence.

Twins enjoy special rules circumstances. First, twins do not need to spend style points to use the Kibitz Rule (see above). Second, they have a Free Aspect called "Twin":

Twin

Invoke: You gain three dice when protecting your twin.

Tag: An opponent can tag this Aspect to gain two bonus dice when you are away from your twin. (alternate tag!)

Compel: You must act creepy. Don't ham it up. Be subtle. Stare. Stand too close. Make veiled references to past violent acts and shiver with delight when thinking of them. You are the villain. You are no hero. Remind them of that.

Min-Max Advice

On the heels of Mr. Colville's cameo, I feel obligated to take a moment and give you some advice for that Cut-Throat Game we've been talking about.

I know there are a few of you out there looking over the rules, figuring out the best way to manipulate the system to get the best character. The best build.

Well, I'll give you a head start. Here's what you need to do to get what you want, step-by-step and some advice on how to keep the advantage you've created.

Step 1: Get Vassals

If you are going to do this, get some friends to do it with you. Get a group together—at least six—and make characters together. Convince everyone else to agree you need one character who is in charge of all the other characters. Consolidate your strength.

Get all your friends to sign contracts. Blood contracts. Make sure they are happy with their contracts. That doesn't mean you have to be fair, you just have to make sure they are happy. (Con men are great at this: making someone happy with a bum deal. We could all learn a lot from con men.) The contracts state that these lesser nobles sign over their land to you, giving you enough land to make you a bigger noble. Depending on how many allies you gather, you could be a Count or even a Marquis. Make sure the land is *yours*. Without those contracts, none of this will work.

You can convince people by convincing them of the strategy. Let them know having a Duke as an ally is important. Many Seats in the Senate, vast lands, a network of allies. You also need to convince them that *you* are the best person for this job. If you can't do that, don't worry. You'll have plenty of opportunities to betray the Duke and take his lands.

So, your lineup looks like this. You have one noble who owns all the land. The other players are vassals under his authority. Their lands belong to him, but they manage those lands under contract. Contracts they are happy with. Each vassal also has a title. Master Spy, Swordsman, Master of the Road, etc. Because each noble has a title, he gets a free action in your Province appropriate to his title. Your Master Spy gets a free Espionage Action, your Master of the Road can quell Trouble.

Step 2: Specialize

With your six buddies, make sure each of you has a different "best Virtue" and a different weakness. Cover each other. Make sure you are the absolute best at what you do. Cover your ass with allies. Make sure that you have one master diplomat, a master swordsman, a master hunter, a master scholar, a master artist.

Remember: ven economy works on favors written in blood and everyone

desires favors. Information, Swords, muscle, poison. You've got to make sure your little crew of nobles is ready to respond to any need or request. If someone asks you for a favor, and that particular favor falls under your weakness, you've got to be able to say, "I can't do that for you, but I know a guy who can."

Step 3: Get Married

You need a Spouse. Right now. Spend three points to get a rank 3 Spouse. Then, in the first Spring, spend a Season Action to train your Spouse into NPC status.

With an NPC Spouse at the end of Spring, you can set your husband/wife to work, spending Season Actions to make your lands better. Remember: a Spouse can do anything you can do. Train Vassals, Explore, Espionage. Anything you can do, your Spouse can do better.

A good Spouse *doubles* your Season Actions. You want this. So does your crew. Make sure all of them have good and obedient husbands and wives. Your character "improves" through Season Actions. Make sure you have double your allotment.

A good Spouse also covers all your weaknesses. If Beauty is your weakness, marry a Fox. If Cunning is your weakness, marry an Elk. Just make sure you keep your Spouse happy. (I sound like a broken record, now.) That usually means letting your Spouse do whatever it is they want.

And keep smiling. Nobody likes being married to a frown. Get your Spouse a lover, keep the affair discreet and keep the lover happy, too. As for the inevitable heartbreak, there are really two ways to handle this.

First strategy: make sure your Spouse's lover makes the break. Your Spouse will be Heart-Broken (the Aspect). Console your Spouse with all the information you've learned about the lover: his unfaithfulness, his previous affairs, his secret marriage. Feed those flames. Then, arrange for proper Revenge. This will re-assure your Spouse's faith in you and allow you to take the lover's land.

Second strategy: make sure your Spouse makes the break. This way, you avoid the Heart-Broken Aspect. Also, when her lover demands Revenge, you are in the position to set the stakes. He'll be pissed and willing to do *anything* to exact Revenge. Be his friend. Let him vent. Tell him about your Spouse's previous dalliances and stoke those flames. Lament about your Spouse's wandering eye and how disappointed you are in your Spouse's faithlessness. Then, when you've earned the lover's trust, betray him and take his lands.

Either of these strategies requires that you be ready for the end of the Romance—something you can arrange yourself. Knowing your Spouse is dancing with secret lovers gives you opportunities. Use them.

Step 4: Build, Expand, Build, Expand

With each new Region, you've got to make sure you've got yourself covered. Build Loyalty with Luxury. Make sure everybody in your Domain is happy. (click, scratch, click, scratch) Don't expand too quickly. Build a strong foundation, then expand out.

All too often, I see nobles expand their lands without consideration to infrastructure. Each Province should have a Spy Network. Each Province should have a Seneschal. Each Province should have a Baron under your charge, making sure everything is going fine. Cover yourself. Make sure nobody is behind you before you take any steps forward.

Step 5: Have an Escape Plan

"Do not make plans, make contingencies." That's the lesson we learn from *Lessons*, the ven politics primer. Make sure that every step you take gives you the opportunity to side-step.

For example, when talking about Romance and Revenge up above, we talked about setting up your Spouse's lover for a downfall. You must *always* be prepared for the opposite: that your Spouse and her lover are preparing for *yours*.

In fact, don't just prepare for it: assume it is true. Don't just send one spy to spy on your Spouse and her lover, send three. Don't tell them you've sent three, just tell each spy you've sent one. The only one you can trust. Tell all three of them that. "You're the only one I can trust." Then, make sure you get independent reports from each one. Compare notes. At least one of them will betray you. Find out which one, and use that spy as a counter-spy. Since your Spouse and lover are using that spy to feed you false information, you might as well do the same. Use the counter-spy to set them up for a trap… and once you do, set up the lover as a traitor so your Spouse will be inclined to kill him. That way, you get rid of the lover and keep your Spouse happy while keeping your own hands clean.

Contingencies.

Finally…

All of this advice comes from *Lessons*, the aforementioned book on ven politics, philosophy and strategy. I found it invaluable research for writing this game. Get yourself a copy.

Telmar's Law

"No tyrant plans for failure." That's Telmar's Law. Not Hitler, not Mussolini, not Caesar, not Napoleon. Take a look at history. The men who were confident (arrogant) enough to become tyrants were also too convinced of their own abilities to consider defeat. Perhaps that's what drove them to victory. Perhaps that's what made them the most powerful figures in history. Perhaps that's also what caused their downfall.

How Telmar's Law applies to your own character is up to you. Perhaps he is Cunning enough or Wise enough to recognize the inevitability of the future. Or perhaps not.

The Morley-Wick Method of Gaming

Sheldon was a bullfrog. Was a good friend of mine.

Actually, Sheldon is an actor and a musician. He's still a good friend of mine. And by "actor," I mean real actor. Not us wanna-be community theater actors, no, my buddy Sheldon has skills.

So anyway, Sheldon and I used to go to LARPs. (That's "live action roleplaying" for all you unsophisticated heathens.) A lot of LARPs. But Sheldon and I seemed to have a problem. We were driving home from a particularly boring LARP, complaining as we usually do. I don't remember which of us suggested it, but one of us said, "Maybe we're doing something wrong."

But what could we be doing wrong? We had great characters. Characters with history. Deep history. Well-written and easy to work with. We were rich with potential. Untapped potential.

And yet, there we were. Bored out of our skulls. We'd interact with the other players, but only in a shallow way. There was just nothing to talk about.

And when we looked around, it seemed to us that the most successful players had the most shallow characters. That is, there really wasn't anything to them. So, again, why were we having such a miserable time when those other folks were having so much success?

Our first thought was that the other players were playing the game incorrectly and we were playing the game correctly. We were wrong. Our observation had betrayed us. It took deeper analysis to understand our problem. So, we sat at Norm's (at 2:00 AM) and talked about it. Sheldon came up with the solution.

"We're playing the wrong game," he told me.

I grabbed the ketchup and Tabasco for my eggs. "What do you mean?"

"Our characters have deep secrets."

"Yeah," I said.

"That nobody knows but us."

That made me pause. And think. "Yeah," I said. Slowly.

We spent the rest of the night talking about the problem. It wasn't a problem with the other players. They were playing the game correctly. The problem was with us.

I think Sheldon also nailed down the guy who could solve our problem. David Mamet. The director/screenwriter. His books and essays on "the method" approach to acting really inspired Sheldon, which in turn, inspired me. Using Mamet's critiques, we came up with a solution to our problem.

From Mamet, to Sheldon, to me. To you.

What's Wrong?

So, after that long introduction, let me explain what Sheldon and I were doing wrong and why it relates to David Mamet.

"The method" is an acting technique. Actors try replicating real life emotions, calling on sense memories from their own past, similar to the emotions the character experiences. Method actors also create "rich interior landscapes." That is, they create detailed histories for their characters. They know everything about their characters, so when a circumstance arises, they'll know how their character would respond.

Rich interior landscapes.

Watching an actor on stage, watching him respond to something seemingly innocuous with a cryptic sigh or a mysterious glance or some other enigmatic gesture. The audience doesn't know what it means, but obviously, the actor's done his research. He's done the work. He's using the method.

Unfortunately, the audience doesn't know what it means. The actor isn't communicating anything to the audience.

In other words, he's failing the entire purpose of acting. Communicating to the audience.

As gamers, we have a similar problem. We come up with elaborate and detailed backgrounds. Rich internal landscapes. And then, when we start playing, whole sessions go by without the other players having a single clue.

Characters have secrets. Sure they do. That's fine. But authors use devices to give the audience clues as to why a character responds a certain way. We get to see that rich internal landscape. Even if a reaction is a mystery, we trust that somewhere down the line, the author will let us in on the secret. We'll eventually understand all those cryptic sighs, mysterious glances and enigmatic gestures. Eventually.

But in roleplaying games, we keep secrets. We write the Narrator private notes. We take him aside for a whispered meeting. We keep that 24 page background to ourselves. Nobody else gets to see it. It's ours and ours alone.

The method. Secrecy. Otherwise known as mental masturbation.

You are, quite literally, playing with yourself.

Nobody else is invited. Nobody else gets to know about your character's past. That lost lover. That blood feud with your father. That secret conversation you had with your mother. Your childhood rivalry with your sister. Your hidden marriage. That secret you've kept for twenty years and never told a soul.

All that rich background you're selfishly keeping to yourself that no other player will ever know. It's yours and yours alone. And you're the only one who will ever enjoy it.

This is what's wrong. We've got great characters and nobody knows but us. Why is that? Why do we feel we need to hide our characters' secrets from the other players?

Well, most LARP settings are PvP (player vs. player), so we don't want others to know our secrets. We assume the other players will take advantage of out-of-character information. And, sadly, we're usually correct in this assumption. But at a table top game, surrounded by friends and people we trust, why do we still follow the same behavior?

Reflex perhaps. Maybe it's just habit.

Well, let's break that habit. Let's get out of the "method" philosophy of character creation and play. Let's try something different.

Let's have open secrets.

Subtlety and Revenge

The ven are not subtle. Certainly, the path to Revenge may only be taken with quiet steps, but when the moment comes, it must be full of blood and spectacle.

Plot and prepare. Smile in your enemy's face until the moment is right, then strike without hesitation and without mercy.

When a man lies to you, cut out his tongue.

When a man steals from you, cut off his hands.

When a man betrays you, slice him open, rip out his heart and eat it in front of his children.

Open Secrets

Now, I should be up front about this. Many of these techniques are not new—I didn't invent them—but putting them together in one set, with one philosophy guiding them, I think qualifies as a new approach.

I'll take you through it, step-by-step. Read through them, adopt the steps you like, throw out the ones you don't, come up with your own. After all, this whole chapter is about modifying things to your own group's tastes. Step-by-step.

Character Background

One page.

That's all you get. One page. That's all you get. Don't try writing small or using a tiny font.

One page.

I know, you've got a lot to say about your character. This is what I call "Character Control Syndrome," or "CCS." You think this is the last time you're going to have any control over your character, so you want to squeeze as much content and detail in there as possible.

Relax. Take deep breaths.

Just write one page. In fact, don't even finish filling out the page. Leave a few details open. Figure out what you think is important, but leave the rest blank. Vague. Open. Let me tell you why.

I was playing a character once. A magic cop. I really didn't have any idea about his past. I just kind of made him an arcane Columbo. But I bumped into a story involving a kidnapped girl. Something triggered in my head. I had no idea about my cop's family. Wife, kids. No clue. I hadn't really thought about it. But at that moment—that very moment—I knew he had a daughter. And he lost that daughter. I didn't know how or why. I just knew it. I knew it.

That one little detail, a detail I didn't know until I started playing, changed the entire course of the character's past and future. Completely changed him. Turned him from an arcane Columbo into something much deeper. And, in a lot of ways, a lot scarier.

All because I had kept a detail open and filled it during play.

From that moment on, that little detail consumed the rest of the character's path. That one little detail informed so many of that character's decisions from that moment on. Something I made up on the spot. If I already had the character's family detailed out, if I already knew everything there was to know about that character, I wouldn't have been able to grasp on to that story. I wouldn't have been able to say, "I lost a daughter, too." And the character who was nothing more than a cliché gimmick turned into one of my favorite characters.

Because I *didn't* know everything about his past.

So, one page. That's all you get. If that. You don't need to know all the details before you roll dice. Some details—most, in fact—you can discover days, weeks, even months after the first session. You'll bump into things that inspire you to fill in those blanks. Keep an eye out for even the tiniest details. After all, like grandma says, it's the little things that make the soup.

External Exposition

Tony is a friend of mine. He has a style of play that's always intrigued me. Specifically, he practices what I like to call "external exposition."

He doesn't just tell you what his character is doing, he tells you *why* his character is doing that. Like an author, he narrates his character's action, using his character's inner thoughts as a guide to his physical actions. For example…

Tony's playing RevQ'an Burghe, a minor Baron from the northern islands. He's one of the many nobles at a party both of you decided to attend. As the Narrator, I ask Tony,

"What are you doing?" This is his reply.

"I stand up," he says. And he stands up. "And I walk across the room. My pace is slow. My head, hung low. My hand hangs on my sword pommel. Gripping it. Like I don't know what to do with it. When I get to Baron Vaccon, I hesitate. You can see there's something in my eyes that tells you I don't want to do what I'm about to do. And I think about the promise to Lady Shara I made. And the promise she made me. And then, I say, 'Baron… I find myself in the position where I must challenge you to a duel.'"

A false friend will remind you of your faults. A true friend will remind you of your Strength.

Tony pantomimes all these behaviors. He pantomimes his hand on the sword. He walks across the room slowly. Uncertainty in his stride. And when he talks to you, his tone reflects the exposition he's giving.

The exposition punctuates the action. Not only does he give you external clues, but he gives you *internal* clues as well. "I think about the promise…" He even gives a bit more information than he should. "And the promise she made to me."

Tony leaves himself wide open when he plays. He exposes his character's weaknesses, keeps no secrets. Why does Tony do this?

Because he knows his friends won't take advantage of him and sabotage his fun. Besides, part of the fun is knowing other characters' weaknesses. And having other players know yours. We put weaknesses on our sheets because we want them exploited. We want to get hurt, get knocked down, get beaten within an inch of our lives. How can we come back from the bottom if we never even get knocked down?

You're probably familiar with the term "Mary Sue character." Over-idealized characters who never make a mistake, never flounder, never flub their lines. You see them all the time in fan fiction. You see them all the time in professional fiction, too.

You see them even more in roleplaying games. A lot more. Especially when you run con demos. Oh, Blessed Eris. Flashbacks. Flashbacks!

Excuse me for a moment…

Violence and Mass Murder

Take your Personal Guard with you, wherever you go. Take your Swordsman with you, wherever you go. Take your Roadmen with you, wherever you go. I cannot express how important this is.

One ambush will teach you the truth of my words.

It's okay. I'm back.

One of the reasons I designed *Houses* with weaknesses was to avoid Mary Sue characters. The ven aren't just bigger than humans in good ways, they're bigger than us in *every* way. That means their flaws are bigger, too.

Now, if you play your character close to the chest, if you don't let the other players see his foibles as well as his strengths, no-one will ever get to see that great background you developed or hear that inner monologue they'd usually get to hear if they were reading a book or watching TV.

Use external exposition. You don't have to do it like Tony does. You can find your own way to do it. But do it. Let the other players in. Let them see the man behind the curtain. Armed with wagers, they'll be more than happy to let your character live out that tired old Chinese cliché about "interesting times."

And you'll thank them for it.

Using Fashion

A good tool for using external exposition is fashion. Now, ven fashion is ten times more complicated than the most elaborate heraldry systems of our own middle ages. So complicated, in fact, I could write seven books about it. Instead of going through the elaborate rules (no dark colors before Autumn unless it is blue and brown, in which case, blue may be the predominant color as long as the ven wears a blue rose in his hat, but only on the left side, and this only on the first part of the week out of honor for She who brought us the roses), let's try something different.

Make it up yourself.

Use your clothes to tell a story about your character.

Trust me, if you knew the actual rules, you'd see how completely arbitrary they really are. So, instead, let's just make them up.

When your character appears, tell the colors she's wearing, but more importantly, tell what they *mean*. If you know some of the rules for ven fashion, please feel free to use them, and even teach the other players, but please—*please!*—don't be a "fashionista." Don't tell the other players what they do wrong and insist everyone do everything "right." Besides, during this era in ven history, fashion rules are changing all the time based on the whims of the elite.

"The brown in my vest and the green in my sleeves means, 'I am working, but I am also looking for companionship tonight.'"

"The red rose I wear across the blue sash means, 'I am looking for assistance with my Revenge.'"

"The black swathes in my grey dress means, 'I should have done more to protect him.'"

Safety

A lot of gamers spend time making sure their characters are safe. Protecting their characters. Ven literature has nothing to do with safety. Okay, that's not true. The ven do try to keep themselves safe, but then the emotions take over and they ruin all those guards they put in place.

Don't try to protect your character. Get him in trouble. Remember, this is a game about *tragedy*. Your character will not die well. Or, he'll pass into Solace with his plans incomplete.

No Passing Notes in Class

Many players like passing notes and having secret meetings with the Narrator. Especially in a game like this one where everyone has a secret to keep.

Here's the news. That's done.

It's no fun to sit around while the Narrator goes off into another room with another player and has a private chat. For those of you who've done this (including in games I've run myself), I applaud your patience and your selflessness, but you don't need to do it anymore.

Secret meetings get handled in front of other players. You got a note? Say it out loud.

Once again, we're all grown-ups. We're all friends. We all want to have a good time.

And nobody gives a single flaming turd about your rich internal landscape if they never get to see it. So, be a ven. You've got it. Flaunt it!

Share Plots

One of the side-benefits of being open about your character's past is finding parallels with other characters.

You've got a vendetta? I've got a vendetta!

You've got a Romance? I've got a Romance!

You've got a hated uncle? I've got a favorite uncle! Maybe they're the same!

The more connections with other characters you can make, the better. Giving you both something in common, something to talk about, something to commiserate about.



Trigger Other Characters' Plots

This takes a lot of trust. Use at your own risk.

The Narrator is a busy guy. He's got five to six players to worry about, and sometimes, he just doesn't have the time or focus to hit everybody every session. Sometimes, players get overlooked. Sad, but true.

With this little trick, you'll never get overlooked.

As above, share your backgrounds with the other players. Send them all around the table. Everybody gets a peek. Look for trouble areas. You know, places where you could cause trouble if you were the Narrator.

