



SUNLIGHT IN SHADOW

I spat to clear my mouth — even the air was rotten here in the shadowlands. The dirt was spongy under my feet and the grass lay limp and dead on the ground. The shadowtown sat in a depression in the earth as if something were dragging it under. There was no life around us, just screams in the distance. As long as they kept on, as long as the tribe kept the shadowtowners busy, we were safe.

I had demanded a small party, not the best warriors, but the steadiest. Everyone else was attacking on the far side of the shadowtown. An old trick, but the shadowtowners couldn't ignore it. Few people bothered shadowtowns. Attacking a shadowland only made it stronger — death fed it and made it grow. Even with every shadowtowner dead, the shadowland remained like poison in water. So there was no point in attack, before now.

Now, Samea was beside me, weaponless but not helpless. If I couldn't bring her to the center of the shadowland, everything we were doing would be pointless. And I'd be very dead. Shivering, I wondered if I'd come back as a ghost if I died here.

The shadowlands around this town were large, but Samea swore she could destroy it from inside. I'd seen her drive back the Wyld, grass and sky unrolling under the touch of her aura, but she couldn't eat away the shadowlands like that. We had to reach the center.

This shadowtown was old, but the rock and sod huts still looked half-finished — or halfcollapsing. Aping the cities of the South, the crooked streets were crudely paved. No dogs fought for scraps behind the houses, and even the birds bent their flight away from the air above the settlement. No animal would come willingly into a shadowtown, so we'd been forced to leave our mounts behind. I'd spent my life riding, and found walking maddeningly slow.

Suddenly, everything began to happen too quickly. Five paces ahead, Jari sank into the ground, buried up to his hips and screaming.

"Jari!" Hunged for his flailing arms and grabbed him, only to be jerked off my feet as he was pulled deeper. Everyone was screaming now — even Jari, muffled, from under the earth. Only his arms remained above the surface. Jari's brother Chem scraped frantically at the dirt. I pulled, shouting Jari's name, and his arms came free. His arms, raggedly torn above the elbow. Nothing else. The ground rocked, surging under us like water.

Heapt to my feet, dragging Chem up by his hair. "Run!" I bellowed. Jari's screams were faint now. Hopefully he'd die soon. We were caught in open ground and the border of the shadowland was too far away. "To the town! Run!"

Samea was ahead of me, her long hair snapping and her felt skirts hiked above her knees. Her anima had kindled, bright gold and blinding. Tadik was just behind her — for an old man, he had a good turn of speed. Chem jerked in my grip and screamed. I hauled him back up and we ran.

My heart was drumming louder than the shrieks behind me and I didn't look back. The ground pitched under us, then yawned wide. There was no time to think. I jumped, but not quite far enough, and sank knee deep in loose soil. Still towing Chem, I floundered forward. Something stabbed my knee, trying to pull me down, but I twisted free and struggled on. Tripping on the edge of a stone street, I thrust Chem ahead of me into Samea's waiting arms. I fumbled out my bow with shaking hands and swung around. There was nothing to shoot at, just the three of us where there had been eight.

The ground boiled at the edge of the town. The rough cobblestone pavement buckled, and a huge creature like a giant maggot rose above us in an explosion of rocks and dirt. It stood taller than a bull mammoth. A tiny eyeless head sat balanced atop its fat, flabby body. Its torn flesh wept clear fluid as it fought free of the ground. Smaller worms, no longer than my arm, struggled out of the broken earth and began to slither towards us. Chem kept screaming, but I had no time for that.

My anima sparked and a golden haze fell across my eyes. My hands steadied and my bow felt light in my hands. We backed away from the open edge of the town, but Chem was slowing us down. The cobblestones around us began to buckle as more creatures crawled up from beneath. The whole shadowtown was infested. A maggot threw itself at me and bit my boot, crushing the wooden sole. I kicked it away and my blood splashed across the stones. I stamped on another and it burst. The stones became slick with ichor and I took a dozen minor wounds as I fought my way to the surviving Blackwater warriors. Chem was down again. Tadik stood over him, fighting back the maggots drawn by Chem's blood.

Then my pale anima was lost in golden light as Samea called up her magic. Crimson lightning leapt from worm to worm. Crackling like fat in a fire, they exploded. Guts and stringy,

half-cooked flesh sprayed across the stones. The spell washed over me as well; a protective fire sprang up around me, dancing over my sleeves without burning. We retreated back into the town, fighting the small worms that boiled up from between the loosened cobblestones as the giant maggot crawled swiftly after us.

The maggot lunged forward, its flabby body moving much faster than I expected. Tadik threw himself aside, dragging Chem, leaving a blood trail for the smaller maggots to follow. Rearing high, the monstrous worm swayed towards the light of Samea's anima. Behind it, more of the little worms poured like pus from holes in the ground. Samea launched another spell at it; blinding white light coursed through the thing, but without much apparent effect. As purple afterimages exploded across my vision, I leaped towards a half-seen target, following my instincts as the worm dived towards her. I slammed into soft, reeking flesh, Samea's scream cut off abruptly, but my block was successful enough. The monstrous worm only knocked her back, winded and coughing.

I rolled over heaving coils, protecting my bow. Smaller slugs tried to burrow into my flesh as I skidded across the cobblestone street. Slapped down again by the giant maggot's flailing tail, I dragged myself away from its huge body and fought back to my feet, worms dangling from me. I pulled one off my shoulder and crushed it as it writhed. The worms at my feet fought over its corpse, biting each other and at me, maddened by the smell of blood and ichor.

"I can't spend more Essence on this!" Samea yelled from behind me. "Not if we want to destroy the shadowland!"

"Get back! Get everyone back!" I yelled, dodging back myself and taking aim at the giant worm. Pale sparks ran from my skin to wash my bow with light. I poured Essence into the arrow until the wood was consumed and a shaft of smokeless light lay across the string. The worm rose high, swaying blindly. Instinct dropped my aim from its head to the widest part of its fat body. As it lashed out, I loosed the arrow.

My arrow punched a blazing hole through it. I tried to dodge as the massive corpse plunged toward me. Its dying spasms were as dangerous as any attack and I had stupidly cornered myself against a building. An unpredictable convolution crushed me against the hard stones of the shadowtown street. I struggled, smothering, and felt one of the smaller monsters savaging my exposed arm. Pinned to the ground like this, I could still be eaten alive by the little maggots.

Hands grabbed me and pulled. I didn't have the breath to scream as the giant maggot rolled down my legs. I was hauled out from beneath it, Tadik's voice echoing in my ears as he stabbed and slashed at the worms crawling all around us. I was forced to my feet and dragged away from the writhing mass of maggots burrowing into the flesh of their giant parent.

Samea let me down next to Chem, who was lying pale on the ground while Tadik cleaned his long knife. A rough lump of bloody rags covered the end of Chem's leg where his foot had been. I remembered him screaming at every step as we ran towards the shadowtown and shuddered. The Unconquered Sun had protected me; I had only minor wounds, but Chem's foot had been bitten off.

"Now we know why the town is paved." I managed after a bout of coughing.

Samea crouched beside me, rubbing her burned hands. Her fur over-robe was gone and her felt dress was spattered with white mucus and blood. The air stank of burning fat. "It didn't work very well. I wonder how many shadowtowners have been dragged under by these things."

I could hear the battle across town; it sounded clear and close in my ears. I wished I were there, where I belonged, facing simple flesh and blood. I still burned, and it was hard to care about Chem or Tadik, and everything would be much easier if we simply killed everyone.

"Yurgen?" Samea shook me. "Yurgen, can you hear me? What now? What should we do next?" She was going to make me think. I quelled my anima and my mind cleared a little. Now I

hurt. I never felt my wounds when the god's gift was burning high in me. Pain always came later.

"Next?" I mumbled as I unlaced my broken boot from my leg. "We have to go on. Going back —"I looked across the open ground beyond the town. There was no sign of Tadik's cousin or his son, or anyone else from the party. Just churned ground. "— isn't an option. We have to finish this. It's already cost too much to leave it undone."

She nodded."I can still manage the spell. But nothing else. I have to hoard the strength I have left. Otherwise, I'll fail in the middle...."

She trailed off. I didn't know what happened to a half-done spell.

"Tadik." I turned to him. He had Chem's head in his lap and his harpoon was thick with congealing ichor. "Stay here with Chem. Yell a warning if something changes."

Tadik looked up at me as I stood. "Tll warn you."

Samea and I went on. The town, seemingly deserted, echoed with the nearby battle. We clung to the shadows of the buildings and scuttled across the narrow streets like thieves. I stumbled over a toy wagon, snapping the wheel. The bones used to make the wagon were old and brittle. Turning it over in my hands, I wondered what it would be like to grow up in a shadowland. I'd never thought of children here.

The road widened in the middle of town and the stone pavement dropped away. A vast, dark hole gaped in the middle of the street, uncovered and unguarded. Bitter cold welled up from the gap, and it seemed to suck at what little daylight reached this far. Glancing up at the sky, I couldn't tell where the sun was but I knew it wasn't long until nightfall.

"That's it," Samea said, and made her way across the open ground. I hurried after her, my rag-wrapped foot numbed by the cold of the shadowland.

The hole was big enough to swallow a full-grown man. I wondered how many people had fallen — or been pushed — into it. It was pitch black, its sides covered in dangerous loose rocks. I picked up a stone, dropped it down and listened to the silence. This close to the chasm, the cold felt like pressure on my legs. Frost glittered on Samea's hair. I breathed on my bowstring to melt the ice from it.

"Now what?" I asked.

Samea crouched at the edge of the hole, making me twitch with nerves, and pulled out the clay-lined gourd most sensible women used to carry a live coal. She pulled out a tiny stone, bright green, and cupped it in her hands. Then she glanced up at me, face drawn. Her aura flared hot gold. "Don't bother me, Yurgen."

I sighed and took up a stand a little away from her, running my fingers over my bowstring to hear it sing. Samea began to mutter and rock back and forth. I wondered how long we'd be here, and if we'd still be here when the shadowtowners retreated back to their homes. Was it going to take a week? An hour? She could have said something.

After a time there was no sound but Samea's voice, and a growing whisper — wind from the pit. Her aura flickered and pulsed as shadows crept up from the ground, blackening the sky and hiding the buildings around us. The shadowland was fighting back, but it wasn't my battle. I tried to watch the hole and the streets both, wishing for extra eyes. My aura shone pale gold and steady in the unnatural dimness of the shadowland.

The attack didn't come from the hole. The first I knew of it was the scuttle across my feet. Then something tiny threw itself at Samea's back. She flinched, but didn't stop her tuneless



wailing. I swung around to see... something. In a moment, I picked out a man amid the shadows, but my first glimpse had been of nothing human.

He glided forward and the shadows followed him with a crisp rustle. His black cloak glittered. Jet black beads the size of my thumb enwrapped him everywhere except for the pale, pale skin of his hands and face.

"Welcome to my home. A pleasure to finally meet you," he said. I shuddered at his smile. The skin of his face looked folded, like stiff parchment, and his eyes were glittering pits. His voice clicked and rustled, sometimes slurred, sometimes too sharp.

I fitted an arrow to my bow and he stopped moving towards me. My anima flickered, then blazed higher, fed by my fear. I hadn't expected to face a deathknight. Samea and I, together, might fight one and win, but I heard her voice droning on behind me. She couldn't abandon her spell to help me.

"Can we not talk like reasoning creatures?" the deathknight said, still smiling. His mouth didn't move. "Can we not come to some agreement?"

I bared my teeth at him, sweat creeping down my back. "Sure." And I shot him.

Suddenly he wasn't there. My arrow skipped down the street, the light I'd given it quickly dying. The deathknight moved in a clattering rush, holding out his arms to me as if I were his close kin. I tried another shot, shouting as his sleeves dissolved into a rush of beetles and buzzed towards me, their leathery wingcases raised and their thousands of wings buzzing. I pushed my aura, feeding the light, only to see the street covered in insects. Terror gave me strength while the bugs popped and exploded, burning as they touched Samea's protective spell. But there were thousands of them and they kept coming. A few made it past me, then a few more. The deathknight kept smiling, smiling and watching me from beyond the light. He had only to wait while thousands of the creatures poured from him, revealing the rag-wrapped, worm-eaten bones that were his true form.

The beetle bites were small and painful. Samea's voice stuttered behind me, but she kept on with her spell even as the creatures crawled over her arms. Her aura blazed higher and higher and her spell began to creep along the street, driving back the swarming insects. As I glanced at her, the Abyssal rushed me.

I had an arrow in my hand and stabbed him with it. It felt like a thousand needles were burrowing into my arm as I punched into the deathknight's body. I screamed, so close to the deathknight that I could see the nibbled edges of his face and the writhing worms behind it. Shrieking in pain and panic, I clutched at him, and felt him trying to squirm past me. Samea was his target, the true threat. I was only an obstacle.

Dizzy from hundreds of poisonous bites, I forced my enemy back as worms and beetles scrabbled upmy sleeves. He tossed me away, but I managed to get off ashot, igniting my arrow with a quick Charm. He didn't bother to dodge — simply rushed me again as the arrow's fire burned itself out in the writhing mass of worms that was his gut. I managed to grab an arm and used his own speed to swing him around. Bugs sprayed like blood over me as I threw the Abyssal down, only to see him scrabble back to his feet.

He was light but terribly strong, and the poison spreading through me brought agonizing pain. The dead Chosen drove me to my knees and turned to attack Samea. I flipped him off his feet again, and both of us leaped back up. I dove forward, closing my eyes against flying insects, and thrust him away from Samea. Bone fingers sharp as knives sank into the back of my neck, searching for my spine. I hunched my shoulders and hung on as worms burrowed into my face and hands. My Essence sparked and flickered, stained with darkness, but Samea's spell was still burning through the creatures as fast as they attacked me.

Samea's spell, growing more powerful by the moment, weakened the deathknight. I could feel the shadowland sinking under us, away from the land of the living. Now the deathknight struggled to escape me. I roared triumphantly and held him close, ignoring the insects that crawled over me. I dug my hands into what flesh he possessed, feeling him writhe desperately. My hands glowed white-hot and stinking smoke billowed up. I dug deep and felt something — some cold, dark center — and wrenched it free.

The Abyssal wailed, his face blowing away on a sudden, clean wind as I pulled out a glittering stone heart. I threw it to the stones, where it shattered into black fragments. The icy wind rose to a screaming pitch, buffeting me off my feet. Samea was pressed flat to the ground as her spell exploded outward, splintering the sickly buildings around us, shredding the last tatters of the deathknight and cracking the stones under my hands. I felt the spell in my blood, driving the poison from my body, and nearly swooned from the pain of it. The darkness called by the deathknight lifted, breaking into clouds that scudded across a clear sky. The setting sun blazed down on us, its last rays of light as bright as the edge of the Unconquered Sun's sword.



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Oops, we did it again...

That's right, some artists names were accidently dropped out of the **Exalted Storyteller's Companion**. Our apologies to Melissa Uran for her great cover illo and to Ross Campbell for his insane full page artwork.



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INTRODUCTION

The blade of the sword has the blood of the sun. The hilt of the sword and the hand are one. —Michael Moorcock, "The Silver Warriors"

Caste Book: Dawn is a sourcebook to help you better understand the Dawn Caste Exalted and their place in the world of Exalted. The Dawn Caste, now most commonly known as the Forsaken, are the greatest warriors the world has ever known. Their return could signal the beginning of a glorious new era, where the forces of civilization drive back the chaos of the Wyld and the horrors of the Shadowlands. It could also herald an age of eternal war, where the neverending struggles of titanically powerful godlings wreak havoc on the world. All of the Forsaken are warriors; however, they are not all fighting the same battles, and they often fight in different ways. This book will help you understand the varied members of this Caste, both before and after Exaltation. It also contains a number of new Charms and wonders to assist Dawn Caste Exalted in becoming truly magnificent warriors.

To fully understand the Dawn Caste, you will need to understand the world in which they live as well as the attitudes and natures of the other powerful beings with whom they interact. The warriors of the Dawn come into a world that has been taught to loathe and fear their kind. This troubled land is filled with hostile Dragon-Blooded, eldritch Fair Folk, devious spirits, and macabre Abyssal Exalted. **Caste Book: Dawn** describes some of the ways the newly reborn Dawn Caste Exalted feel about those with whom they share their world, and how other powerful and dangerous entities view the return of the Dawn Caste. In addition, the Dawn Caste is merely one of the five castes of Solar Exalted. Many Solar Exalted are drawn together into Circles made up of members of several castes. In these pages, you will learn how the Dawn Caste view their fellow Anathema, and how these various individuals feel about the militantly warlike Dawn Caste.

Each Dawn Caste Exalted is a uniquely powerful individual, gifted by the Unconquered Sun with unprecedented fighting prowess. However, they all share certain drives and imperatives. Only individuals who carry within them the potential to be truly superlative warriors can become members of the Dawn Caste. Once chosen by the Unconquered Sun, these individuals gain access to powerful magics and fragmentary memories of their past lives.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Caste Book: Dawn grants new insights into the lives and motives of the Dawn Caste. It also offers new powers and magical items for use by Dawn Caste Exalted. This book can help you better understand your character and her place in Creation, as well as offering information on how others in the world of Exalted are likely to react to your character.

Chapter One: Our Souls Through Our Eyes introduces five very different Dawn Caste Exalted, describing in their own voices who they are and how they came to be Exalted. These characters provide examples of some of the diverse individuals who belong to this caste.

INTRODUCTION

Chapter Two: Obligations of the Caste provides a range of opinions on what Dawn Caste Exalted hope to accomplish and how they see their place in the world. The various anecdotes in this chapter serve to illustrate the world of Exalted and to show how members of the Dawn Caste hope to either fit within it or change it more to their liking.

Chapter Three: The World Awaiting Us gives the opinions of the five Dawn Caste Exalted on mortals, other Exalted and the wide range of supernatural beings they have encountered in their travels.

Chapter Four: Voices Not Our Own shows the wide variety of opinions held by mortals and various powerful beings about the new Dawn Caste. Some seek to use them, others see them as allies. Many fear the Dawn Caste, but all acknowledge that they are forces to be reckoned with. Players can also use the anecdotes in this chapter as a basis for possible opponents or allies for their characters.

Chapter Five: Dreams of the First Age offers information about the vague dreams and memories of the First Age that occasionally come to all Solar Exalted, and includes examples of the types of memories many Dawn Caste have about this lost era. This chapter provides some of the first published information about life in the Old Realm.

Chapter Six: Magic of the Dawn provides many new Charms for use by Dawn Caste and other Solar Exalted devoted to the ways of war and battle. Among these various Charms are a few exceptionally powerful ones that require Permanent Essence scores of 4, 5 or even 6. Additional Hearthstones and magical items, including magical weapons, also appear in this chapter.

SOURCE MATERIAL

Powerful warriors are a staple of heroic literature from the Bronze Age to the present day. In addition, such paragons of martial prowesscan befound in many movies and television shows. Though good choices abound, players may find a few suggestions useful.

TELEVISION

The TV shows Xena: Warrior Princess and Hercules are both somewhat silly and lighthearted, but can still be used as examples for Dawn Caste Exalted.

MOVIES

Conan the Barbarian, Conan the Destroyer and Red Sonya, while inferior compared to their literary models, do portray good examples of Dawn Caste Exalted who are acting as heroic barbarian warriors.

For an excellent depiction of both pre-modern warfare and gladiatorial combat, watch the recent film *Gladiator*. Russell Crowe shows what it's like to be both a commanding general and a hard-bitten gladiator.

To see truly amazing warriors in action, there's nothing like Hong Kong cinema. Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, The Legend of Fong Sai Yuk and The Swordsman II are all excellent places to start.

LITERATURE

The classics are a wonderful source for tales of inhumanly grand warriors and astoundingly skilled fighters. Any good compilation of the *Twelve Labors of Hercules* provides an excellent description of the ultimate brawny, greatthewed, club-wielding fighter. The *Epic of Beowulf* gives another, somewhat darker picture of the same sort of hero. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* describes a godlike warrior king, while the legends of Theseus illustrate the adventures of a fighter who wins more by cleverness and skill than simple muscle.

A good translation of the Argonautica (more popularly known as Jason and the Argonauts or The Voyage of the Argo) by Apollonius of Rhodes shows a large and diverse party of heroes in action. Homer's Iliad provides a portrait of warfare on a grandly heroic scale, while Julius Caesar's The Conquest of Gaul depicts a more realistic view of early warfare. Homer's Odyssey chronicles the adventures of a brilliant warrior who struggles valiantly against powerful monsters and the will of the gods.

Good translations exist of all of these works; most libraries have several choices available.

20TH CENTURY FICTION

Not all tales of great warriors were written many centuries ago. Excellent contemporary works on this topic include the following:

The Conan series by Robert E. Howard (Conan, Conan of Cimmeria, Conan the Freebooter, Conan the Wanderer, Conan the Adventurer, Conan the Warrior, Conan the Usurper and Conan the Avenger) are all far better than the movies by the same name. These books and the many other Conan stories written by other authors chronicle the adventures of the ultimate barbarian warrior.

Vazkor, Son of Vazkor and its sequel, Quest for the White Witch, by Tanith Lee are excellent examples of the adventures of a young Dawn Caste. The main character is an inhumanly powerful warrior, who discovers through the course of these books that he is part god and that he possesses formidable supernatural powers. In these two novels, the protagonist goes from being a skilled young warrior to a living god who can walk on water, command storms with a whim and kill with a glance.

The Fafhrd and Gray Mouser books by Fritz Leiber (Swords and Deviltry, Swords Against Death, Swords in the Mist, Swords Against Wizardry, Swords of Lhankmar and Swords and Ice Magic) are all wonderful to read. They depict the adventures and misadventures of Fafhrd, a mighty barbarian warrior, and his more urbane companion the Gray Mouser, a skilled thief. Fafhrd is an excellent model for a powerful Dawn Caste, while the Gray Mouser works well as a nimble-fingered member of the Night Caste.

Jirel of Joiry by C.L. Moore gives a vision of a powerful female warrior and her adventures in a land as strange as the oddest portions of the world of **Exalted**.

The Black Company books by Glen Cook are a classic fantasy saga revolving around the infamous Black Company, a renowned mercenary band. Set in an exotic and wonderful fantasy world, these books provide a gritty portrait of mercenary life. The best of these books are *The Black Company*, *Shadows Linger* and *The White Rose*.

For an exceedingly vivid and slightly more historical portrayal of mercenary life, The Books of Ash by Mary Gentle (*The Secret War*, *Canhage Ascendant*, *The Wild Machines* and *Lost Burgundy*) are excellent fantasy novels set in the early Renaissance.



CHAPTER ONE . OUR SOULS THROUGH OUR EYES

CHAPTER ONE OUR SOULS THROUGH OUR EYES

Members of the Dawn Caste were created to fight. In the long-ago days of the First Age they were valiant generals, noble hunters, proud duelists, devastating commandos and deadly assassins. Regardless of the form their conflicts take, all Dawn Caste Exalted find their true fulfillment in violent physical confrontations. Some lead huge armies against overwhelming odds, while others seek the joy and honor of single combat against deadly foes. When confronted with a problem, a Dawn Caste's first impulse is normally to solve it directly and physically. However, this does not mean they are unimaginative, stupid or crude. While some Forsaken are reckless berserkers who smash all opposition, others are brilliant strategists who plot and execute devastatingly effective battle plans, and a few are matchless assassins who defeat powerful enemies with a single surgically precise thrust. Members of the Dawn Caste are living weapons, but each one is a weapon of a different sort.

In the world of Exalted, these characters come from a wide variety of backgrounds and occupations. In general, most members of the Dawn Caste gain their newfound powers during a conflict. Some come into their powers in the initial terrifying minutes of their first battle; others find new life and renewed strength just as they are about to be cut down.

Although both their backgrounds and the circumstances of their Exaltation may greatly differ, members of the Dawn Caste have much in common. Individuals who become Dawn Caste are all drawn to violence and the arts of war. Brutish streetfighters, noble warriors, gifted martial artists, skilled commandos, brilliant duelists, bloodthirsty berserkers, cold-hearted assassins and greedy mercenaries are only a few examples of the many types of people who can become Dawn Caste. All of these individuals find their deepest fulfillment in violent physical conflict. Members of the Dawn Caste may also be wise scholars, dexterous crafters, clever thieves or silver-tongued orators, but such talents and occupations are secondary to their interest in and devotion to the many forms of physical combat.

The process of Exaltation is the single most transformative experience that can happen to someone. Divine power grants an ordinary mortal both vastly enhanced physical capacities and access to powerful magics. Even a single newly transformed Dawn Caste can defeat half a dozen skilled warriors at once. However, on a spiritual level Exaltation greatly enhances existing traits. Fawning slaves and cowardly bureaucrats never become members of the Dawn Caste. Exaltation is the divine gift of the Unconquered Sun, and so it is only given to those whose minds and spirits are appropriate for their caste. Here are the stories of five members of the Dawn Caste.

DACE

It's no surprise that I became a mercenary—I grew up in the camps. Sergeant Redda told me that I joined the company after they hit a rebel town near Thorns. I was five or six at the time and don't remember much before then. My life was the Wolves.

Companies like the Ravenous Wolf always have camp followers. There are dozens of children along with the cooks, smiths, armorers, whores, washers and — if you're lucky a few half-decent entertainers. The camp followers looked after me and the rest of the camp kids until I was grown enough for some of the mercenaries to take an interest in me.



I was always following the mercs around, trying to figure out how to use a sword and spear.

Redda had a soft heart for kids. She made me a wooden practice sword and showed me a few basic moves. I seemed to have a bit of talent, so she made me her aide. I worked harder than I'd ever worked in my life — I scrubbed armor, polished blades, cleaned tack, cared for her horse and learned that being a soldier is a whole lot of dog work. Watching the battles was good——at least, the ones we won. The proudest moment I remember was when Redda gave me my first pike and shield and set me with the shield wall guarding the archers. I pissed my pants when the first charge came, but the archers got most of them, and the rest didn't have a chance. I thought I was such a hero.

From there, I worked my way up from shield wall to light infantry, then to standard-bearer. I snagged enough loot one time to get myself some better armor, and I inherited Redda's horse when she fell at Nardan creek—too many people I know are dead. I got a promotion to lieutenant during that disastrous battle out near Marin Bay. After the fifty under my command saved the rest of the company by driving back a horde of hobgoblins near the Hundred Kingdoms, Captain Vanil stepped down and gave me command of the Wolves and the Black Fifty, his elite troops.

After fifteen years leading the Wolves, I knew I was getting old. There weren't going to be many more big victories for me. In this life, there's nothing dignified about growing old — every old wound comes back to haunt you when you put on armor. It's no surprise that old mercenaries don't live long unless they get enough sense to settle down and train younger ones. I didn't want to give up fighting — I didn't want to admit I was getting too old for the battlefield.

EXALTATION

I thought Greentooth Pass would be my last battle. It wouldn't have been a bad way to go, either. We were hired by Great Forks to drive a Lookshy force out of some prime qat land they'd taken last year. We'd had a week of rain after we signed the contract, which gave us seven days of good wine and better drugs before we had to die. Once the sun came back, we set out for the qat fields.

My left knee had been bothering me more lately and my vision was starting to go. Between the two, I figured I'd fall in this battle. I'd heard the troops we were fighting weren't fools. They'd take the Wolves' surrender if we lost, just like we'd take theirs — mop-up killing is a waste of good troops.

After their first big push, Garsey's Fifty and the Blacks were both cut off by a Lookshy cavalry charge. Half their cavalry parked itself between us and the rest of the Wolves. With their archers to the south and a big river at our back, our situation didn't look good. If we went for the river, the archers would cut us down, and if we stayed where we were, their cavalry would run right over us. I rallied my troops. If we could break their cavalry, the rest of the Wolves would have an easy victory. If not, we could send some of Lookshy's soldiers on ahead to let the Deathlords know we were coming.

Garsey's Fifty broke when she went down. Garsey was a fine lieutenant, but she wasn't even 30—I hate it when good soldiers die. I'll miss her singing and those stupid jokes she

always told when she was drunk. I rode out to take down the bastard that killed Garsey and I suddenly felt better. I was attacking and parrying everything near me without effort — I felt stronger than ever before. It's hard to describe that feeling. I blocked attacks almost before I saw them coming, and hit so hard that I sometimes killed both horse and rider in one blow. After a while, I had to ride pretty hard to find the enemy; most of them were too busy running away from me. About that time, I also noticed I was in the center of this huge glow, like an aurora I'd seen up north a decade back.

When I looked around, Garsey's lot was back in the fray. With me leading both fifties, we cut right through the Lookshy cavalry. By the time we were done with them, the Lookshy archers had all run off. We charged back to the main battle — I was at the front. When I gave the call to rally the rest of the Wolves to me, almost a third of the Lookshy force fled, and so did more than a few of my own. Heh.

The rest of the battle only took about half an hour. Once it was all over, everyone cheered, then they all started staring at me. I'd already gotten the gist of what some of them were whispering. I swigged some cider and went up on one of the wagons to talk to them. I could see that the thrill of winning was beginning to mix with worry about what the hell had happened to their commander. I'd seen that look in other companies. I could either deal with the problem right now, or there'd be bad trouble before morning. I couldn't hold the Wolves if they thought I was a monster.