When you see an opportunity to cause trouble... do it. You've got style points, you've got wagers, you've got Wisdom and Cunning risks. Do it.

For example…

Shara has a problem with her father. All the players know this because they've read Shara's background. They also know that she's looking for the man who killed her mother. Armed with this knowledge, they start screwing with me.

They use wagers and style points to have Shara's father come walking out into a party half-dressed and fully drunk. They use wagers and style points to have NPCs drop suspicious hints about secrets only Shara's mother would know. And then there's the kicker. One player uses style points and wagers to have Count Vathen mention he has the missing pages from her mother's diary.

Wagers and style points.

One more example. (Although, this one is kind of a cheat. I've changed the details a little bit for illustration purposes. I hope the people involved will forgive me.)

Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, there's a young woman playing Lady Niassa. She's been playing

Physical Characteristics

Remember, the ven use physical characteristics to identify a character's role. The combination of hair and eye colors are particularly telling. Keep this in mind when describing your own character and be sure to tell the other players what your particular combination means. Just like the colors your character wears, the actual combinations could fill an entire book unto themselves. You don't need to know the particulars: pick a combination (try to make it a bit more stylistic than just "blonde and blue") and tell the others what you—the author—mean to communicate to the audience with your choice.

For example, I could say, "My character has black curly hair and dark hazel eyes. This means my character is a bit of a devious trickster with a deep sense of personal loyalty."

a kind of dowager duchess in one of the playtest games and that character has a beloved servant: her frightened and fragile maid, Alyss. Now, for a few months, Alice has been shivering and quaking and nervous around all the big, bad, violent beautiful noisy people. Alice doesn't talk much, fetches tea and biscuits really well and stays out of the way even better.

But then she got caught in a little bit of trouble and someone used a Blessing to force Alice to tell the truth. Someone asked her, "What have you been up to?"

And someone spent a style point and answered for poor, little Alice.

Pantomiming the whole scene, the player shows us what happens when Alice is asked the question.

Poor trembling little Alice suddenly straightens her back. Her face calms. Her breath shallows. Her eyes fill with confidence. And Niassa's little helpless maid, speaks in a deep voice she's never used before.

"I'm a house assassin, spying on my Lady, sending information to Count Kether."

The whole room was stunned. Now, that's a typical revelation for a game like this, but what can make a revelation like that great is that it can come from the players.

The Narrator could have done all the stuff we've been talking about, but he's just one guy. Plus, he's got five other players to worry about. I've got six Narrators now, each complicating my plotlines, making things more difficult for me.

Just the way I like it.

When other people know how to push your buttons, they get pushed. And as bad as that might sound, it's a lot better than getting overlooked by a busy Narrator.

Improvisation 101

Houses of the Blooded demands a lot from its players. Many may not be familiar with the skill of "making stuff up on the fly," otherwise known as "improvisation." Anybody can make stuff up. That's no issue. But spending a wager and adding a fact that helps the game move forward... that's a bit more tricky.

Two things to remember when using wagers and both of them are questions.

Does your wager move the plot forward?

Does your wager have an opening for others to work with?

These two questions are *vital* to creating wagers that don't bog down the plot with excessive detail or derail it in a direction that goes nowhere. Keep them close to you. Write them down on your sheet.

Flashbacks

I also allow other players to trigger flashback scenes with style points. If another character does something odd, reacts in an unexpected way, or otherwise catches the players off-guard (even if it's the player in control of the character), someone spends a style point and we're off to a flashback sequence.

Each player can spend a style point to participate, playing a part in the flashback. The player with the spotlight can run the scene as the Narrator or let the Narrator do her own job or let another player be the Narrator for a while. We invent a scene, right there on the spot, with circumstances similar enough to the scene we were just playing, adding deeper meaning to the scene and the character.

But remember the *Lost* Rule. Don't make the flashback more important than the current scene. Flashbacks provide additional flavor to current action. Flashbacks do not eclipse current action.

Of course, you could run an entire session as a flashback scene if it's really important. An example of that may be Shara reading her mother's missing diary pages, finally discovering who killed her mother. Three degrees of cool here.

* First degree of cool: the Narrator tells me what they say. Eh.

* Second degree of cool: the Narrator makes the prop pages himself and gives them to me to read. That's pretty hip.

* Third degree of cool. The group plays out the events in the pages with all of us discovering together what happened. Yeah, it'll take me weeks to recover from that.

Remember, the ven go to eleven. Or, in this case, to the third degree.

Conclusion

Here's the big lesson. Keeping secrets is fun. Revelation is fun. Revealing a secret you've been keeping for months is a lot of fun. You don't have to use all the techniques I've listed above, nor do you have to get rid of secrets. But keeping everything to yourself isn't just selfish, it's spoiling everyone's fun. Including yours.

BAD FORM

The word translates as *bad form*, but the best translation—the one I prefer—is from a paper Harry "Smitty" Smith found for me in the Arizona Public Library (with assistance from the Great and Mighty Troll Lord, Ken St. Andre).

"Don't make me look like a jerk."

(The actual ven is a bit more vulgar and involves references to male genitalia.)

Bad form occurs when someone puts you in the position of having to correct them. Correcting another ven in public makes you look bad. Like you're nitpicking, or being another adult's parent. Nobody wants to watch someone correct someone else. You look like a jerk.

Thus, if someone puts you in the position of correcting them in a public forum, the person who made the error has *insulted you*.

Insulted you.

Don't make me look like a jerk.

Bad form can also come into play out of character. Like when a player starts complaining about the rules and everybody has to make an effort to refocus the game back on playing rather than rules-citing.

Don't make me look like a jerk.

Bad form also comes into play when the game degenerates to quoting Monty Python movies and the Narrator has to cough, raise his voice, and refocus the group on the action.

Don't make me look like a jerk.

Or when a player sits with his laptop playing video games.

Or when he's reading another game system at the table when he should be paying attention.

Or when he talks about last night's episode of *Heroes*.

Or you answer your cell phone (don't forget the Pregnant Wife Exception).

Or you cheat.

Yeah. There are actually people who *cheat* sitting at the roleplaying table. I know, it's the most pathetic thing I've ever heard, too. But it happens. Sadly, it happens.

Bad form. Bad form. Bad form.

There's a penalty for such behavior. You lose style.

As a warning, the Narrator takes one style away. If the problem persists, he takes more. If you argue, he takes all of it.

Don't make me look like a jerk.

The Wanker Rule

Playing an RPG is *fun*. It should be fun. Sometimes it's fun.

Sometimes, a player abuses the rules to make the game fun for him at the expense of everyone else. Ah, wankers.

David Williams (one of the best game design minds in the world) came up with The Wanker Rule. At least, I learned it from him. Here's how it goes.

If you find a way to interpret a rule that clearly damages the play environment, sabotages other people's fun or is just plain nonsensical, don't use the rule in that way.

In other words, don't be a wanker.

I fully endorse taking style points from players who decide to be wankers. Of course, a warning is fair. Sometimes, we get caught up in the drama of the moment. Sometimes, our characters' motivations seep into our own. Sometimes, those "imaginary" characters we play just get the better of us. I understand that. Hell, I've been on that end of things. But, we have to remember that what we're doing is building a story, and sometimes, the hero doesn't win. Sometimes, the hero *loses*.

But then, sometimes, the player is just a wanker.

Troupe Style

While *Houses* is a game about the noble class, it doesn't have to focus on them exclusively, nor do you have to tell stories the same way. Experiment. Try different things. For example, let's look at a few different ways you can use the rules to tell lots of different kinds of stories.

For example, let's talk about "troupe style."

This is an old trick I learned from an incredible game called *Ars Magica* (currently published by Atlas Games and well worth your cash). Here's how it works.

Every player makes a noble character, but don't spend points on Vassals just yet. Instead, one by one, each player goes around the table and assigns each other player the role of a Vassal. Each player does this, making a *huge* group of characters. If you have a six person group (not counting the Narrator), each player will have five Vassals. A Spy Master, a Master of the Road, a Seneschal, a Swordsman…

For example, you are in a group of five other players. Albert, Bob, Cindy, David, and Elaine. It's time to make your character. You choose each of the other players to play a different Vassal. Albert is your Spy Master, Bob is your Master of the Road, Cindy is your Seneschal, David as your Apothecary, and Elaine is your Swordsman.

Then, it comes time for Albert to make his ven. Albert chooses Bob to be his Roadman, Cindy to be his Swordsman, David to be his Spy Master, Elaine to be his Seneschal and you to be his Valet.

Go all the way around the table, giving each player a different role, a different position in a different noble's court. Since each player has five Vassals, that's a total of twenty-five characters. A whole host of individuals all interconnected. Yeah, interconnected. Make sure everybody knows everybody else, and no, it doesn't have to be in a friendly way.

Each noble gets one Season to hold the spotlight. Then, next Season, the game focuses on a different noble. Moving around the table, a different character gets the spotlight while the other players fill supporting roles.

With smaller groups, you can switch focus multiple times per Season, moving at a slower pace. Or, if you like, make each go around the table a Year, performing "Year actions" (one Season per Year instead of one per Season).

The Seven Fools

If we're going to emulate ven literature and Art, why not go straight to the source. Opera.

Let's use the Seven Fools as character types. Every character gets one of the Seven Fools as an Aspect (just use the aspects from the *Seasons* or *Aspects* chapter). No character gets more than one Fool Aspect but you can switch to a different Fool Aspect once per Phase. If your your character gets all the way to Winter, he can have four of the seven Aspects. And just to make things interesting, let's make them *Free Aspects*. That way, players are *really* rewarded when they play their characters to type.

Duncan's Three Styles

The ven scholar Dominic Cyril Duncan (to whom this game owes much) was the first to recognize three different "styles" of ven literature: dramatic, romantic, and epic. These three styles are most often used in the three most common forms: theater (dramatic), pillow books (romantic), and opera (epic).

With these three styles in mind, I suggest choosing a specific kind of way to play the game. The "genre" differences are outlined below.

Dramatic

The most important thing to realize about ven theater is the blood. Think *Macbeth*. Think *Hamlet*. Think *Titus Andronicus*.

Okay, don't think about that last one, but when you think about ven drama, think about blood. Blood. *Blood!*

Ven theater seems obsessed with the ideas of Revenge. Romance, not so much, but Revenge is a big "AW HELL YEAH!" That can be heard all the way across the archipelagos.

There's enough treachery and backstabbing and bloodlust to make your teeth hurt.

If you want to simulate ven theater, I'd suggest advising everyone before you begin that this is gonna get bloody. Everyone is gonna die.

Also, a few key elements. First one is misunderstanding. As a character in a ven drama, you must always assume the worst.

You overhear part of a conversation between your wife and your Swordsman? Assume the worst.

You read a letter from your son to a neighbor with vague references to "doing away with *him*?" Assume it is about you.

Assume the worst.

Assume the worst.

Assume the worst.

Miscommunication and assumption are the lifeblood of tragedy. Of course, when the blood has been spilled, it's time to reveal the truth and revel in the lament. The grief. The regret.

The tragedy of it all.

That which we take without effort, we throw away.

Only when we bleed do we appreciate our conquests.

ROMANTIC

Ven pillow books were written for women, although there is ample evidence they were equally read by men as well. Ven Romances are not as bloody and bleak as a tragedy, but they have their share of clashing swords.

In the Romances, we have dashing heroes and swooning heroines, acts of derring-do, secret rooms behind shifting bookshelves, illicit affairs, dangerous liaisons, and it all ends with a duel or a wedding.

Duels for tragedy, weddings for comedy.

Like the theater, misunderstanding creates drama. Misunderstandings, bad timing, and miscommunication. Unlike the theater, most of these are a bit more light-hearted; however, as in all ven literature, *nothing* is harmless.

Death is a present threat in the pillow books, but they are far less bloody than the plays. Wrong-doing is answered for, the wicked are punished, and all's well that ends well… some of the time.

Often in pillow books, the reader's suspense is built on the ambiguity of the ending. Will it end with a duel or a wedding? The author tricks the reader many times, sometimes giving signs of a comic ending, but revealing a tragic conclusion at the last possible moment.

A later innovation in the genre came from the use of a prelude foreshadowing the book's ending. A wedding or a duel. It's called a *pah'ton*. Scholars speculate the pah'ton became a popular addition to the pillow book to warn readers beforehand what they were getting into; however, many of the most successful authors used the pah'ton to throw off the reader, making the author himself an untrustworthy narrator.

I suggest using the pah'ton in your own game. Narrate the ending. Use the same techniques the ven authors used: ambiguous identities, vague references, etc. I've included the pah'ton from *The Great and Tragic Life of Shara Yvarai* as an example of one of the most famous pah'tona to give you an idea how to use one.

Shara Pah'ton

When her back hit the floor, the sword fell from her fingertips, scattering away.

He moved fast, his own blade plunging downward, powered by both hands on the hilt. She rolled, but not fast enough.

The tip of his sword pierced her belly, her blood splashing across her chest. She felt it reach through her flesh, cracking the stone under her. She screamed, grasping the blade with gloved hands.

"It is over," he said, looking down at her, his hands still on the pommel.

She could not move, could not speak. Only look up at his face. His eyes. Those beautiful eyes.

Her fingers reached for her sword, but he leaned on his own, making her scream again, her voice echoing around the cold walls.

"You are dead, Shara," he told her.

All around her, blood on the floor. The faces of Senators watching closely. Intently. Some eyes burning with fire, others wet with tears.

Then, she saw his injury. His hand, drenched in crimson, holding his side.

She shook her head, her sweat and hair in her eyes.

He smiled. The same smile he gave her before.

"Very well," he said. He twisted the sword.

Her scream was cut off by the blood in her mouth. Her voice made a wet sound as she choked. The tip still buried in the stone beneath her, he could not twist it all the way. Only enough to aggravate the wound.

"Enough!" a voice called out from the Senators. Shara recognized it. A woman's voice. A young voice. Older than she remembered from two years ago.

He looked up and out at the face in the crowd. He nodded. "Agreed." Then, he pulled on his sword, still trapped in the stone below her.

But her hands wrapped around it, holding on. Pulling against his strength. The strength of the stone and the strength of her hands, keeping the blade in her body.

He looked down at her, his eyes confused. "What are you doing?"

And through the blood, and through the pain, and through the memories of it all, she smiled.

She smiled and said his name through bloody lips.

Epic

Opera is…

… epic.

… spectacular.

… overwhelming.

… sublime.

Using *Houses* to emulate ven opera is a difficult task. It requires a complete surrender of reason and rationality and an absolute embrace of emotion and passion.

One cannot gaze too long at the sun.

Ven opera deals with characters from the distant past, but at the same time, all the settings, costumes and trappings are distinctly modern. Like the Arthurian tales of England, the bards told stories of knights and kings, queens and maidens, but they told these stories of long ago with modern sensibilities.

"Once upon a time…" is a safe place. Distant. Far away. A safe place to talk about true love and marriage, Revenge and forgiveness, duty and honor. By putting the stories so far away, the opera makes us feel as if we are looking at something faraway, when in fact, we are feeling something immediate.

We know it. We allow ourselves to be fooled. This is the magic of Opera.

Ven Opera is huge. Big, big, big. Grand, sweeping vistas and immortal heroes who can never be defeated, except by their own hubris. Undone by their own hand.

Theater is bloody.

Literature is romantic.

Opera is epic.

The Dragon

There are times at the game table when something happens... something so profound that all the players can do is sit with their jaws wide open and wonder. When what their characters feel is exactly what they feel. When the wall between imagination and reality isn't just blurred, but knocked down, leaving nothing but rubble in its wake.

This is the dragon. That moment. When it happens, any player can spend a Style Point and call, "I see the dragon." Seeing a dragon is no small affair. It is a life-changing event. As such, seeing the dragon changes everyone involved. Any players involved in the scene may then spend a Style Point, nominate an Aspect and change it to reflect the current moment.

Some involved in the scene may not see the dragon. Their Aspects are not changed. But those who have seen it are altered, their destinies turned.

Forever. (And that was for you, Dannie.)

A Final Note

I just want to say this one more time.

I trust you.

As a Narrator, as a game designer and as a fellow player, and, finally, as someone who loves roleplaying games, I trust you.

I didn't make rules to stop the wankers and cheaters and selfish bullies who ruin the game because they're too caught up in their own ego to notice other people are sitting at the table.

I didn't do that because I trust you.

I trust you to help your fellow players make your time around the table—no matter what game you play—as enjoyable as possible. That's always my goal when I sit down. Maybe it's because I started my gaming career as the Narrator, and I learned early on that my job was a hard one. Looking out for other people's enjoyment.

I trust you to do that, too. And I hope I've showed you ways to do that with this chapter.

And with that in mind, I have one last question…

… friendly game?



Most extraordinary obsidian like puppets. Remnants of clever pulleys and wire crumbled to metal dust when we brought it out of excavation.

I find it striking that yet again, a woman is depicted with a sword. The swords actually do slide in clever pin holes within the palm. Unfortunately, the male's sword was broken eons ago.

Are they children's toys? Probably too sophisticated. Most likely puppets for social and political commentaries. S.

I agree with Heinig's assessment that while these appear to be children's toys, the presence of weapons says much about their attitude toward educating their children. On the other hand, the ven did put a great importance on theater. I suggest that perhaps theatrical techniques were used to educate young nobles, presenting morality plays and the like, much the same way the Masons teach their secret Craft.

H.

Narrator

As you may have gathered from the title, this chapter is for the Narrator. Players can read it if they wish—there are no metaplot secrets or spoilers—but reading this chapter is a lot like learning how a magic trick works. And trust me, learning how a trick works is a lot less sexy than watching the trick as a sucker sitting in the audience. In the audience, everything appears effortless. Magic. Once you know about the trap door in the floor or the marked cards or the slight hand gesture that hides the bird from plain sight… trust me, knowing how the trick works isn't as cool as it sounds.

No amount of Art can hide evil.

After all, a Narrator is a kind of magician. Magicians create something out of nothing. Pulling rabbits out of hats, making beautiful assistants appear and disappear, pulling your card out of a deck of 52. Creating something from nothing.

Shanri and the ven are gone, but if the Narrator does his job, he'll convince you that your character *does* exist. To pull emotions out of you from pure fiction.

When you feel the ork's hot breath on your face.

When you feel the passion of Revenge bursting your heart.

When you feel the cool mist of the Shanri jungles.

Magician. Making something from nothing.

The ven called this *altrua*. (Do not believe scholars who say this is the true root of the word "altruism" or "truth." They're talking out of their hats.) The best translation for this word is the Greek *pathos*.

In a dark theater, watching the hero on the screen, and you feel his pain as your own.

Watching the TV, feeling the heroine's heart break, the pain as real as your own.

Reading the novel, the suspense in the detective's chest, pounding as hard as your own.

Altrua. Pathos.

This is the Narrator's primary goal. To make the players feel what the characters feel. What they see. What they smell. A hint of danger. That whiff of scented hair. The taste of the wine. The bliss of new love. The cut of steel against flesh.

All of these things are possible. Something from nothing.

Magic.

I can help you. I wrote this chapter to help you. But if you're a player, reading any further will ruin the trick. So, stop now.

But, if you are the Narrator, keep reading. You and I have a lot of work to do.

How This Chapter Works

Okay, now that we've gotten rid of the players, you and I can talk in earnest. And yeah, I know, you've got that one player who's gonna read this chapter anyway. Don't worry about him. I've got a trick for him, too.

This chapter is sort of a mish-mash of advice. Storyteling is more of an Art than a Science, so I've decided to take a less formal approach here. A conversation between you and me.

First, we'll talk about some basics. Things you could apply to just about any roleplaying game. Narrator techniques that may, or may not, already be familiar to you. Advice I've found useful for running games.

Then, I'll start giving you specific advice for *Houses*. How to use the system to your best advantage.

The Narrator Toolbox

Every mechanic has a toolbox.

You don't need to use everything. Just the right tool for the right job. Some tools, you never use. Some, you think you'll never use… until it just so happens to be the exact right tool at the exact right time.

Every Narrator should have a toolbox.