I told everyone I was stepping down as head of the Wolves and appointing Belik as the new head. It's always better to make the inevitable look like what you wanted all along. Then I asked for volunteers to accompany me to do some serious and dangerous work, which sounded like a good description of working for one of the Anathema. Almost two fifties of men looked like they wanted to go, but I couldn't take that many and leave the company whole.

Before Belik could start objecting, I talked to each one of the volunteers. Het them all know exactly what I was and what we'd likely be facing. In the end, I only took half a fifty away with me. They're not many, but they are the best and they won't turn on me. More than half of them were with the Black Wolves, and they're the finest soldiers I've ever worked with.

I caught Belik making signs against the evil eye at me as we rode off—not that I could blame him. I half expected I'd become a pointy-toothed cannibal in a few days. I'd heard all the stories, and while I didn't feel like a ravening monster, I imagine many monsters don't feel that way either. I didn't care much at that moment — I was too busy wondering what I'd do now and thanking all the dragons that my knee didn't hurt anymore. I felt like I was 20 again, only stronger than ever. I guess working for the Sun offers some pretty significant advantages.

Word got out faster than I'd hoped. I knew what would happen once news of the battle reached Greyfalls, and sure enough, the Realm troops caught up with us in six days. We'd been going towards Nexus, where folks don't give a fig about the Realm or any of their policies. I guess the Realm really is a mess — they only managed to send one Dragon-Blooded and a couple dozen men after me. The commander must have

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expected me to be alone, or for my men to all desert once the Wyld Hunt showed up. Just what you'd expect of someone used to leading gutter-sweepings and conscripts.

The imperial troops had ridden hard the whole time and haddefinitely seen better days. I told the Dragon-Blooded officer we could either massacre her and all her men, or the two of us could fight one-on-one, with amnesty for the loser's troops. She didn't want to agree, but the look on her men's faces convinced her. There's no need to talk about the fight, it didn't last very long. She really hated me, or she would have given the surrender I offered. Killing someone without the sense to stand down is always a waste, but I couldn't really turn my back on her.

After the duel, I buried her and let her troops go. They were disheartened by her weakness, both in the duel and as a leader. Her lieutenant and four others broke ranks and joined up with me. The lieutenant seemed honest, and he vouched for the others. They've proved to be more than reliable in the months since. From there we headed for Nexus. I learned long ago that if you don't make the wrong kind of trouble and you pay the right bribes, the Council will make certain no one can murder you in your sleep.

It's worked out okay. We offered the Council one season of service every year, with our only pay being food for my people and animals. Most of the time, we don't actually work for them — I never knew the Council of Entities did quite so many favors for other powerful groups. I can't say I trust the Council, but they've treated us fairly so far. Also, every time they call upon us I learn a bit more about them. Once I understand enough about the beings who are running Nexus, I'll renegotiate our contract on a more equitable basis.

That first season working for the Council was hard. They had us guarding a Guild caravan going from Nexus to White-

wall. Guild work is usually more trouble than it looks. We took a ship along the coast for most of the trip - there were too many obvious guards for any of the coast-hugging pirates to try for us. Then we hit the Traveler's Roadbeing on that road is supposed to protect you from almost any threat. The Syndics of Whitewall have treaties of free passage with the Deathlords and the Fair Folk, and even the Icewalkers go by the rules. The problem is, Wyld barbarians don't follow any rules they don't make themselves. I'd heard they'd been worse up in the North that year because of some large disturbance up near Gethamane.

They hit us two days out from Whitewall, well within the range of both the dead and the fey. The barbarians must have made a deal with the Fair Folk, or perhaps the Fair Folk simply have no use for Wyld barbarians. Regardless, the freaks were safe off the road and we weren't. I think the Fair Folk may have been breaking treaty on that one, but dragons' know they'd argue the point. The savages spent the first day hanging back in the scrub, making occasional charges at the caravan.

Even the barbarians had enough sense to stay on the road when night fell and the dead came walking. I used my power to terrify almost a third of the barbarians into the arms of the dead just after full dark, but couldn't push that advantage. Open battle on that narrow







road would have been suicide for both sides. The rest of the night was pretty peaceful with the dead clustered around us all, waiting for someone to step off the road. Put even one foot off the road and you're gone. The caravan and the barbarians huddled on the paving stones and glared at each other. The next day was bad — the barbarians kept charging while the Fair Folk waited for us to get pushed off the road.

I took point and managed to frighten off some of the weaker savages. Then I went to work knocking down the ones left. Eventually, I got tired of being trapped on that useless road. I waited until the Fair Folk were hanging back a bit, charged out and took the head of the barbarians' leader. The rest of them formed a line to try to keep me from getting back on the road. I cut my way through them and noticed the Fair Folk weren't coming after me — I guess they'd rather see their allies get slaughtered than lose their own heads. After the savages broke and ran, I did get a salute from the leader of the Fair Folk. I have a feeling I'll be seeing her again.

The merchants were impressed. We even received a bonus, and you know how difficult it is to get extra money out of the Guild. It made me a bit of a legend, but a bunch of locals in Whitewall told me I was a damned fool, should have turned around or just left the caravan to the barbarians. Whitewall apparently isn't a very nice place. I made sure my men didn't give out any hints there about what I am.

YURGEN

My daughter's daughter swung 'round the fire, her long hair loose and shining down her back. Moving to the rise and fall of women's voices, she called the grass in a long ululation, her skirts swaying, full and heavy as the tribe's hopes for the spring. Full as her belly, carrying a child for the tribe.

The men and boys clustered around the women, crying out words so old we didn't know what they meant. The drums boomed, driving the pace faster and faster. How many years had I drummed this dance? My wife had danced so, seasons ago, and I had drummed for her. Later she had followed me into the icy spring darkness and we had lain in the snow, sheltered only by the omen dog pelt of my manhood hunt. We had been hot-blooded enough then, and never minded the cold. So, too, had my sons drummed and my daughters danced while my wife and I had watched with laughter and pride. When had I known I was no longer welcome at the fire?

In the flicker of the high burning fire I found a moment of familiarity in the faces around me: a turn of a nose, the shape of a jaw, the bi-colored eyes of a woman dead for many seasons. I stepped forward, hand half raised to greet old friends. Then it passed. Everyone I knew, all my friends, all my enemies, had already joined the ancestors. Things of my life; great hunts, the terrible rise of the White Moon shadowland across the path of our herd, the great sack of the Haslanti cities were stories now, myths and shaman's tales. The camp looked strange to me — the smell of roasting meat, the looming elk totem standing above the shaman's ratty black yurt — these were all as I remembered. This is how the Reedplains elk tribe had always looked. This had been my home since I'd drawn my first breath. But a tribe of strangers had invaded the home I knew. All my people were gone. I stood

in the shadows beyond the fire, knowing that the ghosts of my dead past were closer to my heart than the children around me.

I was a living ghost, seasons older than anyone in the tribe. I had outlived even the shaman and eyes had begun to turn from me. Conversations fell quiet when I came near. No one had called me to the hunt this year. My yurt — where I had loved three wives and raised seven children— had become very large and very silent.

No one knew what to do with me. No one had lived as long as I had. I was no shaman. No one turned to me for wisdom. I was a hunter, a warrior — a man. I was a man who had passed out of the circle of life without dying. There was no place for me here.

I turned from the Grass Dance and no one called me back. I should be whispering in the smoke and sand of the shaman's visions, nothaunting my children's children. I turned from the fire and walked out—out past the round tents spiraling away from the central fire, past the sentinels shivering in the chill and looking back towards the song and light. I walked out beyond the tribe, hearing the elk herd shifting and grunting in the hollow. The steam from a warm spring drifted across their backs, scattering diamonds over their rough winter coats. Hands empty of weapons, carrying no food, I passed the herd and followed the ancestor's shroud unfurled across the sky in gold and violet brilliance.

The shroud, shimmering in the night sky above the plains, was bright this season. In the silence, I heard the faint whispering of the ancestors falling around me. My skis carried me over the rise and fall of the plains; the frost-dead grass gleamed like knives and the long, strange voices of omen dogs carried to me, faint and sweet like a song I could almost remember.

In the darkness and chill of spring, I looked up and saw cold falling in from the stars. The shroud flickered and danced on the horizon, bright gold banded with blue, and a mist as luminous as a pearl began sink from the sky like streams of milk. Suddenly the cold deepened. My breath fell from my lips and froze on my beard. My fingers, ears and nose began to ache and my lashes started to freeze together. It was the white fog. It came from the sky. I watched it fall around me and the pain began to leave my fingers as they went numb. The shroud above me began to dim and I heard the grass around me shattering like glass.

My heart was staggering and the feel of my own blood racing in my veins was almost painful as the cold slid into me like a skinning knife. I was shuddering so hard I could barely stand. If I fell, I knew I would shatter like ice. The fog looked as soft as goosedown and I blinked sleepily. It glowed around me and I heard a sweet, high chiming. Stench hit me then, offensive even in the utter cold. I recognized it — omen dogs. I would not freeze to death, then. Though I had come out to die, I still wished I had my bow.

The dogs came into view, shoulders high as my chest. Their yellow eyes shone like moons in the dimness. Their coats glittered and chimed, coated with clear ice. They circled me, waiting. I didn't know why. I could hardly move, let alone fight them, and omen dogs were hardly known for patience or fear. Strangely, they sank to their bellies, whining. I stared past them with half frozen eyes and wondered what they served.

A woman appeared out of the mist, and for a moment I wondered if my wife had come to take me to the ancestors. But

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this woman was nothing from the tribe, nothing human perhaps nothing alive. She seemed to condense out of the fog, white skin, white hair swirling around her ankles, the flutter of thin robes revealing the still curve of a breast, the perfect sweep of her icy waist. She was beautiful, her eyes all the colors of the shroud hidden above us. Despite the cold, my body ached for her. All I could feel was that terrible desire. I stumbled forward a step, drawn, forgetting the omen dogs groveling around me and the cold killing me. All I wanted was to taste that frozen mouth, lose my heat, my warmth, my life in the icy perfection waiting for me.

With blackened fingernails and hoarfrost glittering on my knuckles, I reached out. When my fingers touched her pale, bitter cold flesh the staggering drum of my heart failed. The silence was perfect. She smiled at me.

In that silence, light leaped like the first spark of a flashing fire. I roared in agony, lungs unwillingly dragging in the icy air. My heart kicked in my chest. My blood was fire, was beyond fire. I was pure light. I opened my eyes wide and the light inside me flared out. The fog around me glowed, a million diamonds before it blew back and the air went crimson, then white and the cold became heat — such heat. The ice spirit turned to flee, but the brilliance and heat of my newborn powers washed over her. With a voiceless scream she dissolved into stinking water, and the sodden bones of the living woman she had once been splashed into the mud. Steam burst from the frozen ground and the omen dogs fled, crying in their sweet voices as they chased the rags and tatters of the evaporating fog.

The light grew brighter, crimson to rose to gold to white and brighter still, blinding me. I couldn't see. The light clung to me, closer than a lover. Whispers fell around me, voices, and flickering images like dreams I'd never dreamt before. I couldn't hold them, couldn't hold the light in myskin. I was too small and I screamed and my scream was light and my tears were light and light danced over the ground, scattering from me as I jerked and stumbled across the melting tundra, boots dragging in the muck and white-hot light spilling from me like heart's blood.

My bones fused, exploding, my skin melted as the light took me, shaped me and made me newborn. In the mud, in the silence of the cold dark I dragged in great lungfuls of air and opened my eyes. Light danced over the grass. As I pushed myself up on shaking arms I saw that I glowed, a soft pale light like the first kiss of the sun in spring. That was me. Perfectly familiar and strange. I held out my hands as the light picked out the edges and scars on my fingers, the bump of an old broken bone. This was me.

I felt more like myself now, shining like a new day, than I ever had in my life.

Jalith

I grew up in the tree-city of Chanta, capital of the Haltan Republic. Having parents who are wealthy merchants meant I could go to good schools and I even had a private tutor teach me about magic. I was fairly good at making talismans and other minor magics, so my parents wanted me to become a spirit-diplomat. There are a whole lot of spirits and Fair Folk in those woods. Anyone who can deal with them and remain sane and whole is always in high demand. I think growing up listening to all those legends of the Old Realm was the reason I wanted a more active life. When I was little, I was constantly asking the storytellers to tell tales of far-off lands and famous battles. Later on, I was always climbing up to the practice platforms to watch the guards train. I loved the old battle epics and dragged around a toy sword even before I was old enough to swing it. I wanted to be a hero. I suppose I've finally gotten my wish.

With the Linowan savages constantly trying to sneak in and kill us in our beds, there was always a need for more guards and soldiers. We were rich enough for me to have my own weapons trainer. That same money made certain I received a position as a junior commando-officer instead of a regular guard. It was a bit more dangerous, but ordinary guards also donof't often get their names sung by the tale-singers. My parents didn't much know what to make of a daughter like me, but they were always willing to help me reach my goals. I haven't been back to see them since my Exaltation — I have no idea what they'd think of me now.

I excelled, but the senior officers were too conservative. Most of them were exceedingly wary of high-stakes missions. They weren't even terribly appreciative when I knocked off a Linowan chief, her husband, and her shaman all in one raid. The other two members of my team died, but Callo was always careless and Rhet died trying to save her. "Excessive risks," the senior officers said. After that mission, they took me off teamwork when they should have given me a medal. In any case, solo work was fine by me — I always preferred working with animals anyway. Achal and Meros are better friends than any human partners I've ever had. Mospids and tree-leopards are good company; most people talk too much.

The higher-ups started giving me a few dangerous but impressive missions, and my backup wasn't always what it could have been. I assumed they were trying to get me killed. Fortunately, they couldn't be too open about it — my family has powerful friends. I didn't really mind the risks. Even before I changed, I was better than those cowardly generals ever knew. They're fools.

EXALTATION

It's been four months now since I found myself and my true home. Ihad just been down in Linowan lands, working a raid with Achal and Meros. Everything went perfectly. Ikilled the chief and was bringing her sacred mask back as a trophy—you can sell those things in Nexus for a bunch of money. The only problem was the Linowan force pursuing me. It's a lot easier to pull off a raid than to get away clean afterwards. Half the warriors in the village were after me, as well as one of their shamans. Looking at those dirty scar-faced shamans makes me sick. The Linowan are the worst sort of barbarians, good for nothing but fertilizer.

They did manage a tough pursuit — I had to run south for half a day while they kept me away from the forest. Evening fell, and my tree-leopard Achal and I worked together to take down a pair of guards. He clawed the throat out of one and I got the other with a boomerang to the back of the head. The rest of them must have found the bodies just after we got through their lines. The Linowan knew I was in the forest, and they weren't foolish enough to try to follow me there. Instead,



their shaman started screaming out some curses. I felt cold for a second, and a few minutes later I heard a soft, almost metallic chittering right behind me. I'd learned enough about those savages' magic to know he'd called up something big. I never got a clear look at what it was, but it had lots of legs and moved fast; probably some spirit totem of their tribe. I just kept moving through the trees. No matter how bad it was, the Fair Folk down below were even less forgiving. That spirit kept trying to drive me out of the forest, but I got past it for a bit. When it started gaining on us, Achal and Meros were both terrified. I got even more worried when I saw how frightened Meros was — it takes a lot to scare a mospid.

The moon was mostly full, and I could almost see the creature. The glimpses I got made me certain I didn't need a closer look. Suddenly, just ahead of me, I saw a huge, ancient metasequoia in the middle of an immense clearing. The gap was no problem for Achal, but I didn't think I could make the leap. I tried it anyway — my choices were to jump or let the spirit-creature get me. I was high enough up that I figured I 'd die if I fell — at least neither that creature nor the Fair Folk would get a piece of my soul. Somehow, I made it. I felt like I was flying. In that second I felt stronger and more alive than I'd ever felt in my life. Once I landed, I stood there and simply breathed. That jump made me appreciate how much lenjoyed breathing. After the shock of still being alive wore off, I realized the monster hadn't even tried to follow me. I could see a glint from what looked like dozens of eyes up in the tree I'd just leaped from. The creature just sat there watching me. I figured we were safe for the moment, so I took a look around. Achal and I were up in the branches of the biggest tree I'd ever seen. After I got my bearings, I realized just how tired I was. I also felt really strange. I could suddenly see, hear, and smell more than I ever could before, and none of the scratches I'd gotten during the chase hurt. However, I was also more exhausted than I'd ever been before. Once Meros landed, the three of us found a hollow to curl up in. I didn't even have to look for one-1 just climbed right up into it. That was the first night of the weird dreams. In them, I was someone else, someone important, in a place more grand and wonderful than any legend.

I slept until the next evening. When I finally woke up, the spirit-beast was gone and I felt amazingly good. The hollow we had all slept in was bigger than it had looked the night before. It was lit by colonies of glowing moss growing on the walls, just like rooms back home. This part of the tree was hollow; it had four rooms, one on top of the other. Openings in the floor of each chamber connected them all. There was even a central ladder connecting all four floors. That tree felt like no one had been there in centuries — it was empty and covered in dust. The only trace of the previous residents was a metal chest in a hidden space under the bottom room. I went right to it and opened it — I didn't stop to think about how I knew where it was. Part of me remembered what was inside: my armor shirt, my bracers and my book of spells.

That book was bound in something that looked like green glass and had pages made from a silvery metal foil. Only the first third of it was intact. The rest looked like it had been eaten away by some horribly strong acid. Each page was as light as a feather, but my knife couldn't even make a mark on the corner. I have no idea what happened to that book, but I knew death and terrible destruction had been involved. Touching its ruined pages scared me — I knew the book was mine and that at some point, something terrible had happened to both it and me.

Under the book, I found the ancient remains of some fancy clothes. I can still remember wearing that emerald green scarf and the black vest, but they and the rest of the garments fell to dust when I tried to pick them up. Right then, I wasn't sure who I was. I knew all these things were mine, but I had never seen any of it before. I couldn't even remember my name, and I remember calling out for someone named Nala.

I've never figured out who Nala was, but saying that name still makes me cry sometimes. I've woken up calling her name more than once. At the very bottom of the chest was a glass mirror set in a black ivory frame. Looking in that mirror was a shock. I still knew my own face, but I had expected to see someone else. I don't remember the face I once wore, but it looked very different — I wonder if that mirror was put there as some kind of warning or joke. Either way, the next thing I noticed was a golden starburst right in the center of my forehead. I started getting my memories straight at that point, and realized what had happened. Heh — and I had always thought the Anathema were only stories.

Knowing that you're a living legend really makes you think about your life. I spent the next three days living in that tree. I slept a lot and ate some of the food I'd brought with me. I also studied that book. There were two spells inside. I knew that whoever I had once been had lost a great deal, but at least we-1—once again knew some real magic. Somewhere around this time, Meros first spoke in my mind. Her breed of mospid is really bright, but not man-smart. Suddenly, she was talking to me, and not just bird thoughts. Her voice sounded like my dead grandmother's, but when she talked, there was always a soft sound like the fluttering of wings and an impression of her golden eyes staring at me, even when she was far away. Having her in my head was disturbing at first, but she still loved me and we were still partners. She's been a lot of help adjusting to my new life. I wish could do the same with Achal, but Meros said I could only link like this with one creature at a time.

On the morning of the fourth day, I finally felt like traveling again. I woke up restless and knew that it was time to start getting things done. First off, I decided to go see if any of my pursuers were still hanging around. The monster had left, so I went back out to the edge of the forest. The main force was also gone, but they'd stationed a few guards to watch for me, or maybe for their spirit-beast. I'm guessing that damn shaman of theirs knew I'd be back. Those tree-lost guards thought they were well hidden, but a child could have found them.

There were two groups. I ran across the branches towards one pair of guards and threw my boomerang at the other two. That one thrown boomerang killed both guards in the second group. Then one of the guys I was charging almost hit Achal with an arrow. After all I'd been through, I was not about to lose someone I cared about because of some louse-covered savage. I shouted in anger and both of those fools fled like demons were chasing them. That wasn't far from the truth by the time I got done with them. I realized that all the tales about the Anathema were true—I really was faster and tougher than anyone alive, even the Dragon-Blooded. I was an unknown, but I could be the talk of the East in a couple of months.

I didn't want to go home just yet. Lots of my people might get scared. After all the stories told about my kind, I couldn't blame them. Getting into that sort of mess could lead to me fighting people I'd rather not. Besides, the idiots in charge of the guard likely still wouldn't give me the type of position I really deserved. For now, they could get by without my help.

I needed to get away from everything familiar and learn more about what I could do. The only way to get past the tales told about my kind was to make some new stories, stories where I was a great champion and not a destroying monster. Once the tales of my deeds were being told in every tavern, people back home would know about me and I could go home safely.

I considered doing some serious solo work against the Linowan, but that could easily turn the Realm against my own people. Besides, killing off a bunch of unwashed savages wasn't the sort of legend I wanted to make. All the stories I'd heard said that Nexus was the place to go if you really wanted to make your name and fortune. I'd also heard that most folks trying this ended up beggars or dead, but I had a considerable edge.

The first thing I did once I made sure no one was after me was head back to the Linowan lands to get some money. The chief's mask was pretty fancy, but from folks I'd talked to, I knew I'd need more than that to make it in Nexus. I stayed on the forest's edge for a couple of days and came in to spy on them at night. On one trip, I overheard that the troops at the imperial garrison would be getting paid soon. Their pay had just arrived, so I decided all that gold was going to be mine.

Leaving Meros up high to keep watch, I snuck in. I stuck to the rooftops and eventually got on top of their storehouse. Unfortunately, they'd had the good sense to give it no windows and only one door. There were two guards on the storeroom, but two boomerang throws got rid of them both before either one had a chance to warn anyone. The older guard had the key to the storeroom on his belt. Once I was inside, the box with the money was pretty damn obvious, an ebony crate covered with impressive-looking seals. The Realm tends to be blatant about anything important, and this box was no exception. Too bad I forgot that the Dragon-Blooded had sorcerers too. As soon as I touched the box, it started shouting an alert. It was heavy enough that I couldn't carry it and run. I had to waste time breaking it open and stuffing most of the gold coins in my pack — and it kept shouting the whole time.

I touched Meros' mind and took a look at the situation outside. The storehouse was surrounded and more troops were on the way. I needed to get up on the rooftops if I was going to have a chance of escaping. A half dozen soldiers were already in position outside, and in a short while I'd be facing the whole fucking garrison. First, I opened the door a crack and tossed out a couple of boomerangs to clear some space. Those throws put down three of them. Once I was outside, I fought off the three that remained and worked my way around to the side wall of the storehouse. Then this stocky guy with grayish skin showed up at a run. He swung a huge mace made of black stone at me. His blow got past my parry and hit me squarely in the side. The pain was agonizing — he must have been Dragon-Blooded, no mortal would have been able to hurt me like that. That was first time I'd been injured since my change. It made me realize that pain was still pain, and if I was careless, I could still die.

I was hurt and more than a little scared. I backed up a bit and hit him with my last two boomerangs. I put everything I had into those throws, and I thanked the dragons when he dropped like a felled tree — lucky for me he hadn't had time to put on his armor. Before any of the other soldiers could rush me, I was up the wall, onto the roof and over the palisade. I called Meros to me and we escaped in a whirlwind back to where Achal was waiting. I knew I'd been careless; I never should have let things get that close. Still, I survived — I had a nice mask and pockets bulging with jade. My next stop was Nexus. I knew I could find work that would have storytellers talking about me from Wavecrest to Chiaroscuro.

DEMETHEUS

Notreally much to tell. I was born in Chiaroscuro, leastways that's the first place I remember. Don't recall much about my folks, except that they died. I grew up on the streets — there are gangs of kids that help each other out. In most gangs, you got to leave when you grow up. 'Till then, they take care of each other pretty well. Plenty of abandoned buildings to live in, some of them even still keep you warm at night. Once you're old enough to go out, you go to work. Little fast kids steal, pick pockets and sometimes carry messages for folks. Bigger kids earn money carryin' loads, stealing and robbing rich kids. I've always been pretty big — mostly I protected the little ones. By the time I was nine I could slow down a shopkeeper coming after the kid who stole his fruit. I even scared off a few; big, crazy-acting kids make folks afraid. A bit after all that, I got work loadin' and unloadin' ships down at the dock.

When I grew out, the kids had the usual party and then I was on my own. Loading was good work, but I had me a temper and liked to fight. I fought the right guy once, too. Really big guy came 'round lookin' to make some deal — fool kid I was, I took him up on it. I snatched part of a load and got it to him. He gave me half what he'd promised and figured he was too big to worry about the rest. He wasn't. When I got done with him, he gave me my money and was impressed enough to introduce me to some of his friends.

I showed them what I could do, and one of them told me he'd teach me how to really fight. The bare-knuckle fights in Chiaroscuro are tough. I learned a hell of a lot and still went down about half the time, least for the first few months. The open matches weren't nearly as bad; young toughs lookin' to impress their friends are fools. Goin' against other pros was hard. That's where I broke my nose. Never killed or seriously hurt anyone, but I knew plenty who did. Money was good though, way better than loading, and I like to fight. Goodliquor, plenty of women, high stakes gambling, and a hard fight to help me keep my edge, all a kid could want. I did that for eight years, until one of the big guys asked me to throw a fight to make his new kid look good. I didn't like that, and I figured things would go bad for me either way.



been hard this year, and no one could afford charity. But recently, lush otter furshad replaced my old and not very warm blankets. The lamps were no longer simple shells, but bronze —probably tribute from a Haslanti city. The children gave me their toys. The old women gave me robes of crimson felt, trousers finer than Tadik's — and he was the tribe's chieftain. I couldn't say no to anyone's offerings. I'd tried, once. The woman had wept. It was hard enough to resist a woman's tears, but then her family had turned her out into the cold, assuming she had somehow offended me. I had to marry her off to her cousin. The Blackwater tribe *competed* to give me things.

The long felt vest was crimson, edged in the black fur of otters we found in the lakes during the summer months. The clothes were common enough among my tribe and the Blackwater tribe. In place of the spreading antler totem of my childhood, or the less familiar bold markings of the mammoth tribe, someone had decorated the garment with a spiral of rough red-gold pebbles and white freshwater pearls. The sacred sign of the Sun had been embroidered onto the felt. This was no sign of any tribe. Wearing it, I would be no part of the mammoth people, or the elk, or the caribou or even of the pitiable creatures that cringed behind the walls of the Northern cities. I would be nothing more and nothing less than the hand of the Unconquered Sun.

"Yurgen?" The voice was frail and tentative. I came out of my yurt at once. It was one of the Blackwater elders, a tiny, fragile woman. She lowered her eyes respectfully. I winced. Behind her was a couple, the woman hugely pregnant. Like all pregnant women, she was beautiful. Her dress was the green of summer and embroidered with wards to protect the baby. She sailed up to me, belly first, licking her lips nervously. Her husband stared at me.

"Yurgen..." she said. She was uncomfortable using my name, but I refused to answer to a title. It made my skin crawl. I didn't feel I'd earned it, gold stamp on my head aside. "I thought... we thought...."

"Bless the child," the old woman urged, her eyes bright with ambition. "Bring us another warrior like you. Give the Unconquered Sun another weapon."

"I..."Myvoice cracked. "Idon't know any blessings. I'm not"

"Hu—" The elder brushed my protest aside, flicking her bent fingers at me. "Put your hands on her belly. Go on!"

The elder was used to being obeyed, and whatever I was now, I had spent a lifetime listening to her kind. I reached out and laid a hand on the woman's tense stomach. She closed her eyes blissfully, her face turned to me like a flower to the sun. I felt nothing. Then, suddenly, there was a jump under my hand. The baby kicked again and the woman laughed.

"He knows you!" she cried. "Thank you! Oh, thank you!" I snatched my hand back. I hadn't done anything — had I?

"Safe birthing." I said awkwardly. "Long life for you and your baby."

The woman took my hands and pressed her cheek to them. Her eyes never left mine, hopeful — worshipful. The husband made me take five precious flaked stone arrowheads. I tried to return them, but he wouldn't take them back. His eyes avoided mine, and I could see the resentment in the set of his narrow jaw. Of course he was angry — the words I offered to his wife were a husband's blessing. I didn't know what else to say.

"I... am praying." I lied as they stared at me. "I need to be left alone."

The elder ushered them all away, puffed up with pride. She was advising the woman on how best to birth and raise one of the "sun-touched." I could hear the woman whispering to her husband. "His hands so warm! When he touched me the baby moved—I felt it! A bolt of heat went right through me!"

I tied my tent flap down and dropped onto my pallet with a long sigh. I rubbed my hands. I wasn't a god. I couldn't give out blessings like candy. The Unconquered Sun certainly didn't need me to choose his servants. The baby had just moved, as babies did while they waited to be born. My own children had done that.

But — what if the child was like me?

The Unconquered Sun had chosen me, an old man whose tribe had rejected him. Would he choose a child? An infant? I didn't think so. However the Unconquered Sun choose his servants, it wasn't through blood. That was the virtue and flaw of the Dragon-Blooded.

But what if I found another like me? What would I do? What would they do?

Iknew the path that the Unconquered Sun had laid out for me, even if I couldn't always see it. My feet were turned out from the North, out into the world beyond the tribes, the snow even the small struggles of the cities along the Frozen Sea. I had dreamed of the world. The Realm would fall before me. In time, human and Dragon-Blooded would be united under my banner. I had dreamed of the struggle in front of me; years of warfare, thousands of deaths. All so that I could rule as I was meant to rule. All so I could rule as my god wished me to rule.

Would I have to fight my own kind to take the place destined for me? Was I the only one who had such dreams?

I touched my forehead again, rubbing at the mark I could not feel. I would not fight those chosen by the Sun. I would not yield, either. So — I must be strong enough, fast enough, to take my place as first among them. There must be no question of my leadership. There must be no doubt in anyone's eyes that I was destined to rule. I could have no equals. I had only one master, the Sun shining above us all.

I stripped off my filthy clothes and picked up the new ones laid out for me. The solar spiral glittered dully in the lamplight. I called up the fire of my Essence and the spiral blazed.

JALITH

Now that I'm some sort of incarnate god, it's time to think about what I'm going to do next. I've been personally chosen by the Unconquered Sun — suddenly I'm a great warrior and the bearer of a grand destiny. The only problem is that most people think the Anathema are depraved monsters and the Realm hunts us down like dogs.

I can fight better than almost anyone else alive, and I'm better at magic than any mortal sorcerer. Perhaps the best thing for me to do is to show everyone that the Anathema can also be heroes. There are a whole lot of dangerous spirits, normally kill someone, even with me behind it, but I could hear his neck crack. I took the stuff worth taking and set fire to the inn. That's not a place I'd sleep in again. I poured the better wine on the graves out back — those poor devils must have had some thirst with no relatives to offer food and drink. The wine that wasn't so good I took with me; I'm not as picky as a ghost is.

Wasn't until the next day when I stopped to wash at the spring that I noticed the mark on my forehead. I knew I hadn't suddenly become evil, so I guess the Realm lied about the Anathema, too. A few days later, I was walking to Gem with a couple of folks I'd met on the road. A silversmith looking for work and his wife — good people, honest, hoping for better days in Gem. Three bandits came on us in the twilight, just as we were getting ready to camp. They had bows, swords and horses. Most times, I'd have let the scum take what they wanted, but the silversmith had already gone through a few bad turns and I guessed I'd be able to handle those three.

That was the first time I ever punched out a horse. All three bandits stopped dead; then one of them nocked an arrow at the silversmith's wife and told me to leave. There was no call for that sort of thing, so I picked up the knocked-out horse and threw it at him. When it was over, we had a load of fresh horse meat, some weapons and one live horse to sell in Gem. I gave the silversmith the horse as a way of saying thanks for their company. He and his wife both looked me over real close when that fight was done. Always have a good story ready when folks are lookin' at you like that — say the wrong thing and they'll think you're as bad as whoever you just killed or chased off. I showed them my new bracers and told them how I'd won them gambling with a desert spirit. They'd heard similar stories, and told me I was damn lucky to still have a soul.

If you're readin' this, you're likely someone like me. Remember that you're the same person you always were. The only difference is now you can do a whole lot more. Istill wander around the Southlands, doing fights and helping folk where I can. Most times, they pay me for it. Now I can help out even better. The key is not going around telling everyone about how great the Unconquered Sun is and how you're now their holy king. Most folks don't take kindly to that sort of message, and rightly so.

Things are messed up and we've got a load of nasty lies to deal with. For all I know, long ago our kind deserved what they got. Don't sweat the past — do what you do best, and don't tell people the real reason you can one-punch a yeddim. The world's full of godbloods and spirits ready to make a deal. I've met two people who got the best end of such bargains, and there are stories of more. If you play your cards right, you can be just another story. Give folk a good tale and they won't be afraid of you — you can be their hero for awhile. Thing is, though, you can't use your power too much. If your Caste Mark starts to glow, no one's gonna be fooled.

Remember that except for the Dragon-Blooded, few folks know the Anathema as anything other than an old story they heard as a kid. If anyone sees you do fancy stuff and doesn't run off, talk to 'em. The easiest thing is when they ask if you're something in particular. If that something seems OK, always say yes — you'll make them feel all happy and clever. They'll tell you all about stories they've heard and ask you some easy questions. Enjoy the chat. There's always another thug on a horse waiting over the next hill.

In Gem, life was pretty much normal — things to do and roads to travel. I stayed in town for a month, with the feeling I was waiting for something. Early on, a couple of greedy guards needed to be taught a lesson. I still felt like staying after that was done, so I had to pay a fine. Listen to your feet; if they don't feel like wandering, there's a reason for where you are.

For me, this time, the reason proved to be Jak. I walked out of my inn one day and saw this short, skinny guy in long robes looking at me. Didn't think much of it, until he watched me get some money betting I could knock out this big guy. Would've been a pretty easy job even before everything happened — that rube was more guts and boasts than skill. I used a couple of tricks to make sure I put him out before he got really hurt — the damn fool didn't know when to stay down. The skinny guy talked to me afterwards, said he knew what I was and that he was one, too. Seemed like an honest sort. Later on, he told me his name was really Jasara, and that she preferred to pass as a man while in the South. It didn't matter much — she wasn't my type either way, too young and way too skinny. She makes stuff and does magic. Says she's Twilight and I'm Dawn, whatever the hell that means. She's got itchy feet too and likes traveling and doing what comes along. Made sense to hang with her, so we travel together now. I haven't taken care of younger folks much since my days in the kid-gang. I kinda like having a little sister again.

Lyta, talking to the Sidereal Exalted Acacia

My parents are both Dragon-Blooded, minor nobles in the Realm. Together, they govern several small towns and villages in a farming region on the western slopes of the mountain. Not unexpectedly, I didn't see much of them growing up, and I saw even less of them when it became clear I wasn't Dragon-Blooded. My older brother became an Aspect of Fire like my mother. He got the praise — I was merely their inconvenient daughter. They wanted to make me a merchant or a bureaucrat, but I never had the patience for haggling or scribing all day. The best times were when they left me alone to stalk rabbits and scare the servants.

Going to the Immaculate Order's Cloister of Wisdom was their idea, but I agreed readily enough — it got me away from home. I loved it there. The texts were dull, but the arts of war were a joy beyond all words. You can lose yourself practicing the combat forms — no thought, no problems, just the perfect unity of one move following another. Sparring was even better. The whole rest of the world went away when I stepped onto the sparringfloor. I was really good, too, for a mortal. Everyone knew the Dragon-Blooded students were the best, but the instructors spent almost as much time with us. If the Dragon-Blooded hope to continue their rule, they need plenty of well-trained pawns.

The rigid discipline was good for me. We always knew our place and what we should be doing. Up at dawn, exercise, breakfast, mediation and then chores. The days were all the same, but each one held a new opportunity for proving myself. I spent six years there, until I was called by the Sun a few weeks



after my 17th birthday. If I'd never been Sun-touched, I would still be there — I probably would have become a martial arts instructor and left my dreams inside those marble and glowstone walls. I never would have known the great injustices around me, and probably never would have cared. I'd have been just another shepherd, keeping the flock in line for the wolves of the Dynasty.

While I was there, I didn't think anything about being a puppet that supported the Dynasty's wretched, ramshackle little empire. I loved Master Willow, too. Now I know he was the worst of all; he and his kind pretend to care about their mortal students, but it's all false. They care for nothing but power and the other Dragon-Blooded. It disgusts me to think I'd still be another of his happy fools if I'd not been called by the Sun. The way everyone there, everyone in the whole rotting Realm, sucks up to the Dragon-Blooded is disgusting. It's not like they give a fig about anyone else. Every last one of them is selfish and rotten with corruption.

EXALTATION

It all started on the training floor. I had studied the dragon dance for six years, and was competing for my ranking that year. My entire class of two dozen fought. When the change began, only the best ten were still fighting. Salan and his friend Verdant Road started ganging up on me. Salan wasn't all that good, but Verdant was Dragon-Blooded and everyone knew he would finish first. He was only going after me because I had insulted Salan a week before. Salan had tried to steal a kiss from me, and I'd slapped him and called him a mangy cur. Now, Verdant was helping him make me finish tenth when I deserved second or third. Thus do the princes of the Dynasty protect their pets.

Suddenly, I felt dizzy, I thought I was about to lose, so I kept pushing. I swung faster, and then blood started flying. I finished the move and kicked Salan in the temple, and he fell down and lay completely still. Verdant went berserk; he wrapped himself in flame and rushed me, intent on my death. My fear and doubt vanished, and I struck as fast and clean as a cat. Before he could react, I hit him in the chest with a tiger claw strike and tore his heart out. I let him see it as he died.

Once he was dead, I noticed the aurora lighting up the practice field. Everyone hadfled, and Master Willow was shouting something about great evil. He sent someone for guards, and I knew in my heart that this place was the great evil, not I. Willow summoned his power and stood between me and the gate. I suppose he was brave, if misguided and tainted by his own corrupt blood. We fought for a time, and though the end was never in doubt, he acquitted himself bravely and gave me a number of slight injuries. I killed him cleanly and left before the guards arrived. I ran for many hours and lived in the mountains for several days.

Eventually I was drawn to my holy cave. I walked to it as if in a dream — there was no path, but my feet knew the way. At last, I stood before an ancient rock-fall, where I dug and moved stones until my hands were raw. Under the rubble and debris was a small opening, and inside was a cave bejeweled like a great geode — it glowed softly with divine light. I rested, and in my dreams I saw myself taking the cave's stone heart with me. I also saw my destiny — I had been chosen to rid the Blessed Isle of its foul masters. One day, I would lead an army that would make the streets run with the blood of those ancient traitors and restore a righteous order to the world.

I also dreamed of my death. Long ago, dying of poison, I had crawled into this cave to hide a magic bracer set with a night-black stone. As I left, I pulled down the entrance to keep my murders from finding either the cave or the bracer. The Dragon-Blooded had betrayed me, but they would never find my most precious treasure. Coughing blood, I had charged down the hill to die fighting those who had already slain me.

When I awakened, I reached towards the tiny crevice where I had hidden the bracer centuries ago. I found it waiting there, untouched by time. I wear it still, both for the power it provides and to remind me of the Terrestrials' treachery. I spent many days in the cave resting and hiding. There was water, and I found the place strangely comforting. I hunted small game for food, but knew I could not remain there. My enemies would search the entire island for me. Unless I left, I would die before I could exact my revenge. It was time to leave this oppressed isle. I'll return when I'm ready.

I'd visited Cloud Peak when I was a child. It was tiny, an isolated port almost a week's journey from the capitol and the Cloister, and I knew word of my change would be unlikely to have reached this sleepy hamlet. Walking there, I had much time to think. Every night as I slept, I learned more of what the world had lost with the destruction of my fellows. The Sun sent me dreams of what I needed to do to make things right again.

In the mountains high above the town, I knelt on small ledge with the holy Sun bright above me. I cut my hand and drew the solar disk in my own blood. When I return, my offering will be far larger and will use the blood of others. Yet, even this small sacrifice was answered. As night fell, a dark young man came and sat down beside me. He said his name was Crane and that a spirit had told him how to find me. He greeted me by name as a warrior of the Dawn. He bore the glowing mark of the stars upon him, and he told me he was one of the ancient magicians who used to aid and advise my kind. According to him, I was the burning fire and he was the divine messenger. The stars had called him three years ago, and he had been seeking one such as I eversince. His magics had foretold my coming, but not the exact time or location of my Exaltation. After searching without success, he had been about to leave the Realm. In despair, he had worked a powerful summoning and had called a great spirit to aid him. In return for the gift of an ancient staff Crane had taken from the Realm's treasury, the spirit told him where he could find me. I do not remember Crane from my prior life, but we are both Celestial. With so many traitors arrayed against us, we must aid each other-he will be the bridge that carries me to my revenge.

Crane left to finalize our passage, telling me to come down at sunset. When I asked how we were leaving the island and where we were going, he told me he had bargained with the same spirit that found me, for safe passage out into the Western islands. The vastness of the Western isles seemed a good place to plan our campaign. Crane said the spirit would come for us at moonrise. Walking down the mountain, the evening was cool and beautiful. So perfect a place must be cleansed of all its taint and made pure again, so that the children of the Sun might establish their seat.

CHAPTER ONE . OUR SOULS THROUGH OUR EYES



I first thought he had betrayed me, for two Dragon-Blooded and almost a dozen mortals were waiting for me at the edge of the town. They were well hidden, but I noticed the glint of their armor. Calling up the tiger within, I charged them. The mortals were easy - a single blow to head or chest broke them past all fixing. Their swords could not harm me, their blades bounced off of my skin, while my hands cut them to the bone. The feel of their blood on my palms was like a drink of the finest wine. The traitors were harder. Bolts of flame from the burning woman singed my flesh, and the other was as swift as a racing hound. Every time I tried to attack the Fire Aspect, the silvery-skinned Water Aspect savaged my back with his blade-encrusted chain. He was the better warrior and meant to exhaust me while his companion weakened me with fire. Every time I tried to hit the faster one, he was elsewhere.

"Wait in stillness until the moment is perfect." Master Willow's words came to me, holding new meaning. I hesitated, and the watery eagerness of the swift one called him to me. Once you commit to an attack, defense becomes far less easy. When he was very near, Hashed out two times. Striking twice is clumsy, but far more difficult to avoid, and I had only one chance to take him down. He dodged well enough that the blow to his chest scraped off of his ribs without rending his vitals. He was not expecting the blow to the head. I clawed a portion of his scalp to the bone and felt something crack under my hand. He wasn't dead, but he was bleeding badly and out of the fight.

During my exchange with the Water Aspect, the Fire Dragon had burned me twice: once on the back and once to the leg. Now that I had nothing to distract me from her death, I could see the fear in her fire-covered eyes. She knew I could kill her and that she could not escape. She fought well, but her flames only singed me while my hands tore the flesh from her bones. Hurry though I must, I played with her a bit. She begged at the end. It felt wonderful to kill her. After finishing them both, I walked into town. The residents cowered in their houses.

Crane was waiting for me at the docks. When I saw him, I ran to him still full of rage and accused him of betraying me. He stood his ground and told me that our enemies possess powerful magics to locate those like myself. When I asked why he did not help me, he told me that he must always remain in the shadows so that the Realm's rulers will not know that I am the chosen one of the Sidereals. My rage calmed as I realized that the small band of opponents had never been a serious threat.

I remember his next words well. "Lyta, could they really have harmed you? If you truly mean to overthrow them all, can you let two young Dragon-Blooded and a handful of mortals stand in your way? The Wyld Hunt's magic finally found you, but this tiny patrol was all they could send. Now there are two fewer Dragon-Blooded for you to fight later."

Then he laughed like the ring of a crystalline bell and cried a soft haunting call. As I looked out over the harbor, a slender galley suddenly appeared in the darkness — it may have been waiting just out of sight, or it may have materialized from nothing. Built of polished rose-colored shell, it gleamed like gold in the moonlight. Short, dark shapes worked the oars and sails. Crane never told me the price of our passage, but the ship carried us smoothly and rapidly into the West.



CHAPTER TWO . OBLIGATIONS OF THE CASTE

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THE ROLE OF THE DAWN CASTE

In the ancient days of the First Age, the Dawn Caste were heroic warriors and glorious generals. In single combat and when leading great armies, they defended the Old Realm against all attackers. The Dawn Caste fought bold campaigns to conquer rebels, usurpers, and the constant threat posed by the Wyld. In return, the Dawn Caste were honored as the Old Realm's greatest heroes. Statues were built in their honor, and adoring crowds flocked to see triumphal processions celebrating their victories.

However, like all of their kind, their pride grew too great and many began to abuse their power. Eventually all of the Solar Exalted were slain by the treachery of the Dragon-Blooded, who suppressed the true history of the Old Realm and reviled the Celestial Exalted as demons. Everyone now knows the Dawn Exalted as the horrific Forsaken, bloodthirsty killers who left only burning cities and legions of the dead and the grievously injured in their wake. Those few Forsaken who were reborn between the end of the First Age and the present day were ruthlessly hunted down and slain by the Wyld Hunt of the Dragon-Blooded. Only now, with the Realm in chaos and their numbers greatly increased, do the Solar Exalted again have a chance for survival. For those who do survive, what will these powerful beings do next? The answers are as varied as the individuals who make up this caste.

Although the Unconquered Sun gives to all Solar Exalted a sense of duty and a desire to venerate their deity, individuals who have powerful aspirations of their own can put both of these impulses aside. Also, while these desires remain constant, how the individual Solars act upon these feelings is a far more personal decision.

Some members of the Dawn Caste become fearless champions of the Unconquered Sun. However, many instead use their newfound powers to accomplish their own personal ends. Most of these new Exalted will eventually seek loftier goals after their first century or two of life, but for the moment, the majority are concerned either with immediate practical actions like defeating the forces that hunt their kind, or with amassing sufficient power and glory to pursue their own plans.

Some Dawn Caste work to free the world from the harsh yoke of tyranny. Others wish to become powerful warlords, holding wealthy kingdoms under their sway. Regardless of their particular plans, every member of this caste is a powerful force and their actions can change the world in significant ways.

DACE

The world's in a truly sorry state. The Realm's falling apart, the Fair Folk and spirits are more restless and predatory, and barbarians keep pushing into civilized territories. About the only places that manage to maintain even a shred of discipline are a few of the shadowlands — and I'm not ready to take my men there just yet. It's no accident that I and



others like me have suddenly been called to serve the Sun. We've been sent here to bring peace and order to the world, and that's what I'll do. I'll leave making treaties and administering kingdoms to others, and do what I do best — lead. Soldiers under my command don't lose very often, and there are many battles to be won before we can push back all the threats facing the world.

Panther and Swan say we must cut the cancer out of the Realm before we tackle any other problems. That's a nice sentiment — the Realm's incompetence and corruption is at the heart of many of the problems facing the world - but some battles can't be won. Each of us can take maybe half a dozen Dragon-Blooded on our best day. There are five of us against the ten thousand Terrestrial Exalted in the Realm. Even if we gathered all of the Anathema together, we'd still lose against that force. We can't attack the Realm directly and win. Besides, none of us have the slightest idea what sort of old magics they have lying around. The Realm is ancient and the folks in charge are exceptionally paranoid and highly experienced at staying in power. The Realm is a problem we can't solve yet. Troubles you can't solve have to be worked around. The Realm is vast and powerful, but much of its might depends upon the tribute it obtains from the Threshold.

The death of the Empress is the weakness we must exploit. Currently, the Realm garrisons out here are spread too thin; many of their outposts are undermanned, and most of the Dragon-Blooded stationed at them want to go home and get a head start on their cousins in the foot-race for the throne. With imperial attentions turned to internal politics and court intrigue, requests for additional men and supplies for the Threshold garrisons will be given low priority. If we can grab a large section of the Threshold before the Realm settles down, then we can starve them of their tribute and have enough of a foundation to support our own bid for power.

We need to hit the Realml's allies, starting with those who've made themselves unpopular with their subjects or their neighbors. Every kingdom or city-state we take is one less source of income for the Realm. We also need to support rulers who are strongly anti-Realm — most nobles out here don't like the way the Realm treats them. After a few flashy, easily won battles, some princes and courtiers will think about how much more gold they'd have if they didn't pay taxes to the Realm. After we have a good power base, we can start hitting the Realm garrisons directly.

I've already made a start at this. A bit north of Sijan, there were a couple of towns ruled by a lordling who paid tribute to the Realm. Her little "kingdom" was a real piece of work. Anyone who spoke out against her got one of their kids snatched. She sold these kids to House Cynis and used the money to hire mercenaries to prop up her throne. Unfortunately for this would-be empress, she also thought she could rip off the Guild, who traded a favor with the Council and sent me off to educate her.

Most of her forces were a right mess, but they had some decent scouts. We came in quiet and at night — I had the cavalry all dismount and slowly walk their horses to the edge of town with the infantry flanking them, to keep anyone from getting around behind us. Unfortunately, a couple of the scouts saw us. Arat managed to take down one of them with an arrow, but the other ran to wake the rest. Most were halfdressed, and a few were drunk, but they weren't too disgraceful. I didn't want to lose any of my men on this job, so we just cut down the good ones and let the rest run off. In less than half an hour most of the ones worth killing were dead.

We were closing in on the last bunch who had sense enough to stay together, when their boss proved she had a nit's worth of sense. She must have used her connections with House Cynis to acquire something from the Realm's treasure trove of old magic. I was riding down on a band of troops when I saw a huge flash of light and my horse exploded. The bitch killed my horse! Almost killed me too, but my armor stopped most of it. It hurt like a mother, though.

There she was on the balcony of her villa, holding this huge glowing staff and calling lightning down from the clear night sky. I told my men to get under cover and ran towards the palace as fast as I could, using the sides of the buildings as cover. That staff wasn't real quick, but the porch of a smithy got hit just after I ran past. As expected, she had her best guards in front of her palace. There were ten of them, a tough number but not so many I couldn't win. I'd hacked down five of them with only a shallow cut on my arm and a big bruise on my shin for my trouble when she sent the next bolt straight into the middle of the battle.

The fool woman got three of her own guards and missed me completely. The other two got some sense and ran like hell. There was no one inside but a few servants, and they all ran, too. She was halfway down an escape passage when I caught up with her. She and a ratty little henchman were each carrying big bags of gems and gold. As I expected, her magic staff didn't work indoors. I heard lightning hit the roof, but we were in the basement. She yelled for the guy with her to keep me busy while she got away. He took one look at the huge glow around me and stabbed her in the back. I appreciated the sentiment, but I don't trust people who turn on their employers in a crisis, so I cut him down and hacked off her head.

Everyone in all three towns showed up to spit on her head after I put it on a post outside her villa, and we got half her treasury as a bonus from the locals. I talked to them and made certain they knew exactly who had saved them and who had been paying their "queen." What I told them didn't fit well with what they'd previously heard about the Anathema, but one dead queen trumps a whole bunch of old stories. I think we did pretty well with that job. The staff wasn't my style, so I gave it to Arianna. We made a difference there — I'm guessing we messed up some nobles' fun and the locals were certainly happy. Long as my men stay paid and in one piece and I'm winning battles for the right side, I'm happy, too.

YURGEN

"Yurgen! Yurgen—" The children sang out my name and skipped behind me. Only the bravest dared to dart up and touch the edge of my fur robes. "Yurgen. Sun-touched! The Bull of the North!"

CHAPTER TWO . OBLIGATIONS OF THE CASTE

It was strange to be wanted. I had left my own tribe, the Reedplains elk, when I became too much of a burden for them. The Blackwater tribe clustered around me, crowding out the rest of the hunting party, laughing and patting my shoulders and back as we returned, bloody and weary from the hunt. This tribe wasn't mine — they should have left me to die weeks ago. But the mammoth herders had taken me in, fed me, given me shelter and now — in their shining eyes and mouths round with awe — they offered me something else. Something I didn't want.

"Look at the size of him!" Tadik's voice rose behind me. "Spectacular! Glorious! We'll celebrate tonight!" He was talking of the game, I'm sure, but it sounded uncomfortably like he was speaking of me.

Chem was already telling my story. The long, weary days of tracking and how my very presence had given the hunters hope. The bloody, triumphant clash with the young bull mammoth. The unexpected attack, when we were all burdened with raw meat and hides, by omen dogs. The flash of my bow, brighter than the sun itself. Chem was a good storyteller and people laughed, gasped and turned delighted eyes back to me. Chem wasn't exaggerating. He didn't have to.

I was no one's brother, father, or fellow hunter. The stories that Chem told, that grew around me like weeds, were the kinds of things spoken about the ancestors, not the living. The happy faces turned to me were not the faces of friends.

I had never wanted to lead. I was no chieftain, no shaman, no elder. I had never wanted these things. All my life I had been content with my wives, my children and my elk. The taste of clean air and the snow pack stretching before my eyes had always been enough. What had hurt, when my tribe began to drift away from me, was losing my friends, my cousins, my brothers and sisters to sickness, age, wolves. I had remained strong and healthy — unnaturally so. I wasn't afraid of the weakness of age. I was afraid of the loneliness.

I was never by myself now, but I was always alone. The children followed me back to my tent, whispering. Maidens of the tribe waited to help me from my clothes, ready to tend any wounds. They made small, amazed sounds as it became clear I was uninjured.

"Go!" I snapped. I shoved the nearest girl away. She was the same age as my granddaughter. "Go on — get out!"

Sparks snapped from my hair and danced in the air. They stared at my forehead where the gold mark must have flared to life and fled. I rubbed my face, digging my fingers into my forehead. I felt nothing. I'd never even seen the thing that so completely set me apart. Samea had to draw it on hide with red mud so I could see the shape of it. A golden sunburst, she said. The god's sign. The god's blessing. I was the god's chosen one.

I struggled to quench the light oozing from my skin like sweat. I had only recently learned the trick of it, and it took a few moments before my yurt returned to normal — mortal — dimness. In the smoky flicker of lamplight, I could see that someone had given me more things.

I had come to the tribe empty-handed. That was why I went on the hunts so often, to repay them. The winter had





It was time to move on, so I took it on the road. Exhibition fights in villages and small towns are easy. You show off a bunch of strong-man tricks, challenge a couple of locals, don't hurt them too much, and collect your money. Not as much cash, but they normally feed you good. I kept folks entertained, got to see new things, and after showin' off like that, my bed was never empty 'less I felt like sleeping alone. Found I really liked to wander, too.

Thing is, when someone big and strong wanders into town, some folks look at him like he can solve all their problems. Didn't think much of it the first few times, but I beat up a couple of local thugs, killed a few wild dogs and suddenly folks were lookin' at me like I'm some kinda hero. Word got around, and I got more offers. They paid me, of course, and sometimes taking people's work was easier than the fights. I did both; I like keeping in practice. Guess I was doin' something right too, considerin' what happened.

palms. Busy innkeeper. The first body I dug up had been stripped, so I searched the inn again — closer this time.

The stuff I found suggested that the guy had a partner who was either recently dead or out somewhere. I also found their stash — mostly useless crap from the victims. Found a dagger whose hilt matched Balam's, pocketed that and the cash, and kept looking. Found a couple of really nice bracers. I'd never seen that metal before; they looked old and fancy. I put them on. I must have fallen over like a felled tree. Next thing I knew, it was night and that mangy yellow dog was barking. I gave the dog a kick and it flew across the room and hit the wall.

In comes this really big guy — looked like he might be the innkeeper's son. He wasn't too happy to see me and was carrying an ax. He was fast, but I blocked the blade with my fist and broke the handle. The boy started hollering like a dozen Deathlords were behind me, so I got really mad and hit him. One jab doesn't

EXALTATION

Few months back, this little guy named Balam asked me if I could find his brother Seth. There's this shortcut between Chiaroscuro and Gem. It's supposed to be a faster trip, but most folks say it's unlucky. Not anymore, but that was too late for Seth. There's a caravansary at this oasis about halfway along sort of run down, but so many are. The guy running it was wrong, though. He was real friendly, but I didn't trust him from the moment I saw him. Claimed he'd never seen Seth, but he looked worried. I saw him eat the same stew he gave me, but I poured my ale under my chair when he wasn't looking. His old yellow dog avoided the spill. The only other travelers there were a big bunch of pilgrims - they didn't know anything and cared even less, worthless damn fools.

The innkeeper kept looking at me, waiting. I yawned a lot and went to bed early. Right on schedule, he comes in with a big thick blanket for my face. The bastard planned to smother me as a slept. I jumped up, hit him a couple of times, and then grabbed him and broke his worthless neck. I waited for the pilgrims to leave and then looked around the place. Maybe he was keepin' folks caged up to sell as slaves - I didn't believe it, but Seth's brother would want to know for sure. I found the graves out back, right under the date



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ruthless warlords and deadly monsters in the world, and a real shortage of people who can solve the sorts of problems they pose. Even a single tyrant lizard can kill half a dozen people before someone finally takes it down.

If I go out and make a name for myself ridding the world of nastiness, and don't make too much of a secret of the fact that I'm a Solar Exalted, perhaps it will make a difference. If not, I'll at least get to see a lot of battles and hopefully make a good living off of the tribute I get from the people I save and whatever I can take from the things I kill.

Nexus looks like a good place for this sort of thing. I've only been here three weeks and I've already heard stories of several Ravager bands out East, cannibal cults preying on travelers to the North, and tales of how a caravan going down to Harborhead recently vanished without a trace. Most of the rumors are probably lies or nonsense, but even they might lead to something interesting. Solving some mysteries and cashing in some rewards should also help my reputation and my money supply. If I perform deeds that no one else can, word will get around fast.

Mostly I've heard about assignments I wouldn't take. I won't kill anyone who doesn't deserve it and I'm not a petty thief. Big flashy successes are good, but so is not looking like a monster. I'm sure there's plenty of work to be found hunting down escaped slaves or helping heartless queens and princes kill off the local band of rebels. If I get into that sort of thing, I might as well head off to the Realm and see if I can join up, not that they'd take me. I'll need contracts where I'm doing something heroic, something people will look up to.

Last week I ran into another being like me, except she said she was Zenith Caste. Meeting her shocked the hell out of me. I was happy to find another Anathema, until she started in on her big plans. She talked my ear off about higher purposes, overthrowing the oppressors and lots of other crap. From what I've heard, there are no more than a few dozen of us. I asked her if she expected the bunch of us to take on the whole Realm and she started expounding on our glorious and holy destiny. I told her that if we all charged the Realm together, our destiny would be getting buried in the same cold dank ditch. I haven't seen her since. Hell, I'm not sure I want to change the world, much less what I'd want to do with it. However, if I want to have any chance of making a difference later, I'll need the support of other people - preferably lots of people. If I'm a big famous hero, then folks will listen to me. Until then, I'm just another minor godling with big dreams. It's not like the world has any shortage of those.