You don't need to use everything. Just the right tool for the right job. Some tools, you never use. Some you use so often, you need to replace them from wear and tear. Some, you think you'll never use… until it just so happens to be the exact right tool at the exact right time.

Consider this chapter a kind of hardware store. Full of tools. You don't have to use all of them. You don't even have to use some of them. Go ahead and browse through the aisles, try things out, give them a good look, and figure out which you want to add to your toolbox.

By the way, you should get yourself a notebook. Write "Narrator's Toolbox" on the cover. Start writing things down. Writing ideas that come to you out of the blue. Ideas from other people's books, blogs and podcasts. Ideas from this book. Write them down. Keep them for that every other Friday when you run your game. When your one of your players presents an opportunity to use one of those tools, *use it*.



Play Dirty

Not too long ago, I was asked to write an advice column for Steve Jackson's *Pyramid* magazine on Game Master techniques (that's what other games call "the Narrator"). As you may have guessed, it was rather unorthodox. *Play Dirty* was, all at once, one of the most popular and least popular columns in the mag. People hated it and loved it. I figured that meant I was doing my job. The basic concept, the fundamental idea behind playing dirty goes something like this.

Your players want to be challenged. They want their characters to be hurt. They want to be beaten within an inch of their lives. They want to feel like they could lose. After all, if everything is a complete cake walk, what have they really accomplished?

Ven literature provides us with an ample environment for such stories. Tragedy is a genre rife with setback, pain, blood, failure and little victories. It's those little victories that make all the sacrifice worth it.

Too many roleplaying games focus on pure success. Eternal "leveling up." Always getting better. Always improving. Gaining new powers, new abilities. Better, better, better.

The structure of a *Houses* game isn't a linear and gradual increase toward perfection. It's filled with hills and valleys. Highs and lows. Defeats and victories.

Until you've lost everything, you can't know true victory.

So, I'm going to show you how to do this. How to put your players through the wringer. How to make them weep and scream and rage. This will give them the fuel they need to see red. To drink deep from the cup of Revenge.

And in order to do that, you're going to have to get your hands bloody. At the end of this chapter, I've included a potpourri of poison pills to make your players' heads explode. But before we get there, we'll cover the basics.

The purpose of this chapter is to fill that toolbox. Give you as many tricks and techniques as we can. To keep your players on their toes, to make them feel that magic. As we go along, you may bump into a tool you don't want to use. Don't feel compelled to use it. Read through each section, decide if anything is appropriate for your group, then either write them in your book or leave them alone.

I ran *Houses* for many different groups and for each group, I ran it a little differently. Different rules for different groups, but the same game. I listened to what each group wanted and modified the game to suit that group. That meant I emphasized some rules, de-emphasized others. I even dropped a few rules and added others.

Listen to your group. I'll be saying that a lot this chapter.

The Big Secret

It isn't a metaplot secret. It's a game design secret. And if you've paid close attention while reading this book, you've already figured it out.

I designed *Houses* for many reasons, but one of the most important design considerations came from a technique I used in most of my games. Again, it involves listening to the players.

After each game session, I'd spend a few minutes asking questions. I'd ask them if they had fun, what moments remained in their memories… and then I'd ask them the most important question.

"What do you think is going on?"

I'd listen to their answers, compare them with my own plans, and if someone's answer was better than mine, I'd adopt it. Or, I'd work it in with my own, combining them, making a mixture of the two.

Two heads are better than one. Six are better than two.

Listening to my players, I let them write the plot. Sure, I had a plot in mind before I began, but if something better came along, I snatched it up. I'm shameless that way.

Now, with wagers and style points, I really got to use this technique. Right up to the hilt. I could throw a dead body into a room and let the players look for clues, making Cunning and Wisdom wagers, and they'd drop all the evidence. Under normal circumstances, in most roleplaying games, they'd be making Perception risks to find the clues I placed.

That's the way I used to do it. Then, I met Jared Sorensen.

Jared's games *octaNe* and *Inspectres* kicked my game design ass. Jared taught me methods of player interaction I'd never anticipated. I had always given my players a lot of influence over the game. I let them create NPCs out of whole cloth and add elements to the setting, but Jared made a *mechanic* out of it. So, when it came time to do this game, I decided to let Jared's influence really set in. And by that, I mean wagers.

Wagers make your job easy. Easier than you'd ever suspect. With wagers, you need only the bare bones of an idea, not even a full story. When the players get the knack of using wagers, *they'll* place the clues around the body. You don't have to put anything there at all. They'll find damning evidence indicting the suspects you never even considered. And that's okay. You *want* them doing that. Why? I'll tell you why. Because being the Narrator is *fun*.

So, here's the Big Secret. This game takes a lot of weight off your shoulders. You don't have to name anything. Just call for a Wisdom risk. You don't have to create NPCs. Just

call for a Cunning risk. You don't have to put clues around the body, you don't have to create orks, you don't have to do *anything you don't want to do* because the players are going to do it for you.

Even weaklings can find Strength in banding together.

You still have to be the Narrator sometimes. But with six other Narrators doing your job for you, all you have to do is sit back, drink your Margarita and enjoy the show.

Your Own Shanri

This book has no map. A lot of gamers may be asking "Why?" After all, standard wisdom teaches us that gamers love maps.

Well, one reason is because we really don't know what Shanri looked like. But that's not the main reason. The main reason is, I want you to draw your own map.

You and your players, through wagers and Wisdom risks, create Shanri. You draw the map. Make your own Shanri. Build it from the foundations I've laid here and build it as high as it can go.

But don't stop with the world.

I love reading how other people run my games. I love hearing about the house rules and table rules they adopt. How they change the system to suit their own group. The rules they ignore, the rules they love.

But, it's really more than that. It's really a magic box. A box of tricks. Illusions and slights.

For example, in the *Aspects* chapter, I made mention of the Great Temple of Jonan Drax. The books make reference to it, but its exact location is never mentioned. So, the question arises: just where is it?

Sounds like a Wisdom risk to me.

Whenever players ask questions about the world of Shanri, and you don't have a definitive answer, tell them to make a Wisdom risk. Let them figure that stuff out. Just make sure to keep a running log of everything your players determine as True. I keep a big book of notes full of facts.

And now, on to the advice.

First, we'll talk about writing adventures.

Second, we'll discuss a few storytelling tricks to make your stories compelling.

Finally, we'll talk about how to use the game itself as a weapon, not just a tool.

The Magician

I've made this analogy before. The Narrator as magician. Making something from nothing.

In order to perform his trick, a magician needs to take certain steps. First, he needs preparation to know what he's going to do before he gets up on the stage. He needs to know the trick. Second, he needs the proper skills to make the trick look convincing. To fool the audience who is ready to be fooled. To be able to sell the trick.

Preparation and Performance.

Let's take those one at a time.

Preparation

Setting up your illusions requires just a little bit of prep work. Fortunately, the best thing about a trick is that the audience is doing all the work. Just a little sleight of hand and their imaginations fill in the rest.

As a Narrator, you've got the same advantages. The players want to be entertained. Want to be fooled. That means you've got them right where you want them.

For most roleplaying games, preparation comes in writing adventures. Sitting down for hours on end, writing up characters, settings, plot twists. Fortunately for you, *Houses* doesn't work like that.

The Revenge of Lady S

Writing adventures for *Houses of the Blooded* is easy. I mean, *easy*.

I've run the game for multiple groups. Convention games, house games, no matter. Months of playtest taught me many things about the game, but the one I found most remarkable was this:

If you let them, the players run the game *for you*.

Take for example a particular house game I ran for one playtest group. I'd forgotten I was supposed to show up and was in a rush. I had *no idea* what to do. So, when the game began, I turned to one of the players…

It's early morning and you're being stitched into your clothes. Your seneschal steps into the room.

"Sir," she says, "it seems we've captured a spy."

I went ahead and told the player Three Things about the spy.

1) She has long, brown hair.

2) She is Courageous (establishing her highest Virtue is Courage).

3) Her eyes are pitch black.

The other player characters quickly joined and the seneschal brought in the spy. When the spy was thrown to the floor, one of the players said, "I have the Aspect *Knows Everybody*. Do I know her?"

I answered, "I don't know. Make a Wisdom risk."

This is *very* important. Whenever a player asks you a question about the world, about another character, about a ritual, about *anything*, your answer should be:

"I don't know. Make a Wisdom risk."

He made a successful Wisdom risk with three wagers. He determined the following things about the spy:

1) She is Blooded of the Serpent (same House as the group).
2) She is a cousin.
3) She is a close friend.
4) She is sympathetic to our House.

After that, other players started making Wisdom and Cunning risks, further defining her character. From those risks, we determined:

1) She was in the castle on a Revenge (thus, her black eyes) for her sister.
2) And a baby was involved.
3) A bastard child.
4) But nobody at the table was responsible.

I took it from there. When they asked her more questions, she filled in the details. Her name was Lady S, a Baroness and neighbor. It turned out their spy master (a Vassal) took advantage of her sister and one Season later, the consequences came. Birth killed her sister and she came to the castle looking for Revenge. She appealed directly to Ikhalu—bypassing the Senate—and he granted it.

The players then found themselves in a predicament. Here is a legitimate claim of Revenge. In their home. Denying her claim of Revenge is to draw Ikhalu's wrath. What do they do?

The entire "adventure" wrote itself. Actually, to be correct, the adventure was written by the players. They used wagers and style points, determining the facts surrounding Lady S and her sordid past. They created problems for themselves. Of course, I rewarded them with style points.

Death at the Opera

Another example.

The Sons of Kryos playtest group were at the Opera. One of them, Baron Ysari, was tasked by his father to get a young up-and-coming duelist in trouble. It seems his father was once the greatest duelist in the Senate, but no longer. A younger, stronger, faster duelist was looking to claim that title. Ysari's father asked him to distract the young man "Just hold him off for a Season," his father told him.

Ysari knew the man would be at the Opera, so that's where he looked for him. Of course, all his friends were there, too. What ven misses an opportunity to go to the Opera?

Ysari's player set up the scene, using wagers to arrange a seating pattern to his advantage. When the duelist entered, everyone started making Cunning and Wisdom risks.

The duelist's relationship with his wife was not good…

It was rumored she was having an affair with another man…

… and that man was Ysari's father.

One little wager did that. Changed everything. Ysari's father didn't want the man dead because he was afraid of losing his honor. He wanted the man dead because he was sleeping with the duelist's wife.

Context changes everything. Turns heroes into villains. But we'll talk more about that in a little bit. Back to Ysari.

Ysari did, in fact, manage to cause the trouble his father was looking for. With a few well-used Beauty wagers, he baited the man into drawing his sword, but the duelist's recklessness caused a child to be injured by the drawing of the blade. Of course, Ysari's player knew one of the other characters had a particularly appropriate compel, so he spent a style point and the other character went into a rage.

In less than a heartbeat, the duelist was over the railing, falling to the floor, breaking his neck against the marble.

A small sequence of actions that threw the entire game into a delicate balance of manners. The challenge of a duel. Loyalties. Betrayal. Complications.

What Jess Heinig likes to call, "The John Wick Social Meat Grinder." We'll talk more about that later, too.

What Did We Learn?

Both of these "adventures" came from the players. All the Narrators did was set up the circumstances. We put the meat in the stew, but the player threw in everything else. *The players* created the situations. Of course, you have to show them they can do this.

The first couple of times you play, encourage the players to use wagers to define the world around them. Chances are, they won't know what to do. The concept is fairly alien to most roleplayers: the line between player and Narrator firmly drawn.

Get rid of that line. Obliterate it. Nuke it from orbit. It's the only way to be sure.

When the players ask, "Is it cool for me to do this?" answer, "Yes!" Enthusiasm. Let them know they can define the world. That's part of the game mechanic. It's a rule.

Of course, now that you have a bunch of Narrators sitting around the table, your own style of running the game has to adapt. You can't set things in stone. You have to be ready to go with the flow.

Don't make plans. Make contingencies.

NPCs

Prepping the game also includes having a long list of NPCs ready for the players to interact with. Now, this really is my favorite part of the game. I love making characters. So much so that I'm a really bad player. I've always got new character ideas running around in my head. Because I get to be the Narrator all the time, I get to explore these character ideas, but when I'm a player, I only get to use one at a time.

As a Narrator, you should keep a whole cornucopia of characters around at all times. Heroes, villains, victims, martyrs, traitors, and the betrayed. Having a good character waiting in the wings makes you look prepared. Having *the right* character waiting in the wings makes you look like a magician.

When designing an NPC, start with the Three Things. That's Three Things that are true about the character. I usually pick from a short list:

- The character's House,
- The character's highest Virtue,
- A prominent physical feature,
- A prominent reputation,
- A relationship with one of the player ven,
- Married or single
- Or just about any other detail that's important to the group at hand

That gives the players something to work with. If I have a more concrete idea about the character, I list a few other things as well, but I like to keep my options open.

Sometimes, I even let the players in on the character's goals. "She wants to start a Romance," or "She wants to arrange for her husband's murder." Giving away secrets like that really isn't giving away secrets. When the players have knowledge, they use it. Sometimes, they even use it to set themselves up for tragedy.

This is a Good Thing. We give them style points for stuff like that.

Getting involved with a dangerous lover or plotting with an obvious villain makes stories happen. Players who avoid danger and trouble don't get rewarded. Playing it safe avoids story, avoids conflict, avoids fun. Makes my job hard. Bad form. No style.

So, when you make NPCs, make them *fun*. In fact, when we get to the next section, I'll show you a little trick your players can use to set themselves up for tragedy.

Scattered through this chapter are various NPCs I've used myself. (Most of them show up at Shara's Party.) I drew many of them from ven literature, although a few I made up myself. I've listed them with the Three Things as well as a brief description of how I used the NPC. Do with them as you will.

Populating Your Shanri

The key to making the players care about your game is making them care about the world. But not just the world. You've got to do more than that. You've got to make them care about the characters.

In order to do this, *you* have to care about the characters. You have to think about their own desires. You have to respect them. You have to treat them right, although, sometimes, treating them right means kicking the crap out of them.

Stories are built out of conflict, not comfort. If you want comfort, go watch one of those made-for-basic-cable-TV movies. You know the ones I mean. Where all disagreements are just big misunderstandings, where everybody is good but frustrated, and all ends well in the end.

This isn't that game. This is blood and tragedy and tears. Everything isn't just a simple disagreement and an honest talking-to in the third act doesn't solve everything.

Remember this when building NPCs for your game. Remember they have to be tough enough to run through them through the gauntlet. Or, perhaps they aren't. Perhaps you build a few NPCs who are just cowards. Cold blooded.

("Cold blooded" means something entirely different in the ven language. It implies someone without courage, conviction or passion. So, like everything else in ven culture, it is similar to our own phrase, just amplified to an extreme.)

Okay, enough with the abstract. Let's get down to the real. Let's build an NPC.

Tavlim Steele, Blooded of the Elk, Baron of Shavri'for

All the NPCs I build have a purpose. A theme. I want something from them. For Baron Shavri'for, I wanted an NPC who illustrated the obsessive bookkeeping we find in ven pillow books.

Three Things for Tavlim:

- He always carries his own accounting book
- Meticulous
- His eyes always seem to be watching *you*

Like I said, he's always got that book with him. And he's always negotiating. When my crew ran into him, they had a gripe. One of his roadmen chased orks onto their land and they weren't happy about it. So, they showed up with their gripe, he accepted them in with the proper ritual, and the crew got down to negotiating.

They complained about losing four personal guard to the orks. He opened his book. As he did some quick math in his book, he said…

"Each of those guardsmen cost you. Because it is still Spring, your cost is diminished by three fourths. Therefore, I will compensate you for one guard, plus a crate of wine for your troubles."

His assertiveness took them off-guard. His confidence took them off-guard. They said three crates, he said two, and they agreed. He said…

"By the way, I was speaking with my uncle. He mentioned you. He doesn't like you very much, you know. He said something about you that might be of interest."

Then, he waited. They whispered. Then, they agreed. He opened his accounting book and said…

"In exchange for this information, I'll be deducting one crate of wine."

By the end of the night, they owed him one Lumber.

This illustrated the point of ven negotiation. Everything is a negotiation. Everything is advantage. Are you tool or weapon?

Baron Shavri'for taught them this. With just his little book.

Technique

A magician can have all the preparation he needs and still pull off a lousy trick. That's because how you present the trick is just as important as the trick itself.

This section discusses Narrator Technique. What you actually do during the game. How you stand, how you speak, how you present information. Everything.

When I go to conventions or game stores, I see a lot of Narrators sitting at tables, hiding behind a screen, a monotone drawl oozing from their lips as they chew on potato chips and suck down soda.

Now, I don't use this kind of language a lot, so pay attention.

This is **bad**. This is **wrong**. This is not how you **engage your players**.

Instead, I suggest the following.

Mood & Atmosphere

One of the most important things to establish right up front is the mood and atmosphere of Shanri. Now, some groups may not be comfortable with music in the background, candles lit, costumes, or other things I've got listed here. I've tried to give you different kinds of ways to establish a thoroughly ven feel to your game. Pick the ones you think your players will like.

To begin, think of the ven opera. The way it looks. The way it smells. Dust and candle wax. Perfume. Scent is a powerful and underestimated sense. Perfume the room with scented candles. Go to the used bookstore, get some old books and leave them open around the room. Old bibles and those Reader's Digest books are the best: they're big and smell great. Nothing beats the smell of old books.

Dim the lights, but not too much. People have to see their character sheets. Give the table a single source of light. Get an old brass lamp and put it right in the center of the table, then turn off all the other lights.

You can also influence the way your room feels by baking bread. This is really pretty easy and goes a long way to making a room feel different. Freshly baked bread has a distinct smell that invokes specific emotions. It just feels old.

Also provide exotic foods for your players. Finger foods are generally very affordable, but don't get chips and salsa. No, no. Get cheese and those crackers that look home-baked. Cheese and crackers are generally just as cheap as chips and soda—sometimes even cheaper, depending on where you shop. Same thing, completely different feel.

You can also pick up a set of cheap wine glasses in most grocery stores these days for twenty bucks or less: about the same cost as a set of plastic cups. Most even come with a decanter. Fill up those glasses with your favorite non-soda, set out the cheese and crackers and watch the attitude of your players change.

As for music, I've collected and arranged a whole CD worth of music from ven opera. You can play the set for free from my website. The link is at the back of the book.

As for maintaining the delicate mood you've set, I recommend using a story candle. Here's how it works.

A little ritual of mine (appropriate for this game). The story candle sits in a special place in the gaming room. Always in sight. When my friends get together, we chat about all the things we've seen and done since we saw each other last. I give them about forty-five minutes or so. Then, I take down the story candle.

Everyone knows that as soon as I light the candle, the game starts. I turn down the lights, take out the matches—don't use a lighter; there's nothing like the smell of sulfur—and light the candle. I usually also play a song appropriate to the theme of the night. If the

players pay attention, they may even get a heaping helping of foreshadowing. As soon as the song is over, I give a brief reminder of what's happened so far. Then, the game starts.

As long as the candle remains lit, the game is on. Monty Python quotes, questions about this week's episode of *Heroes*, Star Trek invokes are all Bad Form. As long as the candle remains lit. Then, when the game closes, I blow out the candle, leaving everyone in darkness for a few moments. Then, we turn on the light. I like that last few moments of darkness. Everyone sits quietly and thinks for a moment. Well worth the silence.

Get Up

Now that you've got the room looking and feeling right, let's get you into order.

First, get rid of your chair.

Stand. Walk around. Talk to the players. Get over their shoulders. Sit on the ground. Invite them to do the same thing.

Get up. Move. Get your blood pumping.

When you fill the role of an NPC, take on that role. If he has a limp, then limp. If he's missing an eye, shut one of your eyes. If he lisps, then lisp.

Every NPC you play should have a distinct and unique voice. Lighter and sweeter. Darker and angrier. Moody. Elated. Seductive. Heart-broken.

When you create an NPC, write down three things (yes, those Three Things) that are true about the NPC. Make them physical characteristics, vocal patterns, mannerisms… *something the players can see*.