In the course of making my name, I'll definitely be butting heads with the Realm. When word about me starts to get around, they'll come looking for me. And, from what I've seen, the Realm supports about half of the really horrid tyrants out there. Getting rid of despots is going to earn me some enemies back on the Blessed Isle. But I'll be the one picking those fights — I'm not going to stroll up to their door and try to kick it down.

After my name is out there and people have some idea of who I am and what I can do, I think I'll go home. That should be fun. The generals won't ignore me then; the rootless bastards will probably welcome me with open arms. With me in charge of either the whole guard or maybe a special elite force, we could hit the Linowan hard enough that generations would pass before theyo'd dare enter our forests again. We could plant redwoods all the way to the coast and wipe out the savages once and for all.

After that, I don't know what - once the Linowan have been dealt with, there won't be much for me to do back home. Founding my own kingdom might work. I'd put it someplace near home so I can help out if there are problems, but it would be my own kingdom. I think I'd enjoy becoming a princess - and getting to be one shouldn't be too tough, once I have more money than I know what to do with. The land to the south of Halta and north of the Scavenger Lands is probably the best choice. Nowadays it's mostly full of underfed peasants, a few small and dirty cities, and some of the more civilized tree-living tribes. I'll go in, wipe out the warlords and spirits who rule most of the city-states, and give myself a kingdom that stretches from the sea in the West to the boundary of the forest in the East. But right now, I need to find some work, because for now I'm just a sword for hire -a really impressive sword, but I can't expect people to hire someone without a rep, and I don't want to be a mercenary. No soldiering or team assignments for me. I work best solo, just me and my beasts.

TWO MONTHS LATER

I just finished my first big job. Raynor hired me — he's one of the biggest fixers in Nexus. The pay was excellent, I put one over on the Realm, and it was great fun. I was supposed to hit this caravan going from the Realm to the city-state of Vesca. Malec, the Dragon-Blooded commander of the Greyfalls garrison, was leading it. All I had to do was make certain Raynor got the pouch Malec was carrying, and that the supplies in the caravan were all stolen or destroyed. I was tempted to look for something more impressive until I found out that the pouch held an ancient artifact sent from the Realm to Queen Tiloca, potentate of a little dump to the south of the Scavenger Lands.

That woman is definitely on my short list. She bargained with the Deathlords to be able to stay young as long as she drinks the blood of young virgins every month. The tales coming out of Vesca aren't nice - she has dungeons full of people ready to become her snacks. Now the Realm is giving that horror a ring that will protect her against assassins. In return, she's going to let the Realm have a garrison in Vesca, and maybe help them make contact with Mask of Winters to negotiate treaties and alliances. Between that ring and the Realm's garrison of Dragon-Blooded advisors, she'd be nearly impossible to put out of the way. I like the idea of keeping her from becoming even more trouble than she already is. Anyway, Raynor also told me he wouldn't mind if garrison commander Malec died. I'd heard this commander was actually pretty decent for one of the Dragon-Blooded, but if he was involved in helping Queen Tiloca, he didn't need to keep breathing.

I'm glad they went through forest. Oaks and maples aren't much like home, but they're a whole lot better than open fields — I still don't know how you manage a decent

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ambush in open terrain. Standing up from short grass and shouting for folks to stop just looks silly unless you have 50 more friends with you. I found out they were using yeddim, which made the job real easy. Yeddim are dead simple to track, especially in forests — they leave a trail a half-dozen yards wide and footprints at least half a hand deep.

I hit them just before they stopped for the night. There were around two dozen people on horses, one pack yeddim loaded with all manner of crap, and two Dragon-Blooded. Raynor never told me there would be a second Dragon-Blooded along. It's a damn good thing neither of them knew any sorcery, or I could have been really screwed. The mission suddenly started looking a lot less like a good deal. Unfortunately, backing out from a deal with Raynor means never working in Nexus again. I'd also have to deal with his thugs. The last person who dumped an assignment from him was later found with parts floating in all three rivers. I don't need the kind of people Raynor can hire coming after me — I had to go ahead with the job. Next time I'm going to ask more questions before I agree to anything like this. At the moment, I was just happy both of the Dragon-Blooded looked fairly young.

I watched the caravan for almost an hour. I'd seen a painting of Malec before; he was sort of cute, but cute guys can still deserve to die. The odd thing was that he didn't appear to be the one in charge. The other Dragon-Blooded, a really mean-looking Air Aspect, was the one giving the orders. He was wearing armor, but no insignia. I never found out who he was.

I crept along the branches until I was up in a nice big oak tree by the only path wide enough for the yeddim. When they were right below me, I called upon my magic. My spell reached out to the minds of the animals and triggered all the rage that even the most placid beast possesses. In an instant I filled half of the animals below me with red anger. It was exhausting — sorcery always is — but the results were well worth it. Malec was really goddamn good; his horse tried to buck him off and slam him into several trees, but he managed to keep control of her. The yeddim drovers and most everyone else had no such luck. The horses screamed, reared, kicked and frothed at the mouth. Once they had their riders on the ground, they started trampling and biting them. Several of the horses were killed — I still hate having been responsible for that, but it's better them than me.

I'd never ensorcelled a yeddim before — they're like an angry mountain. I was glad to be in a sturdy tree, and I still heard the trunk crack when the yeddim kicked it. That giant beast shook itself hard enough to throw off its pack, then trampled three horses and four men. I had planned to grab the pouch during the confusion, but nothing on earth would have gotten me down there until they put that beast down. Its bellows of rage shook my tree. When it died, it fell on its pack. At least one part of the mission was over.

While the yeddim was bleeding to death and kicking, I went after the pouch. A boomerang shot cut the strap on the pouch, and it fell before the commander could grab it. I wish I hadn't needed that ring, otherwise I'd already have gone. Just as I was about to jump down to get the pouch, the other DragonBlooded saw me and leaped up onto my branch. He was tall and willowy, but strong as iron and wielding a jade-tipped spear. I knew if I didn't get him soon, one of his blows would get through my parties and I'd be either dead or too badly injured to escape. I called Meros down and had her flutter just out of range. She distracted him enough so he didn't notice that the boomerang I threw was meant to miss him. It bounced off a branch a yard behind him and hit him in the gap between the back of his helmet and his breastplate. He wasn't dead, but he was hurt badly enough that he fell off the branch and didn't get up.

By this time, Malec had the pouch in one hand and was trying to get his company back in line. His horse was badly hurt, he had a large bloody gash on his left leg and more than half his force was dead, but he still looked really tough. I hated risking her like that, but my only chance was to hit him with another boomerang and have Meros grab the pouch when he dropped it. Luckily, it was fairly small pouch — otherwise, I would have had to go down there and get it myself. I threw right at Malec. He dodged, but he also looked me right in the eyes and dropped the pouch. No one else saw him do it, but he deliberately dropped it. Meros scooped it up and brought it back to me.

What he did next may have been for show, but I think it was because I'd killed some of his men. He started throwing bolts of brilliant crimson fire from his hands. One of them came close enough to scorch my face. I hate the smell of burning hair. If it had been any closer, I would have seared my lungs breathing flames. Another larger bolt set my tree on fire. Malec wanted me dead, and my guess is he was hoping the damned ring would burn up with me. I sent Meros and Achal away to get them out of danger and dodged the flames until I could call the whirlwind to carry me away to safety.

He would have gotten me if I hadn't known that spell. Once my wind chariot formed, I was safe. Not much can keep up with something that fast. I don't know if he did what he did for politics or some deal he made with Raynor, but I like to think that Malec let the ring go because he also hates Queen Tiloca. I have a feeling I'll being seeing Malec again. I hope next time it's on better terms. I'm not much for partners, but I could see working with him on something. Lots of people say he's a decent guy — he's also amazing to watch in action, and he's really cute.

ONE YEAR LATER

I almost died yesterday. If I hadn't been so damn good, I'd have been spirits' meat. Lots of folks in Nexus were talking about how a huge caravan going out to one of the deep forest tribes had been virtually destroyed by a huge nest of spirits. I talked to one of the few survivors of that massacre. He looked to be almost 50, and told me he'd been working caravans for the past 30 years. Now his left arm ended in a bandaged stump — one of the spirits had ripped half of it off. He didn't want to tell me, but I paid him for the exact location of the massacre, and he wasn't exactly getting much work with a missing arm.

I commanded the swirling winds to carry my beasts and I down to where the Nessus River runs into Lake Khol. After that, we walked southeast until I could smell the corpses.

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Many of them hadn't even been eaten — there was almost no animal life in the whole region. Just after I saw the first corpse, I heard a rustling up ahead. The next thing I knew, a dozen spirits were headed right at us. They looked like a pack of apes, but black as night. They were blobs of monkeyshaped darkness with silver teeth and the longest claws I have ever seen on an animal.

I sent Meros up and got Achal behind me. If we'd come here at night, they'd have killed all three of us. The worst part was that the spirits were totally silent. The only sound was the rustling of the brush. I'm so glad I had that returning boomerang I found in the haunted ruins of Ra-talah. Achal fought beside me, my parries kept us mostly safe, and his claws and my weapons slowly worked through the press. At the end, I was exhausted and both the cat and I were bleeding from several wounds each.

It was early evening, but I could see the source of these spirits by my own glorious and golden light. At the center of a clearing, six strong, perfect trees had grown together into the likeness of a grand ground-dweller palace. The walls were leafy branches laced as tight as a well-woven basket. I climbed a tree on the edge of the clearing to get a better look. Through the large windows, I could see that a carpet of other branches formed a full second story. It was a grounder's house, but an incredibly lovely one. The question was, why was it full of deadly spirits?

Whatever was inside wasn't coming out, so I had to go in. Meros gave me a closer look in the upper windows. Well furnished, but no one in sight. The lower windows were all closed. Achal and I ran up the side and went in through one of the upper windows. If there was a trap on the first floor, the residents would be disappointed. There were no spirits up top, but the furnishings were incredible. Almost everything up there was alive. Growing branches and vines made chairs, tables and even cabinets. I'd never seen anything like it, but there was no time to look around. We went down to the first floor together.

They were waiting for us. There were two demons, with what that looked like an old woman standing behind them. The two demons were like nothing I'd ever seen before. Gods and dragons, they were horrible! Their skin flickered with dim red flames and their bodies were covered with gaping, open-lipped mouths. The flaming maws on their palms and their cheeks were the most terrible part. I never want to see that again.

The two demons rushed towards me, while the old woman stayed back against the wall. I didn't know what my weapons could do to those demons. Guessing the woman was the one in charge, I hoped her death would dispel them. I certainly wasn't in any shape to fight those things. Feinting like I was aiming at the demons, I threw two boomerangs at the old woman. One took her in the neck, the other low in the side. She shrieked like a young girl and fell over dead. The two demons evaporated like water in a hot pan — suddenly there was just a dead body and a huge pool of very human-looking blood. I only got a good look at the woman once she was dead.



The instant I turned away from her to pick up one of my boomerangs, Meros yelled for me to look out and an cold, inhumanly strong hand grabbed my shoulder. A rough voice said "Thief, I think you're being a bit premature looting my house."

It sounded like she'd last spoken before I was born. I grabbed my blade and tried to twist away from her. I felt my collarbone break as I spun around. She grabbed for my throat. I blocked her shining clawed hand with my sword. When the steel struck her, I got my first good look at her neck. The wound was little more than a scar and healing as I watched.

She swung her arm almost faster than I could see and shoved me back. As I hit the wall, I heard several branches snap and felt some of my ribs break. She was stronger and faster than me, and my weapons couldn't harm her. With a lucky stroke, I managed to slash her left arm so that it hung by a single strand of flesh. I'd put it out of action for a while, but it would heal and then she'd come at me again. I was growing weaker with every blow while she stayed strong.

A stroke to her neck showed me a glint of emerald. Something brilliantly green was embedded in the flesh of her throat, and I figured maybe hacking it out would harm her. I didn't exactly have a lot of choice; unless I found an edge, I knew I'd be dead soon. I hesitated for a second too long and she got a blow through that broke my left leg.

I had only one chance left. Rolling backward away from her, ignoring the agony in my shoulder and thigh, I threw two boomerangs at her legs. My aim was true — I cut them both off at the knees. Just after she fell, I threw two knives to pin her arms to the floor. Her legs were inching towards her as I crawled forward. Her legs and I left trails of crimson blood on the soft leafy floor. She pulled one arm free and was grabbing for me when I used my knife to gouge the bright stone from her body. She slumped and dissolved into vile liquid corruption even as she struck at me. In less than a minute she was nothing but foul-smelling black dust.

I was hurt bad. I heal fast, but I didn't know if I could recover from those injuries. Worse yet, it was almost dark. If anything else lived here, I would be easy meat. It was a beautiful place to die if it came to that, but I wanted to live. Achal washed my wounds while I crawled over to my pack to get my canteen. After wrapping myself in more secure bandages, I looked at the stone I'd taken from her. It was warm in my hands. I stared at it and felt it draw me further in. Either something amazing was happening or I was dying. I didn't know what was going on, but I felt incredibly grateful that I didn't hurt any more.

It felt like falling asleep. When I became aware of my surroundings again, the green stone was in an old amulet I'd found in the pack of a cutpurse who had tried to attack me a few months ago. I don't know how or why any of that happened, but I felt wonderful. There was no pain, I wasn't hungry anymore, and I felt better than I had in days. I checked my wounds — they had all healed completely and without scars. I guess the old Sun hasn't given up on the likes of me yet.

DEMETHEUS

Don't much know what I'll do now — most likely what I been doing. There's a lot of trouble in the world, and I'm lookin' to get rid of some of it. Before all this happened, I traveled a lot. Can't see that my life has really changed, 'cept that I'm not as likely to lose any of the fights I get into. I know some folks like me are makin' armies, settin' up kingdoms, and all sorts of other big plans. I've seen too many kingdoms where the king has no clue who's really in charge or what life is really like for most folks. I don't see how it will be any different for us, sitting up on some high horse or lookin' out from some fancy palace balcony. I don't want to be any kind of general, lord or prince—I just want to make things better for folks. From what I've heard, our lot were kings and generals once — look how that ended up.

Long as I keep moving, no one and nothin' really nasty is likely to catch up with me, and I get to see what problems need fixing. All the power in the world doesn't mean nothin' if you don't know how to use it right. You don't figure out what needs doin' by reading books or askin' anyone whose job depends on your liking them. You find out by walking down a road and looking for yourself. You can ask folks what they want done, but you'd still better go look. There are a whole lot of liars out running around makin' trouble and lookin' to help themselves at other folks' expense.

'Course, this doesn't mean you got to live like some sorta monk, walkin' around with a ratty old robe and a begging bowl. When you do most decent folks a big favor, they'll want to make it up to you. Taking their money or whatever else they give you is polite and keeps you ready for the next job. Some folks can't or won't give you anything, but that's their business. You'll make it up with what you get off some of the scum. Most of the folks I take down a notch or two are pretty rich; they can afford to share some with me and with the folks they hurt.

The big advantage of my way of doing things is that I come in fresh to wherever I am. A couple weeks back, I was at one of these mining camps that Gem runs, and some fool had been stealin' from other people's claims. Most everyone there thought it was this little guy named Rifter — no one but his boyfriend and this old gray cat liked him. He had too big a mouth and not nearly enough sense.

Problem was, no one could find where he'd hid the gemstones. They were getting set to torture him the evening I wandered in and his boy asked me to save him. The boyfriend was too upset to be any use, and the rest of them had already decided Rifter did it. So, I looked at who was shouting his guilt the loudest. A couple of them were folks everyone agreed hated Rifter, and not necessarily for bad reasons, but one was second to the guy in charge of the whole crew. From what folks said, he was pretty new and didn7't know Rifter much at all. As it happened, the first theft came only two weeks after he arrived. So I went up to this guy and played like I had some contacts for selling the stones. He talked to me, and then I worked him over until he talked to the crew boss, too. When things started goin' bad, folks in the camp all went after Rifter because they didn't like him. I didn't dislike him, so I saw who really did it.

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I don't got much respect for anyone not willing to get his hands dirty. It's not like we're too good for that sort of thing we're people just like everyone else. Best as I can see, we're just about perfect for being able to go someplace, find out what's up and make it right. I don't guess we'd be so damn tough if we were meant to sit up in some palace and tell other folks what to do.

I'm not much into big plans, but I agree we should work together. Sun only knows the folks causing all the troubles are well enough organized. Jasara knows three more of us, and I know two others. We don't hang out much, but we do keep in touch — Jasara has a spell for that. She has this cute little thing that carries messages fast as lightning, and one guy I know can move leagues in a single step.

We let each other know what we're up to, and we give warning when the Wyld Hunt or any other big goons are on the move. We also try to get together every few months. There's nothing like meeting up and sharing drinks to get to know what someone's really been up to.

Last time we met, we talked about Paragon a bit. That city gives all of us the creeps. Becoming a citizen there is for keeps — I don't like having my choices taken away. Then again, there are a whole lot fewer hungry kids and beggars on Paragon's streets. Jasara and Aesha wanted the Perfect dead the rest of us talked them out of it because there are lots of worse places around. The thing that really has us all worried is the trouble between Paragon and Gem. It could mean war, and the Perfect has the Realm on his side. Gem's Despot is a right bastard, but he doesn't much care if our kind lives there. He also ain't got much use for the Realm. If he loses big, the Realm could move right in to the whole South. Next thing you know, Chiaroscuro has a nice big garrison and the Dragon-Blooded have the whole Southland in their pocket. It's a big deal getting involved in a war, but it looks like it may be the only way. We won't be signin' on with the Despot, but we're planning take out a few of Paragon's supply caravans. An army can't fight without food or water.

I don't much like wars — I prefer my battles one on one. I also like fighting who I choose, not some slob this rich guy tells me to kill. I'd rather fight a fire spirit taller than three date palms than be any kind of solider, but someone needs to keep the Realm out of the Southland, and it looks like we've got the job.

LYTA

LYTA TALKING TO CRANE

Crane, my goal is clear. The Realm is an abomination — its streets run thick with corruption. Cutting off the head is not enough: it must be cleansed and purified. The Realm is the heart of the world — as it continues to decay, the Wyld areas and the shadowlands grow larger by the day. Unless the holy Solar Deliberative is restored, the world will surely die.

You and others like you can help rebuild its glory, but my destiny is different. I am the holy knife to cut away the diseased tissue. I am the fire that burns the field so that the new crops will grow tall. The blood I shed is my gift to the Unconquered Sun. Those mortals I kill will be reborn as the princes and queens of the new world. Those who fall by my side will return as the new Dragon-Blooded, loyal servants gifted with powers second only to mine.

In the Cloister of Wisdom, I was taught that war was a useful tool of state and a chance for skilled warriors to prove their martial prowess. Such beliefs are merely another evidence of the Realm's decay. War is a sacred act — in battle we all become gods, taking the lives of the enemy and giving life to our comrades and ourselves. Remembering how I feel while I'm in battle makes me weep for joy.

You say that I could live for thousands of years. The brightest fires often burn the shortest, but I may survive the coming battles. If so, there will still be Wyld areas and shadowlands to drive back and servants of the Yozis to defeat.

We must not delay! I understand your desire for caution, but it is essential that we return to the Realm soon. The remainder of my destiny can wait, but the fact that I am related to a pair of living Dragon-Blooded revolts me. As my blood-kin, every act they perform stains my soul. I must go back and slay them both. Their deaths will free me of all ties. Once they are gone, I can become the pure blade of destruction the Unconquered Sun means me to be.

LYTA TALKING TO THE SIDEREAL EXALTED ACACIA

So far, we have fought only minor battles. Nothing impressive, but they will set the stage for our major victories. We have also begun to sway the wills of the mortals. Unlike the vile usurpers, our victory will be a righteous one. In their hearts and souls, all mortals know that their rightful leaders are the chosen of the Sun. Look at their faces when they first see sunlight after a long rain, or the joy they feel when the rising sun first becomes visible. Out in the Western isles, far from the Dragon-Blooded, I go among them and announce my presence. I call to them and ask them to aid us and to fight beside me. Crane remains my secret ally, as is only right. His task is to advise, mine to conquer and rule. This conquest demands armies, and we are building one. The smaller islands of the West are fertile grounds for our program. From countless isolated atolls ruled by cruel despots or rapacious Fair Folk, our followers are rising.

Redspar was our first true success. Crane told me that the inhabitants of Dolphin Harbor had conquered the island of Redspar, and its people were now little better than slaves. The soldiers of Dolphin Harbor took their yams and salt fish, leaving the conquered hopeless and near starvation. Crane then introduced me to Galat, a refugee from Redspar, who described the island's towns and the ways of its conquerors.

We arrived one night on a small boat. Crane found an isolated cove and prepared a ritual to cause the soldiers to make poor choices and lose all common sense. Then I went to work. Redspar was a small island, inhabited by no more than fifteen hundred people. There were less than 200 soldiers, and most of them were asleep. I crept to the edge of town and carefully stalked the three guards on that side. One after another, I slew them.





Guided by Galat's descriptions, I went into the long house that served as the invaders' largest barracks and slew them in their beds. Most died dreaming of rape and pillage. Then one screamed and the battle truly began. Their blows could not touch me, and my hands sliced their flesh. Outside the barracks, I heard the townspeople begin to gather. After all the guards in that town were dead, I went out into the crowd. Still flushed and glowing from the glorious carnage, I called on them to take up the soldiers' fallen arms and help retake their island. Filling them with courage and righteous anger, I called upon their desire for blood. They followed me and we slew the other soldiers like sheep. I ran ahead to kill the guards, and my people descended on the sleeping or carousing soldiers like wolves, my own sweet wolves. Blood ran in the streets. When dawn fully broke, all our enemies were dead.

Amid the piles of the slain, I spoke to those I had freed. I announced who I was, and told them I was now their ruler. Some seemed dubious, but my words and the ample evidence of my deeds swayed them. They love me now; Redspar is my island. When the ships from Dolphin Harbor came to see why the tribute had stopped, my people lured them in with false promises of safety. I used burning arrows to cripple their sails, while some of my subjects used the dead soldiers' ships to storm the arriving vessels. After the second group of ships was destroyed, Dolphin Harbor relented.

With Redspar safely mine, Crane and I planned our next move. We both agreed that we should expand outward to conquer other islands. Since Dolphin Harbor was likely plotting some way to retake Redspar, they should fall first. However, we needed more subjects and a larger fleet of ships for that conquest.

Crane disapproved, but I knew of a small garrison led by a single Dragon-Blooded on Three Peak Island. When Crane realized I was determined to go, he relented and came along. The islet held only half a dozen imperial soldiers, guarding a small but deep harbor where ships from the Realm stopped to take on fresh water. With help from Crane and some of my best sailors, I slew them all. The Dragon-Blooded fought well, but even her bravest blows could not harm me. My hands drank deeply of her tainted traitor's blood.

The savages of Three Peaks had honored the Dragon-Blooded as their god. I walked among them and told them their god was dead — replaced by a more worthy deity, the holy and Unconquered Sun. They all bowed before me. They pledged their undying worship and begged forgiveness for honoring false gods. As word of my deeds begins to spread, more mortals will realize the Dragon-Blooded are not invincible and know that their true rulers have returned.

Much work remains to be done. I must first teach my people to follow the Sun and to rightly honor his name. The rituals of the Immaculate Order are the worst sort of heresy — falsely placing the square outside the circle, venerating the Earthly-born Dragon-Blooded above the perfect circular glory of the Sun itself. The Order's temples are built so that worshippers must face the lesser Earthly directions rather than the pure and eternal line of the Sun's path through the sky. Using wealth captured from the Dragon-Blooded garrison, I have had my people build a small temple. Within it is



a huge gold-covered mirror. I stand before it when I speak to them of the holy Sun, bathed in its brilliant pure light. For now, my words are enough, but as the numbers of my people grow, I will require the aid of one of the holy Zenith Caste, for whom preaching is a holy duty.

I have built an altar with a thick golden ring at each corner. On it, we sacrifice captured Dragon-Blooded and any who betray us. Sturdy chains tie the sacrifice's ankles to the surface — they are then each given a short blade, and I face them bare-handed. I take their lives and offer their spirits to the sacred light. These acts of purification will suffice for now, but there must be more.

I once saw a toy for children that used a small mirror to concentrate sunlight bright enough to light a fire. Since then, I have had a vision of vast mirrors of purest gold. When we have acquired yet more gold, I will have the crafters fashion a whole series of Sun-mirrors. I will create a wondrous altar where the Sun itself can take the lives of the captured Dragon-Blooded. As my kind returns to our prior glory, I shall offer up to the Unconquered Sun the lives of our betrayers. The Contagion was his vengeance for betrayal. To avert all such future dangers and to obtain his blessing for the new era we will bring, we must give him the souls he cries out for.

Once we are victorious, I shall see to the creation of an even greater such mirror in the very heart of the Realm, and we shall parade the Realm's deposed Terrestrial Exalted rulers there in a vast procession of death. Visions of this day haunt me. First, the mirrors will burn all the betrayers into pure white ash. Then the sun will glow a perfect cherry red, and grow brighter and more beautiful than ever before as it honors our sacrifices and announces to all the peoples of the world that the sacred order has been restored.

ONE YEAR LATER

The Realm finally noticed us; their garrison at Wavecrest dispatched four ships to Redspar. Crane and I both knew this would happen. Even the most inept and corrupt regime eventually sees the knife poised above its foul heart. The ships arrived carrying hundreds of troops and more than a dozen Dragon-Blooded. This was our first real battle. That day, we planned to shed their blood and show them our true power. With Crane aiding me, they had no chance for surprise. Without that, they seemed predestined to fail. Crane said their hulls were warded, so their soldiers were best faced on land. So be it—a fight where I could see who I killed and taste their blood as they died.

First, I spoke to my people, "Today the Realm itself comes to battle us. They have many soldiers. They are well armed and well trained, but in their hearts they are weak and sick. The Sun shines upon us alone. The wrongness of their cause saps their strength and will eventually destroy them. Onward the Sun!

"Those of you who die today will return as the Dragon-Blooded lords of tomorrow. Those who live to see our victory will soon help drive the usurpers from their palaces in the Realm. Honor and glory awaits, and power and wealth as well. Their riches will become yours, sharks and eels will gnaw their bones. Onward the Sun!"

The Dragon-Blooded did not know they could not win. I led, as was my place. I knew many of them were coming, but it meant nothing to me save more blood for my Sun to drink. After this battle, we planned to drive the Realm from Wavecrest. Crane urged caution and delay, but the fires of conquest burned within me. I knew that we *must* act then.

They were upon us. At the bow of their largest ship, an aged Water Dragon held a glowing staff. The other Dragon-Blooded surrounded him as he stepped off the vessel and thrust his staff into the sandy beach. Some magic deflected most of our arrows; we found that the only way we could attack the imperial soldiers was in hand-to-hand combat. The one with the staff was clearly my primary target — several dozen mortals and seven Terrestrial Exalted were guarding him. I rushed them with over a hundred warriors by my side.

Sacred orb, they turned the very forces of nature against us. The sky had been clear — then, without warning, wind and waves began to strike the village and our ships in harbor. Giant waterspouts lashed the troops beside me, slaying half a dozen at a time. From the corner of my eye, I could see huge waves arch up and batter the nearby town. Their force smashed the thatched huts into ragged splinters. I realized the staff was to blame — they had turned magic stolen from my long-dead brethren against us.

The battle to reach the staff-wielder was turning. The waterspouts avoided me, and I knew Crane's magics were keeping me safe. However, he clearly could not protect my valiant warriors. Most of them were already dead, and not one of the Dragon-Blooded had fallen. I could also hear the sounds of the soldiers from the other three ships rampaging over my island. A shift in the wind brought the scent of smoke, and I realized my precious towns were burning. I still do not understand how we lost. The sun was on my side — I had promised him blood and glory.

I saw Crane running up onto the low chalky cliffs above the battle. I cried out, begging him to destroy the staff. I remember his words far too well

"Blessed one, I cannot. There is a ship offshore carrying another magician. She binds my power. Redspar is lost — we must flee. I can get us away, but we must leave now. You run faster than they, and your troops will slow pursuit. Go now, or we are both lost."

My warriors and I had managed to kill one of their Dragon-Blooded, but the rest stood firm. Knowing the day was lost, I called retreat. More than half of my remaining soldiers gave their lives covering my retreat. Those of my people who fell that day earned the Sun's blessing, and I vow that their sacrifice will not be in vain. Crane had arranged our escape in case we were overwhelmed. A sea-beast like a vast, swift whale was waiting for us and the few of our warriors who remained. The traitors could not follow us through the black depths. We came so close. Next time will be different. We will start even further from the Realm and gather our warriors more quietly. Then we will strike and destroy them all. I will burn them, and boil their blood in tribute to the Unconquered Sun.





CHAPTER THREE . THE WORLD AWAITING US

CHAPTER THREE THE WORLD AWAITING US

The newly reborn Dawn Caste have been thrust into a world where they are surrounded by a multitude of powerful beings, all of whom take an interest in their actions. This chapter examines how the Dawn Caste feel about and relate to the various other forces around them. As with everything else about the new Solar Exalted, there is no single answer to any question and no unified point of view.