So, get up. Move. *Show* the players something. If they don't see it, then it doesn't exist.

Don't Look Down

Not just in a metaphorical sense, either.

When you talk to your players as an NPC, engage them. Look them in the eye. Don't look at their shoes or their chins. Look them *square in the face*.

Talk to them like they actually exist. Talk to them like they *are* their characters. And when an NPC gets shot down or humiliated or embraced or forgiven… show them that emotion in your eyes.

Don't look at your shoes. Don't look at your dice. Look at me.

Show it in your lips, in your voice, in every part of your body.

Pay attention to the way you move. Pay attention to the words you choose. Pay attention to *everything*.

And look at them while you're plotting their demise. Let them see *that* in your gaze.

Don't look down.

Look at them. *Show* the players something. If they don't see it, then it doesn't exist.

(My editor suggested this cheat. If looking someone else in the eyes makes you uncomfortable, watch the space right below his eyebrows. Don't be too obvious, but just make sure you are staring at that little patch of flesh. Makes it a bit easier for those of us who could use another rank of Courage.)

Show Me, Don't Tell Me

If the first two didn't get you, this one should.

I can't tell you how many Narrators I meet who show me huge notebooks full of "world notes."

"How much of this have your players seen?" I ask them.

"Almost none of it," they tell me.

My response is always the same. "Then what good is it?"

A Narrator's primary job is to entertain the players. You do this by showing them the world. Not telling them about it. Showing it.

Don't tell them about an super cool and obscure ven ritual you read about in some archaeological journal. *Show it to them*. Write it into the adventure. More than that, *let them do it*.

Let them *feel* the wind on their cheeks. The cool, cool wind on a hot, hot day. The sun beating down, making your breath burn the inside of your nose. But there's the wind, smelling like the sea, cooling your skin.

Let them *feel* the cramped Senate floor. The bodies in elegant gowns and robes too hot for such quarters, making everything smell like bodies and perfume. The sweat beading down your back. The itch you wish you could scratch. Silk, satin and velvet stuck to your skin. The seat too small. The wine far, far away. And outside… and outside that Autumn breeze and open air. Not the smell of sweat and jasmine.

Let them *feel* the raucous party. The music overhead from the chamber orchestra playing on the platform suspended over the room. The smell of powder in the wigs and on the makeup. The smell of bacon and grilled chicken and steaming potatoes. The cool, biting taste of the wine. And the taste of the hidden kiss you stole in that dark corridor when no-one was looking. The smell of her hair still on your skin. Feeling her sweat on the small of her back. The sound of her whispers in your ear. Promises to be kept when all the fires are put out.

Let them *feel* the winter. The winter so cold, it makes your teeth ache. The painful numbness of your ears and your nose. Blinking to keep your eyes moist. Your bones aching. The wind sneaking through your winter clothes, scratching your skin. Your toes burning. So cold, it burns. *So cold, it burns*.

"The little things make the soup," my mother tells me. And I can still taste it. The beef she sautés all night. The fresh vegetables she just picked up from the store, crunching between my teeth. The broth, so hot it burns, but so sweet you don't care.

Show me.

Faking It

Sometimes the players will just catch you off guard. They'll throw you a curve you never saw coming and you've got two choices: duck or swing away.

This is what divides the men from the boys, my friend. The real test.

Can you improvise? Can you adapt? Can you overcome?

If you think you can't, let me persuade you just how wrong you really are.

Just like everything else, improvising is a skill. The more you practice, the better you get. But there are some tricks you can employ to help you out.

And I'm not going to talk in abstracts. Here's a real example from a real game I ran.

Consider this.

The group is in the Capital City, enjoying a leisurely afternoon between Senate votes. One of the players remembers mentions of a catacombs under the Temple of Talia. He decides he wants to go explore it.

You had no idea there were catacombs under the Temple of Talia. (In fact, neither did I until I just wrote it down.) He asks for a Wisdom risk. You're a Good Narrator, so you don't want to tell him "No." Besides, it sounds like the perfect opportunity to get the players into real trouble! So, you tell him to go ahead.

He makes his Wisdom risk, comes up with a few details, and before you can reach for the rulebook, they're at a secret entrance in Talia's temple, torches and swords in hand.

What do you do now?

Take a ten minute break. Your players will understand. They've just completely derailed what your plans were and you need a second to catch up.

Me? I told them I needed to run to the bathroom. Five minute break. I locked the door, sat down and started thinking.

I thought about the players. I had a group of six, but only two of them could really handle any kind of real trouble if it showed up. That meant four of them were stuck. They didn't want to be down here in an underground nest of vileness, but they didn't want to look like cowards, either. One of them even had Courage as a weakness.

The blowhard who wanted to come down here was the Serpent. He wanted to find lost scrolls, rituals, knowledge. He used that damn charisma of his to convince the other players this was a great idea. Okay. This is *his* fault. I'll punish him. But I'll also give him what he wants.

The character with the Courage weakness was the Fox. He was a dandy. A damn fine swordsman, but his sword was the only thing hard on his body. When the orks come, he'll be the first to scatter. Make sure he notices something when he runs away so I can isolate him from the rest of the group. Divide and conquer.

The two ladies are a Bear and another Fox. The Bear isn't afraid of anything and likes to prove it. The Fox is secretly in love with the Bear, so she's not going anywhere. She'll bleed for him. The Bear knows this, but is faithful to his marriage, so he's torn. A Romance is blooming between them. One of them just needs to make the first move. Good. I've got them covered.

Two more. The Falcon and the Wolf. The two who are really prepared for this. As soon as the trouble hits, everyone will look to them. The Wolf likes to fight (both the player and the character), so he's actually looking forward to this. It will give him an opportunity to show off (both the player and the character). The Falcon is a pretty quiet character—he pretty much follows the Wolf around—so those two will stand and fight.

Okay. So, out of the six, we have one that will run, two that have an emotional investment in protecting each other, one who wants to discover new knowledge, and two more who will stand and fight.

I'll have the orks show up on a natural bridge over a seemingly endless crevasse. Large enough for a fight, but narrow enough for folks to fall off.

For the wimpy Fox, I'll make him run into a spectre. That'll scare the hell out of him. He will be by himself. Everyone else occupied by the orks. The spectre will be a beautiful woman who seems vaguely familiar. He may even remember her from a portrait in his mother's castle. She touches him and he passes out. When he awakens (or the other players wake him up), he has a shock of white in his hair and his right eye is silver. I have no idea what that means, but I've got time to figure it out later.

For the potential Romantics, I'll have one of the orks grab the weaker of the two (the Fox with Strength as a weakness) and throw her into a pit. The Bear will want to catch her.

That's a Strength risk, so he'll handle it no problem. I'll use the ork's Strength so the risk will be contested. I know the Bear's Strength is five and he has an appropriate Aspect, so the Bear will be rolling eight dice at least. I'll give the ork sufficient dice to make that challenging. Make them sweat a little. The Bear will probably succeed, but he'll still worry. And the poor little Fox will have her big handsome Bear save her at the last second. Excellent.

Meanwhile, when the orks attack, the Falcon and Wolf will have their hands full holding them off the land bridge. But just fighting isn't enough. Let's make it more interesting. The orks are using bows. That's right. Bows. And tactics. This should catch the ven off-guard. Bows?!?! Give the Falcon and Wolf something to do.

Meanwhile, the curious Serpent will get distracted by an ork in the background with a bloody knife. What's he doing with a bloody knife? It looks like he's… chanting?

When the fight is over (and the wimpy Fox is recovered), the two potential lovers have that awkward "thank you for saving my life" moment. The Wolf and Falcon have a story to share. And the Serpent finds scrolls in a language he does not understand. Not the language of the sorcerer-kings. Not ven. Something… different.

Five minutes in the bathroom. I'm ready for them now. Of course, things will not go as planned. But I've got goals and that's more than what they've got.

So, there you have it. A real example of improvising. How did I do it? Easy.

I listened to my players. I know what they want. I give them what they want. The Serpent wants mystery. The Wolf and Falcon want adventure. The Bear and Fox want Romance. The wimp wants to be the comic relief. I give them what they want and drive them by their own desires.

(My editor demands an example.)

One of the most famous villains in ven literature is Count Kether. I took the liberty of introducing him to my playtest groups. He was charming, witty, seductive… and completely insane. And not in the cute, cuddly way. No, let me show you how insane.

I spent a little time thinking about one thing Kether could do to each of the player characters if he had the chance. I didn't look at what they held dear or sacred. No, no, no. Quite the opposite. I looked at what each character *wanted*. Then, I thought of a way for Kether to give it to them.

As it turned out, Kether got that opportunity with a young Bear named Lyssa. Lyssa didn't like ven court. She didn't like manners, but instead, valued honesty. She didn't like cleverness, but instead valued Strength. She didn't like being a ven and never once tried to hide it. (Three Things.)

She also didn't like her husband. She thought he was weak. Always dependent on her. But he was useful: she let him take care of the Season Actions. At the end of each game session, Lyssa's player always lamented how much she wanted to get rid of her husband. "If only someone would get him out of my way."

You see where this is going.

When he first met Lyssa, she knew his reputation. A cunning Fox with a flare for the dramatic. Little did she know he was also completely smitten with the young Bear; a secret he kept to himself until the right moment. That right moment came at a masked ball. Kether wore the same costume as an old flame of hers from many years ago. She mistook Kether for her youthful dalliance, and when he asked her to share a bottle of wine with him, she accepted.

A dark room. Candles. The scent of ambergris.

A large box on the table. Lyssa asks what it is. The masked man urges her to open it. "It is for you," he says. She opens it and finds her husband's head inside the box.

"If only someone would get him out of my way."

I had no idea how she would respond, but I didn't want to know. I wanted to play the scene from there.

A different path for each player, depending on which one I got to first. Contingencies, not plans.

Spotlight

One concept I've been toying with myself is the idea of "the spotlight." I didn't think of this one; I've been hearing a lot of people talk about it, but I've been toying with it for a while, trying to give it my own twist.

Every session, pick one player. That player has the Spotlight. (Capitalizing it makes it a rule.) This means that player is the focus of the game. The Narrator and the other players work toward making that player's ven the center of that session.

Using the Spotlight allows you to focus all your powers on a single player. Ask the other players to take the roles of significant NPCs

One character has the spotlight. Other players assist the Narrator in making that moment special. You'll get your own. You play an important NPC in that player's background.

Set your Spotlight on one character per Year. Let the players switch around the focus, helping each other tell their characters' stories.

Mix Backgrounds

If you find a common element in two different characters' backgrounds, find a way to link those elements.

For example, one ven has a favorite uncle and another ven is looking for the man who murdered her mother. Turns out both of those NPCs are the *same* NPC.

One ven is having a secret affair with a married woman and another ven suspects his wife is having an affair… Guess who the common element is?

Read your players' background write-ups carefully. If you look hard enough, you'll find all sorts of ways to make your players love you. Or hate you. Same difference, really.

The Great Game

Okay, you now have a strong basis to start thinking about how to run *Houses of the Blooded*. The following sections give you specific advice on how to do this. I designed this section to address the most common questions asked by playtesters who ran the game.

Enjoy.

Giving Out Style

One of the games I wrote previously used a mechanical bonus for rewarding players. The game was *7th Sea* and the mechanic was drama dice.

Now, having *played* in a few *7th Sea* games, I can tell you the chief difference I found in the way I run the game and the way other Narrators run the game is in the distribution of drama dice. Much like style points, drama dice reward players for acting "in character" and "in genre." While I was giving out a dozen or so per session, other Narrators were giving out perhaps one or two. Total. When I asked, "Why aren't you giving out more drama dice?" the answer always was, "We thought they were special. Reserved for rare events."

Well, to prevent that misconception *again*, let me state right here, for the record what my intention is. Let's answer the question. "How many style points should I give out."

The answer. "Tons."

Players make things harder on themselves? Give 'em style.

They use their wagers to make things more complicated? Give 'em style.

They add an element to the game that knocked you on your heels? Give 'em style.

Reward your players' creativity with style points. After all, style points make all the good things run. They refresh your Aspects, they give you a moment of narrative control, they let you use your Blessings… style is good. Give it away. Like candy.

I usually give out at least ten style points per game session and I encourage other players to do the same. Reward other players with style.

Also, the more you give, the more likely players are to *use them*. And we want them using style. Especially to make little contributions to the game. Whenever a player asks me a question about Shanri, I almost always answer, "I don't know," and I point at their style points.

"How far is Count Kether's castle from here?"

"Did I know Shara when I was younger?"

"Where is my older brother?"

Let them answer their own questions with style points. The more you give, the more they'll have to contribute to the game, and the less you'll have to think on your feet.

And let them kibitz, too. Trust me, having six or seven people all thinking about an answer, all wanting to contribute, that's good. Giving them plenty of style to do it encourages them to do so.

Give 'em style!

Different Viewpoints

This game was designed with the noble class in mind. Playing a kind of character you really can't play in that other fantasy roleplaying game that shall remain nameless but whose initials are "D" and "D."

But what if you don't want to play nobles? What if you want to play that lower class scum that allows the nobles to live their reckless and indulgent lifestyles?

Well, I've got a sourcebook for that coming out soon. But until then, here are a few other options.

At the end of a game session, as everyone is packing up, tell your group that the next session is going to focus on different characters. Just one session. A pause in the storm. A moment for reflection and a break from the drama. Perhaps a bit of fun. When they ask, "Who are we going to play," you tell them this…

The Midnight Game

This is best to use when you've just finished a party. A buddy of mine called it "The Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Game." The ven called it "The Midnight Game."

When the nobles go to bed, the servants come out to play. Their masters and ladies are all asleep (or pretending to be asleep) and that affords the servant class an opportunity to let down their hair.

Nearly every lord or lady has a maid or valet. (Even if they don't have the Vassal; that just means your maid or valet isn't cool enough yet.) Write down your maid or valet's name, write down Three Things that define him or her, and throw all those names at the Narrator. Then, the Narrator throws all those names in a hat and everybody draws one. If you draw your own, throw it back and pick another.

For the next game session, you play a maid or valet to one of the other nobles. Moving around the house by candlelight, meeting with other servants for less-than-honorable purposes, spying on other nobles, carrying out illicit affairs.

Spend a whole game session on the vassals. If your Narrator is generous, he may even allow you to elevate a vassal to NPC status. If you are all very good.

I mean bad. Very, very bad.

Roadmen

Roadmen are a source of fascination for the ven. Hundreds of thousands of pages written about these bold and adventurous ven going forth into the Wasteland, fighting for honor, truth and all that other stuff.

Now's your time to do your duty to your lord.

Exactly like the Midnight Game above, everybody writes down a Roadman, the Three Things, and throws those names into a hat. Draw. Play.

Because the nobles gathered have a common interest (I assume), their Roadmen will likely have common interests. Never enough knights on the Road. Banding together for safety is a wise strategy. You can cover more ground that way. Protect each other from orks or bandits. After all, you don't want to be on the lonely side of the Mass Murder rules.

Roadmen encounter all kinds of dangers, but their primary danger is espionage from foreign nobles. Spies sent to sabotage or bribe local villages away from your liege. And then there are the orks. And spectres. And peasant revolts.

A Roadman's work is never done.

Yvtavia

Another kind of Roadman. A lady's Roadman. Same deal. Names, Three Things, the hat. Draw.

Protecting her journey from party to party. Protecting her journey from room to room.

Protecting her honor from a jealous lover. Protecting her honor from a jealous husband.

Wooing her heart. Winning her kiss. Waiting in the shadows as she shares her favors with another. Protecting her with a broken heart.

Style and NPCs (The Narrator Version)

You may have seen a section in the Player chapter about giving NPCs style points. If not, go read about it now.

Essentially, what I've done is told the players they can reward you for being such a bitchin' Narrator by giving the NPCs style points. The NPCs can then use the style points just like players do: denying compels, vetoing wagers, all that sort of thing.

Hopefully, I've gotten them all hot and bothered to do so, because if I've done my job, what we're gonna do with those style points is *so bad*… well, let me just show you.

When the players invest style in a character, they're truly *investing* in the character. They're telling you, "I like this character and I want to see more of her." This is a good thing, because all that investment is going to make the betrayal sting even more.

Let's go over what an NPC can do with style points.

She can deny compels: If a player tries to compel an NPC's Aspects, she can spend two style points to deny that compel.

She can veto wagers: If a player uses a wager to define something about an NPC, that NPC can spend a style point to say, "No, that isn't true." Players can do it, so can NPCs.

She can define the world: Just like the players can spend a style point to say a little truth, so can NPCs. They can even spend style to define something true about a player character. *Especially* when that player is out of style points.

The more the players invest in an NPC, the more powerful the NPC becomes. The more powerful the NPC becomes, the more useful that NPC is to the players… and the more damaging she becomes when they screw up and lose her as an ally.

Even more painful when she turns out to be a traitor all along.

Get your players to invest style in NPCs. And don't worry if they read this section. Don't worry at all. There's a reason nobody wears black in Shanri.

Makes it hard to sort out the good guys from the bastards.

She can define herself: The most important (and last) thing an NPC can do with Style is define herself. Use a Style to say something is true about herself. Her father, mother, motives, desires. Anything. Giving a style to an NPC means she becomes more real. And more dangerous.

Of course, only more dangerous for her enemies.



Roses & Thorns: A Sample Adventure

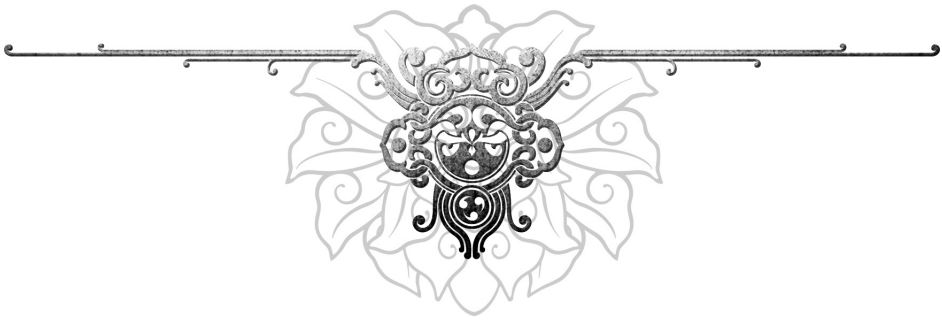
I wrote this "sample adventure" to show how the *Houses of the Blooded* game works for both the players and the Narrator. I drew it directly from one of my favorite pillow books. Shara Yvarai, the famous character from ven literature, is throwing a party. Your ven show up looking for opportunity. Opportunity to make new Contacts, opportunity to trade, opportunity to cause trouble.

Of course, Shara's party is anything but typical. A whole series of events happen, throwing her young life into absolute turmoil.

Shara wouldn't have it any other way.

The Party takes place in Shara's puzzle house. An old relic her father fought for long ago. Accepting the invitation to Shara's party means each ven attending must bring a gift. Shara throws a Party 2 (that's a rank 2 Party) meaning folks should probably bring at least a rank 2 gift (something that can bank at least 2 style points). See Shara's detailed description below for further advice on what to bring.

I've drawn this adventure from the first Shara pillow book. If any of your players have already read it, don't worry, you can still throw them off balance. Set up their expectations and dash them with hidden secrets. Besides, the other players will probably do your work for you as they make Wisdom risks and spend style points.



That which we take without effort, we throw away.

Only when we bleed do we appreciate our conquests.

The Set-Up

When I run *Houses* at conventions, I bring a few notes with me, but in general, I allow the players to define the terms. Here's how I do it.

First, we go through the process of making characters. I encourage the players to make characters with connections. I even go so far—when I have time—to write up a Blood Contract and make them sign it. When I don't have time, I give them a pre-written Contract to sign. I also bring a box of matches, just in case.

Second, I give them the outline of the story. For "Roses & Thorns," I tell them this:

Young, beautiful and dangerous. Shara Yvarai's coming out party is an opportunity for Romance, trade, Contracts… and murder. Your Count (or Countess) wants a Contract with Shara. Convince the young baroness to sign a Contract of servitude.

Then, I have everyone make a Wisdom risk. This is a contested risk, so only the victor gets to use all his wagers. If I feel merciful (the ven word translates to "weak"), I give those with a Wisdom weakness a free wager. The result of the risk is "What do you know about the circumstances of the story?"

For "Roses & Thorns," the question usually hinges on Shara, her party, and the Count (or Countess). Because I do not determine the identity of the Count/Countess, the players can use their wagers to determine the gender/identity of the character and his/her motivations.

I'm not trying to be clever with the ambiguity of gender. By not identifying the PCs' superior in any way, they are free to say anything they want. The wagers they make give them that opportunity.

Because the players define the important elements of the story, every time I run the game, it is a completely different game. To show you what I mean, here are a few examples of how wagers determined different circumstances.

Defining Circumstances

I gave the players this information:

- *Shara is throwing a party.*
- *She's Blooded of the Fox, but her mother was a Wolf.*
- *Your Count/Countess wants Shara as a vassal.*

The players gave me this information (each point is a different wager):

- *Our Countess is blind*
- *Shara is the one who blinded her*
- *Our Countess is Blooded of the Wolf*
- *Our Countess has many enemies*
- *Our Countess is cruel*
- *Our Countess is fair*
- *Shara is unmarried*
- *Our Countess gives generous gifts, but always at a price*

With these facts in mind, the players embarked to woo Lady Shara. A relationship had already been established with the wagers, making their job difficult (I gave two Style to the player who made the job so hard).

Another group came up with *this* situation for the same adventure:

- *Our Countess is a Serpent*
- *Her Name is Wren Thorne which means "to serve the servants"*
- *If we can't recruit Shara, our Countess wants her killed*
- *Our Countess is a sorcerer*
- *But she keeps that a secret*
- *She knows the Ritual to make twins*
- *She has a reputation as a lush*
- *But she isn't*
- *She keeps a close eye on her barons*
- *She has a financial obligation involving the sorcerer*
- *Hush money for using the Twins Ritual*

Again, by defining the Countess, the party came up with a completely different circumstance for the adventure.

Finally, a third group:

- *Our Count is fond of the Sea*
- *He is a Wolf*
- *His name is Marco which means "Captain of the Seas."*
- *He is most fond of Bejorak, Shara's uncle*
- *Bejorak is also the father of one of the PCs (making Shara a cousin)*
- *Bejorak owes one of the PCs a favor*
- *Our Count's wife is dead*
- *And he's looking to make Shara into his wife*
- *Our Count has a daughter*
- *"And she likes me best!"*
- *Our Count sent a painting as a gift for Shara*

By defining the Count/Countess, the players also defined their own goals. Kill Shara, win her favor, get her to fall in love with our Count. All of these are distinctly different goals. I particularly liked the mixed goal of the first group. They couldn't decide if they wanted to win Shara's favor or kill her for blinding their Countess. The conflict made for great story and I rewarded them with Style.

Story Outline

I've divided this Story into two sections. The first details significant NPCs at the Party and the second details the Events.

For the NPCs, I've listed a few details. Three Things that are true about each NPC along with some details of my own. When you introduce an NPC, announce these Three Things. This allows you to set precedent with the NPCs before the players get a chance to mold them with wagers.

As for the Events, I've also left those very scarce. There's really no reason to detail motives and machinations here. Your players will come up with all their own details. So, to begin, let's talk about the Party's hostess…

The future will forgive all sins
if you achieve what other men desire.

NPCs

Lady Shara, Baroness of Tilvia, Blooded of the Fox

First and foremost is the hostess herself. Three Things about Shara:

- She's carrying a beautiful (and very new) sword on her hip.
- Calling her "bold" is like calling dry ice "chilly."
- Her dress is … well, it's amazing the damn thing stays on.

Shara knows what she wants and she isn't afraid to take it. Relying on the "easier to ask forgiveness than permission" philosophy, she acts almost without reflection, relying on her mother's diaries as a guide to her actions.

She flirts with everyone at the party, regardless of gender or status. Men, women, husbands, wives, counts, and dukes. But Shara's technique is a bit more sophisticated than most: you're never really sure if she's flirting with you or not. Her intention is to create desire but never give anyone a justification for it. It's a strange alchemical mixture: bold suggestions made through the most subtle innuendos.

Shara's behavior gets her closer to what she wants: protection for her father's lands. She wants Contacts and she's willing to sign blood contracts to get them. A contract protects her: others will protect her lands as long as she fulfills her end of the bargain. Anyone doing business with her will do what they can to make sure their investments don't go to waste.

As the hostess, Shara expects a gift from each ven attending. Although she is Blooded of the Fox, she is much more attached to her Wolf heritage. Gifts acknowledging that distinction earn guests a particular fondness from their hostess.

Shara's lands are famous for rare and exquisite spices. The pillow books invoke one of the spices: *avartha*. Scholars disagree on exactly what this spice is, although it seems to be a kind of sweet pepper. And it also seems the valleys of Shara's lands are the perfect place to grow it.

Despite what the ven may think of her, Shara does not share her favors lightly… if at all. She knows the most powerful motivator is desire. What we *want*. And the fires of *wanting* are quenched by *having*.

She is particularly distracted by the appearance of Valin Burghe. The two were childhood friends—before the tragedy that stole Valin's family from him. A new opportunity to reunite with an old crush.

Lord Valin Burghe, Baron of Ishnavay, Blooded of the Bear

Three Things about Valin:

- His hand seldom leaves his orichalcum sword, strapped to his belt.
- He is quiet and only friendly with Shara.
- A dark, shadowy figure follows his every step, whispering advice.

One of Shara's guests is the Baron of Ishnavay, Valin Burghe. The Baron is young—only twenty—and recently returned to public life under mysterious circumstances. When he was only a boy, his family was murdered by a spectre. For over a decade, the lands remained haunted, all those who dared enter the castle murdered by the creature. It was only last Season that Valin returned to his homeland and slew the spectre. Slew it with an artifact from the sorcerer-kings. An orichalcum sword.

Valin is a walking conversation piece, carrying the sword with him wherever he goes. He seems uncomfortable at the party, but his shadowy "doctor" that never leaves his side guides him through most social traps.

Anyone who pays any attention should notice Valin doesn't want to be at the party. He's here to meet with the only friend he knows. Anyone else is an annoyance until proven otherwise.

Lady Peacock, Duchess of Q'var, Blooded of the Fox

Three Things about Lady Peacock:

- She knows everyone.
- She's surrounded by admirers.
- She knows everybody's secrets, no matter how well-hidden.

"Lady Peacock" is a common character type in ven pillow books: "The Dowager Duchess." An older, more experienced woman who guides the younger, less experienced heroine of the book.

Lady Peacock could be of great help to "little nobles" or she could be a great pain. She could even be dangerous. She's rather flippant and doesn't seem to take anything seriously. But, in fact, she is fiercely devoted to those who treat her with respect. She'll even put her own reputation in danger to protect them.

Lady No, Countess of Ival, Blooded of the Elk

Three Things about Lady No:

- She's a poison teddy bear.
- She has three dead husbands. Currently looking for a fourth.
- She has some kind of relationship with Zsanosz, Count Kether.

Lady No is small, demure, and absolutely darling. She's also one of the deadliest guests at Shara's party. Her three ex-husbands, all mysteriously deceased, provided her with a great deal of land, elevating her into the middle level of society. She also demonstrates all three of the villainous traits: red hair, pale skin, grey eyes.

Men don't know whether to fear or desire her. Women don't know whether to admire her or scorn her. All three of her husbands were stolen from other marriages. The wives mysteriously… oh, you get the picture.

Lady No is deadly. She's also damn clever. There's a reason she's gotten away with so much without ever getting caught. Crossing her is a mistake. Starting a Romance with her could be the last thing you ever do.

I'd do it.

Count Kether, Zsanosz Yvarai, Blooded of the Fox

Three Things about Count Kether:

- He's an honest, loyal and honorable ven.
- He's also the most ruthless bastard you've ever met.
- He has some sort of relationship with Lady No, the Countess of Ival

He never breaks a promise. Always keeps his word. Keeps to the absolute letter of the law. And he's the one of the most black-hearted bastards ever to grace a pillow book. Zsanosz, the Count of Kether, is an intriguing dichotomy.

Zsanosz is also good friends with the Duke of Syvala (see below) and has a "special" relationship with Lady No. Everyone knows about it, but nobody knows what it actually is or to what extent the two might protect each other… or betray each other.

While Zsanosz is Blooded of the Fox, his suaven is Jaymin Steele. And it shows. He's willing to do anything—anything—to extend his lands. Make any promise, cut any throat. But he'll never break his word. Never.

Dannin Steele, Duke of Shyvala, Blooded of the Elk

Three Things about Duke Dannin:

- He's due to become the Earl any Season now.
- He's spent time in the Senate trying to convince the Senators about a threat of "smart orks."
- He's an Autumn ven, single, and every woman in the Senate wants him.

When he enters a room, all the ladies look. The walking, talking evidence that ven really do age into Beauty. Some claim he may even be the truest descendant of Jaymin Steele himself. He makes allies of his enemies and elevates his allies. A true gentlemen, the most popular ven in the Senate. Until recently.

At the last meeting of the Senate, he spoke of an unspeakable horror. The possibility of orks organizing in his lands. He brought a spear, carved with what looked to be primitive language. He spoke of them using tactics. One of his Roadmen talked of a village. A village! What nonsense.

Of course, no-one in the Senate takes him seriously and the claims have begun to stain his reputation. The more ambitious Senators see this as an opportunity to steal the lands of a ven who seemed all but indefatigable a month ago. His allies see a ven failing in a very public way and cannot come to his aid for fear of being associated with his madness.

And that's how the majority of ven see Duke Dannin. He is approaching Solace. Perhaps the Winter Madness has come soon, clouding his mind and darkening his thoughts.

Or, perhaps he's right.

Lady S of the House Falcon

- Blooded of the Falcon
- Courageous (Courage is her highest Virtue)
- Long, brown hair

Lady S is a practical woman. She doesn't like politics and she particularly doesn't like shenanigans. Her vassals have been drawn from the unblooded she felt she could trust. This means almost all her vassals are at least a little rough around the edges. Manners isn't her primary concern, loyalty is. She won't keep secrets, so don't ask her to. In fact, she may take it as an insult.

She doesn't suffer fools. She doesn't tolerate liars. She particularly hates condescending Blooded who think they can talk down to her vassals. She's a fierce Falcon (I made Prowess her second highest Virtue) and she'll shed blood for a friend. She doesn't have many friends.

Shara's Seneschal

Three Things about Shara's Seneschal:

- He's tall and creepy.
- He's thin and creepy.
- He's creepy.

He stands a head taller than the tallest ven. He's deep into Winter, his Solace Aspects the most prominent. His height. His brittle thinness. His smile. His damned smile. His paper skin. His chilling touch.

No ven knows his name. Every room they enter, every corridor they walk, even in the garden maze… he is there. Waiting patiently. Eager to serve. His voice, high pitched. As emaciated as his skin. His gleaming teeth.

The Seneschal seems to be a part of the puzzle house. And no-one knows his name.

Well, almost no-one.

Baron Xanos, Blooded of the Falcon

Three Things about Xanos:

- He carries a bow, but no sword
- He looks like he slept in his clothes
- He doesn't say anything unless he's spoken to

Xanos is everything you'd expect a Falcon to be. A walking, talking cliché. But, there's a slumbering storm under that calm, quite demeanor. Xanos does not tolerate the games the ven play. He knows them, he can play them himself, but he doesn't put up with them.

Xanos went native two years ago, living with the orks. He learned many of their secrets—including their language—and knows much about the ruins of the sorcerer-kings. He knows Shara's lands quite well… and yours for that matter. In fact, he probably knows your lands better than you do.

Xanos isn't interested in being anyone's Master of the Road. He's already been there and done that. What he's looking for is something else. Two years ago, his Count was murdered and the criminal never identified. Xanos suspects his lord's wife was responsible but he has no evidence.

He has secrets, but no evidence. He'd be more than happy to trade one for the other.

Baroness Niassa, Blooded of the Elk

Three Things:

- Niassa is always with her Maid, Alyss
- She is Blooded of the Elk
- She is an Autumn

Baroness Niassa is a dear friend—honestly!—of Lady Peacock. The two go back a long time. Niassa is also never without Alyss: a petite, demure, harmless little girl who always seems out of place. Niassa sees Alyss as the daughter she never had and will go to great lengths to protect her. Niassa's Solace Aspect is her voice: never rising above a hushed whisper.

Niassa is quite infatuated with Duke Dannyn and will do almost anything to win his heart. Even betray him.

Young Alyss has a few secrets of her own. While looking completely harmless, Alyss is actually a Blooded and cunning spy master. Nothing escapes her notice. Because few Blooded actually pay attention to her, she is able to spy for her lady with little difficulty. She also has a deeper secret: she has Devotion for the forbidden suaven, Ikhalu. Using her illegal Blessings, she ensures Niassa's safety and security. Not even Niassa knows of her maid's secret.

Plots

This section gives you a brief idea of what exactly happens at Shara's infamous Party. Like I said, if the players are familiar with the work, don't worry. They'll soon spin everything away from the "canon" of the novel. Just throw the Event at them and watch what happens.

Tulpa Murder

At some point during the evening, a tulpa (see *Sorcery*) of one of the guests is found murdered in the halls. It could be anyone, but picking someone the ven have a fondness for is most effective.

There's really no need to know the who and why behind this act. The players will determine that with their wagers. Just throw the body at them, let them make Cunning and Wisdom risks, and watch them build motives and machinations.

When I ran the adventure for two different groups, both came up with different suspects for the crime. Both for who created the tulpa and who killed it. The first group found a tulpa of Duke Dannin, created by the Duke's Spy Master. He created the tulpa to protect his lord. The murderer mistook the tulpa for the actual thing. The second group came up with a different answer. The tulpa was actually of Shara, sent from the Blooded of the Serpent as a kind of warning. Making her an offer she shouldn't refuse.

Ikhalu Cult

The Ikhalu cult is a prominent part of many blood operas. The ven fascination with Revenge makes Ikhalu an intriguing enigma. The forbidden suaven who grants the most sacred and holy gift.

The Ikhalu cult is present at the Party and they are present to murder someone. Who that is and what they want is up in the air. In the original story, the cult was at the Party to murder Duke Dannin, but just throw a nameless servant with an Ikhalu dagger into the mix and see what your players come up with.

Serpent Plot

A small contingent of Serpents have shown up, accepting Shara's invitation, even though they have no reason to be here. They meet together, they speak together. They have a goal.

They want the house.

Something in Shara's puzzle house intrigues them. Perhaps it is the mysterious Seneschal. Perhaps a hidden hallway deep in the corridors. A relic. An artifact. A secret even Shara does not know.

They want the house. And they're willing to do anything to get it.

The Spectre

Wandering the halls of Shara's puzzle house is dangerous. Rumors say a spectre waits for the lost. Waits to drink their blood and steal their Seasons. Whether or not the rumors are true, they provide an interesting possibility.

After all, even Shara does not know all the house's secrets…

The Hunt

Shara holds a Hunt, giving her guests an opportunity to let their Swords meet the day. The orks in her nearby Forest have been giving her problems, and by letting a whole host of ven loose on the scene, she clears it of the Trouble she had been experiencing.

Of course, many things can happen on the Hunt. A stray arrow. A poisonous ork claw. A wayward kiss finding unsuspecting lips…

Adventure Ideas

As I said, writing adventures for *Houses* is easy. All you need is a premise. Your players will use wagers to create NPCs. Friends, enemies, rivals. The premise of a *Houses* adventure is seldom the focus of the adventure. It only provides the initial details. Your players will provide the rest.

The Storm

Travel is always dangerous in Shanri, but never so dangerous as when the Storm finds you. The producers of *Twister* must have been thinking of the Shanri Storm. It's smart. It's vengeful. It hates you. And it is trying to kill you.

Visiting a Distant Suaven

The journey to visit the resting place of a suaven is more than just a physical journey; it is a spiritual journey, filled with symbolism and meaning. As the co-author of the journey, be sure to put difficult choices in the journey, all choices important to the suaven in question.

Upon arriving at the Temple, a visit with the suaven, a waking dream. Reflection on those choices and how they could have been different. How the ven succeeded and how she failed. Check out some Native American spirit journeys and the Arthurian Grail Quests for more inspiration.

Becoming Seneschal to NPC liege

A powerful NPC asks one of the ven to become his Seneschal. This allows the other ven in your group to fill other roles. Spy Master, Master of the Road. Access to lands and Resources not available to young ven. Also plenty of Trouble.

Imagine all the secrets you can learn, all the favors you can earn, all the power you can acquire. But be careful… your new master keeps a strict eye on his Vassals. Not to mention his black iron altar hidden deep in his castle. You know, the one he sacrifices babies on to appease his dark suaven.

Wedding

The going to a wedding is the making of another. Heading off to participate in a wedding may not seem like much of an "adventure," but that's only because you've never been backstage at one.

Weddings are huge, dramatic affairs where everyone involved loses all sense of priority. Life-long friends declare blood Revenge. Women fight over the most meaningless details. Last minute efforts to dodge out of responsibilities. And does anyone know exactly where the bride might be?

Bargains are made, Resources exchanged, and parents look at their own children, wondering if there might be an eligible match to be made.

By the way, what are those orks doing over there on the edge of the woods?

Spring Party

A "spring party" is when a young noble changes his name. His first act of adulthood.

Another excuse for nobles to gather and plot and trade and scheme. Fall in love. So many young men and women in one place, all eager for Romance.

So young. So easy to manipulate. So easy to fool into life-long contracts binding them forever.

Of course, at this particular party, the noble in question is of marrying age and her consort was recently killed on an ork hunt. She's available. Ripe for the picking. What the ven don't know is she's playing a game with her two friends: who can collect the most promises from desperate old men willing to do anything to win the favor of a beautiful young girl…

Ork Hunt

Following on the heels of Duke Dannin's suggestion, the young Barons and Baronesses go out into the Wasteland to find these "smart orks." Some options.

They find ven dressed as orks, hoping to stir up the rumor of smart orks. Of course, Duke Dannin knows nothing of this. An attempt to discredit the Duke and steal his lands.

Or, they find those same smart orks. Using tools (spears and bows), living in buildings, speaking to each other in a crude language (a variation of the old sorcerer-king tongue). The orks also seem to have their own kind of magic. Something to do with names. Nothing to compare with ven sorcery, of course.

Or, they do not find orks, but find evidence of someone planting fake evidence. Spears and shields. Footprints. Roughshod huts.

Puzzle House

Exploring a puzzle house is no small affair. These were the homes of the sorcerer-kings. Untold dangers. Horrors. Secrets. Some houses seem to defy time itself. A ven walks in through one door and steps out the other side twenty Seasons later.

Go too deep and discover endless black corridors. Whispers. Shimmering visions. Spectres. Go on. Tie off a string and make your way down. Stairs and stairs and stairs and stairs and stairs and stairs and stairs and stairs and stairs and stair and turn around and face the door you never came through.

There is also the rumor of "the heart of the house." A place where… well, nobody's really sure what may be there. But it can't be good.

People Problems

Trouble calls in many forms. Sometimes, it even knocks on your backdoor.

When you have Trouble in your Farms, Cities or Villages, it's because your people are angry. Why? Time to find out.

Solving Trouble in populated areas can require a good deal of subterfuge. Perhaps a rabble-rouser has the people in a fury. Talking about justice for all, equal rights, that sort of thing. Or, perhaps your people are terrified of some monstrous ork wandering their streets at night.

Finding Something New

The ven are always looking for unknown advantages. That's why they comb the ruins of the sorcerer-kings. New Artifacts, new Rituals. If another ven finds it, you want it. That's how it works. Better to have it than to want it.