Although the Solars are highly diverse, these other parties predetermine some of the Exalteds' relationships. Those Dragon-Blooded who are loyal to the Realm wish to kill all Solar Exalted, and any Dawn Caste who does not hate or fear the Realm's rulers will soon learn to. Other relationships can be strongly influenced by the fragmentary memories of past lives that Exaltation brings. For example, many Dawn Caste Exalted feel that other Celestial Exalted are their natural allies. However, present-day interactions normally hold far greater weight than vague dreams of ancient lives. Regardless of their memories from the First Age, Solars who grew up in tegions where the people were tormented by hungry Fair Folk othunted by legions of the walking dead normally take a rather dim view of denizens of the Wyld or the shadowlands.

Once you have generated your character, you may find it useful to sit down and decide how she feels about the various supernatural beings with whom she shares her world. As warriors naturally drawn to violence, the Dawn Caste often respect force. However, respect is not the same as affection. All sane Dawn Caste respect the power of the Wyld Hunt, but most also wish to avoid it or destroy it. Also, the directness common to many members of the Dawn Caste can cause them to underestimate more subtle and devious entities. Does the character have no use for silver-tongued diplomats and erudite scholars, or does she feel that other approaches can complement her own?

All Dawn Caste Exalted grew up as perfectly ordinary human beings. With no expectation that they would ever be anything else, they made lives for themselves and learned to interact with their fellows. The moment of Exaltation changed all that. Members of the Dawn Caste are now more than merely human. Over the course of their millennia-long lives, they will become fundamentally different from the mortals around them. Some members of this caste reject their prior kinship with humanity and revel in their newfound power. They see themselves as something apart, subject to different rules. Others still consider themselves human and interact with those they feel close to as if they were still mortal. How your Dawn Caste Exalted feels about humanity will affect every facet of your character's life and is one of the most important factors you should consider. Will the character treat the humans he deals with as friends and shield-mates, or as weaker beings deserving of his protection? Does he see mortals as cowering subjects who should yield to his every command or vermin who occasionally obstruct his grandiose plans?




politely surrendered. It then promised that its master would no longer trouble the people in the harbor or under the sea.

That night, after the battle, the folk of the city held a joyous celebration. I don't remember how I got there, but I ended up under the water. There was a city of blue glass beneath the waves. The inhabitants had shiny skin and gills on their necks like fish, but the celebration was just as wonderful down there as on the surface. I wasne't the only surface-dweller in the place — there was some enchantment on the bay to protect us from the water. The strangest part came when the tentacled thing

showed up. It came to the edge of town and when I walked out to it, my erstwhile foe gave me a pendant made of a shell more beautiful than I'd ever seen before. It also said that its master wanted to congratulate me, but I woke up before I met the master. In the back of my head, I can almost see something much larger, dark, and formless in the water beyond the sunken city.

BLOOD OF THE SUN

The Sun turns away from us, and one by one, we fall into darkness. Asleep, I see it; Saechan's Essence bled away in a hunting "accident," Damar dead in the fallen sky-city of Tzatli, blood, bodies and shattered crystal scattered for miles over the plains below. Soon ---some nearby tomorrow ----I smell burning and taste betrayal. Bronze doors are spell-locked beneath blistered hands and there is pain - terrible pain. Beyond the pain, beyond death, something worse waits for us all; darkness and silence and the stillness of a long death we Solars have never known.

I fight my way awake, strangling on my

screams. The air is thick in my throat and my familiar bedchamber is alien to my eyes. The nightmare has followed me. Death spells drift like smoke in the air, making it hard to move, to think. They whisper to me in sleepy little voices. Rest. Lie back. Surrender. It's easy to obey and I'm so tired. Only the irritating, familiar cry of my sword pulls me back. She's wailing, rattling in her sheath; her warding eye is open wide and glowing white-hot as she fights the darkness. Centuries of training, of battles, draw me to her. I push myself up and call her to my hand. She gives me strength. bitter. Unlike the Fair Folk, who are as erratic as their twisted homeland, there is much to be gained from allying with the Deathlords. Never assume they have your best interests at heart, never mistake the motives of a Deathlord for those of the living, but consider the benefit we can gain from them. A shadowland makes an excellent emergency retreat. Few armies will follow your force into one, especially if several legions of the dead are waiting for your enemies at the border. All alliances come with a price, but a careful negotiator can work out an agreement that doesn't cost too much.

Dealing with the dead is never safe, but neither is living in the world as it is now. In order to make real changes, we must work with those who share our goals. An alliance with the Deathlords also allows us to watch their movements. If they decide to use our strike at the Realm's power as an excuse to expand their own, we can stand ready to hold them back.

LUNAR EXALTED

I saw a Lunar Exalted in a fight once out West, beyond the Coral Archipelago. The Wolves were working as marines on a couple of ships Coral had dispatched to wipe out a nest of Wyld barbarians on the island of Silver Peak. As we got close to the island, the captain of the other ship decided to go whale hunting for extra cash. To this day, I don't know if the Lunar Exalted was protecting the whales or the Wyld barbarians, but as that ship closed in on a whale, this thing erupted from the water. At first it looked like an aquatic barbarian — those twisted creatures are far too common out on the Western fringes. Then the thing began shifting its shape. It extended one arm a few dozen yards and ripped the ship's mast clean off. It struck as swiftly as a cobra and changed form constantly. Within seconds it got up on the deck of the other ship and killed the captain. It then screamed for both ships to go, in a voice that sounded like all the beasts of a huge menagerie shouting as one. Let me tell you, we ran as if our feet were on fire and our asses were catching. Without a doubt, that Exalted was one of the most dangerous creatures I'd ever seen.

I asked several savants about Lunar Exalted after the voyage ended. We'd clearly gotten off easy — either the thing was feeling generous, or it wanted to make certain we would go back to Coral and spread the word of its presence. The second option seems more likely, I think. I've asked the other members of my Circle to see if they can find out any way to contact the Lunar Exalted —they'd make potent allies. I doubt they'll be willing to obey orders or follow battle plans made by others, but a good commander could find uses for them. Several of them working on our side would give us an edge over the Realm.

On the other hand, most of the stories I've heard of them are horrific. They've been living out near the edges of the Wyld since before the Contagion. They might be insane, or maybe they've changed sides. I've never heard of one fighting alongside the Fair Folk, but they do seem to turn up close to Wyld barbarians, and I can't see much to be gained from dealing with those cannibalistic vermin. Much as I'd like to have one on my side, I'm putting aside the thought of the Lunar Exalted until I've looked at more certain allies.



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WYLD BARBARIANS

I've fought these things on several occasions. Many are little better than animals, but the ones who have actual tribes and leaders can give me a good fight. The bands we faced out near the Haltan lands were a particularly tricky bunch. The kingdom we were guarding had some trouble with a group of barbarians who were using a horde of Wyld-twisted animals to break their enemies' lines. For savages, they had a good grasp of basic tactics and fought with sense and courage. They even knew when to withdraw, a rare trait among barbarians.

The Wyld barbarians are something of a puzzle. I know there are hundreds of thousands of them, and that they can be extremely tough and determined. They could make excellent allies, if they were sane. But most of them aren't, and too many are cannibals who see us as objects to eat, loot and rape, sometimes in that order. I have no idea how many of these tendencies are innate. The savants I've talked to say the Wyld-twisted are just made that way, but these same people claim that the Anathema are all ravening monsters.

Almost all the Wyld barbarians I've encountered have been dangerous vermin. But it's not like civilized vermin are all that rare, either. If I could recruit and train some of the large ones, I'd have troops that would stand a chance of beating some of the younger Dragon-Blooded in single combat. Recruiting whole bands would never work — they're cunning, but they would never follow orders, and together you'd never break them of their bad habits.

Even if they can't be trained, though, they might still prove useful. When the barbarians out in the Haltan lands attacked, they drove large beasts before them. Once the beasts had softened up the opposition, the barbarians came in and mopped up. Perhaps we could do something similar with the savages themselves. With the right sorts of magic or a clever enough lure, a horde of them could be sent ahead of a well-trained force as shock troops. A thousand naked cannibals descending on your fort would definitely soften you up for the real assault.

YURGEN

SPIRITS

"Hold!" I bellowed. "Hold fast!" The stairs were slick with blood, and impenetrable darkness hovered beyond the torches and the pale flame of my own Essence.

The Gethamanese troops had fallen back, which at first hadn't troubled me. Battles move like avalanches — hesitations, sudden rushes and unexpected quiet where the screams of the wounded under your feet come clearly to you. But they kept falling back, refusing to engage us, dousing the lights as they went. Their retreat wasn't a rout. It was planned.

"Hold!" I yelled as my men began to spread out, some pursuing the shadowy Gethamanese forces. Others were straggling behind, wounded or frightened in the black darkness here under the earth. The courage of my men was being sorely tested under the crushing weight of the mountain fastness of Gethamane. We were used to dying under the clear sky, beneath the wild light of the ancestors' shroud. We were used to our ancestors above us, calling out the names of the fallen. How would our fathers find us down here? Even following my lead, my men couldn't keep in touch with the retreating defenders. We lost them and they lured us from the stairs into disorienting darkness.

The Gethamanese had greater experience in their own terrain, but I had the numbers. I would win, eventually, but the victory promised to be bloody and cruel. In the pitch blackness beyond our torches, I heard the grating of stone. Whatever the Gethamanese had planned, it was going to cost my men.

The mountain kingdom was only my first goal, one of many. It would be my first foothold on the rest of the world. From it I would step beyond the North. With the fortress-city of Gethamane under my control and its soldiers in my armies, I would be more than another fur-covered savage. The Gethamanese soldiers knew the lands beyond the North, lands I only knew the names of, lands I had only seen in visions. Once I had the troops in my hand, I could turn them to my use. I needed them.

"Tadik!" I called as I pulled the old Mammoth chieftain close. Gouts of blood poured from his broken nose, but he felt steady under my hand. Tadik had followed me from the beginning, and his loyalty had drawn his tribe to this place. They were more precious than gold, and I wasn't going to spend them here. "Keep the stragglers in back under control. And find us something to put our back against!"

He mumbled something and turned away, shouldering through the stinking, bloody mass of my men to hold them for me. In the cold, hard world of Gethamane, we looked like invading wild men with our blood-spattered felt and mammoth-pelt coats. The Blackwater tribe stiffened their beards and hair with wax, and beads of blood glittered in their hair like rubies in the dim light.

My anima burned high, kindled by all the fighting. Pale gold, shadowless, my Essence spilled across seamless, shiny stone. My men shifted around me, staring out into the blackness and expecting a fall of arrows. I was the only light, which made me a perfect target. I was worried about more than Gethamanese archers now. There was no sign of our enemies and I had no idea where we were. The floor felt cold and smooth as black ice. There seemed to be no ceiling above us, and we had been drawn away from the security of the walls.

The grating sound stopped, and I gagged on a draft of freezing, stinking air. The torches fluttered and dimmed, their flames turning blue, then violet, then dying out. Only the golden light of my own anima remained steady.

"Poison!" someone cried, his voice spiraling upward into panic. "They're going to poison us!"

"No!" I yelled, as several elk riders shoved past me and ran into the darkness. I poured more Essence into my anima, flaring brighter and catching a brief glimpse of one of my men. We heard screams just beyond the light. "Come back! Stay together, damn you!"

No one came back.

We were packed together like sheep. I knew there was something out there, but it stayed just the wrong side of my light. Behind me, flint and tinder flared up, then dimmed again, quenched by whatever was in the cavern with us.

CHAPTER THREE . THE WORLD AWAITING US

"Put the wounded to the center," I ordered. "And find our own blood trail."

No one wanted to flee now. We edged back slowly, following the blood of our own injured. Amid the sounds of my men, their heavy breathing, the occasional cry or moan from the walking wounded, I could hear something else. Maybe.

Scratches. The click of — claws? — just beyond my sight. I strained outwards, struggling to see. Suddenly there was a shriek and someone was dragged away from us. I caught a glimpse of something gray, perhaps, and sharp.

"Damn it!" I snarled and set an arrow. As I poured my will into it, the stone head blazed, echoing my own white-gold anima. The light grew blinding. I held on as long as I dared, aiming for the unseen roof above us. We needed the light.

The arrow soared upward, and a wild rustle arose from all around us. In the sudden brilliance, dozens — hundreds — of gray monsters flowed back from us like the sea rushing away from shore. My arrow arched high, then fell onto bare stone, going dark as my Charm failed. We heard the faint rush of the monsters surrounding us as they swept back, silently, waiting just beyond my light.

No one said anything. No one even seemed to be breathing. My anima jumped and pulsed in time to my racing heart. I could still picture the jumble of gray, gaunt flesh. The flexing of claws the length of my arm and strange forms that could be wings. The taunt flanks and bizarre, wide faces were as tall as my shoulder. Where there should have been eyes, there was only smooth gray flesh and bone horns as long as my arm. Those things, those eyeless — hounds — surrounded us completely. All that seemed to be holding them back was my own blazing anima.

Behind me, someone drew a shaky breath. "I think I saw the steps," Tadik said.

LUNAR EXALTED

Spring had turned vicious. Caught unawares by the unexpected storm, the Blackwater tribe were forced to set their camp in the lee of their own mammoths — the only shelter available. It made me uneasy, camping in the midst of the great beasts. If they stampeded we would all be crushed. But Samea and the elders assured me that their totem animals were well controlled, and they did act as excellent protection from the cruel winds of the storm. The weather worsened, and soon even the mammoths resembled nothing more than snow-covered hills around our tents.

The strangled trumpet cries of panicked mammoths woke me from a bored doze. Screaming followed, almost lost in the shrieking wind. I snatched up my weapons and tore open the flap of my tent, to be blinded by snow as cold and cruel as ground glass. Even as I threw an arm up to protect my face, I saw the looming shape of a mammoth bearing down on me and I leaped aside. The crazed animal trampled my tent, squealing shrilly as the bone and wood framework snapped under its massive feet. Other tents had been flattened —the people trapped inside were still screaming. The hot smell of blood burned through the cold and the wind that was trying to hammer me down. My anima burned bright, casting a steady circle of pale gold around me. A woman of the tribe struggled towards me and collapsed at my feet, blood pouring from a wound no mammoth could ever give. We were under attack.

"Samea!" I shouted, hastily stringing my bow. As if in answer, a sudden light blazed high and Samea's golden anima turned the driven snow into a fall of diamonds. In the confusing light, an inhuman silhouette startled me. I sank an arrow into its back instinctively before I recognized a great snow ape. The shaggy beast howled and spun around, legs bucking and long arms clawing at the drifts of snow. I ignored it as the herd of mammoths trumpeted and shrilled around us and the Blackwater tribe struggled from tents that had become deathtraps.

Torches blazed up, dim in comparison to Samea's brilliant anima, as the tribe shouted and struggled to drive the herd away from their homes. Above the human cries I could hear the drawn-out bellows of snow apes and realized that they were driving the mammoths into the camp.

I plunged away from the tribe towards the attacking apes, pouring Essence into my battle Charms. Around me, my anima took shape, rising in crimson glory. My skin was molten gold; hot light danced over the edge of my skinning knife and wrapped around my bow, and my beard and hair crackled with sparks of red light. The Unconquered Sun's gift to me blazed white-hot in the darkness of the storm. The mammoths shied from me with shrill, frightened bleats and the shouts behind me were lost in the roar of my own racing heart. I paid no more attention to the tribe and went hunting.

Snow apes are solitary hunters, too stupid to plan an attack like this, but I could hear a half dozen or more out beyond the frenzied mammoth herd. The sense of something wrong drove me into the teeth of the storm, looking for the source of the madness around me.

Beyond the camp, the storm struck like a weapon. Out of the teeth of the wind two snow apes rushed at me, howling madly. I felled them with two blazing arrows, but another was on me before I had a chance to nock another bolt. I danced easily around the ape's brutal swipe, gutting it with my skinning knife in the same moment. It collapsed, dying with the rest. I shook blood off my blade and pushed on through the snow, looking for more victims.

A mammoth was down nearby, groaning piteously and writhing in a crimson muck of melted snow and its own blood. Guts piled as high as my head spilled from its torn stomach. Balanced on top of its heaving sides, someone was watching me.

It could have been a snow ape, with its mane of pure white hair and slender silver claws; but there was far too much intelligence in those large, pale eyes. I stared, caught for a moment in eyes as white as the new moon, then shot at it. It leaped in the same moment and my arrow buried itself in the dying mammoth. The monster dropped down on top of me like an avalanche. My bow was swept aside like a child's toy and snapped like brittle bones in the creature's hand. A stunning kick drove me down to struggle in a snowdrift. The creature was on me without pause, hands



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I lunged forward as it retreated, trying for a gut blow with my knife, but it slipped away from me, lightfooted while I floundered in the deep snow. It was back on me in a moment, shredding my tunic. I barely blocked the first blow, was thrown again by the second, and rolled frantically in the snow to avoid death by the third. The creature landed a bone-breaking kick, and my knife went spinning off into the snow-shot darkness. It was too fast for me; I was going to die here.

The thing was on me again with a flurry of blows. Its silver claws nearly tore my head off. Blood ran down my face, blinding me. With a howl that was half laughter, it feinted back, then forward, forcing me down again. I threw a handful of packed snow at it and then kicked the ape's feet out from under it. While it was still down and vulnerable, I rolled over it, pinning it under me, and managed to lock an arm around its throat. Hanging on grimly, I buried my face against its furred shoulder, while it savaged my exposed arm and shoulder and fought for air. Blood covered us both. As it struggled, I recognized human words among its animal cries.

Suddenly, the creature under me shuddered and began shriveling in my grip. Only instinct kept me from throwing it away in horror as the furred beast in my hands became a writhing snake. Venomed fangs snapped inches from my face and heavy, ice-cold coils the color of new snow wrapped around my chest, crushing the air from me. I dug my fingers into its flesh until blood ran thick and cold over my hands. It stared at me with those same white eyes — and changed again. A huge cat clawed at me and still I hung on. It changed again and again — a silver carapace cracked under my unyielding grip, then a hissing reptile's glassy spines dug burning holes in my flesh, then I found myself holding something quicksilver and nearly formless. Still I hung on, until finally it slumped unconscious into the bloodstained snow.

Panting and dizzy, I scrabbled in the snow for my knife, lost in the first few exchanges. I knelt above the shapeshifter and pressed the bronze edge against its pale, pale flesh, but I could not kill it. Some impulse stopped me; I didn't know why, but I knew in my blood, in my bones, that killing this thing was forbidden. Instead, I pressed a hand to its pulse to see if its heart still beat. It opened those inhuman eyes and stared up at me.

"What are you?" I rasped, closing my hand over its throat. "Who are you?!"

It laughed, raw and cold, but did not fight me. "Who are you, Dawn child? Who are you?"

JALITH

MORTALS

I conquered a town yesterday. It was small, only a few hundred people, but it was mine after less than an hour. It was a little roadside place about halfway between the tree where I found my book and the border of the Scavenger Lands. The townsfolk had a pair of tree-leopards, big ones, larger than Achal. I have no idea what tree-leopards were doing there, but the townspeople had them both in a pit and wanted them to fight. I heard the shouts and snarls before I could see what was going on.

The people were all gathered in a crowd, throwing stones and yelling. They were all making bets. They'd tied the cats together so they couldn't get away, and when they tried to stop fighting the villagers threw small stones at them. One of the cats was half dead when I arrived, and the other wasn't doing much better. I went a little mad and attacked the townsfolk. A good number of them were armed, I guess in case things got out of hand or the cats escaped. It didn't matter. A few minutes later, a dozen of them were dead and the rest were bowing at my feet. I used some healing herbs on the two cats — these herbs come from the realm of the grandfather trees, and can cure almost any injury.

The herbs worked; the two cats were far better this morning. One may have a limp, but nothing too bad. I'll take them with me and find them good homes. The villagers claimed they will worship the tree-leopards in my stead, but they'd likely forget those promises once I'm five miles down the road. The most amazing thing is not that taking the town was so easy, it's that they don't even hate me. People hate conquerors and bullies; they don't hate thunderstorms, earthquakes, or droughts. To those small-hearted folk, I'm more a force of nature than a person, and perhaps they're right. If the old stories are true, I'll still be young and strong when their grandchildren are dust, and in time I'll become even more powerful. It feels odd to talk about people as mortals, as something separate, but I guess they are now. Am I a god? I still feel pretty much like me. I don't know what I am, but I do know that I'm something more than them.

THE FAIR FOLK

I grew up with the Fair Ones prowling below. They're scary, but they know their place - I still find the howls of their hunting bands comforting. Most times, they were chasing Linowan raiders who'd come to kill us all in our beds. Still, it's best to deal with Fair Folk from a distance. Fair Folk are attuned to the eternal change of the Wyld and have little in common with us. They mostly take the weak and the foolish, and they can be bargained with. They're not to be feared or loved - they merely are. They can also be really useful. Everyone outside my lands hates the Fair Folk and will slay all they find, but you can work with the Fey if you share a common enemy with them. Working together requires great care and planning, but you can make a deal with the Fair Folk and live to tell about it. Opening the way for a pack of Fey to descend on a imperial garrison is the best way I know to make certain that no one inside escapes. The essential part of all such deals is making certain they would rather take your enemies than you.

Others among the Fey can be dealt with in a slightly less restrained manner. While most Fair Folk live in the Wyld and only come out to feed, others leave it and live among us. Some seem interested in humanity, while others never speak of their reasons for leaving. I'd guess they're exiles from the Wyld. In either case, the longer they live among us, the more like us they become. They never truly blend in, because they aren't human and never will be — they still feed on our feelings. However, they can learn to ape our ways and avoid causing trouble. I've considered taking one of these Fey as a partner. Another Exalted could only do what I can already accomplish. The Fey are something different. They can work amazing and wondrous glamours.

I worked with one on a job once. Some particularly wretched merchants took a company of mercenaries out to where the forest tribes live, and had the thugs torture the tribesmen until they got a nice fat load of drugs and medicines from out where the grandfather trees dwell. Merchants like that can't be allowed to profit from their deeds. Celadon, my colleague, was one of the Fair Folk who lived in Nexus. He didn't want any of the plants - he wanted to feed on the fear and violence of the attack. He agreed to help me take the plants as long as I made sure there was plenty of violence and terror. The mercenaries were still guarding the caravan, so violence was easy. Carving up a couple of those fat Nexus merchants made for some high quality terror, too. I'll say this for Celadon - he did his part. The illusion of a pack of tyrant lizards charging the soldiers was an excellent distraction. Almost half the company fled without looking back. The rest wished they had.

SPIRITS

I honestly don't like dealing with spirits. Most of them have little use for anyone else — people are irrelevant to them. The Fair Folk need us, but most spirits would rather humans and Exalted didn't exist. We intrude on their world.

The worst part is, while Fair Folk hunt people because they need to eat, spirits hunt us because they enjoy it. When I was a kid, I once wandered too far from Chanta, off into the part of the woods that folks with good sense avoid. Being only seven, I had no clue as to the proper rites to observe when I went there, so a green-beard chased me. I was quick, and it went for me just after I entered its domain, but I was still lucky to get out of there alive.

Spirits make bargains with us, but I've never met one that liked people. They're all tied to their places of power and have little influence or knowledge of anywhere beyond that. I was in a spirit-controlled city once, and I swear the very air held menace. Children turned incredibly quiet when the thing that ruled this city walked the streets. I was told a boy had yelled at it once and it took out the child's tongue — just touched it and it fell right out. Spirits have no mercy if you trespass on their laws. Failing to keep even the smallest portion of a bargain will get you dead quick. Fair Folk become more human the longer they live with us, but spirits are forever alien.

LUNAR EXALTED

I'm not certain, but I think I saw a Lunar when I was out in the lands of the god-trees. I'd been hired to harvest a rare emerald orchid that only grows on the trunks of trees more than a mile tall. A tea made from this flower was said to give a vision of your true love. Flower collection isn't my normal line of work, but the pay was excellent, and I figured if Prince Sylan of Fenta fell madly in love with someone, he'd be less likely to wage pointless wars against his neighbors. Fenta lies just a bit north of the Haltan forests. While he mostly attacked the Linowan, I was worried that he might decide to go after my people instead if nothing else kept him busy after all, the Linowan didn't have much worth taking other than those ugly masks.

The last three expeditions sent to get this orchid never returned, and so this job made an interesting challenge. With the wind as my steed, the journey to the deepest forest was short and swift. The problems came once I arrived. The flowers are extremely rare, growing high in vine-covered trees, and many dangerous beasts live in the deep forest. As long as I was awake, I could use my Sun-given power to scare away the Wyld barbarians and the strange creatures that came hunting me. Sleeping was less safe. More than once, Meros or Achal woke me up as vast snakes or bark-skinned tribesmen were creeping up on me. I wished the Wyldtouched would talk to me—I was certain they could find the flowers — but they're too used to being hunted and slain by strangers. I searched for more than two weeks and found nothing. Meros wanted to leave, and I was inclined to agree.

Just as I was about to give up, I caught a glimpse of a tall, strong woman covered with intricate tattoos. She was dressed in a brief garment of skins and woven leaves and looked strangely familiar. In an instant, I knew her name — this was Nala of my dreams. My Nala was alive and whole again. For a second I saw her without tattoos, standing on a bridge of spun gold that stretched between two huge clouds.

Her face was different back then, but her soul was the same. I remember holding her in my arms. I called her name. She turned — I think she recognized me. She said nothing, so I called out what I was looking for. She pointed halfway up a great tree a few hundred yards away. I was about to thank her, when she yelled back that I could have it if I reached it. first. Then she set off after me. In a second, her limbs lengthened and became like the legs of a racing cheetah. She ran on all fours. Seeing her feral eyes and fanged mouth, I ran for the tree. As fast as I moved, she was faster. When she reached the tree, she jumped and clung to it with her huge claws. I threw my boomerang and severed the branch she was on, sending her to the ground. At first I thought this was some sort of game, but she moved like a killer. I was fighting for my life against someone I could not bear to harm. I don't know why she challenged me like that - had I done Nala some terrible harm I couldn't remember?

We both ran up the vast trunk of that enormous cedar. The fall had slowed her just enough to let me to reach the blossom first. I had time to grab it and call the winds to me before she was upon me. I parried her razor-sharp talons with the flat of my blade and fled. She was more feral, more terrible and more wondrous than anything I've ever seen. I've heard stories of others like her; they're all supposed to live on the furthest edges of the world. I think they've been there since my kin were all killed. I want to see her again, and would gladly fight beside her against any foe. I wish I knew what stories her people tell of my kind or how she remembers me. I want to go back to that forest and see her again, but I don't know how to avoid another fight.



WYLD BARBARIANS

I respect the Wyld-touched. They're widely hated and in most places they're killed like dangerous animals — is it any wonder that they're so hostile to most people? Growing up, I was taught that they are different, and should be left to their own portions of the great forest. Some of the Wyld barbarians, especially those who were part animal, were sacred. Others, especially the mad ones, were simply best avoided.

Since my change, I've realized that the Wyld barbarians are treated much like my own kind. Many people, from the nobles of the Realm to peasants farming in the fields, hate and fear both us both — the Wyld-touched and the Anathema are all outcasts. Exaltation and being touched by the Wyld are changes that end your previous life. These events forever set us apart from all others. I've never seen the oldest records, and I don't know if the Wyld-touched existed during the First Age. If not, then perhaps they are the world's attempt to recreate the lost Celestials.

Even if that isn't true, we still have much in common. When I found my kingdom, the Wyld-touched will all be welcome. Many of them have special gifts, and can perform feats impossible for others. Why should I shun those with the power to aid me in my efforts? While I've not spoken with any since my Exaltation, I wouldn't expect them to harbor the same fear and hatred of my kind that most people have. We should be able to work together. If I can, Ih'll found my kingdom using Wyld barbarians as part of my army. I've also heard that some of them live with the Lunars, and that definitely makes the Wyld-touched worth getting to know better.

DEMETHEUS

MORTALS

I'm not too comfortable with folks like us talking about how we're so different from what some of us call "mortals." I'm not too fond of anyone who talks about people like they were pets or stock. It's not like we don't bleed and die too you just have to hit us a bit harder, is all. I hear some Dragon-Blooded talking the same way, mostly the ones I don't like.

I saved the life of a queen once — she had assassins after her and didn't know who sent them. She ruled a little bitty kingdom that was dirt poor because she taxed them till they bled so she could have a nice palace and lots of jewels. This queen thought she was safe from rebellion because the people were too tired to rise up against her, and she'd hired mercenaries to make sure. I wouldn't normally have helped, but she offered a big reward, and I needed some quick money to buy a bunch of kids from Chiaroscuro out of slavery.

Besides, she seemed more ignorant than evil. Ignorance can be fixed — I only know one answer for evil. She promised me anything if I could stop the assassins and learn who wanted her dead. That last looked like a long list.

I also wanted to see just how much to trust anything she promised. I lived in her palace, and had better food and wine than any I'd had before. I sat beside her at table and shared her bed. She was almost 40, but still real sweet. The next attack came four days after I arrived. Not a subtle type, he snuck in while she lay sleeping, but I don't sleep real deep. I broke the thug's arm before he could stab anyone, then went to work on him. It was nice to see he was a hired tough and not someone with good reason to want her dead.

Turned out this thug was hired by her cousin, who wanted her out of the way so he could run the show. I brought her the cousin's head and then I asked her for the money. Het her know her why I wanted it and told her to start doing some good for the folks she ruled. I also told her I'd be the one comin' after her if I didn't see some serious changes next time I wandered through.

I went back in six months. There were fewer beggars, and most of the folks hanging from the trees deserved to be there. All she really needed was someone to give her a good reason to change. My fists are two of the best good reasons you're going to find. My threats weren't all of it — I took her out and showed her how folks were living, because she'd never looked any too closely at who she ruled. Plenty of folks are like that. It's easy to be a real bastard — all it takes is not looking at or thinking much about what you do. Give 'em a good reason, and most people are happier being decent. Those that aren't, well, that's why the gods made us, isn't it?

THE DRAGON-BLOODED

The way you hear some Solars talk, the Dragon-Blooded are a bunch of cannibal demons whose black hearts are thrilled by the thought of slowly killin' all decent folk. I can't say I have much use for such talk. I've never been to the Realm, and these days it isn't my first choice of places to visit. Still, I've met folks from there, and most of them liked living there. Long as most everyone has food on the table and the people in charge go easy on the taxes, arrest the worst criminals, and mostly leave folks alone, anyplace can be worth living. From what I've heard, life in the Realm is a lot like life anywhere else. I can't say I like all the slavery, but the Dragon-Blooded aren't the only folks ruling a nation with way too many slaves.

The Dragon-Blooded may not like us much, but they're not monsters. Heck, most folks don't like us much. Even if there are no Dragon-Blooded as far as you can see, going out in the middle of a town square and announcing yourself as a glorious and powerful Solar Exalted will likely get you laughed at if you don't back it up and mobbed if you do nearly everyone is scared of us. So maybe the ancestors of the Dragon-Blooded killed all our kind at dinner. Then again, maybe our kind needed killing back then. That all happened longer ago than anyone knows about for sure.

Yeah, the Realm is messed up — the whole damn world's messed up. I've run into a couple of Dragon-Blooded the world was better off without. I've also run into some who were good and decent. They used to work for us, and if that's somehow the natural order of things, then going around killing every one of them you see ain't necessarily the best idea.

The thing to remember is that there are two main kinds of Dragon-Blooded: those that are part of the Dynasty and those that aren't. While they may not be too bad on their own, Dragon-Blooded working for the Realm are trouble. Most of them follow orders, which means they cause trouble for folks in the Threshold, and they're willing to kill us on sight. However, working for someone and following all their orders ain't the same thing. Like I said, I've met Dragon-Blooded who needed killing — my guess is you have too. But some deserve to live, just like anyone else.

The last Realm Dragon-Blooded I ran into was the commander of the garrison in Talt, out in the Varangan lands. I hear the Realm may break its alliance with the Varang and let Harborhead invade. Well, this commander, Black Mist was her name, had been stationed in Talt for the past 30 years and wasn't any too anxious to see it overrun. In her off time, she was drilling Varang troops and givin' their officers lessons in Harborhead tactics. Not breaking any rules, but bending them pretty severely.

Anyway, shortly after I heard about this, Talt got raided by some of those crazy warrior women from Harborhead. You don't want to be a man caught by them. Anyway, they set fire to a couple of outlying buildings and caused all sorts of trouble. I was drinking at a bar nearby, and didn't like all the noise interrupting my evening of ale and gambling. So out I go, and start tossin' some of them women around and generally chasing them off. Well, along comes Black Mist at just the wrong moment. She sees someone break her spear on my back while I'm throwing a woman and her horse over a stream. With me all lit up like a bonfire and shrugging off sword blows, Black Mist didn't need to be any too bright to guess what I was, even if she missed the big gold mark on my forehead.

At first I figured the only reason she didn't go after me was all those crazed amazons lookin' to kill us both. After I cleared away all the nearby opponents, Black Mist rides up, daiklave bloody, and tells me I should probably head out of town once the fighting is over. I'd been worried I'd have to kill her and here she goes being all decent. If most of the stories are right, plenty of the Terrestrials are pretty bad pieces of work, but not all.

The Dragon-Blooded that don't work for the Realm are a real mixed bag. Some of 'em got sick of the shark-faced politics and either wanted to do some good or just wanted to lead a quiet life away from all that mess. Either case, most of them like the Realm even less than you do. I'm not lookin' for anyone to work for me, but if you are, they might make a good choice. Some of those sort seem a little lost. An offer to work for someone like us might suit them just fine.

You'd best be careful who you have working for you, though. Not all the Dragon-Blooded exiles left because they're wonderful folks who thought the Realm was a bad place. I've run into a few that made the nastiest of the Realm's nobles smell pretty fine. The worst was out West on a tiny little island called Reefhaven. I'd been having a good time drinking and meeting pretty women on Wavecrest, when I heard tell that ships from Reefhaven had stopped arriving. The island had been exporting pearls for the past couple of decades, but the shipments stopped a few weeks back, and rumors of invasions from Coral were flying. A merchant ship getting ready to head out there was lookin' for some marines in case there was trouble. I felt a bit restless, so I signed on. If you're strong enough, tough





enough and know anything about the sea, you can always get a berth as a marine or a sailor.

When we showed up at Reefhaven, we didn't see any trouble at first. Then we landed and had a look around, and ran across a Dragon-Blooded noble named Red Canyon who'd left the Realm. I never found out if he was exiled for being really bad news, or if he wanted to cause more trouble than they'd let him make. Either way, here he was, in charge of this little island. Most of the menfolk were dead, and he and his guards were having a fine old time with the women. Things likely would have quieted down soon enough to make Reefhaven just one more really nasty place to live, but this Dragon-Blooded was taking his time breakin' in the natives. He had more thugs than our ship had marines, so he decided it'd be nice to have another ship. Not wanting to join his little army, I put a stop to that. I picked up a small boat and threw it at half a dozen toughs, then tossed a few of the rest into the ocean. The other thugs rushed up to surrender to me.

The fight with Red Canyon took longer — a Dragon-Blooded as old as he was know loads of nasty tricks. Rocks kept jumping up from the ground and blocking my punches, and even the blows I got through didn't do all that much. Fucker hit like a triphammer, too. I finally had to pick him up and throw him off a cliff to kill him. Anyways, there are others like him. If you're not careful, some of them may trick you into working for them. We can get into enough trouble without having someone else trying to pull our strings.

The rest of the Dragon-Blooded I've met out here were born and bred in the Threshold, and never had squat to do with the Realm. They're pretty much like everyone else out here — tougher than most, but so are folks who are the byblows of spirits or Fair Folk. Best as I can see, Terrestrials raised out here are no more likely to get into serious crap than anyone else I've met. I don't hold with any notion that says some people are born evil.

SPIRITS AND THE FAIR FOLK

I know some people don't distinguish between these two types of creatures much. That's the sort of mistake that can get you dead. I've never had much trouble with spirits. The thing to remember is, each one has its own thing to be doing. Most of them are really focused. Forest spirits don't normally care much about city life or the price of horses, while city spirits aren't much interested in trees. Of course, even that sort of thing varies. Most of the really tiny spirits can only keep one thing in their heads at a time — they've got their job and they do it. You won't be taking any of the little ones out for drinks or gambling. All the rest are more like people — if you catch their fancy or offer them a sweet deal, they'll work with you. But you'd best not annoy the big ones — I don't want to see what they could do to one of us.

You also need to remember that spirits follow rules. If you recognize a particular type of spirit, you always know it will act a certain way. Fire spirits like to make things burn if you need to end a drought, you call a water spirit. All spirits like to bargain, and they all keep their word. There was a town out on the Western coast where it hadn't rained for six

CHAPTER THREE . THE WORLD AWAITING US

months — it turned out that a man living there was some kind of witch. He'd captured the spirit of a spring and forced it to provide his land with all the water he needed. Because of what he did, all the other water spirits avoided the area. When I wandered by, I went out to the ocean and the water spirits told me what was really going on. They let me know that if I freed the captured spirit and brought them the head of the guy responsible, they'd give the town its water back. I looked around a bit, found and killed the witch, and freed the spirit. It rained buckets the next day — spirits don't lie.

Lots of spirits don't much like people, and most are happy to get the best of you, but if they make a deal, they'll keep it. Thing is, you better make certain you keep your part of the deal, too. I knew a bodyguard once who bargained with a spirit for great strength. The spirit wanted an offering of a young virgin bull every spring. The deal worked out great for five years, but then the bodyguard moved from Chiaroscuro to Nexus, and decided that maybe she could get away with old worn-out bulls. After the second spring she pulled this, she woke up one day to find her arms and legs withered and crippled like an ancientr's. A bunch of sacrifices of the finest virgin bulls got rid of that, but she never did recover the strength the spirit had given her. Do that sort of stupid thing once, and you'll likely never get another spirit to deal honestly with you. They talk to each other, and they've got no sympathy with oath-breakers.

Fair Folk are a whole different matter. Best I've been able to tell, all they want is to suck us dry. I've heard you can get lots of magic from them, if you're willing to sell them a horde of children in exchange. If you're that sort, I hope I find you before you do it twice. Fact is, we're food to them and nothing much else. I've seen Guild caravans carrying folks South to become living snacks in Fair Folk castles. I've also seen the pathetic wrecks that sometimes stumble back out and the mindless ones that the Fey sell back to the Guild. I heard some Fair Folk are okay, and that they can feed from people without doing permanent damage, but I can't say I believe that. All you really need to know is that Fey come from the Wyld. I've been in a Wyld area once, and I don't see any reason to go back. Those are places to avoid, and so is anything that comes out of one.

LYTA

MORTALS

Mortals die — it is their lot — but we are eternal. Crane and I and others like us will be young and strong when the grandchildren of mortals now alive have been dust for a century. They are ours to protect and preserve, but we must never forget how different we are from them. We must seek the greater good, not the welfare of every individual. We have been chosen by the Sun to watch over humanity — as a shepherd watches over his flock, we must care for our mortals. Like the shepherd, at times we must cull the herd for the good of the flock. The death of a single sheep should not concern us overmuch.

Both we and the world will endure long after every mortal alive now is dead. The fact that some will die a bit earlier than others should not stay our hand. With the conquest of Redspar, we attempted to build a center of resistance to the Realm's power. It failed and some of our mortals died, but our plan lives on. Also, the manner of their deaths gave them a chance at something far greater than their short and limited lives. All who die in the service of the Unconquered Sun shall return as a new and glorious breed of Dragon-Blooded. With their souls reborn in more noble and enduring shells, they will reap the rewards of their previous deeds and have further chances to serve the Sun's will.

After Redspar fell, Crane and I were forced to seek another home. We both knew the isle of Thassa was far from any others who might interfere, and we needed that safety. Before we conquered the island, I gave its ruler, Chief Dagantar, a chance to surrender. I sent him a message asking him to turn the island over to me. He sent the messenger's shark-torn body back to us in a small open boat. Mortals must not be allowed to show us such contempt. If they rise up and attempt to overthrow their divinely appointed sovereigns, only anarchy and barbarism can follow.

The inhabitants of Thassa needed a lesson. That night, after Crane lulled their guards into a stupor, he used his magic to prevent anyone from leaving the royal long house. Then I set ashore and stole inside the doomed dwelling. When the sun next rose, no one inside the long house still lived, from the chief to his lowest bath-servant. Crane lifted the spell and I threw out the chief's body. Then I addressed the people from the balcony of the long house. Their former ruler's mangled body and my own power filled the people with righteous terror. They were ready to listen to their rightful overlord. Mortals are simple creatures, and such vivid demonstrations of power are sometimes needed to capture their attention.

THE DRAGON-BLOODED

These betrayers slew us in our palaces and usurped our glory. Their pride brought the great Contagion. The Dragon-Blooded have proven themselves monstrous traitors without honor. In our holy mission to retake the world, we can only have one response. They must be destroyed. When they die, their souls are consigned to the outer darkness. Once our conquest is complete and the traitors are dead, their places will be taken by the new Dragon-Blooded, created from the souls of those who die in the service of the Unconquered Sun. This new breed will arise as soon as the Solar Deliberative is restored. But first, all Terrestrial Exalted who serve the vast pit of corruption that is the Realm must die. Their hearts' blood will serve as a sacrifice to atone for their misdeeds and as an offering to help create the new generation of loyal servants - the traitors' magical essence will mingle with the souls of the honored dead.

Even Terrestrial Exalted who have left the evils of the Realm behind are not to be trusted. Regardless of their motives, they bear a dark taint in their blood. I initially believed they should also all be slain, but Crane has taught me that some can be redeemed through their service to me. Those Dragon-Blooded who have grown up in the Threshold are similarly tainted by their lineage, but they have not been touched as directly by the poison of the Realm. With much dedication and



loyal service, they can eventually atone for their kind's betrayal and earn a place within the new Solar Deliberative.

We recently visited Mylon, the smallest of the isles of Wavecrest. Crane directed me to a pair of Dragon-Blooded who had gained wealth and fame as hunters of the warped beasts that occasionally crawl out of the islands' Wyld areas. I confronted them and gave them a choice. They could renounce all prior alliances and serve me, or they could die. One agreed, but I was forced to kill the other when she attempted to flee. Crane says I can trust the one who came with me.

THE SIDEREAL EXALTED

Most people believe that the Sidereal Exalted are only legends, or that they all vanished long ago. Those few who claim they still exist talk of them in hushed tones as crafty and evil manipulators. Mortals and Dragon-Blooded are such narrow-minded fools. The Sidereals live among us still, and continue to offer counsel — only now, they give their advice from the shadows. Some have been misled by the Dragon-Blooded and serve them, while others saw the folly of the other Celestials' destruction and the horror of the Contagion. These worthy ones have worked for centuries to free us and restore the world to its pure and just state.

Crane tells me that he and the other Sidereals he works with only managed to free my kind a few years ago. In time, more of us will come back. With the Sidereals to guide us and teach us how best to use our great power, we will surely triumph.

Shortly after my Exaltation, Crane introduced me to another of his kind, one who remembers the era just after the Contagion. Her name is Acacia, and she is a general of the Sidereals. According to her, those like me are the war-leaders. We ride into battle, slaying all foes in our path, while those like Acacia pore over maps and devise deadly strategies. Acacia tells of a great division among the Sidereals. Many are like her and wish for the return of the glories of the past. Others were fooled by the corrupt Dragon-Blooded, and fight against us. This misguided faction also controls the Realm's martial arts academies and the Immaculate Philosophy. According to Acacia, several of the Sidereals work alongside the Dragon-Blooded in the temples and in the halls of the palace. Although the foul Dragon-Blooded deny they ever existed, these Sidereals remain as their hidden allies.

Those misguided Sidereals call the worship of the Sun heresy and help the Dragon-Blooded kill our kind. I know little of their ways, but Acacia and Crane agree that we must offer all Sidereals the choice of joining us or being slain. They have been fooled, but their wisdom may yet help them escape the evil clutches of the Dragon-Blooded. We are strong and powerful, but we are also newly reborn — the Sidereals are wise, we must listen to their advice.

SPIRITS

The Realm fears the power of spirits. During my training as an Immaculate, I was taught that spirits were exotic creatures to be avoided by all right-thinking mortals. Now I know differently. We must embrace that power, because we all serve the Sun. The spirits are old and wise and possess a vast hierarchy. When we visited Wavecrest, Crane cast a spell to allow us to journey safely under the water. He took me to a series of gigantic caverns underneath Orchid Isle. Here, in tunnels once carved by lava, the Court of the Seasons dwells in immense, black water-filled chambers.

We met with the youth, the man and the graybeard of Resplendent Water. They were all of ice, and very proud. They asked me to bow to them until I filled their hearts with the fear that is my birthright; then we talked as equals. Crane wished for their support against the Dragon-Blooded and their Sidereal allies, but the spirits were reluctant to become involved in the struggles of the Exalted. Yet they were also eager for the power they might gain from us, and desired to test me. They were feuding with a faction in a local court and wished me to bring them the head of a Storm Mother particularly hostile to their interests.

My target lived on a tiny, isolated atoll. The test was for me alone, and so I journeyed there in a small boat. As I approached her island, the Storm Mother struck at me with wind and wave. The boat was swamped and I was forced to swim. Once I was in the water, she called upon her allies, the beasts of the deepest ocean. As I swam, I slew half a dozen sharks and drove off a small kraken. The light of my Essence lit the darkest depths of the sea. After I had defeated all of her beasts, I clawed my way up onto her shore. Fire is the bane of water; I shot her with flaming arrows, then charged her and rent her flesh with the power granted me by the Tiger Form. Struck by her lightning and bitten by her jagged fangs, I continued to fight. Just as Master Willow trained me, I never let her hold or restrain me. I jumped and feinted and lungedforward to rendher scaled flesh. Eventually she weakened, and my last blow tore out her throat. Exhausted but triumphant, I lay on the island's soft white sand and drank cool water from its spring while my wounds healed. That night, I went back to the caverns of the Court of Season, and they were well pleased by my swift success. Our alliance has been finalized — any ships of the Realm that come seeking my isle of Thassa will sit helplessly immobile in deep waters, far from any land. Those aboard will be easy prey for us, or if they are unworthy foes, the spirits can freely devour them. All is now as it should be, Exalted and spirits working together again. The Celestial Exalted and the spirits both serve the needs of the greater whole and protect the world from tyrants and dangers with our magics.

THE SHADOWLANDS

Death follows life, yet the two must remain forever separate. Commerce between the shadowlands and the living world disrupts both spheres and leads to unbalance and chaos. The dead should go their ways and we our own. Like any powerful spirits, the Deathlords have their rightful place in the natural order, but that place is far from the living. I see two disturbing trends in the shadowlands: the spread of the Deathlords' influence and the growing numbers of deathknights. I have been to Skullstone and found it an abomination—the living dwell in the shadowland itself, ruled by the dead! If we do not stop such incursions, the dead could rule the entire world, destroying the cycle of life itself. The boundary between life and death must remain inviolate.

CHAPTER THREE . THE WORLD AWAITING US

THE TRUTH

Although she believes them, the stories Crane and Acacia have told Lyta about the role of the Sidereal Gold faction are mostly lies created to ensure her continued loyalty. The Gold faction played no role in releasing the souls of the Solar Exalted. Also, the Bronze faction of the Sidereals were actually the ones who long ago convinced the Dragon-Blooded to slay the Solar Exalted. While the Gold faction wishes to restore the Solar Exalted to their positions of power, these Sidereals are also making certain of their own status as the power behind the Solar Exalted. Like all other Sidereal Exalted, members of the Gold faction are consummate manipulators and rarely tell the complete truth, even to their closest allies. For the moment, the Goldfaction makes plans and Lyta carries them out.

Watching the living ruled by the unliving is a true horror. Anyone who has ever visited such a place must see that the living residents are unnaturally pale and drawn. They produce few children, and those who are born often look as much dead as living. If such places continue to exist, their taint will spread until no difference exists between life and death, and the entire world has fallen under the Deathlords' thrall.

I have never met a Deathlord, but deathknights are abominations that mock the Sun itself. They are horrific travesties of my kind. I cannot agree with Crane when he claims that they serve the same function among the dead as we do among the living. My visions tell me that deathknights were once among the ranks of the living, and I believe they are a twisted creation of the Deathlords. I believe that when the pure fires of Exaltation burn in someone near the shadowlands, the Deathlords sometimes reach out and infuse those fires with their own morbid touch. Every deathknight means one fewer of us, perhaps forever.

There is only one answer to all these problems. We must drive the Deathlords back to their citadels and free the living from their thrall. Furthermore, we must destroy all the deathknights in order to free them as well. Within the dark, shriveled remnant of every deathknight's soul, a pure and holy sun-shard lies trapped. Once the knights are truly dead, this spark will be free to depart and awaken again in one of the living, where it will bring forth another Solar Exalted

While the shadowlands are not as great a threat as either the Realm or the Wyld, we must not forget them when we purify all Creation with blood and fire. If confronted with a strong and unified force, I expect many of the Deathlords will relinquish their holdings in mortal lands and agree to pull back to realms more natural for their kind. Any who resist will be vanquished by our might. Once we have driven them back into the shadowlands, those regions must be carefully guarded, and the rents between the worlds of the living and the dead sewn shut. Contact between the living and the dead must be restricted to the children of the Eclipse and other beings able to safely enter the Deathlords' foul lairs.





CHAPTER FOUR . VOICES NOT OUR OWN

CHAPTER FOUR VOICES NOT OUR OWN

News of the Solar Exalteds' return has begun to spread throughout the known world. The Dawn Caste, the greatest warriors the world has ever known, have returned. Everyone who fights with or against one of these powerful beings has seen a living god performing its sacred duty; consequently, many who survive such battles emerge profoundly changed. As stories of these battles spread, the powerful forces currently competing for control of the world have begun to form opinions of what these new Dawn Caste Exalted mean for them and their goals. Many fear them, but many others see the Dawn Caste's martial prowess as a force to be shaped and used to promote their own agendas.

Their warlike nature often makes Dawn Caste members the most noticeable of the Solar Exalted. The most skilled members of the Night Caste are almost never seen, and unsubtle Eclipse Caste Exalted rarely flourish. However, powerful Dawn Caste Exalted often have their deeds celebrated in rousing songs or terrifying stories. Everyone with much to lose fears that such an unstoppable warrior might suddenly deprive them of their wealth or power. Similarly, everyone with plans for conquest or hopes of regaining lost power understands that access to the services of an inhumanly skilled general is a sure way to accomplish their goals. In the midst of these schemes and counter-plots, the Dawn Caste must struggle to find their own path. The following represent a small selection of various beings' many different reactions to the Dawn Caste.

MORTALS

We must remember just how rare and powerful the Solar Exalted actually are. Until a few years ago, they were the stuff of legends, generally dark and terrifying ones. In areas whose people practiced or were influenced by the Immaculate Philosophy, many parents told their children stories of the horrific excesses of the Anathema and the heroic Dragon-Blooded who freed humanity from their horrid thrall. In some isolated regions far from the Realm, a few hopeful rebels and dissidents cherished myths of godlike saviors who would free them from the yoke of the decadent and corrupt Dragon-Blooded.

The reality of the Solars' return has proven different from any of the stories told about them. The Solar Exalted are extremely rare — less than 300 of them currently dwell in the entire world. Amid the teeming masses of humanity, the Solar Exalted remain legends to everyone except the few who have met them or witnessed evidence of their deeds. Almost no one will ever see more than the members of a single Circle. As befits beings so rare and powerful, a Solar's very presence often makes a deep and lasting impression on everyone with whom he interacts. Careful Solars conceal their true natures from the general mass of mortals. Incidents in which a Solar revealed the full, majestic extent of her power have produced panics, wild hysteria and devout worship.



These facts are doubly true for the Dawn Caste. Usually, those who see these Exalts using their powers to the full extent are warriors fighting beside or against them, or terrified civilians caught in the midst of a titanic battle. Using their unique caste power, the Forsaken can literally drive terror-filled mobs before them with a single grimace. If prepared, one Dawn Caste can triumph against a dozen mortal attackers. Even the mightiest mortal foe is no more than a weak child before one of the Forsaken.

Although some are vastly patient, many of the Dawn Caste are hotheaded and eager for battle. As a result, they often cause death and devastation wherever they go. Some are terrible conquerors, leaving burned towns and weeping orphans behind them. Others are remembered as god-like heroes who overthrow tyrants and slay Behemoths. Whether generals leading great armies or merely solitary wanderers, the Forsaken bring great changes wherever they wander.

Soldiers who face a Dawn Caste in battle sometimes throw down their weapons and find a new profession or attempt to join the Exalted's troops, content in the knowledge that they are fighting under the greatest warrior the world has ever produced. While civilians often run in fear, some invariably remember the glory of the Exalted's passage — generally after the Exalted has departed — and set up shrines to him. Some shrines honor the Forsaken and attempt to attract their favor; others contain offerings and wards designed to prevent Exalteds from returning. Already, half a dozen of the Dawn Caste have spawned cults that worship them. Many such cults are confined to small areas, but some have begun spread more widely.

Fear and worship are common reactions, as are greed, avarice and envy. Although the Anathema are hated and feared in the Realm, some queens and princes out in the Threshold are willing to ignore tales of the Anathema's evil if they can make use of the Exalteds' potent powers. Many rulers distrust the rabble-rousing charisma of the Zenith Exalted, but the deadly precision of Night Caste assassins and the battle fury of Dawn Caste warriors are in high demand. Now that stories of the true powers of the Solar Exalted are becoming known, many princes dream of having a member of the Dawn Caste as their personal champion, body guard or general. States who hope to oppose the Realm's hegemony have all seen the devastation caused by Imperial armies led by legions of Dragon-Blooded. The prospect of commanding beings even more powerful is seen as one of the few methods of ensuring victory against the might of the Dynasty. However, most rulers also realize the danger of giving their armies over to these violent godlings. While Dawn Caste members may find warm welcomes and immense luxury working for rulers in the Threshold, they will be closely watched and their weaknesses carefully recorded, in case they should ever attempt to overthrow their masters. Forsaken who take such positions sometimes discover that

everyone they care about is secretly a hostage for their good behavior and that the ruler has surrounded the Dawn Caste with skilled assassins disguised as servants, lieutenants, and even lovers.

All Solar Exalted sometimes find that powerful mortals wish to partake of their power and their ageless state. Because the process of Exaltation is poorly understood, some mortals will ask Solar Exalted to share their gift, while others demand this service and refuse to accept the impossibility of granting their request. Kings and sorcerers may attempt capture Solar Exalteds in a fruitless effort to extract or harness their power. Because the Dawn Caste are the most obvious of the Solar Exalted, they often become prime targets for such exploitation.

YESIA DEASON, DIPLOMAT

Beloved Cousin,

Have you neglected our ancestors' altar? Surely I do not deserve the fate meted out to me. I beg you, spare no expense to placate my grandfather's spirit, that I might be spared further indignities.

Dedicated as I am to my master's needs, with my eyes as you know — firmly on the day when I take his place and the sweet bribes and payments due an envoy fall into my hands, my courage nearly fails me. Look, my words tremble like fallow deer facing the wolves. Only my memory of you, waiting so patiently, keeps me on this perilous course.

These words come to you from a squalid corner of a mammoth bone and elk hide yurt where I crouch beside a disk of burning tallow. Can you not smell the stench of unwashed bodies? All around me, the coarse savages of the elk tribes bellow like animals in rut, laughing at humor so crude I cannot bear to stain your mind with it. Why the council has sent us — me — to this horrible place, I dare not imagine. Rumors of alliance with these barbarians cannot be true!

It seems an eternity ago that my master and I were sent as envoys to the massive tribe gathering on our northern border. We waited, as agreed, next to the frozen curve of Red Deer creek, listening to the ice snap and groan like a dying man. The sun has weeks yet to return and only the winter veil, blue and violet above us, illuminated the desolation of wind-sculpted snow. How creatures so huge could have come upon us so silently, I cannot fathom.

I have never seen a live mammoth so close. They look like vast, steaming mountains and, spirits, the stench! We saw two mammoths, and between them a single elk rider. So small in comparison, he should have been dwarfed by his gigantic escorts, but it was to him our eyes turned first. The bull elk was a glorious creature, with eyes of liquid gold and antlers spread wider than my outstretched arms. Yet again, it was to the man my attentions were fixed.

He dismounted and came towards us, this elk rider, wearing a prince's ransom of furs. An omen dog pelt fell from his broad shoulders to brush his hide boots. His breath streamed around his face like clouds caught on a mountain

CHAPTER FOUR . VOICES NOT OUR OWN

peak. He threw back his hood and my eyes fell on the gold sunburst pressed on his forehead like the thumbprint of a god. Those of the Realm call it the demon mark, but, my beloved, they are fools. Hair like granite and ice fell past shoulders wide enough to build an empire on. Set deep, his eyes were the color of honey — wolf's eyes — and I cringed as his gaze stripped me down to my most petty dreams and secret desires. Beside me, my master sobbed aloud as the barbarian turned to him. Beloved, I am grateful to be only a servant in this matter. It was some little time before I realized the elk rider was shorter than I.

This was our introduction to the Bull of the North. No one calls him that. He is neither chieftain, nor shaman there is no name I know for what he is. His felt vest doesn't carry the totem of the elk tribe, nor any other. Instead, he wears the sun-spiral, embroidered in ice pearls and redgold.

The tribe lays gifts at his tent: meat and the foul fermented milk they all drink, gold, uncut jewels and more. He ignores it all and favors only those who give him loyalty and obedience. No one refuses him, some for love, some in fear. I have heard tales of his rages, where the tribe flees their own camp for fear of their lives. I have also heard tales of his great mercy — from the mouths of the Gethamanese warriors who now serve at his side. The mountain city still stands, but his banner flies above it. Gethamane is only a beginning.

Beyond Gethamane stands our home. To us his eyes turn next, and I pray to our ancestors that our envoy's honeyed words can turn aside his interest. But I have no faith in that.

Beloved, things are no longer the same; the axis of the world no longer lies in the Realm. I have given myself over to the future. I hope my service will be of use to my new master. I hope my loyalty will spare us all. Look for me soon, my heart, look for me in the shadow of a god.