Finding something *significant* on your lands is another matter. The ven start out small. They're Barons. They need each other for protection. But if they find something awful, something terrible, something so unspeakable… they'll have big bad ven knocking on their doors, hat in hand, on bended knee. Just for an opportunity to get it for themselves.

If your players bitch about not having anything cool, give them something cool. Then watch them rush to get rid of it as fast as possible.

Neighbors and Fences

The ven in your group aren't the only ven in the world. They have neighbors. And good neighbors are like walls. They protect you from danger.

Maintaining a relationship with a neighbor presents all kinds of problems. Peasants from his lands running onto yours, hoping you'll protect them from his tyranny. Orks from his lands finding their way to your lands because he doesn't cull their numbers. Or even the other way around.

What if his Spy Master defects? Or his daughter? Or his wife? Showing up on your doorstep, begging for protection. What do you do?

The Calling of a Suaven

Not all ven are called by their own Houses' suaven. Foxes hear the call of the Wolf. The Elk hear the call of the Falcon. The Bear hear the call of the Serpent.

What happens when you do? Do you ditch your old suaven for the promises of another? Do you travel to their shrine or temple, seeking their visions and Blessings?

Many tales of ven giving up everything they own to answer a suaven's call. Your ven could hear that call. Could be hearing it now…

Secret Army

Armies are illegal. No ven may raise an army. Then again, sorcery is illegal, too. Isn't it?

What if you got together your peasantry, put them in black garb, put spears in their hands and taught them how to protect themselves? A crime, yes, but who is going to catch you? And who can truly punish you? The Dukes and Counts doing the same thing?

And what about those orks? They can hold spears, can't they?

Passing into Solace

Passing into Solace an adventure? You're damn right it is.

Before your ven passes, he has to make preparations. He has to make sure his lands will go to his heirs. That means finding support in the Senate. He has to make sure his neighbors won't invade. He has to make sure shrines and temples are built in his name. He has to make sure his possessions pass into the right hands.

So much to do… and no more time.

Bad Marriage

Someone you know—possibly even *you*—is involved in a marriage. It just has to be put to an end. But how do you accomplish that? Murder is out of the question.

Or is it?

You can't just arrange a Romance; infidelity is not grounds for divorce. In fact, there really aren't any grounds for divorce in ven culture. So, how do you get someone out of a bad marriage?

Find a way.

Of course, these kinds of problems are best solved before the marriage is made legal.

Death (and Inheritance)

There's the other end for a ven. Death. The cruel gift.

When a ven dies, the law states all his property is forfeit. Unable to protect even his own life, he has proven he was unable to protect his property. Typically, that means the ven who killed him inherits everything, but that is not always the case. For example…

Duke Cxexk (kuh-chez-yk) dies. He has a son, but that son does not have the strength to claim his father's lands. The Duke died under the blade of Lady Falvren, whose eyes burned with the black fire of Revenge. When the fever passed, she was not prepared to take the Duke's lands, either.

Both the Duke's seneschal and the Lady Falvren have come to you. They want your support in the Senate when it comes time to claim the lands. Both make you promises. Both make polite threats. Which side do you favor?

Bandits

You would think they wouldn't be much Trouble, but they're everywhere. On every Road, in every Region, every Province. Robbing your supply lines, stealing your source of income.

You've already promised that wine to Lord Balchenioux. You've already received the steel in return. He's expecting it. You have to go out and deal with the bandits who stole it… and the noble who happens to be sponsoring them.

Perhaps it's even Lord Balchenioux himself? Or perhaps his wife, hoping to distract him long enough so she can carry out her own little plots and plans behind his back. Or perhaps she's intentionally starting a fight between you and the Lord. His death would make it easier for you and her to meet on those sequestered holidays, now wouldn't it?

I mean, a woman plotting to put her husband and her lover in the middle of a Revenge just so she can get what she wants? It's absurd! Outrageous! Preposterous!

It's Opera. And bandits.

Liege's Birthday

So, your liege lord has just turned from Summer to Autumn. Time to get him something spectacular and impressive. Of course, you'll have to outdo every other vassal trying to get his attention. Exactly how are you going to…

What's that? He's coming to visit you? Here? *Now???*

Yes, your liege has made up his mind. He's spending his birthday at your castle. Are you prepared? He's also decided to throw the party here. Not that you can argue. He's in charge after all. He's the one who actually *owns* the castle. You're just watching it for him.

So, get everything ready. And be sure his wife and mistress have rooms set far away from each other. And his second mistress. And third.

Collecting Taxes

Someone has to do it. If it isn't you, who?

Besides, collecting taxes makes sure you get everything you deserve. Tax collectors skim off the top. They believe the sob stories peasants tell them about the Winter cold and the Summer heat and the Spring rain and the Autumn drought. Tax collectors get mobbed by bandits, who are usually in collusion with the tax collectors anyway.

Yes, each of these is an adventure in itself, but this one is simple. Collecting taxes. Of course, that also means you'll be hearing all the plights, trials and travesties of your vassals' daily lives. Perhaps you might even find it in your ven heart to do something about them.

War

War is something that I despise, but we should spend time talking about it.

Every once in a while, some Duke or Count gets it in his head that he should be the Emperor. He gets a few allies together and they make a mad dash to unite Shanri under one crown. Of course, everyone else gathers up their resources to stop him, and in the end, blood is spilled, borders shift and the whole face of Shanri changes again.

This is the arching storyline in *The Great and Tragic Life of Lady Shara Yvarai*. The War of Seven Swords. It starts out as nothing. A whisper. A faint touch. When it's over, it is blood, blood, blood. Shanri is like a cannon with a hair trigger, just waiting for someone to twitch. And it doesn't take much.

Forbidden Knowledge

Orks have a Ritual to steal the magic in ven Blood. A knife, a prayer, and murder. Where did they learn this Ritual? Certainly no ven taught it to them…

Revenge

Revenge is never a simple matter, nor should it be something taken lightly. The ven view Revenge as an Art. Not a club, but a Sword. Any ork can kill. It takes a ven, with Cunning, Wisdom and Beauty, to declare Revenge.

Making Revenge a long-term goal. Let it take years to fulfill. Ripen. Blossom. And then, finally, when the moment is right, let it wash over you like inevitable snows of Winter.

A Suaven's Wrath

When you betray the suaven, they drop their wrath on your head. Getting rid of that wrath is tricky, but essential.

Let's say you get Talia Yvarai mad at you. The suaven of Romance. Well, forget long walks in the garden. Forget favors. Forget any of that. You'll get nothing. Winning her favor back? That takes Blood. Yours.

Win the heart of the most cold, most calculating, most bitter ven in all of Shanri. Until then, you can live with the wrath.

Apology

Ven are big on promises. Don't make one you can't fulfill. And don't apologize for anything. Not anything.

But, in case you do, you'll find yourself on a quest to make up for your failure. After all, apologizing is admission of failure. Admission of guilt. And there you are.

If your break a promise, it's time to pay.

Pirates!

Delivering Resources overseas, the Master of the Road and his vassals have to face many dangers. Among them are pirates.

Nobles hire mercenaries to raid enemy shipping lanes all the time. Stealing spices, silks, metals and other resources, they are a constant source of Trouble.

Escorting these vital treasures requires strong men of breeding and character. What the Duke wants moved, in addition to his wines and silks, is a large box, wrapped in iron chains. What's inside? If you listen carefully, you can hear a voice. A woman's voice. Is that a woman? Maybe a child.

Of course, pirates want the box, too. They don't know why. They're under orders. Get the box and bring it back.

The box whispers to the crew. Begs them to open it. Nobody knows what's inside… but you can bet someone is going to find out before the voyage is over.

No Moon

Dark Night. No Moon. The blackest night when the suaven's whispers turn mad.

Everyone gains a new Aspect: Suaven's Whispers. There is no invoke, only a tag and compel. The tag is equal to the ven's Devotion. The compel makes you act like a lunatic, throwing away all reason, all sense, embracing the dark shadow of your suaven.

Followers of the Sacred Harlot become lustful beasts.

Followers of the Bloody Wolf become bloodthirsty animals.

Followers of the Falcon's Friend become impudent fools.

Followers of the Mother Bear become over-controlling prigs.

Followers of the Cold-Hearted Elk become even more emotionless and ruthless.

And followers of the Wandering Wise One become something so dark, so sinister, it may not be spoken.

For one night. No Moon.

At least once a Year.

Repairing Your Reputation

You carry a damaged reputation wherever you go, hanging around your neck, biting at your heels, weighing down your hands like lead.

How do you repair a reputation? How do you restore your dignity?

Declaring Revenge is one way. Proving the reputation wrong is another. Some ven spend years trying to demolish a bad reputation. Cowards challenging every swordsman they can find. Unfaithful husbands remaining steadfast by their wives. A neglectful father restoring his daughter's faith in him. These are the acts of ven willing to sacrifice to fix what went wrong.

What would you do?

Winning a Lover

If you can't think of a way to make this complicated, you need to get out more often.

Romance is a messy and mean business. You've got rivals and parents and brothers and sisters and arranged marriages. Maintaining a Romance is even worse. The ven have laws for such indiscretions and they are not kind. Sure, society accepts Romance, but the law does not.

So, we've got lots of sneaking around. Lots of innuendo. Lots of other people trying to discover your secret so they can use it against you. Blackmail is such an ugly word…

A married woman or man approaches one of the ven, looking to begin a Romance. Besides the mechanical advantage of a free Aspect, she also provides a new ally. An important ally. A powerful ally.

And remember the consequences of breaking her heart. Free Aspect, just to hurt *you*.

Because Romance gives a free Aspect, players want it on their character sheets. But make them work for it. Otherwise, it's just another Aspect, and that's just ignoring the point now, isn't it?

Duel

Duels are Events. Huge spectacles. It is easy to make a duel an adventure.

What if someone approaches the ven. Secretly. A request. "Throw the duel." Yeah, she wants you to lose on purpose. Because she's in love with the other guy and she can't stand to see him hurt. Or lose face.

Please. *Please*. She'll give you whatever you want. *Whatever you want*. Just lose the duel. Humiliate yourself for just this moment and she'll humiliate herself for you. Any night you want. *Whatever you want*.

Please. *Please*.

You want Resources? You want land? Anything. *Anything*.

Murder Mystery

A murder mystery using this system is a bit different than the kind of murder mysteries you've played in other systems.

You see, in this case, you provide the body and the players provide the clues.

I've done it to every playtest group. Threw a body at them and let them make Wisdom and Cunning risks. Watched them build an elaborate scheme, interwoven with treachery and Revenge. It's really that easy. Just throw a body at them and watch them make the mystery for you.

Of course, I also give bonus style points when a player provides clues that could point to more than one suspect. Good form. I also give big bonus style to the player who provides clues that point to *him*. Very good form.

And finally, I give mucho mondo bonus style to the player who spends a wager and says, "It was me," spends another wager and says, "but the clues point to Lord Syther."

Makes my heart quiver.

Hunting the Olivana

Many mystical creatures in ven mythology. The Great Elk. Serpent. Primal animals from which the ven draw their beliefs and culture.

Hunting sacred animals is a favorite ven pastime. Each House has its own ritual to perform before the hunt, appealing to the spirit of the animal, preparing for the kill.

Then, the Hunt. Not just for ork, but for what is truly holy and sacred. The *olivana*.

Haunted Mine

Deep in one of your Mines is a doorway. It won't open for the miners, but it may open for you. Especially if you know the correct ritual. Especially if you bleed on the lock.

Kidnap & Ransom

A simple task. One of your relatives/allies/whatever has been kidnapped. Ransom demands have been delivered. It is now your turn to deliver the ransom.

Remember: ransom is a legal action. If you cannot protect yourself, you deserve what you get.

Now, delivering the ransom is something else entirely. Delivering 3 Spices, 2 Stone, and 2 Metals is no easy task. All kinds of dangers await you. Orks, bandits, rival nobles who don't want to see your cousin rescued.

There's also the option of stealing your cousin back, but that could involve bloodshed. Murder is still a crime, even though kidnapping is not, and kidnapping is no excuse for murder.

Good luck, Jim!

Even More Adventure Ideas

Just in case the above didn't give you any ideas for adventures or stories, here's a few more. Just nuggets this time. But don't worry. With a few wagers here and there, your players will turn these little morsels into four course meals in no time.

- A band of young heroes shows up in your domain, killing orks and capturing bandits. They are commoners with cunning and prowess. Do you hire them or let them move on to another domain?

- A peasant calling himself "the Arch Druid" comes to your court. He insists the magic of the land is in peril. He calls himself "druid," which is an old ven word meaning "voice of the land." But the land has no power. He's obviously a madman. Or is he?

- An assassination in your castle goes wrong and you catch the assassin. He claims to be sent by a beloved friend or relative. Do you trust him? Or perhaps he is only a ruse, a double blind.

- Or, perhaps, an assassin shows up on your door with the letter in hand, asking you how much you would pay for him to turn his coat.

- This Spring proved to be a good Spring. Perhaps too good. You have an abundance of children in your domain and the peasants are wondering if you're going to increase security. After all, *someone* has to look after these kids.

- Your sister (brother/cousin/wife/whatever) comes to you with a broken heart. Her secret lover—the one she kept secret even from you—has broken off the affair. She needs your help to declare Revenge on the savage lover. Problem is, the reason the lover left your sister is because you've started a new Romance with her old lover. And he never told you.

- You've been witness to an omen: a vision from a suaven. You do not revere this suaven, nor do you understand the omen. But you recognized a face in the vision. A hated enemy. What does the vision mean? Perhaps your enemy knows… Or perhaps the suaven is offering you the enemy's life in exchange for something…

- A drought has fallen on one or more of your villages. The people claim it is a curse. A curse from a local suaven. Or perhaps a spectre, poisoning the lands. Or, perhaps a more mundane enemy.

- A new ruin has been found near your lands. In unclaimed territory. You know other nobles will scramble to claim it as their own. Can you gather enough force to take the land and place it under your banner?

- An earthquake has shaken a neighbor who now asks for your help. How much help can you send? The neighbor is incredibly influential and powerful, but if he's asking for

help, it means his lands could be taken as your own… or by another if you do nothing.

- Something is hunting your people. A terrible ork that your Roadmen cannot capture. It disappears into the night, leaving no trail. No sign of passage. It seems intent on murdering your people. How long will you wait until you fulfill your obligation to protect those who serve you?

- Evidence of a cult has shown up in your court. Evidence implicating one of your most trusted vassals. Do you assist the vassal or expel him immediately? If this evidence got into the wrong hands, it could ruin you and your ancestral claims.

- Farmers report a boom in the crops this Season. Twice as many as they suspected. But if someone doesn't find a place to put all this grain, it will spoil by the end of the Season.

- A terrible fire breaks out in your castle. Was it an accident or something a bit more sinister and intentional?

- Something exploded. A black fire erupting from the mountain. What was that? It is on your lands. If you don't go out to look, someone else may… and reap the benefits.

- A faithful band of villagers has built a shrine to honor you. Unfortunately, someone has already defaced it. Who could do such a thing?

- A neighbor has declared a new holiday—in honor of himself, of course. You need his help. You need his friendship. Go bring him a gift and celebrate his self-made holiday… the pompous ass.

- Spices, Wine, Metals, Food… but what about a new Resource? What about Obsidian? Or Crystals? New Resources found in the Wasteland. And they must be yours. Set up an outpost with your Master of the Road and get ready to defend it against all the might your cousin ven can muster.

- A family member—brother, sister, mother, father—falls under the sway of a spectre. Black lips, yellow eyes, pale skin, black blood. There is no way to free them. No way at all. Unless that local ruin holds some kind of secret. Perhaps the spectre's secret name?

- A mysterious plague strikes your lands. The land itself bleeds. The corn bleeds, the soil bleeds. Sorcery. But who?

- A cryptic dream from the suaven leaves you with the distinct impression that all temples and shrines to another suaven must be removed. The suaven your father/brother/sister reveres.

- Pirates have been raiding nearby ports for years. But now they've come to you for help. A curse on their heads from a nearby enemy. They swear fealty to you, if only you'll release them from the curse.

Ork

Out there, in the hungry world, the orks wait. Waiting for the sorcerous blood and tender flesh of the ven.

This chapter details how you can make orks for your players to hunt—and orks to hunt your players—using traditional ven texts as a resource.

Terror

Facing an unspeakable horror isn't your everyday kind of cakewalk. Oh, no. These things brewed up by the sorcerer-kings can curdle your blood with a single glance. The trait we call "Terror" represents that truth.

All orks cause Terror. Just how much depends on each ork.

Determine Terror

You, the Narrator, determine how much Terror an ork creates. The Terror rank goes from zero (not at all frightening) to ten (altogether mortifying). Terror is a pretty arbitrary thing. A large ork may cause no Terror at all while a very small ork may cause an insurmountable amount of Terror. When you design your orks, determine just how mind-shattering that ork may be. Then, assign the Terror rank.

An average ork—the kind the ven usually run into on hunting expeditions—is Terror 3 to 5. Minor orks cause less Terror while greater orks cause more.

Do not underestimate the power of Terror. A truly horrifying creature can completely paralyze even the bravest ven. Take care how you assign your ranks.

The Effects of Terror

Whenever the ven encounter an ork, they must make a Terror risk. The ven roll Courage + any appropriate bonuses against the ork's Terror rank. The Narrator rolls a number of dice equal to the ork's Terror and the players roll their Courage.

Use the standard rules for Courage risks found in the *Virtues* chapter. For the duration of the ven's encounter with the ork, they must suffer the penalty or enjoy the rewards of their Courage risk.

Ork Rank

Each ork has an ork rank: an abstract and subjective number indicating how strong, formidable or dangerous the ork is. Tiny orks with soft teeth are rank 1 ork. Huge, fire-breathing, flying orks are rank 10 orks.

Ork rank is the same as a ven's Virtues. It provides a base number of dice for the ork to roll in just about any circumstance. So, instead of rolling Strength or Prowess or Cunning, the ork rolls Ork. A rank 3 ork rolls three dice. A rank 5 ork rolls five dice. A rank 7 ork rolls seven dice.

Ork Traits

Orks do not have Virtues or Devotions, but they do have Traits.

Traits are things distinguishing one ork from other orks. Claws or teeth or tentacles or invisibility or spraying ink.

When creating an ork, consider the following Traits. Some orks have wings, some have claws, others have fangs. Some have all three. A few orks even have seemingly supernatural abilities. They were created by the sorcerer-kings, after all.

Are ork Traits considered Free Aspects?

Yes, they are. Makes 'em a little scarier, doesn't it?

Traits and Aspects

Many of the Traits act as Aspects. They have invokes, tags and/or compels. This is for ease of use and not a standard for all Traits. Just because some Traits *act* like Aspects doesn't mean all Traits *are* Aspects. To tag or compel an ork's Traits, the player must spend a style point and must know the tag or compel.

The ven can use Wisdom and Cunning to determine an ork's tags and compels. Remember: Wisdom is foreknowledge. Cunning is perceiving tiny details that present themselves.

A Note on "Game Balance"

Game balance rests on the Narrator and the players using good judgment and common sense. Throwing seventeen Terror 10 orks against three ven with no Prowess or Strength is not only stupid, but irresponsible. Giving orks some kind of arbitrary value—oh, something like a "danger rating" or "challenge threshold" is just silly. An ork is as deadly as the Narrator makes him. If the ork is stupid, the ven have an advantage. If the ork is smart, the ven have a disadvantage.

Wait a second. *Smart orks?* Nonsense.

Weapons

Many orks have Weapons as Traits: you can tell by the (Weapon) listed after the Trait's name. A Weapon allows an ork an additional attack per beat. Most orks only get one attack, but for each Weapon it has—natural or otherwise—it gains an additional attack. See *Violence* for more information on attacks.

If an ork does not have Weapons, the ven may call the Tool Aspect from the Violence chapter, as usual.

Additional Arm

The ork can make one additional attack, dividing its attention between multiple opponents. An ork may have this Aspect multiple times, each giving it an additional attack. The ork may use its Additional Arm in both duels and Mass Murder.

A Thousand Eyes

Invoke: This ork gains three dice for Cunning risks.

Tag: Bright lights cause this ork's enemies to gain 2 bonus dice on any risk against the ork.

Blind spot

The ork has a blind spot, preventing it from fully seeing the tactical situation. A ven may tag this for two bonus dice for the purposes of dodging an attack or hiding from the ork. The ven can discover the blind spot through a Wisdom or Cunning risk. If they spend a moment or two to look at the ork, let them know about it.

Tag: 2 dice on all risks against the ork if the ven know the blind spot.

Compel: A ven may also compel the Aspect to make the ork move in specific ways. Attacking particular foes (because it cannot see the others), missing obvious advantages, etc.

Burning

The ork produces some kind of fluid that burns flesh and melts bone. If a hit is successful, the injury increases each time the burning ven takes a risk. For example, a rank 1 injury becomes a rank 2 injury the next time ven takes a risk.

When an ork dies, the burning ceases. This has something to do with the sorcery used to create the ork—the ven aren't exactly sure why this happens.

Burrowing

The creature burrows into the ground, removing itself from danger. This is considered a Strength risk. The creature may burrow and move to a different location as an action. Like most Aspects, using Burrowing for the first time is free, but using it multiple times requires a style point.

Camouflage

Invoke: 3 dice for hiding

This Aspect may only be invoked under the correct circumstances. If the ork's hide provides the correct camouflage, the ork gains three bonus dice for hiding.

Claws

Claws count as a weapon, giving the ork an additional attack risk per beat.

Invoke: 3 bonus dice for attack.

Compel: This Aspect can also be compelled. Because the creature has claws, it has difficulty picking up items.

Cowardly

This ork does not want to fight, but will if provoked.

Invoke: None

Tag: A ven may tag this Aspect to gain two bonus dice when fighting with an obvious advantage.

Compel: The ork is cowardly and will run the first chance it gets.

Fangs (Weapon)

Fangs count as a weapon, giving the ork an additional attack risk per beat.

Invoke: 3 bonus dice for attack.

Fat

This ork is a bloated mass of body fat.

Tag: 2 bonus dice for the ven tagging this Aspect. You may tag this Aspect when the ork's grotesque size proves disadvantageous. In other words, when you have to be faster than the ork.

Compel: You can compel this Aspect by preventing the ork from taking certain actions based on its size. Running, climbing, etc.

Fire

The ork breathes fire. Ten dice worth of fire. That is, when it uses this Trait, it uses its one risk to blow fire over the entire area. It rolls ten dice plus its ork rank against the ven's Strength plus any other dice they can find to protect themselves from fire.

The fire blast can affect one character or multiple characters. The ork has to spend a style point for each additional character it wants to affect.

Merciful game masters may want to reduce the number of dice this Aspect gets. If you qualify, get yourself a new pink t-shirt and paint "WIMP" on it.

Gas

Creates a haze of smoke/gas putting enemies to sleep. Roll the ork's rank plus ten dice, affecting a single target. Spend additional style points (one-per-one) to affect additional targets. The ven get to roll Strength plus any other dice they can find.

If the ork wins the risk, the ven fall asleep.

Glare

Using this Aspect gives the ork 10 dice against the ven's Courage (and any appropriate Aspects). Roll ork rank plus ten dice. Success for the ork gives the ven a new Aspect: "hypnotized." The Aspect may be tagged by anyone, but may only be compelled by the ork that hypnotized the ven in the first place. The ven cannot spend a style to ignore the compel, but must make a successful Courage risk against the original roll.

Tag: You are too hypnotized to notice details. Opponents gain two dice to hide from you.

Compel: The ork who hypnotized you may spend a style point to force any action.

Pride hides our weakness from ourselves and reveals it to our enemies.

Hooves

The ork has hooves instead of feet or claws, making it very fast, but also unable to traverse some kinds of terrain.

Invoke: 5 dice for movement-based risks.

Tag: 2 dice for slippery or rocky terrain.

Hibernation

This ork hibernates during certain Seasons. It does not have to be the Winter Season—orks are strange that way.

Tag: 2 dice when fighting ork during sleepy Season.

Insubstantial

Invoke: The ork can turn insubstantial, immune to mundane attacks. Only weapons made from orichalcum may harm the ork. The ork may not harm any ven while in this form.

Intuition

This ork has an almost supernatural kind of danger sense, making it nearly impossible to surprise.

Invoke: The ork has a supernatural danger sense. Gains 3 dice for surprise risks.

Ink

This ork squirts a blinding liquid—typically ink—at enemies, giving it a chance to escape… or fight a blinded foe.

Roll ten dice plus the ork's rank in a Cunning risk against the ven. If the ork wins, the ven is blinded for a number of beats equal to the ork's rank. A blinded ven cannot defend himself, therefore, he cannot roll any dice in any risks that require sight.

Invisibility

The ork can become invisible, making it difficult to see. To see this ork, a ven must make a Cunning risk against the ork's rank + 10 dice. Once the ork is invisible, it remains invisible. Ven who beat the ork at a Cunning risk see the ork and are not affected by this Aspect.

Iron Stomach

This ork can eat anything. Metals, stone, ven. Anything.

Lays Eggs

Invoke: The ork gets three dice when protecting its eggs.

Tag: When threatening the ork's eggs, the ven gains two bonus dice.

Compel: A ven can compel this Aspect, forcing the ork to protect its eggs rather than take any other action.

Muscle

This ork can use Grapples from the *Violence* chapter.

Nocturnal

Invoke: This ork can see at night, suffering no penalty for darkness related Aspects.

Tag: Because the ork's vision is so sensitive to light, others can tag this Aspect to gain 2 dice against it in the light of day.

Compel: A ven can use this Aspect to compel an ork to run away from bright light, flashes of light, or other severe light sources.

Quadruped

This ork has four or more legs, making it very fast. It gains three dice for outrunning other orks or ven. A quadrupedal ork with hooves gains dice from both Traits.

Quickness

Invoke: This ork is particularly quick, gaining three dice on any speed-related risks.

Compel: Sometimes this ork thinks *too* quickly, making him act hastily in stressful situations.

Regeneration

This ork can invoke this Aspect to heal a single Injury.

The ork rolls its ork rank plus three dice. A successful risk (TN 10, as usual) heals that Injury. Each wager the ork makes heals an additional Injury rank. For example, if the ork makes two wagers, it can heal up to three ranks of Injury.

Most orks cannot regenerate Injuries caused by fire and/or orichalcum. A few cannot regenerate from injuries made with silver or iron. It all depends on your breed of ork.

Rhino Hide

This ork's skin is so thick, weapons cannot pierce it easily.

Any Injuries inflicted on the ork lose one rank. An ork may have this Trait multiple times, each adding to the effect. For example, if an ork takes this Trait twice, any injuries inflicted on the ork lose two ranks.

Roar

The ork's roar is so great, it stuns opponents.

Make an ork rank + five dice vs. the ven's Courage plus any appropriate bonuses. If the ven is the victor, there is no effect. If the ork is the victor, the ven is stunned for one beat (cannot take any risk or action) plus an additional beat for every wager the ork made.

Small

The ork is particularly small, allowing it to duck into small holes, dodge larger creatures, and move in short, quick bursts.

Invoke: 3 dice for being small.

Tag: 2 dice for being small.

Smell

The ork has a heightened sense of smell, allowing him to find perfumed ven easily.

Invoke: 3 dice for smell-related risks.

Tag: 2 dice if a ven knows how to distract this advantage (crossing water, covering your scent, etc.)

Compel: Distracted by powerful smells.

Spines (Weapon)

Spines count as a weapon, giving the ork an additional attack risk per beat.

Invoke: 3 bonus dice for attack.

Swarm

This particular breed of ork doesn't travel alone, but travels in a swarm.

The swarm can affect multiple ven at a time. When using the Mass Murder rules, one wager spent by this ork inflicts a rank 1 Injury on all ven and orks on a single opposing side.

Tentacles

This ork may make two Prowess wagers in a row.

Tools

This ork knows how to use tools such as spears or shields.

Of course, no ven would ever believe such nonsense and would go far out of his way to ridicule any other ven who would be so gullible to believe it.

Tongue

This ork can speak the language of the sorcerer-kings. Granted, it is a crude and vulgar version of the language, but the ven can understand it, nonetheless.

Most ven have never heard an ork speak and will mock those who claim these beasts can even *think*, let alone form words.

Venom

This ork has one of the poisons listed in the *Poison* chapter. It can deliver it through a bite or even through a spear or other tool.

Wings

This ork can fly.

Add five dice to any attack against a ven while in flight. Also, attacking a flying ork is very difficult. The ork gains five dice for any kind of defensive risk.

Lack of reason gives our enemies opportunity.
Even when comitting the most foul acts,
submit the most sublime apology.

Fashuva: The Fell Ones

I told the players I would not speak of them.

I lied.

No ven reveres them. Their sleeping bodies hidden, sending dreams out to the vulnerable, to the weak. Or the desperate.

These are the Fell Ones. The forbidden suaven. Use them carefully, my friend. They are not "balanced" with the others. Their Blessings are twisted and evil. If your ven seek them out, they will find nothing but darkness and hate.

Power. Darkness and hate.

Use them carefully.

Ikhalu: The Lord of Revenge

When the ven first found their freedom, two brothers sought to lead them to their destiny: Uhmume and Ikhalu. Both spoke to the gathered, both made their appeal for leadership. When all the words were spoken, the ven choose Uhmume. The brothers' rivalry is now one of the greatest stories in ven legend. After years of bloodshed, Ikhalu and his followers were cast out. But that was not the last the ven ever saw of them.

The ven who revere Ikhalu do so in the shadows. The Senate declared worship of Ikhalu illegal centuries ago: one of the few laws that remains without loopholes. Death is the only penalty for any found with an Ikhalu shrine or one of his forbidden knives (see below).

At the same time, the Senate recognizes that if Ikhalu has blessed a request for Revenge, no ven may stand in her way. No ven, no ork, no law. Nothing.

Ikhalu has devotees but his cult is kept secret. Those who join his secret cult are called *ikhalya* which best translates as "children of Ikhalu." Ikhalu's children believe the blood of the ven carries sorcery. They also believe they can steal that sorcery through the use of proper rituals. The Ikhalya use these rituals to "steal the sorcery" of other ven for a dark purpose: to raise the Lord of Murder from his Solace.

The *ikhalya* are masters of disguise and the shadowy Blessings their suaven bestows upon them. Also, every Ikhalu priest carries a magical dagger; a dagger that can steal the sorcery from a ven and return it to Ikhalu.

BLESSINGS

Ikhalu assists his followers with powers devious and diabolical. Every ikhalya is given an unholy dagger that steals sorcery and sends it to Ikhalu. His shadow-magic helps hide his assassin-priests, giving them the ability to hide in plain sight and disappear into shadows. Ikhalu also visits his followers in omens and dreams.

Unlike other suaven, the worship of Ikhalu is strict and regimented. The followers perform initiations to move from rank to rank, until finally, they become fully trusted priests in devotion to their dark lord.

At each rank of Devotion, the worshiper gains one Blessing, listed below.

Devotion 1: The Deepest Cut

Spend a style point when you give another ven an Injury. By invoking this Blessing, the ikhalya gives his opponent a grievous Injury. This Injury does not heal normally, nor can any sorcery restore the Injury. It heals one rank per Year.

Devotion 2: The Stolen Mask

By invoking this Blessing upon a body he's murdered, the devotee may steal the face of his victim. He cuts the face from the body and puts it on his own. By stealing the face, he steals the demeanor of the victim as well. The ikhalya's clothes appear to be his victim's clothes, his voice sounds the same, even his possessions are identical. The deception is true until the ikhalya removes the mask or until dawn. The face then shrivels and cannot be used again.

*Devotion 3: The **Taba***

An Ikhalu knife is a sacred item given to the most trusted Ikhalya.

Only those who have proven their devotion are bestowed this Blessing. If the priest hides it on his person, it cannot be found. No ven or ork can find the knife if the ikhalya hides it.

Devotion 4: Ikhalu's Wounds

It is said that Ikhalu taught his followers how to murder an opponent within a single heartbeat. Irrevocable death. The strike is actually three strikes, performed from behind. The first puts the knife through the heart. The second across the back of the neck, severing the spine. The final wound occurs as the ikhalya pulls the victim's head back and drives the knife under the chin, up through the victim's brain.

Spend a style point when you've caught an opponent by surprise. Then, make a Prowess risk. You may spend six wagers to immediately murder your surprised opponent. Two wagers for each strike. When completed, your victim dies. This is the exception to the death rules listed in the *Violence* chapter, although your victim still deserves a Final Monologue.

An ikhalya may not perform this Blessing and the next (Avali) as the same action. This Blessing is expedient. Avali is sacred.

Devotion 5: Avali

The ikhalya believe in something most ven have never heard of. A soul.

Whenever an Ikhalya commits "holy murder" with his knife, he believes he steals his victim's soul. The knife immediately gains a bonus die. The knife may have a number of bonus dice equal to the Devotion of the Ikhalya.

To commit avali, the assassin-priest must spend a style point and make a successful Prowess risk. He needs five wagers to perform the ritual successfully. He must also strike his enemy without the enemy knowing he's present. The priest uses his blow to pierce his victim's heart. Then, the priest utters a small prayer to Ikhalu, telling his dark Lord that a soul is on its way.

Again: the avali ritual may only be committed if the target has no clue the priest has intention to kill the target. The priest could be in disguise or hidden. Then, once the priest is in place, he comits his sacred murder.

Jaymen Steele: The Mad Emperor

It is said that Jaymen Steele's body was burned in an Elk forge and the ashes scattered to the sea. This is what *should* have happened to the Emperor… but what if his body was smuggled out by his faithful followers just before it was put to the flames? What if the Mad Emperor lived on? And what if he fell into Solace?

No ven was more ambitious than Jaymen Steele, and while he was quite mad when he finally gained the throne, his ability to counter his enemies at every turn leads me to believe that he *must* have had an escape plan. After all, no man so ambitious and cunning would ever begin a plot of conquest without first coming up with an escape plan.

And so here is a possibility. The Mad Emperor was not utterly destroyed in the flames of an Elk forge, but instead, escaped his fate and lived the rest of his days plotting Revenge. He eventually fell into Solace and now is one of the most dangerous Suaven in Shanri. But what Blessings would he give his devoted followers?

The Blessing of Ambition.

Ambition

Ambition and morality never sleep in the same bed.

As a devotee of Jaymen Steele, you may have Elk Blessings as usual. However, your *first* Blessing is Ambition. For every rank of Devotion you have for Jaymen Steele, you gain a bonus die you may use for *any single risk* during the game session. Rank 2 Devotion gives you two bonus dice. Rank 3 Devotion gives you three bonus dice.

You must spend your bonus dice on a single roll. In other words, if you have rank 3 Devotion, you get three dice to spend on one roll per game session. A rank 5 Devotion gives you five dice to spend on a single roll.

You can only spend your dice on a risk that *directly leads* to expanding your own personal power. You can use it for *any risk*, just as long as that risk *directly leads* to your goal of gathering power.

But Jaymen Steele never gives anything for free. Oh, no. If you call upon this Blessing, the Narrator will immediately demand another action from you. It may be that you give a favor to a stranger. It may be that you betray a friend. It may be that you surrender one of your Regions to an enemy.

Whatever Jaymen Steele demands, you must give. You won't understand why; his motivations are mysterious and unknowable. He sees the plan within the plan within the plan. Deeper than you ever will.

If you *ever* fail to perform as Jaymen Steele demands, you lost *two* ranks of Devotion. If your Devotion ever falls to less than one, the Suaven has abandoned you and you may never serve him again.

Mahl: The Bloody Eyed Widow

She walks the streets when there is no moon, snatching up children who have no home, drinking their blood, holding them close to her bosom as she looks for more. Blood seeps from her eyes as she weeps and those who hear her wails are doomed to know her deadly kiss.

Children who fall under her care are transformed into awful beasts. Mahl's Children are the monsters of the world: orks and spectres. She is the Mother of All Monsters, claiming those society casts away as her own.

Monsters

Mahl's worshipers revere their dark mother at hidden altars, capturing wayward children to drink "mother's milk." A priestess is chosen, and after an exhausting ritual (involving

painful ordeals), Mahl possesses the priestess. She then bestows her milk on the children (a combination of blood and breast milk). Slowly, the children are transformed into the horrors associated with Mahl.

The followers of Mahl don't have Blessings: they have orks. Mahl sends creatures to her devoted; horrible creatures from the worst parts of Shanri.

The orks sent to a follower of Mahl have a number of Ork Traits equal to her Devotion. A follower with 3 Devotion can summon orks with three Traits. She can summon a number of orks per day equal to her Devotion; each ork costs one Style point.

See *Orks* above for more information.

Afhil: The Grinning Man

Afhil is a tall, spectral figure dressed in immaculate black robes. His fingers are slender and groomed, his hair is black and wet against his skull, and his aggressive brow hides his eyes. And his grin… any who look upon it risk madness. Under his black robes are barbed whips, butcher's knives and other instruments of pain. Afhil's followers understand their dark lord's wisdom: pain is the path to strength, the truth only the devoted can follow.

Afhil's followers hide deep scars under their clothes for such scarification is a tell tale sign of Afhil worship. What makes the Grinning One's worshipers dangerous isn't that they seek wisdom in their own pain, but that they seek wisdom in the pain of others as well. Torture is a sacred ritual in the hidden shrines to the Father of Pain.

Blessings

The followers of Afhil seem completely impervious to most injuries. This is due to their aggressive torture/training and Afhil's blessings. Afhil is also capable of striking down enemies of his followers with incredible wracking pains.

The Darkest Fear

Followers of Afhil are distorted creatures so awful to look upon, only the bravest may do so. When he activates this Blessing, the Follower of Afhil spends a Style point. Any ven looking upon him when he activates this Blessing loses a number of dice from their next risk equal to the follower's Devotion to Afhil.

This is the only exception to the rule that a ven never loses dice. The Father of Pain gives his followers that exception.

If a ven cannot muster any dice, he cannot take any action.

The Malice Hammer

A devastating curse put upon those who are Afhil's enemies, the Malice Hammer makes the target revisit his most tortuous moment. The priest calls upon the power of this Blessing, spends a style point and looks upon the target. In that moment, he knows the one thing that pains the target most. Whether this is a lost love, an estranged parent, a villainous act committed long ago; the priest knows it.

The target gains a free Aspect: "I Know Your Pain."

The Aspect may be tagged and compelled by any member of the Afhil cult. The tag gives the cultist a number of bonus dice equal to his own Devotion. The compel makes the target pause, losing an opportunity to take a risk.

The Sweetest Sting

This Blessing does not need to be invoked; it is always active.

Followers of the Grinning Man suffer for his wisdom. They swallow glass, carve their bodies, distort their features, and make themselves cruel mockeries of happiness. This makes pain an empowering experience, not a debilitating one.

The followers of Ahvril may tag their own Injuries for bonus dice. They must spend Style points to do so. Also, they do not gain Style points for others tagging their Injuries. These tags are Free Aspects and do not count toward the total number of Aspects that may be tagged per risk.

The Mask of Ahvril

This Blessing requires the making of a particular item. The item must be made from black iron (requiring one Metals Resource). The item is like any other and requires at least one Season action to make. The end result is a black iron mask. A perverse thing that clamps to the face of the victim. Barbs and screws twist into the flesh, as if seeking the victim's blood. In fact, blood empowers the mask.

Once applied, the victim is completely paralyzed. Also, when he attempts to lie, the mask twists deeper into his flesh, causing indescribable pain.

In order to lie while wearing the mask, the victim must spend a number of Style points equal to the rank of the mask. The mask is created using the same rules as other Craft. Thus, if we have a rank 2 mask and the wearer wishes to tell a lie whilst wearing it, he must spend two Style points to do so. If the victim cannot spend style points, or even enough Style points, to resist the mask, he must tell the truth.