Your beloved cousin, Yesia Deason

MELIZON OF THE HARBORHEAD ROYAL GUARD

Many of my sisters have fallen. Our attack on the Varangan city of Talt was utterly and unexpectedly repelled. I offer no apology except to say that we cannot fight incarnate gods. We knew Talt had a Realm garrison, but our sources assured us they would make little effort to stop us. All we faced was a poorly-trained local militia. We went to our deaths with the fullest confidence in our victory. I was attacking warehouses on the outskirts of the city, which is why I survived. We heard the sounds of fierce fighting towards the center of the city, but our own opponents were a moderate contingent of guards. They fought better than we had been led to expect, but were still no match for us.

Then the Anathema arrived. Glowing with a light that set almost half of my two dozen troops fleeing, he rode through us like a scythe. He carried no weapon, but his fists struck with the force of stone-hard maces. The few blows that penetrated his guard bounced off his skin as if he were made of iron. Battle leader Vekra faced him in her glass armor, riding her armored war steed. He cried challenge and struck a single blow that killed her and her horse. When her second Kalla came to avenge her, the godling grabbed her horse and threw rider and steed into our lines. I sound like a toothless elder reciting foolish tales as I repeat this. I swear by Ahlat the Terrible it happened exactly as I said. He struck blows that could have killed half a dozen in an instant. With Vekra and Kalla dead, I called retreat. Fighting him further would merely have killed more of us. War leader, we cannot hope to win against such a foe without powerful aid.

I have been told that I saw one of the Forsaken. If gods now walk the Earth, how can any of us remain safe? My warriors have faced forces three times our size and easily won, and yet a dozen such as he could conquer any of our cities. I have not known such fear since I was a young girl. How can we charge bravely into battle when we may face an opponent who can slay our best without effort?

SERGEANT KRISLAN TO A NEW RECRUIT

I knew Dace back in the old days. He was a good commander, fair to his troops, made sure everyone got paid, and he won a lot. When he didn't, ransoms and prisoner exchanges were his top priority. He knew that the best way to win was to keep those under you loyal. He had a bit of a temper, but mostly only for fools and shirkers. Tossed them out right quick, he did, usually minus an ear or sometimes a hand if they were real trouble. He was a quiet sort, but we learned to stay out of his way when he got drunk — his temper got lots worse in his cups.

'Bout a year ago he changed. The rumors are straight on target; he's one of the Forsaken now. All the stories about wild-eyed murderous devils, that's our Dace, 'cept he's not much like that. The most obvious change is that he always wins. Yeah, I know all the companies say that: "Kid, we haven't lost a battle in over a year. Join up — it's good pay, little danger and plenty of loot. All we need is your oath." That exact same speech is all lies everywhere but here. Great Mela, you got to see him in battle. Once he gets going, nothing can stop him. I seen him fight four at once and kill them all before the first one fell down, I swear on my daddy's grave he did this. He's got magic in him.

Dragon's tits, girl, I've seen him shout at the other side and watch a third of them turn and run, and most of those left had wet themselves. I don't 'spect you to believe it all now, that's why we let you sign on for a one moon trial run. We got a nest of Arczeckh barbarians to clear out — that's why we're recruiting now. We won't be that far from your



home when your tour is up, and you'll have seen him in action. If you got the stomach for a real fight, you'll stick.

ONE MONTH LATER

Now that you've been in for a moon, I guess I can tell you more about him. He's still the same old Dace as before, but some stuff has changed. I respect the hell out of the commander, but he gives me the creeps. We'd follow him anywhere, but he doesn't have many close friends anymore — just those strange folks that come and go. That Southern woman, that white-haired girl and the queer-looking guy she travels with, and that big black guy. You know that black guy is famous? He used to be the toughest pitfighter in Nexus. I paid a guy a jade obol to get a place in line to shake his hand after a fight about three years ago.

Anyway, it's hard to say exactly how, but Dace isn't the same man he was. It's not the tricks he can do. We've had a few sorcerers here — they can be pretty odd, but nothing you can't get used to. He's different. It's like there's him, but there's other stuff in his head, too. He knows things he didn't used to. See that fancy sword of his - he picked it up a few weeks after he changed. We were rooting out bandits in some ruins just to the north of Nexus. It was one of the old First Age cities that's only a mess of picked-over rubble now. After we got done with the fight, Dace went inside a pile of debris that must've been a house once. He dug through the rubble for a couple hours, not talking to anyone. It was like we weren't even there. There was a bolthole under the floor, and when he opened it up this nasty thing covered in spines and bristles jumped out. It looked like some kind of huge spiny lizard. A bunch of us rushed up to help, but he killed it before we could get a blow in. Then he went down into that hole and came up carrying that blade. He was crying. We thought that spirit-thing had done something to him. I snuck down into that space when he went off for a walk. I saw a dead guy down there, long dead. His bones had been scattered and chewed on, probably by the thing Dace killed. Dace went and buried the guy later that night, all alone, and never talked about it again. I asked him once; he told me it was something old and not important anymore. I'll bet you a month's wages them was his bones from his last life, boy, or the bones of someone he used to know.

That's not the only change either. He used to be spooked by Fair Folk. Hell, who isn't, it's just good sense. But I've seen him face them recently. He doesn't just know he'll win, he knows he's bigger than them. Now he's the wolf and they're the rabbit. Pretty much everyone is his rabbit now. He's still got sense, he'll retreat if things get bad. But now he pretty much never gets afraid, just cautious. Some of the troops say he's a god. I don't know about any of that. I'm not much for gods — making a few offerings to Mela is enough for me. My guess is, he thinks he's a god, and I'm not going to tell him any different. He ain't the same Dace exactly, but he wins, and long as he keeps doing that, we'll follow him down a Deathlord's gullet if he asks.

CHASSOM'S SPEECH IN A BASEMENT SHRINE IN NEXUS

Brother warriors, I make an offering of gold and olive branches — I bring you tidings of glory the likes of which you have never known. I come to you to tell you to give up your false gods and to renounce the petty spirits you worship. A new god has arisen among us, a god of soldiers and those who follow the way of the sword. Some of you know the name of Dace. He was one of us, a mercenary tough and brave enough to survive more than a two score hard campaigns. I bring you news that he has become more. The fools of the Immaculate Order call him Forsaken and place a price on his head. They will fall under his deadly blade - I have seen him fight. He is a man who became a god, or perhaps a god who merely chose this time to reveal himself. He is now our god. Warriors who honor him gain prowess in war and shall return to even greater glories if they fall in battle.

I offer you these medallions emblazoned with his crest and talismans containing bits of the armor and bones of those he personally slew. With your donations, I shall raise a temple to his glory, where we can all honor him as befits an incarnate god. For those among you who wish to truly partake of his most potent blessings, I also have amulets containing mud from his sacred footprints. With this connection to Dace the warrior-god, your blade will never swerve from its mark and you shall never be defeated. The preparations necessary to contain even the tiniest portion of his power within these charms are extensive. Would that I could offer these to everyone, but I require significant recompense for the expenses necessary to bring these wonders to you. What are a few coins when you gain access to even a pittance of a god's power?

HESTAL OF CARAZOL TOWN

He came to my farm. My daughter was sick, and the shaman told me the dream lions were to blame. I tried all the charms I knew, and then paid the shaman for even more. I prayed for aid from the lords of spring, but did not expect any response. My daughter no longer woke fully and grew thinner by the day.

He came in the evening. He dressed modestly, like any other traveler. I will never again forget the old stories about hospitality. Don't refuse water and salt to one of the gods — I shudder to think of the results. He came seeking a bed for the night, but I could tell there was something different about him. There have been bandits on the road of late, but his face showed no fear. I first suspected him of being a scout for brigands, but we had nothing to steal. As he talked to me, my fear vanished. I did wonder a bit. The day was still hot, the flies buzzed lazily, and I was reluctant to leave the shelter of my house. He looked no worse than someone taking a brisk walk during the cool days at the beginning of spring. I invited him in and gave him what food I had. I tried not to burden him with my sorrows, but Tessa cried out during supper. He asked about her, and I told him. He said he appreciated my hospitality and would try to help. He looked like neither a healer nor a shaman, so I had little hope. He asked more of what the shaman had said.

He slept soundly and when the sky first began to lighten my guest went out, vowing to be back before the sun fully rose. Horrible sounds came from the half-light. I looked out and saw him wrestling with two lions. He moved as swift as lightning and I saw him break one lion's back over his knee like a man breaks kindling. Just as he finished, the other lion struck him full with its paw. That blow would have crippled a horse, yet my guest was unwounded. Then he picked up the beast and beat it to death against the ground. When he took out his knife, I went back inside. Tessa started to stir. After a short while he came back with a bloody skin and a leather flask. The flask smelled of blood, but I dared not protest when he poured the steaming gore down Tessa's throat. In minutes, she awoke fully for the first time in days.

After I made certain she was well, I bowed down before him. He pulled me up and told me my meal and bed were all the offerings he required. He then walked off carrying the skin.

A god slept in my house. If you also pray sincerely and with full conviction, he may hear your prayer and come to your aid. He is tall, strong and proud. I will guide all of you in making images of this new god. We must all worship him and abandon our prior gods. He traveled alone and spoke of no other gods. My visions of him have told me he wishes to be our sole god and will protect us against the Faerie lions and other dangers.

Beleria of Azure Coast to the Feathered One

Please, great lord, we must have the help of Wavecrest. I am our chief's only surviving wife, and if you aid us I can promise your island a wealth of pearls and precious coral. One of the Anathema has attacked us — she arrived in the company of a small fleet. We first though her a Tya brigandcaptain intent on looting our island. Then she asked us to surrender and said she was our new chief. We refused, confident that our great war canoes and many brave warriors could easily defeat this bandit. We were wrong.

She shot blindingly bright arrows of magical fire that shattered the hulls of our war canoes and killed our sailors, while our own arrows could not pierce her flesh. On the shore, we watched helplessly as she jumped onto the deck





of our proudest ship and killed everyone on board. Then she returned to her own ship and was rowed to land. All our remaining men and Tya were waiting there to stop her. She and her warriors cut through them as a machete slices a palm leaf. My husband faced her in his whale ivory armor, carrying his ancient and sacred war club. She ripped off his head with her bare hands. Just as he had asked of me, my servants and I set off from the far side of our island to come plead for help to free my people.

We could all see the foul golden nimbus that surrounded her. I have heard all the old stories — she is one of the Anathema, a Forsaken who brings terrible destruction as her kind did long ago. I fear she will bring back the Contagion and other ancient terrors. Please, Feathered One, send your warriors to slay this monster — if she is not stopped, she will destroy all the islands of the West.

Other Castes of Solar Exalted

While some members of the Dawn Caste show great patience and excellent planning, other Solar Exalted tend to view Dawn warriors as the least thoughtful and most aggressive of the five castes. Eclipse Caste Exalteds often complain that the Forsaken slay their enemies before anyone has had a chance to negotiate, or even to determine if a fight is truly necessary. Similarly, many Night Caste see members of the Dawn Caste as overbearing and unsubtle.

Dawn Caste often find their most natural allies among the Zenith and Twilight Exalted. Noon Exalted help train recruits, boost morale and rouse mobs of civilians to aid the soldiers, allowing Dawn Caste to concentrate on leading armies into battle and destroying the opposition that the Zenith Caste has already weakened with propaganda and dissension. In the Twilight Caste, the Forsaken often find the excellent pairing of magician and warrior. While Twilight sorcerers cast potent spells and summon powerful spirits, members of the Dawn Caste give these magicians time to cast their most powerful magics by hewing swiftly through all corporeal opposition. When facing attack, members of all four other castes happily acknowledge that they would rather have a Dawn Caste beside them than any other being.

While they are sometimes given little credit for any abilities not directly related to violent conflict, the other four castes realize that the Dawn Caste are the ones charged with keeping any Circle safe from harm. Unfortunately, some of these warriors find their lives and their talents taken for granted. Their martial prowess means that in some Circles the other members expect the Dawn Caste to face many purely mundane threats alone, or aided only by Charms and spells that can be cast from a safe distance. In a few extreme cases, Circles expect Dawn Caste members to single-handedly perform the majority of combat. Though the Dawn Caste are well equipped for such a role, being continually asked to risk one's life alone rarely leads to a harmonious partnership. Wise Circles realize that members of the Dawn Caste are more than merely exceptionally dangerous bodyguards, and treat them accordingly.

SWAN TO THE REST OF THE CIRCLE

To be blunt, we were set up. There is no rebel Varangan faction. I thought I could help them throw off their allegiance to the Realm, and I was wrong; Varangan nobles working with the Realm engineered the whole plan. They wanted to draw in any Solars and other dissidents they could find and crush them all. They almost succeeded. It's a good thing Dace only brought a small force along for backup; most of them didn't get out. They couldn't take the same kind of damage we could, and we had to head into the deep jungle to lose our pursuers. Dace is the reason any of us are still here.

Something didn't seem right as soon as we met our first contact at the inn next to the post-rider stop. I used my Charms to makes certain of his loyalty, but everything checked out. In retrospect, it seems certain this man was as ignorant of the truth as we were.

Our contact took us to the town of Tarcha to meet the leaders of the alleged conspiracy. Dawn was just breaking when he led us into a small villa on the outskirts of the city. As soon as we were inside, the guards came out. Dace and I had both been worried, but thought we were being paranoid — then three dozen soldiers and six Dragon-Blooded came out to greet us. Dace's men did a wonderful job against the soldiers, but they were outnumbered two to one. I took down two Dragon-Blooded — they were apparently unfamiliar with the warrior-diplomats of Coral, and did not expect me to be a master of supernatural martial arts as well as a skilled negotiator. Dace was amazing; even the Dragon-Blooded couldn't compare to him. Their leader hid behind a pillar — Dace cut through the pillar and sliced her in half. I've only seen him fight so rapidly once before, when the Fair Folk ambushed us out West. He held them while his men and I got out. The Dragon-Blooded's efforts didn't stop at Tarcha's border; they had troops waiting at several towns on the main roads out of the Varangan lands, and we had to fight the whole way to the jungle.

FROM JASARA'S JOURNAL

Today, Demetheus and I went deep into Chiaroscuro's New City. Two days ago, some scroungers got into the subbasements of one of the ruined towers. They were chased out by something that drove them mad with terror. Last night and the night before, several people vanished from a nearby squatter camp. The scroungers let something loose; we meant to find out what and chase it away or put it down.

Demetheus heard about this situation first. He asked me in because he figured I'd be interested in anything hidden in the city, and he's right on that count. The last big haul in this city was 30 years ago. I'd love to get hold of some old books or maybe even some First Age artifacts. Folks back then could do so much, and we know so little about them.

Demetheus' reasons are a little less obvious. He talks about liking to help people and being a good person. I guess that's all true, but that's only part of the story — Demetheus was looking forward to finding something big and nasty and pounding it into the ground. I imagine it was easy to find a real challenge back when he was human. These days, finding something tough enough to stand up to his fists can take some work.

So off we went, me driven by greed, him by pride. To give us an edge, I conjured up two fire constructs, one to protect each of us. At the site of the first killing we found bits of clothing; at the second spot, there was some blood and a couple of fingernails from where it looked like someone had tried to hang onto a corner of a building. The trails were obvious, but they led deep into some of the least passable ruins. I could see why no one had gotten up the courage to follow them. Those ruins were also near the basement the scroungers had opened up. That basement smelled like old carrion, but was completely empty. We prowled around the ruins until I heard someone crying. The sound was coming from a small hole in the middle of what had once been a street. Demetheus had to rip up chunks of the street to widen the opening, but doing that wasn't much trouble for him. Watching him rip up pieces of steel-hard glass pavement still surprises me. Once the hole was big enough, we crawled down into it and found ourselves in a gigantic tunnel complex.

A ways down one tunnel, we found the two missing people. Both were wrapped in cocoons of vermilion thread. One was still alive, the other a drained husk. I really hate bugs. We got the live one out and then figured if the food was here, the things that captured them were likely nearby. Right we were — by the time we got the live one back to the surface, we heard them coming to look in on their dinner. They weren't any too pleased to find their meal had departed. There were four of them; they looked like spiders made from red glass. I still don't know if they were urban spirits or some sort of Old Realm constructs ---maybe folks back in the First Age could make spirits to order. Not that it mattered. What mattered was that they were hungry and upset. First, I went to work with spells. The two flame constructs I'd called earlier mostly kept the giant bugs off of us. The spiders looked brittle, so I called up an icy wind to freeze them. This spell slowed all four spiders down and shattered one of them into shiny dust. Then Demetheus went after two of them, while I drew my sword and fought the third. Demetheus' fists bounced his two off the walls and each other. I got lucky; my sword broke my spider in half. Demetheus looked like he didn't need any help, so I stood back and watched him finish off the others. I've never seen anyone else fight like that. It's not just his skill, it's his total concentration and utter joy when he fights. He's so calm other times, it's like he saves it all up inside his fists.

We didn't find anything else down there, but I looked over the cocoon with the corpse in it. Assuming a buyer didn't mind the body inside, we had several hundred yards of red glass spun into thread. We sold the whole mess to some clothiers after I performed a short ritual on the body to lay any ghost to rest — the clothiers will also give me the body to bury once they've unwrapped it. I'm guessing the Tri-Kahn and half his richest nobles will be wearing robes and turbans made of those threads within a couple of months.

THE DYNASTY

For most of the Dragon-Blooded, the Solar Exalted are their worst nightmares made flesh. The Realm's rulers have made certain that all who serve them learn the old tales about the ending of the First Age. Almost no one still remembers that the Dawn Caste were once brave and valiant warriorgods. Instead, the Immaculates tell of the horrors perpetrated by the terrible Forsaken. They killed without thought any who gave the least offense to their dignity. They fought vast, pointless duels that could lay waste to entire cities. In their excesses, some were said to have rampaged through the landscape, slaying thousands and causing thousands more to cower before them. These Anathema were said to have transformed entire cities into fearful slaves who lived only to serve their masters' insatiable desires.

Stories of the Anathema's rebirth have caused many Dragon-Blooded to fear that such terrible days may soon return. Other Dragon-Blooded worry for their own safety, fearful that the newly reborn Forsaken will exact vengeance on the descendants of those who slew them and overthrew their rule. Although the Realm lacks the resources to track down all rumors of new Solar Exalted, the Terrestrial Exalted who rule the Realm have vowed to prevent any Solar Exalted from attacking their domain. The Realm's Dragon-Blooded rulers fear that those they call the Deceivers will make dark pacts to unite the Fair Folk, the spirits, and the legions of the dead into an unholy alliance against the Realm. They fear the Unclean will rediscover the great power of the lost and deadly magics of the First Age. Most of all, they fear that one of the Forsaken will gather a vast army in the Threshold and lead it against the Realm, looting and pillaging their ancient empire. Any member of the Dawn Caste who leads a large military force will rapidly become the primary target of the Wyld Hunt.

THE WYLD HUNT

Last entry from the journal of Del Shimarz Cathak; returned along with his head to the Sixth Legion stationed at Pigshead Bluff, Wavecrest Satrapy. The rest of his Hunt remains missing. Head and journal forwarded to his family.



I thought the North was an unpleasant taste of the afterlife, until I came here. I'm too hot-blooded for this bog. It's been raining for a week and my boots are molding. Four decades ago, I'd have laughed at anyone who said I'd find myself squatting in some nameless swamp, covered in bugs and bog slime, hunting demons. And here I am. I'm not here for duty, or the glorious missing Empress. I'm here for my family, squabbling over the throne, and for everyone else who sits safe in the Realm with dry feet, blind to what's happening out here.

The demons are returning. Maybe the Empress was more than a greedy old hag after all; with her gone, the Forsaken are popping out of whatever hell they'd been stuffed into like maggots out of bad meat. Except it's the Realm that's rotting.

All of us are hurrying home to fight over the throne, imagining that's where the power is. Half the heliograph towers are abandoned out here; I haven't been able to signal back home that another demon is loose, and Hesiesh knows if anyone even cares. Soldiers are deserting the legions in droves, called home by family or simply turning outcaste. Unthinkable when the Empress still held power, and not just because deserters are crucified. I always thought honor was something more than a convenient phrase. It holds me still, fool that I am. If we leave, those of us left of the Hunt, who will protect all those idiots back in the Realm?

Sometimes the job's easy — half the calls for the Hunt are false alarms. It's like we're a bunch of exterminators, taking care of malicious spirits, greedy Fair Ones or some half-witted godblood with a piece of bronze glued to her forehead and a couple of flashy Charms. That joke used to be funny until my brother paid for it with his life. I crucified the damn witch myself.

I don't think this one's a joke.

The woman's still screaming and wailing, down among the blood-spattered rushes. She tried to crawl away until I stooped down and cut a tendon. She won't do us any good as a stalking goat if she manages to creep off and die somewhere else. We're all crouched in the mud watching the leeches try to get in our boots. I have to ignore the wet and the cramp in my knees and my dry-mouthed terror. I have to be ready.

Mytalis is off on the high point — such as it is tasting the air, trying to ferret out the demon. The rest of us wait, praying for a successful ambush. None of us want to take the Anathema face to face. If we fail, Mytalis swore on her father's blood that she'd let the wind take her away and carry the news that one of the demons is still alive, and had its first taste of dragons' blood. I should have given her my journal to take with her, so at least my name would survive. If we're lucky, I'll put an arrow in the demon's back and we can get the hell out of this cursed, sodden place. I want to die somewhere warm.

The woman gave me the idea herself, clinging to Mytalis' feet with her gray dress rucked up to her knees and wailing in her mushy accent about her son, her only childher baby. As if the whelp she'd nursed at her breast still lived somewhere inside the mind of the demon who took the boy's body the way you hollow out a gourd to carry water.

They all start like that. Anathema come out of humans like the parasites they are. Mortals are too spiritually weak to protect themselves from the Forsaken — no Dragon-Blood has ever been taken by a demon like this. The Anathema don't possess us, only murder us. Maybe they hope soft-hearted humans will protect them in those first few years when they're still vulnerable. I've read that they pretend love and friendship and all the mortal emotions, at least until they come fully into their power.

I asked nicely at first, asked the woman to call her son for us. She wouldn't, so we had to hurt her enough to make her scream. I don't make my troop do something I won't — I can still feel her bones breaking under my fist. I'd forgotten how fragile the unBlooded are. Still, it took awhile before she'd cry out and betray her child to us. There are days when I love my work, but this isn't one of them.

Once upon a time, this kind of thing wasn't necessary. We had dignity, before the Regency. When the Wyld Hunt rode, we could call in half a legion, plan the attack like a military maneuver, and come back to the towns as heroes. Now, there was just us — five of us who hadn't gone home to fight over the scraps of power, five of us to take down the kind of monster that could kill with a touch. Now we need all the advantage I can scrape up, and I'm choosing the battle ground by staking the demon's mother out to die in the mud and cold in hope that we can trap him with the memory of human love.

Out here in the marshes, sound carries quite a distance. I'm betting the Forsaken is still lingering somewhere; it's young, only a couple of days old and still confused. The first few days, all they think about is the betrayal that happened so long ago, when they were murdered by their own kind. Sad, sure, if I didn't know what those creatures turned into, how powerful they were, how dedicated they are to the destruction of everything around them. I'd rather be at the mercy of a Fair One than one of the Anathema.

Entry ends here.

REPORT TO LORD VIOLET OF THE SHIMMERING EYRIE

This is acting garrison commander Yelon. I regret to inform you that garrison commander Rada was slain yesterday during a raid by an extremely dangerous Haltan commando. Two weeks ago a Haltan assassin killed our close ally Chief Klyenka. The chief's best warriors pursued the assassin into the forest. Reports by a Linowan shaman present at both raids indicate that the same raider perpetrated both acts. The shaman also claims that the raider was somehow *larger* during the second raid.

Last evening, the assassin was discovered robbing our storehouse. Later examination proved that she took the

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contents of the pay cask and killed both of the guards. The commander and six of his bodyguards surrounded her in front of the barracks. As I ran up, she killed the commander and one guard with Haltan boomerangs while simultaneously parrying another guard's attack with her short sword. She moved with inhuman speed. Once the commander was dead, she leaped onto the roof of the storehouse and quickly lost her pursuers. She was covered with a brilliant golden light, clearly indicating that she possessed powerful magic. Possession, use of a powerful enchanted item, and some form of malefic transformation are all equally possible. No Fair Folk or other Haltan were seen nearby; this being seems to operate alone.

I have assigned messengers to carry this individual's description throughout the Linowan lands. If she strikes again, we will know. I am formally requesting aid from you or one of your captains. I do not believe purely mortal soldiers can hope to defeat her.

OUTCASTE DRAGON-BLOODED

The outcaste Dragon-Blooded who leave the wonders and horrors of the Realm behind them have more varied feelings. Many of these outcastes left because of politics. Such individuals normally hold orthodox views about the Anathema. However, others departed because they can no longer tolerate the Realm's corruption and hypocrisy. This collection of fanatics, idealists and misfits can prove quite valuable to the new Solar Exalted. Some fear the Anathema even more than they hate the Dynasty. However, there are those among both the exiles and the idealists who see an alliance with one of the Solar Exalted as a real chance to strike back against the Realm. Such an opportunity can persuade many to ally with someone they consider to be a dangerous monster. A few of the most disaffected and angry outcastes distrust all of the Realm's pronouncements and see the Solars as potential saviors.

Because many outcaste Dragon-Blooded are disaffected warriors, and some deserted from garrison duty, these individuals often hold valuable information about the Realm's defenses. These soldiers are most comfortable with other warriors, and so those among them that choose to work with the Anathema are likely to ally with one of the Dawn Caste.

Of course, blind hatred and open alliance are not the only possible reactions to the return of the Dawn Caste. In contrast to the relative inexperience of the newly reborn Solar Exalted a number of Dragon-Blooded are several hundred years old. Naturally, some of these old and cunning Terrestrial Exalted are experts at planning and carrying out complex and devious machinations. Some of the most Machiavellian Dragon-Blooded seek to use the Solar Exalted to their own advantage. Instead of a partnership, these aged outcastes attempt to use their long practice at complex schemes to turn one or more members of the Solar Exalted into their pawns. Again, the Dawn Caste hold a special place in such plots. Fearful of the mind-bending powers of the Zenith and Eclipse Castes, as well as the cunning of the Twilight and Night Castes, a number of ambitious Dragon-Blooded have decided that harnessing the raw power of one of the Forsaken is their most effective path to domination.

FROM THE DIARY OF THE DRAGON-BLOODED RISA

Lord Fucian has been dead for six weeks. I served under him for more than a year, but all I feel about his death is relief. Dace is a far better leader than Fucian or any of the other high nobles under whom I served. Perhaps this is my true destiny. Within hours of meeting Dace, my entire world changed. I have gone from being a staunch defender of the Realm to the second-in-command of one of its most deadly enemies.

It's surprisingly easy to work for one of the Anathema. In manner and speech, Dace is much like any other mercenary leader. He is proud, brave and cautious enough to keep himself and his troops alive. He is also as powerful as the eldest and most skilled of the Dragon-Blooded. We just finished driving off some Wyld barbarians who had been harassing Soja, a small forest kingdom south of the Haltan lands. The Haltan have a truce with those vile things and aren't much inclined to help neighbors who have raided them in the past.

The queen of Soja was on her own, so she hired us. The barbarians had tamed or made a pact with a number of Wyld-tainted beasts. During their largest raids, they drove a two-headed tyrant lizard, a horde of bark-covered hatra and something that may once have been a burrowing lok before them. These beasts seem to kill for the sheer joy of killing. After these creatures have wreaked enough havoc, the barbarians follow behind. These savages were particularly unwholesome — they were misshapen and hairy like monkeys. With arms longer than their legs, they swung through the trees like apes.

Dace decided to handle the beasts alone. The rest of us took positions to the side, so we could use arrow fire on the animals and their masters. Then Dace stepped in front of the horde. He killed the tyrant lizard with three blows and defended himself against half a dozen attacks at once. The creatures scattered — many of them died, some from our arrows, most from Dace. He fights with a speed and a fury I've never seen before, swinging his blade with the same ease that I walk across a room. When I'm with him, following his orders and fighting beside him are the most natural things in the world. If he is any example, I believe that my kind instinctively follow the Solars much as young animals naturally obey their mothers.





We follow generals because they have the power to slay us and the ability to win. We follow kings because they were born to the office and because they have many guards to back up their wishes. I follow Dace because of what he is. I've seen the same look in the eyes of village youths they want to touch that power and belong to him.

OTHER CELESTIAL EXALTED

The Lunar Exalted lurk at the fringes of the world, while most Sidereal Exalted reside in the Realm, their presence hidden from all but a few. For both types of Celestial Exalted, the return of the Solar Exalted is a great opportunity and a serious threat. Many Lunar Exalted long for the glorious days of the First Age. Back then, Solar and Lunar Exalted fought side by side to preserve and protect their mutual domain. Some Lunars now regret their abandonment of the Solars and hope to regain this long-gone age.