Da'fhil: Afhil's Children

Woe to those who are captured by the followers of Afhil, for they are taught the ultimate lesson in pain. The body is bound and this elaborate ritual cast upon it. The secret name of Afhil is written in spiral patters along the skin. Written with razors. The body wrapped in sacred garments, then slowly smothered to death.

Smothered to death over the course of years.

Finally, when the body dies, the soul remains within the rune-carved skin.

The creature is called *∂a'fhil*: a Child of Pain. The wretched creature suffers eternal agony so blinding, all it can do is strike out at others. A da'fhil has no Virtues, no Aspects. Only Pain. It's Pain is equal to the Devotion of the cultist who created it plus the number of Years spent on the ritual. Instead of rolling Virtues or Aspects for contested risks, use the da'fhil's Pain.

A da'fhil may not make Wisdom or Cunning risks. Its Pain has blinded such things. It has no fear, so it also succeeds in all Courage risks. A da'fhil will slay whatever stands in its way, regardless of who it may be… even its own creator. Speaking to it accomplishes nothing. Pleading and begging? Nothing. No dialogue. No bargains.

There are only two ways to kill a da'fhil. It must be dismembered or burned. Each rank 5 Injury inflicted on it removes one limb. An arm or a leg or the head. Even when the head is removed, the body still functions, seeking to share its Pain. Only when the da'fhil is completely incapacitated can it be dismembered completely.

For burning a da'fhil, use the fire rules found in the *Violence* chapter.

Spectres

So many ambiguities in Shanri. The sorcerer-kings, the suaven. Spectres.

(I use the British spelling because some of the original texts used it, I like how it looks, and it's the name of one of my favorite Blue Öyster Cult albums.)

Where do they come from? What do they want? Lots of speculation, but not a lot of answers. In this section, I'll detail everything I know about specters. First, some theories on where they come from. Then, rules for using spectres in your game.

Theories

Ven literature is conspicuously vague about spectres. Where they come from, what makes them tick. I have a few theories—pulled from scholarship and from my own observations—so I'll share all of them here. Use the one (or ones) you like and ditch the rest.

Bringing the Scary

They want to touch you.

A little girl who wants to be held.

A lonely woman who wants someone to dance with her.

A tall, thin man lost in the corridors. So cold.

They want to touch you.

Spectres want things. All of them seem to want *something*. Most of them want to touch. Touch a ven's warm hand. The back of the neck. The small of the back.

Come closer. *Closer.*

Where there's nowhere to run, they find you. In small, dark rooms hidden behind walls. In large closets. In the attic. In the cellar.

They want to touch you.

Come closer. *Closer.*

Let me kiss you.

When men have nothing else, they still have their Courage.

Ghosts

Most scholars agree with the hypothesis that spectres are the ghosts of the ven. Having failed to reach Solace, their spite and anger keeps their spirits alive, even after death. This conflicts with the concept that the ven have no souls, but then again, many facts conflict with that belief.

Spectres certainly *look* like the ven. Male, female, children. No animals.

This version of spectres certainly does open certain possibilities. After all, if the ven have souls, the Ikhalu cultists are right. They are stealing their victim's spirits. But if that's true, who are they sending those souls to?

Echoes

Some scholars believe spectres are the echoes of the sorcerer-kings. Remainders of their rage, lust, and fear. So powerful were these creatures, so dominant, so transcendent, that their moments of pure emotion remain. Fragments of passion. Echoes of memory.

Intangible Orks

Another hypothesis about spectres suggests they were created by the sorcerer-kings just as the rest of the strange life forms surrounding the ven. They are orks. Intangible, but orks nonetheless. Creatures born from the intent of evil.

Shanri's Will

One of the strangest explanations for spectres comes from an obscure text on the subject, all but rejected by most ven scholars. Professor Joseph Cottonworthy suggested spectres were the living will of Shanri. The intangible mind of the land given slightly less intangible form. As I said, most scholars reject the idea, but for our purposes, it provides intriguing possibilities. The land acting against the ven, personifying itself with images the ven understand, but without the correct language to communicate.

I have to admit, this is my favorite answer to the question, but if another pleases you more, go for it.

The Rules

Writing rules for something that doesn't seem to follow any rules is rather silly. Like writing rules for ghosts.

Why can ghosts walk through walls but seem to be compelled to walk on the floor? And why do they wear clothes? Wouldn't a ghost be naked? *Pah-shah.*

Anyway, the rules for spectres are less for fighting and more for creating a specific kind of effect on your players. After all, encountering a spectre should be a terrifying experience. So, let's get started.

Intangible

First, spectres seem intangible. At least, the ven seem helpless to stop the things. I've never read of a spectre moving through walls or doors, but whenever the ven try to stab, slice or otherwise wound a spectre, nothing works.

Possession

Second, a spectre can possess a ven, turning his lips black, his eyes yellow, his skin as white as a corpse. When possessed by a spectre, add ten to any dice the ven rolls for risks. Just go ahead and add ten. To all rolls.

Spectres may only possess the ven with the subject's permission. There are many tales of defeated ven accepting the spectre's offer, and they all end in bloody tragedy.

Any Injury the ven acquires while possessed by the spectre heal at a rate of one rank per beat. That's one rank per beat.

Once the spectre has its hold on the body, it won't let go. Not for all of Shanri. The only way to rid the ven of the spectre is to kill the ven, which frees the spectre from the body but does not destroy it.

Orichalcum

Third, orichalcum items seem to repel spectres. The things recoil in horror, screaming, leaving behind a trail of blood. Seeing a spectre scream also seems to be a bad idea. The typical result is grey eyes, white hair, pale skin. Even hearing a spectre's scream can leave a ven deaf for Seasons. Even Years.

A few tales say the creatures can be harmed by weapons made of orichalcum, but others disagree with this assertion. I leave the truth up to you, but I suggest the spectre use the same "add ten dice" rule from above. In other words, a spectre always rolls at least ten dice. Also, only a rank 10 Injury inflicted by an orichalcum weapon can dispatch the spectre. That's what I would recommend.

One More Thing

I gave the players a last bit of advice. It should be no surprise that yours is the same.

I trust you.

I trust you to change this game to better suit your players. I'm not saying you can ignore the rules, but I am telling you to make this game yours. Stamp it with your own style.

Shanri isn't mine. It's ours.

Because I trust you.

Play Dirty

Okay. Now we're cooking with gas.

I promised you a few miscellaneous notes from my experiences running the game. Here they are. In no particular order, in no particular style. Just some friendly advice from me to you, the Narrator.

Go kick their teeth in.

Little Rituals

As you move through the world of Shanri, you'll find most of the sorcerer-kings' secrets require some kind of ritual. A ritual to open a locked door. Bleeding into an empty fountain. Putting your hand into a gargoyle's mouth, full of razor sharp teeth.

Ven blood accomplishes many mysterious things in Shanri, but don't let it become a gimmie. "We don't know what to do. Bleed on it." That's bad form.

And remember: the Injuries caused by sorcery are still Injuries. Tag, tag, tag.

What's It Worth?

Many times, players have disputes about how things go. Sometimes, these disputes are character-driven and fun, but then there are the times when these disputes turn disruptive.

If your players have a player vs. player dispute, the best way to resolve it is by asking, "What's It Worth?"

Ask each player to give up style points. Don't make it a secret, do it right out in the open. "I'm willing to give up seven style to get my way." The player who gives up the most style is right and the other person is wrong.

Turning Failure into Success

Another trick. Just because you succeed in a risk doesn't mean the character has to succeed. Sometimes, failure is better than success. Here's an example.

One of the characters in my game has a daughter. She's engaged to marry a neighbor. Unfortunately, she gets pregnant by someone else's son. That's all right. Mom comes up with a solution. She starts wearing a fake belly to parties, planting the idea that *mom* is pregnant. Mom agrees to rear the child as her own while the daughter gets married after the pregnancy is over.

So, she goes to a party with the fake tummy. Everyone congratulates her. Smiles and embraces. She heads off to bed early—pregnant women shouldn't be up too late, after all—and when she enters the dark room, an assassin attacks.

Our young faux mother is no slouch, but she's not carrying a sword or a knife. We roll for the risk… and the NPC wins. The player expects the worst. After all, I have four wagers ready to aggravate that Injury right up to rank 5. But I don't do that. Instead… the knife plunges into her belly.

Her fake belly.

The blade never reaches her flesh. The assassin's eyes glare with understanding. She can see the hint of a smile spreading under his mask.

"Blackmail," he whispers.

Then, he runs to the window, leaping off into the night.

Turning failure into success.

The Vach Question, Part 1

I have a friend named Vach. He's a great roleplayer. I mean a great roleplayer. But Vach has this… thing.

Vach always asks if he can play something that isn't in the game.

If we're playing *Ravenloft*, he wants to play a kenku samurai. If we're playing *L5R*, he wants to play a gaijin. You get the idea.

Now, I know Vach is not alone. I know there are tons of players with the same disease. So, we might as well address them right here.

The ven never mention other cultures, but we do know they co-existed with the early Atlanteans, Lemurians and Hyperborians. These cultures were in their infancy, still little more than orks, but they do exist.

Like I said, these alien cultures never appear in any ven literature. Given the auspiciousness of such a meeting, we'd expect even a casual mention of Atlantean magicians, Lemurian mystics or even Hyperborian warlords. But, unfortunately, there is nothing.

So, with that in mind, here's the answer to The Vach Question.

Yes, Vach, you can play an Atlantean. I know the game is about the ven, but yes, you can play something that isn't that.

Character creation is pretty easy. You have no Virtues. You have one Aspect: "Ork." You have webbed feet and hands. And, you can make two sounds: high pitched noises and low pitched noises.

Have fun. I know you will.

Shadow Servants & Other Mysteries

As with other kinds of literature, ven pillow books are filled with little ambiguities. Little things that never show up again or get only the slightest mention. Lord Donley's "shadow servant" is a great example.

Lord Donley has a servant he calls "Hush." It's a shadow. Not a spectre, but a shadow. An inky thing that abhors the light (one Serpent almost kills it with a lantern). It slips under doors, listens to conversations, causes all kinds of trouble. But how did he get it? Where did it come from? The books never tell us.

Literature doesn't need the same rule a roleplaying game has. No need for "game balance." Weird things happen. Stuff you never see again. Would have never counted on. Now, as gamers, we naturally want to make sense of it, to make it "fit the rules." How do you Injure it? Does it have Courage? Aspects? Can I give it Style Points? (That last question, I'd answer "Hell yes.")

Well, some things just don't fit the rules. Some things in ven literature are just *weird*. Count Kether's scars. Niassa's maid, Alyss. Shara has her own mysteries which are never fully explained. Nor should they be.

For some things, applying rules just ruins them.

So, instead of rules, I suggest a different way to handle weird little things. Style Points.

If a player comes up with something downright awesome, let him have it. Awesome adds to the game and encourages other players to come up with cool things, too. But make them pay for it. Pay for it with Style. Ten Style Points.

Also, get that guy who keeps coming up with cool stuff for his character to come up with cool stuff for *other* players' characters, too. And reward him for it. You know this guy. He always thinks up just the wackiest stuff. And the other players look at his character and wish they could come up with something just as cool. Don't let him keep all his cool for himself. Suggest he come up with rockin' stuff for others.

And make sure everybody gets at least one thing that nobody else has. Even if it's a mondo-wicked maid or a super-suave valet. Just having *one thing* that nobody else has makes a player feel great about his character. Do it. Give them the cool. They'll love you for it.

Players, Wagers & Style Points

In many ways, running *Houses of the Blooded* is no different than running any other game. More specifically, your players will always come out of left field with some wild scheme and lay waste to your best laid plans. The difference in *Houses* is: we give them *mechanics* to do it. They use wagers and Style Points to screw things up. They'll take your best laid plans and throw them out the window… just like they do in other roleplaying games.

But you have an advantage here. *You have no plans*. You have a kind of outline and perhaps some motives, but as soon as players figure out they can assign motives and histories on their own, they'll start building the story themselves. So, what do they need a Narrator for?

They need you to throw surprises in the mix. They have to make wagers and spend Style to add details. You don't. You can make things up on your own… just as long as you don't contradict what your players have already established.

But this kind of power in the hands of the players is a good thing. It means they can tell you—right up front—exactly what they want.

When a player turns an NPC into a cousin or a former lover, it means "I want to have a relationship with that NPC." They don't have to ask you, they just do it. Same thing happens when a player spends a Style to say, "We've been enemies for a long time." The player doesn't need to spend points on an "Enemy" to add it to his character sheet, he can play the game for a few sessions, find an enemy he really hates (or loves to hate), throw down a Style Point, and *BANG!* he's got a new enemy.

Power in the players hands gives them the ability to tell you what kind of stories they want, what kind of allies they want, what kind of enemies they want. You don't have to be clever about it. You can give them *exactly* what they want *because they told what they want*.

That's the advantage of the *Houses* system: it allows the players to create characters, plots and mysteries all on their own. You aren't a "dungeon master" or a "game master." You're a Narrator: guiding the story along, working *with* the players—not against them—to make a story you all want to hear.

Who is the Protagonist?

This comes to me, writing about NPCs…

I recently came across an observation about the roles of protagonist and antagonist in a story. The concept that the protagonist of a story is the one who changes and the antagonist is the instrument of that change. For example, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we know that Huck is the protagonist, but it could be argued that Jim is the *antagonist*. Jim challenges Huck's assumptions in the world, instigating a vital change in his character.

Likewise, in the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, one can argue that Red (the character played by Morgan Freeman) is the protagonist—he is the narrator of the story and the viewpoint character—while Andy Dufresne (the character played by Tim Robbins) is the *antagonist*. Andy is the instigator in the transformation in Red's character. Red begins the story without hope. A broken man. By the end, his transformation could not have occurred without Andy.

Likewise, in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago serves as the antagonist—this time a deadly one—but his hatred for the Moor is not what defines him as such. Instead, it is the fact that he does not change but inspires change in Othello himself that defines Iago as the antagonist.

Like most observations about literature, I do not mean to say this is an absolute truth in every story—it most certainly is not—but it helped me refine the roles of my own antagonists in stories. I hope it helps you do the same.

Always Ask for Wagers

Whenever a player makes a risk, make a habit of asking, "Do you want to make any wagers?" Players forget these things and until they've got the habit on their own, keep feeding it to them.

"Do you want to make any wagers?"

"Do you want to make any wagers?"

"Do you want to make any wagers?"

If you forget, how do you expect them to remember?

Wisdom Risks

Whenever a player asks you a question about the world, your answer should be, "I don't know. Make a Wisdom risk."

The Vach Question, Part 2

It's easy to categorize players as "munchkins," "actors," or "rules lawyers," but that misses the point. There's a *reason* gamers act the way they do. I find, most of the time, that reason is as simple as "I want my shtick to work." Let me show you what I mean.

Elsewhere in this chapter, I mentioned my buddy Vach. In every game, he always wants to play something completely outside of genre. What I didn't mention was that Vach is also one of the world's best munchkins. He can tweak any system beyond its limits, almost breaking it. He completely exploits rules. Completely. So, one day, I sat down with him and asked him why. What I found out during the conversation made sense.

Vach wants his character to be distinct. He doesn't want to be "just another Bear" or "just another Wolf." He wants his character to stand out, to have his own voice, to be something unique. As for the munchkin stuff, Vach also wants his character to *work*. What I mean is, if his character is supposed to be stealthy, he wants to sneak across a crowded room without anyone knowing he's there. Even if he rolls like crap, he still wants his

stealth to work at least a little bit. After all, if he's the greatest thief in all Shanri, shouldn't he be able to get some level of success from even an abysmal failure?

I agree with Vach on both points. Players *should* feel their characters are unique. After all, we're talking about protagonists from ven opera and pillowbooks. They should have a distinct voice and flavor all their own. At the same time, I also agree with him on the other point. If he's the greatest thief in all Shanri, he should get *some* level of success, even if he fails.

This conversation with Vach inspired much of the system you see in this book. You've almost always got at least one wager to play with.

Official Canon

I know what happened to the sorcerer-kings. I know where they went and I know when they're coming back.

Houses has no canon. No official canon I expect you to follow. Make up your own answers to these mysteries and secrets. They trump my own answers.

So, here's my solution for Vach.

Dude, I know you want to play a distinct character, so I recommend you play a servant who's been secretly Blooded by his liege. That'll probably be a player from the group, or if you like, I'll play him as an NPC. As a servant, you'll stand out. You won't be like the other characters and you'll have opportunities the other characters don't have. And, like we talked about, you'll also have unique challenges. I also recommend you get yourself a really high Cunning and Wisdom. Possibly Strength as well. You could also go for the no Wisdom option. After all, you are a peasant, but you can make up for your lack of Wisdom with Aspects like "I Never Forget a Face" or "Quick Learner."

You can also play a Mountain Man: one of the ven who has gone native, joined the orks, and embraced their culture. (Orks have culture? Damn your tongue for such blasphemy!) Again, you'll have unique circumstances on your side, making your character distinct, and at the same time, you'll have access to benefits the others do not.

Finally, remember that your unique circumstance also puts you at a serious disadvantage. Whatever kind of outsider you choose to play will put you on what Sun Tzu called "serious ground." You'll always be at a disadvantage, always be treated as an inferior, always get spit on—even if it's behind your back. I know you like this kind of challenge, but I wanted you to know it is there.

I won't use it to piss you off, but I will use it to make stories.

I won't use this as an excuse to be a jerk, but the ven will.

What a player does and why a player does it are two different things. Go beyond the cliché. Find the motivation.

Just a few questions turned Vach from a "munchkin" to a "storyteller." It all rests in the motivation.

(Sorry, Shel.)

LAST WORDS

An aphorism I learned while writing *Legend of the Five Rings*: "Japanese fix the problem; Americans fix the blame."

No roleplaying game will be fun for everyone. No game is perfect. No "generic" system will make everyone happy. It's an impossible task. That's why we have 31 flavors of ice cream, that's why your TV has fifty thousand channels, and that's why everyone has a different favorite roleplaying game.

If you aren't having fun with a mechanic in the game, change it. If you aren't having fun, it isn't my fault, it isn't your fault. It's nobody's "fault." You and I just like different flavors of ice cream.

Change the mechanic to something you like more. Don't worry; I don't care. And nobody is going to stop you from having fun with my game. Least of all, me.

Enjoy! (And make mine chocolate chip mint.)

My love, goodbye
At the end, there are always two
The one who leaves and the one who is left
And you abandoned me
Long before I abandoned you



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Elk CUNNING



Falcon COURAGE



Fox BEAUTY



Serpent WISDOM



Wolf PROWESS



High Concept

House

Family

Public Name

Secret Name

Age

Titles

Devotions

Suaven **Rank ( )**

Blessings

Suaven **Rank ( )**

Blessings

Suaven **Rank ( )**

Blessings

Suaven **Rank ( )**

Blessing

Suaven **Rank ( )**

Blessings

Phase

Spring Aspect

Invoke Refreshed ( )

Tag

Compel

Summer Aspect

Invoke Refreshed ( )

Tag

Compel

Autumn Aspect

Invoke Refreshed ( )

Tag

Compel

Solace Aspect

Tag

Compel

Spring Aspect

Invoke Refreshed ( )

Tag

Compel

Summer Aspect

Invoke Refreshed ( )

Tag

Compel

Winter Aspect

Invoke Refreshed ( )

Tag

Compel

Solace Aspect

Tag

Compel

Contacts

Spring Summer Autumn Winter

Style Points

Item Banked/Max

Maneuvers

Name

Effect

Name

Effect

Name

Effect

Name

Effect

Name

Effect

Name

Effect

Name

Effect

Name

Effect

Contacts & Friends

Extras

Province: _____

Region	Rank	Produces	Holdings	Loyalty	Security
Castle					
Village					

Vassals	Rank	Costs	Paid

Resources Stockpile

Year: _____

Spring

Planning

Trouble

Action

Harvest

Autumn

Planning

Trouble

Action

Harvest

Summer

Planning

Trouble

Action

Harvest

Winter

Planning

Trouble

Action

Harvest