However, many realize that they and the Solar Exalted may well be on a different side. The Lunar Exalted turned their backs on the Realm and the civilized kingdoms of the Threshold. If the Solar Exalted regain control of the Realm and attempt to restore it to its previous state, they will face Lunar Exalted determined to protect the Wyld and halt the advance of the civilization they feel led to the horrors and excesses of the late First Age. Many Lunars understand that while they would benefit greatly from the martial prowess of the Dawn Caste, they could just as easily find themselves facing Forsaken in battle. Today, a few Lunars are actively seeking to ally themselves with the newly reborn Solar Exalted, while others strive to slay the Solars before they become a threat. However, most Lunar Exalted are not yet willing to take an active role in this conflict. The majority of Lunars fear that the Solars must eventually be destroyed, but hope that the Dragon-Blooded and their allies can accomplish this before the Lunars need to join the fray.

Ancient stories of the Solar Exalted are more commonly told nowadays at gatherings of Lunar Exalted. A few of the Lunar Exalted who have actually met Solars were so struck by their memories of days together that they could only gaze at the Solars in wonder. Since most Lunar Exalted greatly value survival skills and physical prowess, such reactions are particularly common when meeting the sacred warriors of the Dawn Caste.

In contrast, most of the cunning Sidereal Exalted see the return of the Solar Exalted as a momentous event that they must now factor into their vastly complicated schemes and elaborate prophecies. The Sidereals of the Bronze faction are at the forefront of the forces in the Realm calling for the destruction of the new Anathema. While few in the Bronze faction fear magical attack from the relatively inexperienced Solar sorcerers, they are quite rightly terrified by the assassins of the Night and the prospect of huge armies led by invincible generals coming



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to conquer the Realm. Of those two threats, several leaders of the Bronze faction believe that the Dawn Caste should be hunted down first.

Members of the Gold faction see the return of the Solar Exalted as the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams. A few see the new Solar Exalted as the heralds of a new world, and passively await its dawning. However, steeped in millennia of intrigue, conspiracy, prophecy and manipulation, the vast majority of the Gold faction believe that the Solar Exalted must be carefully shepherded and controlled to fully restore the wonders of the First Age.

Possessing centuries or even millennia more experience than the Solar Exalted, the leaders of the Gold faction have been actively seeking to guide and aid the Solars into truly fulfilling their destinies. Of course, most members of the Gold faction have a clear vision of exactly what those destinies should be. To the Gold Sidereals, the Solar Exalted occupy a strange position as both pawns and saviors. Only the Solars' own actions can determine if they will blindly follow the Sidereals' plans or if they will boldly find their own way. Many members of the Gold faction are wary of the powers of the Twilight and Eclipse Castes, the cunning of the Night Caste, and the raw, unchained charisma of the Zenith Caste. Most of the Gold faction sees the Dawn Caste as their ideal pawns. Believing themselves destined to be the powers behind any throne, these Sidereals regard the Dawn Castes's martial prowess as an ideal counterpoint to their own manipulative genius.

Also, while the actions of the Zenith, Twilight, and Eclipse castes are seen as having vital roles in rebuilding the hoped-for Golden Age, the first step in the Gold faction's plan to restore the Solar Deliberative is the destruction of the existing regime. They hope to use the Solars to carve out the rot within the Realm's government and remove the Dragon-Blooded nobles from their positions of power. While they remain safely behind the battle-lines, the Golds wish to see the warriors of Dawn tear down the palaces of the Realm and slay all inhabitants who resist the Gold faction's plans.

Currently, the Gold faction has convinced several newly reborn Solar Exalted to aid them, and is eager to find more. These Sidereals are especially avid to find members of the Dawn and Night castes. Members of the Gold Faction are naturally suspicious of any Solar Exalted who has plans different from their own. Ideally, they wish to find a newly reborn Exalted and teach her about her power and her responsibilities. However, keeping their minions under control may prove challenging. Recruitment of additional Solar Exalted and maintaining their grip on their Solar servants are the Gold faction's two major priorities.

MASTER ASCENDING CLOUD'S LETTER TO CHEJOP KEJAK

I regret to inform you that less than a day ago one of the Anathema was reborn in our very midst. Novice Lyta, studying martial arts under sub-master Willow, was Exalted yesterday. In her mad frenzy, she slew several of her fellow students as well as sub-master Willow. Your predictions have proven correct — today, no place is safe from their depredations.

Because the cloister had no one capable of destroying her, Lyta fled into the hills. An all-night search by several of our Dragon-Blooded acolytes and sub-masters revealed no trace of her. My magics have also failed to locate her some powerful force must shield her. There are two lost Demesnes in the foothills around the Cloister of Wisdom. If she is inside their borders, even our most potent magics may miss her. Tremors in the web of destiny seem to indicate members of the Gold faction may be sniffing around. While their misguided auguries certainly could not have located the arrival of an Anathema so precisely, even those fools occasionally get lucky. We must keep them apart.

Initial reports suggest that this Anathema is one of the Forsaken. With the Realm's forces pulling back and the defense grids uncontrolled after the death of the Empress, we cannot afford power-mad warlords conquering the Threshold or threatening the Realm. I have already stationed members of the Wyld Hunt in all nearby coastal towns and strongly recommend that you seal off all of Lyta's exits from the Blessed Isle and post her image in every port. I urge you to move swiftly on this matter — after talking to individuals who witnessed her Exaltation, I believe she could become one of the most dangerous Anathema now alive if she gains time to develop and understand her considerable powers.

We have received reports that the Gold faction has already recruited two Anathema. I fear what might happen if they get their hands on a third, especially one of the Forsaken.

Those fools hope to bring back the horrors of the Old Realm. The world was almost destroyed once by those power-mad godlings — if they get another chance, I'm afraid they will succeed. As you say so often, we can keep the Dragon-Blooded in line, but not the Solars.

LUNAR EXALTED FLOURISH DEATHCRY TO HER PACK

The Solar Exalted have returned — I saw one last week. She was slaying a Storm Mother that lived near Wavecrest. I've heard the old tales, but I've never seen anything quite so magnificent — the stories do not do them justice. She moved with the grace and speed of a sea serpent. We may be able to master ourselves, but she went well beyond that. In the heat of battle, I could see the power radiating off of her like flame. I opened my senses and felt the fierce joy of combat burning within her.

I believe she was of the Dawn Caste — predators without peer, hunters capable of stalking the most dangerous prey, and matchless warriors. We must seek them out. If we work together, our long exile may be over. The fact that



they are now free proves that the rot at the core of the Realm has reached a critical stage. It is now ripe for destruction. We have our Wyld-blessed allies and the great beasts, but those have never proven sufficient. With the warriors of the Dawn beside us, however, we can cut out the very heart of the sickness that afflicts the civilized world.

In watching her, I also realized we must approach such an alliance with great care. We have learned caution and patience in our long years at the edge of the world. These new ones remember nothing but their current brief lives and the fragments of days long past. We must take care they do not lead us into overconfidence and disaster.

I watched that Dawn-warrior after her battle, when she returned to make a deal with the spirits' Season Court. She could not see me, and the spirits did not care to alert her to my presence. What I saw convinced me that we should also fear these newborn Solars. She spoke with utter conviction and burned with the all the wild fervor described in our oldest legends. We could gain so much with an alliance, but we could also awaken one day and find our allies our masters. Still, perhaps the old ways are best. We never needed to fear dissolution into the Wyld during the days when we helped to rule the Old Realm. However, I know I am drawn to that Solar — perhaps the opinions of any who see them may become similarly tainted.

The Deathlords

Having originally come from their ranks, the Deathlords are in an oddly neutral position regarding the return of the Solar Exalted. Obviously, the Anathema are inferior beings by virtue of the simple fact that they are still among the living. However, they also undeniably possess great power, and they are all the enemies of the Realm. While many Deathlords remain aloof from the politics of the living, others realize that the excesses of the Realm can threaten even their own dark kingdoms. Many hope to preserve their own forces and lands by pitting the living against the living to neutralize any threat posed by either the Realm or the Solar Exalted.

Because the Solar Exalted are few in number and have not yet fully returned to their power, several Deathlords have decided to covertly aid them in their struggles. Others see their growing power as a possible threat to the stability of the shadowlands and discreetly aid the Wyld Hunt. Perhaps most disturbing of all, several Deathlords are eager to gain further powerful servants. These dread rulers hope to find Solar Exalted that they can convert to their ways, and most plan to turn any Solars they can trick or capture into Abyssal Exalted.

Currently, most Deathlords remain neutral. The majority of those who have taken sides favor aiding the Solar Exalted. However, the dead take care to keep their politics and their machinations secret from the living. Most Solar Exalted will never know that some of the assistance they received originated in the citadels of the Deathlords.

If openly approached by a great military leader who commands a large, well-organized force, many Deathlords might offer aid, but most are unwilling to risk an open alliance with one of the Solar Exalted. Most Deathlords fear the concentrated wrath of the living, and only the boldest Deathlords will risk openly angering the Realm's rulers. Some Deathlords are unwilling to work with the Solar Exalted because they find the presence of the Solar Exalted because they find the presence of the Solar Exalted extremely disturbing — seeing them brings back memories of the Deathlords' previous existences. These Deathlords eagerly use their unwholesome magics to transform any Anathema they capture into deathknights, condemning the newly reborn Solar Exalted to the same fate the Deathlords once suffered.

While many Deathlords would gladly have a Dawn Caste fight their battles for them, they will keep all such alliances very secret and make them only with warriors who have already proven that they can reliably win. Deathlords are willing to provide their living allies with information, subtle magical support, supplies and hiding places against enemies. They may even rent or possibly sell zombies, skeletons and other mindless undead soldiers to those in whom they feel the utmost confidence. However, any Solar Exalted who expects to come away from such negotiations with Abyssal Exalted officers and an army of war-ghosts at her back will be sorely disappointed. Open aid will rarely, if ever, be forthcoming.

The Deathknight Ebon Siaka to the Deathlord of Skullstone

Approximately one week ago, one of our living residents joined the ranks of the Solar Exalted. He resides on Cold Harbor Island. All indications point to him having become one of the beings known popularly as the Forsaken. He was a mercenary and frequent pirate, currently working under our unofficial letter of marque. Moray Darktide is his name, and he seems to have been quite a competent raider. As directed, he concentrated the majority of his attacks on the Coral Islands and the Lintha pirates. He captains the zombie-galley Mailed Fist.

His change occurred during a raid. Reports indicate that a battle was turning against him when he suddenly began fighting with inhuman power and skill. He was said to have chopped down a ship's mast with one blow and to have shredded the sails of another by throwing a single knife. His living crew rallied and took the enemy ship with no further losses. They then went on to capture another vessel and scuttle and loot two more before returning to port with bulging holds.

Darktide is clearly an asset. In these troubled times, with Coral on the move, I recommend that we bid him welcome. Dread mistress, his kind are growing in numbers, and I don't believe we can afford to be without one. However, we should also be cautious. The old tales tell how the Solar Exalted grow in power, eventually becoming so great than no one can defeat them. However, I do not yet believe Darktide poses such a threat. Perhaps we can study him, and learn his weaknesses and strengths. If we can learn to stunt his powers and keep them at an acceptable level, he could be exceedingly useful.

Since death is far stronger than life, our magics may be able to hold his power in check. If we fail, another option always presents itself. Perhaps he can be brought into our fold. If he dies, we may find some way to trap his power within his corpse, or your magics might be able to subject him to a living death, keeping his strength but joining him to the glorious powers of extinction. However, his nature might keep him from rebirth. It would be terrible to lose one such as he and deny him his chance at the cold embrace. Until his crossing becomes necessary, I will watch and guide him. I also swear to take full responsibility for his actions. He will not have the chance to turn on us, if such ever becomes his will.

The Abyssal Exalted Shards of Basalt to her Army

This new being has harmed members of our number and stolen from our great master. The voices gone beyond tell me that its name is Jalith and that it is one of the Suntouched come back to make war on the dead. Two days ago it arrived on the outskirts of our homeland, from the East where it abides. The voices do not know why it came into the Northland, or if it will stay here.

It came inside a magical wind and attacked a group of our servants carrying back the spoils of an amber caravan we found near Gethamane. That caravan was so delicious. One night, a blizzard buried everyone — all had frozen in their sleep, and everything was perfectly preserved. The being Jalith took all our lovely golden amber and stripped the bodies of their exquisite finery. Too many of our comrades were destroyed attempting to protect those most intimate possessions.

It departed as quickly as it came, leaving us no chance to pursue. Yet it was inside the boundaries of our land and must have seen some of our other great wealth. I have asked our master what we should do. He tells me, "If it comes back, capture it." I wanted the abomination destroyed, but our master believes it can be used. With the most powerful of his magics, he hopes to make Jalith into our thrall. It had great power, and if its will-less body and deadly skill can be harnessed to our use, it will become a war machine grander and more powerful than any ever seen. It must not be killed. If you cannot capture it, corner it and await the deathknights. The only thing more important is keeping it out of the sacred crypts of the newly dead. We need this one, but even for such a great prize we cannot risk our precious children. If it attempts to enter such places, kill it quickly and carefully so that we may have a chance of bringing it back in its own body, for I do not know if its power resides in its body or in its spirit.

The Spirit Courts

Most spirits remember the old order, when they dealt openly with humanity and often received mortal reverence. The Dynasty's Immaculate Philosophy has suppressed these practices, just as its rulers have upset the balance and order of the world with their destruction of the Solar Exalted. Many small gods have arisen in the centuries since the fall of the Old Realm, and these beings are loath to allow Celestial Exalted to rule over them again. However, others long for the stability of the Old Realm and the return of their rightful place in the cosmic order. The only things all the spirits tend to agree on is that they will oppose any Solar Exalted who seeks to further reduce their power and influence.

Currently, a few spirits actively support the new Solar Exalted. While lesser spirits exist to be commanded by anyone with more power, the sorcerers of the Dragon-Blooded also sometimes attempt to control powerful spirits they believe to be useful and attempt to destroy those they fear. While few such attempts succeed, the spirit lords resent anyone who tries to enslave or slay them. Regardless of their opinion of the Solar Exalted, no powerful spirits are allied with the Dragon-Blooded.

Similarly, many Threshold kingdoms have neglected the ancient pacts humanity once made with the spirits, and view them as either gods or hated enemies. Although few spirits completely trust the new Solar Exalted, several powerful spirit courts who long for the stability of the First Age have decided that supporting sympathetic Solar Exalted is their best hope of restoring the glories of the past. The Solar Exalted have a clear place in the world, and like the spirit courts, they obey the unconquered Sun above all other gods.

Solar Exalted who ally with the spirit courts are bound by potent oaths. They must promise never to deceive their allies, to forever more uphold the interests of the courts, and most of all never to betray the spirits. While the most powerful spirit courts can grant boons, breaking a bargain with them can have equally dire consequences, even for the most powerful Exalt. Any who work with the spirit courts can also expect to be carefully watched for signs of betrayal or neglect. However, those willing to place the interests of the small gods on a par with or above the interests of humanity will receive potent aid from the spirits. Those spirit courts willing to work with Solar Exalted accept any promising Solars, regardless of caste. However, they have particular use for Dawn Caste members. Spirit courts who seek valiant champions or deadly protectors know that they can find few better than the Forsaken.

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While no spirit courts openly oppose the Solar Exalted, most remain firmly neutral and are unwilling to enter into any form of lasting alliance. However, the spiritsr' reluctance to engage in long-term alliances doesn't preclude the Forsaken from finding temporary employment slaying the enemies of various spirit courts. In return for such deeds, most powerful spirits can provide a wide range of services available nowhere else.

GRANDMOTHER BRIGHT TO DEMETHEUS

Dearie, I'll tell you one for free, though you already know it. Your power is old, almost as old as me, but you'll never age another day. If you wanted knowledge or even treasure, I could find tasks that fitted you. I still can, for there is much a big strong man like you can do. For the right service, I could tell you where to find a belt that would make you as strong as a yeddim or a perfect diamond as big as your fist. Bring me the left eye of the Perfect of Paragon and I'll give you the secret for making your truest love ageless and eternal so long as she continues to love you. I can do that for you and far more, but I cannot do what you want. You cannot live among my people. This is a nice neighborhood.

It is true that some of my residents lead exciting lives when they are in the outside world. However, they make certain never to bring any of that home with them. You could not help but do so. War and death follow you like loyal hounds. If you live here, devastation will come to my neighborhood, and I cannot abide that. It doesn't matter how hard you try, you'll never be able to keep yourself out of trouble for very long.

It's difficult to say, but you're also not very popular with some people in the city. I can keep them out, but do we really want all those big Dragon-Blooded warriors waiting just outside my boundaries, looking over everyone who enters or leaves? My residents wouldn't be able to sleep at night worrying about that sort of trouble. I'm very sorry, dearie, but I really can't let you stay here. I do appreciate your gift, it's been simply ages since I last saw a scarf of vermilion glass thread. Wherever did you get it? Make sure to come on back if you want any of the things I can offer you.

The Graybeard of Resplendent Water to Lyta

"Sun-born Lyta, great riches lie at the bottom of the ocean. Centuries of wealthy ships have sunk in waters we control. Pearls, jewels, gold and artifacts of ancient magic wait in these depths. Some portion of these can be yours."

"Wealth does not interest me, but perhaps it can be used for our cause. What must I do in return?"

"A small thing only, Solar one, very small for such as you. Humans have moved onto the island of Scarpfall. They are not welcome there. That isle lies at the westernmost portion of our domain, and it belongs solely to us. They arrived while we were weakened and now they



CHAPTER FOUR . VOICES NOT OUR OWN

number more than we can easily remove. Go there and slay them, and we will prevent others from returning. There are five hundred of them perhaps, no more."

"You want me to butcher an entire island of mortals for you? I would then be almost as bad as the Dragon-Blooded. I might order them to leave, but I will never slay them."

"Lyta, what are mortals to you? You are bound to us we wish you to do this. If they leave, they or their offspring may return. If they die, mortals will fear this island for decades to come. We offer you great wealth. If you refuse our generous bargain, we still wish the deed done. If you will not do it, we will find another, and you will not reap the benefits. With your prior aid, we have become powerful. If necessary, we can find another to aid us. Why should it not be you? Either way, those mortals are as the dead."

"Those mortals are not your toys. The humans on the islands near Thassa are mine, to do with as I please. It would not please me to have anyone slaughter them. You shall not harm the people of that island."

"Do not tempt us to become angry, Sun-born. We are bound to keep our prior bargains with you, but there is still much we can do against you. Work with us, and we will dwell in joyous harmony with you; oppose us, suffer our wrath."

The Fair Folk

The Fair Folk possess long memories. In the long-lost days of the First Age, the Solar Exalted, particularly the Dawn Caste, were the primary force that continually drove the Fair Folk back and halted all attempts to expand the Fey's domains or power. The Contagion and the fall of the Old Realm signaled a great victory for the Fair Folk. As the order of the world collapsed, Wyld areas expanded and the Fair Folk grew in power and influence. Even the Empress of the Dragon-Blooded lacked the vast power necessary to drive back the earlier expansions of the Wyld, and could only maintain Creation's boundaries. To the Fair Folk who live in the chaos of the Wyld, the idea of restoring the Solar Exalted to power is repugnant, since it could mean losing all the gains their kind have made.

However, the politics of this inhuman race are complex and devious. Since the Solar Exalted are powerful beings not yet secure in their position, many Fair Folk see them as a useful commodity. Some Fey nobles hope to recruit Dawn Caste to use against their rivals. Others hope that the magical barriers the Realm still maintains can be further weakened or even destroyed. By helping Solar Exalted strike back against the Realm, these bold and rapacious Fey hope to remove all barriers to their expansion, and so use the Solar Exalted to insure the Wyld's domination of the world. Others fear the return of the Old Realm and the Solar Deliberative, and even go so far as to occasionally assist the Wyld Hunt.

The feelings of those Fey who have left the Wyld to live among humanity are equally complex. Some hope to use Solar Exalted as tools to destroy their enemies and regain their position in the Wyld. Others fear the Realm's power and work with Solar Circles intent on overthrowing the corrupt Dragon-Blooded nobility. A few have even discovered various idealistic causes, and will openly ally themselves with similarly inclined beings. All castes of Solar Exalted are seen as useful by the Fey. However, some Fey see the Dawn Caste as the simplest to control and direct. In addition to being the most useful at winning battles against their enemies, the direct aggressive power of these chosen causes many Fair Folk to assume that the Forsaken are particularly susceptible to various forms of subtle manipulation.

THENLI OF THE ATONEMENT FAIR TO JALITH

"You will entertain me — marvelous! If you do so successfully, then I will happily free Manatha. She juggles quite well, but her heart really isn't in it. She hasn't made anyone laugh in weeks. The problem is one of motive. You're coming here not because you care for Manatha, but because her uncle is paying you a great deal to do so."

"How in the name of the great tree do you know that?" "Of course I know about her uncle's plans. I know

everything that concerns my performers." "So what? A show's a show. If mine doesn't impress you enough, it was still something for nothing. Besides, this one will be like nothing you've seen before."

"If Manta's uncle were here, I would take it up with him, but sadly he's not. I resent my performers being bartered like cattle. If I let this sort of thing become common, I shudder to think where it might lead. No one would be happy then. There will be an extra condition for freeing her. If you fail to entertain me, both you and Manatha will serve out the remaining months of her contract. You would be a perfect addition to my fair. The children would love to see you perform. You'd direct the finest of the animal acts. I haven't seen anyone as impressive as you in simply ages."

SEVERAL DAYS LATER

"Well, a bargain is a bargain. Here she is. I do wish you would reconsider and stay on for a while. I particularly loved the trick with the tightrope and all the knives. Cutting all those flowers with only one knife throw was very nice. I quite liked the way the petals fell on the audience. The bit where you threw the knife so that it cut the lit candle in half and the candle didn't fall over or go out was simply marvelous."

"Thank you, no, Lord Thenli. Manatha and I must be going."

"Yes, yes. I could always send an escort with her some fierce bears or something. If you stay, I would pay you well. That's not a common offer, you know. The performers are brought here, and I've never needed to actually recruit them. I would make an exception for you...."

"No. Goodbye, Thenli."

"Well, if you ever change your mind, please get in touch. You will come back here to see me again, you know."





CHAPTER FIVE . DREAMS OF THE FIRST AGE

CHAPTER FIVE DREAMS OF THE FIRST AGE

All Solar Exalted possess the memories of earlier members of their kind. Since none survived for long after the fall of the Old Realm, the modern Solar Exalted carry spirits within them that last wore flesh during the wondrous First Age. As the newly Exalted explore their powers and their destinies, they occasionally have dreams or flashbacks of earlier times. Because these new Exalteds receive only the soul fragment that carries the Solar-given power, such recollections are usually misty and unclear. The sight of the ruins of an antique villa might spark a detailed memory of a grand ball held in its halls, or merely a brief image of walking through its main gateway accompanied by a group of faintly remembered companions.

An Exalt can look at two artifacts and have detailed memories of one and no knowledge of the other. Such information should be used to aid the plot and to provide interesting roleplaying opportunities for players. If memories of a specific artifact, place or person would spoil the plot, then assume that none of the Exalted present retain any useful memories of the thing in question. In general, the higher an Exalted's Permanent Essence score, the more detailed and common such memories will be. The process of Exaltation usually involves seemingly random flashes of such memories suddenly erupting for a period of hours or even days. The same thing often happens on a lesser scale when a member of the Solar Exalted increases her Permanent Essence. Otherwise, these memories should only resurface when the Exalted confronts something or someone very important to her past, or when the Storyteller decides that present circumstances resemble an event in the Exalted's previous life.

Seeing First Age structures and artifacts can spawn such memories, as can meeting other members of the Celestial Exalted. During the First Age, most of these powerful beings had at least a passing acquaintance with one another. Meeting another Celestial Exalted could trigger memories of a bitter rivalry, a deathless romance, or merely a drink of water shared at an oasis long since reclaimed by the desert.

FESTIVAL

...and above the roof of the palace the People of the Air flew high and proud. The feathers of their wings shimmered golden, blue and black — some carried banners in their feet. One of them swooped down and opened the hand on her wing to drop toys and candies to the children below. Looking out over the city, I could see that it filled the valley. Evening was falling; the city was lit like a forest of candles. Thousand of brightly dressed people were coming to the palace for the festival that night. Above the throng walking through the glowing gates hovered half a dozen splendidly armored guards, each in her own small floating chariot.



As night fell, the People of the Air landed and walked as men and women. The other nobles and I came down off of the roof and went to the balcony that overlooked the central courtyard. The crowds below were packed into every place except the main square. A trio of people I knew came out into the center of the square. They all wore bright red robes. As music played, they held up their hands; a vast fire surrounded them and filled the entire plaza. First it burned yellow and red like old wood, then it began changing color and shape. We watched the fireworkers make pictures from the flame: a massive army of men, beasts, land barges and tall flying boats attacking a great city. Everyone cheered when the army defeated the city's defenders.

HUNTING

I was one of two Dawn Caste Solars leading a hunt. There were a dozen other people with us --- some looked like Dragon-Blooded, two were some other type of Solar Exalted, and one was a tall scaled reptile man with a long tail. We flew through the air in something like a flying howdah. The vast forest stretched below us, cut by a huge swatch of fallen trees and torn red earth. It looked like the feet of gods had trampled this land. We flew along the path of this devastation until we saw a vast herd of mastodons led by a huge female, larger than even the biggest yeddim. She stood taller than the tallest tree, with glowing golden tusks and brilliant red eyes we could see shining from the air. Her trunk was thicker than the body of a warhorse. One of my companions told the helmsman to land near the head of this immense procession and we all got out. The sound of the trees crashing before these giant beasts was like nothing I've ever heard. The forest hid the rest, but the enormous head of the herd's leader was easily visible.

One of my companions called to the beast, asking her to return to her homeland and cease troubling our cities. The beast roared defiance and the herd charged us as one. The lizard man raised his arms and shouted. A bolt of fire as bright as the Sun reached down from the sky and struck the head of the huge lead mastodon, burning off a portion of its blood-red fur. It bellowed in rage, but kept coming. My companions and I rushed forward. Some shot arrows or strange magics; I drew a huge blade and swung at the mammoth queen. The beast hit me with its huge trunk. I flew through the air, only stopping when my back hit the trunk of a great tree. I moved slowly, badly hurt by the impact. By the time I limped back to the battle, the lizard man had fallen and was bleeding from terrible wounds, while the other member of my caste had been crushed under the creature's huge foot. I raised my sword and used my most potent Charm. My body burned and lightning flew from my arms as I struck. I felt all my Essence explode from my body into the huge beast. It shuddered and one of its gigantic tusks exploded. The air smelled like lightning and burned bone as the blackened remnants of the beast collapsed to the ground.

Everything went black and I fell over, dead or unconscious. Yet, even as I fell, I knew I had done my duty and won our battle against the spirit of the mammoths.

WYLD BATTLE

It was a fight from an opium-laced nightmare. We galloped on huge steeds of shining metal across a plain of human skin, strewn with forests of enormous alabaster trees and jade feathers and rivers of blackish blood. The sky was a jagged swirl, green and gold like a mangled piece of jewelry. Before me was an army of inhumanly thin warriors mounted on horses of living glass, and beside me were my companions. We were the soldiers of the Sun and we fought against the forces the Wyld. Each yard we conquered drove them back and increased the size of our domain. In the distance, behind our enemies, I could see that the very ground breathed.

I was a great general, with armor made in my colors and a host of the finest weapons by my side. I fired my bow at the charging enemies; bolts of sunfire and hails of arrows slew dozens them for every shot I let fly. Yet they turned the very landscape against us. The earth swallowed a dozen horses and soldiers on my left. In front of me, one of the rivers of blood reared up and lashed out at me. For every dozen foes I killed, at least a dozen more rode up from the twisted depths of the Wyld. The fighting seemed to go on for days. Our forces were losing.

When more than half my company had fallen, I gripped the crystalline pommel of my saddle and shouted a word that echoed in my head. A tiny shining spirit of cold violet fire coalesced on my hand. I ordered it to call for reinforcements and it vanished in a swirl of light. We continued fighting until the very air was torn by a sound beyond all imagining. The earth and sky parted before a vast ship, far larger than any whale. It sailed along the ground, its keel buried deep in the earth. We made way for it, and I looked up to see the greatest of our number on board. Strange devices on the ship called lightning from the sky. The blasts scattered the vast horde we were facing.

The sorcerers on the ship then readied another, even more powerful mechanism. As it began to glow, the forces of the Fair Folk charged as one, but we stood firm. The ground reached up and ate the hind legs of my steed, so I jumped from the saddle and fought afoot with lance and bow. We formed a shield wall as my bolts of solar fire and the lightnings cleared the land before us. The glow from behind us flashed as bright as the sun and a strange light bathed the landscape ahead of me. I was blinded for a moment. When I could next see, the ground had ceased to breathe. The rivers of blood ran clear, and tall trees and gray rocks replaced the skin and forests of feathers. The last of the Fair Folk host soon fell back, their morale broken by the loss of their homeland.

CHAPTER FIVE . DREAMS OF THE FIRST AGE

There was a parade, with me in the lead. Amid horns, bells, dancers, chanting, and bursts of bright-colored sparks that flew high in the air, we went from the palace at the heart of the city down to the harbor. For many hours we walked through a maze of city streets. When we arrived at the waterfront, the lord of the city wished me well. Then I boarded a strange vehicle like a cross between a boat and a chariot. I commanded it to take me to the isle nearby, where the fight was to take place, and it did so without oars, sails or crew. When I arrived, I left the boat and walked down to a small cove on the other side of the island. I stepped into the water until my feet were just wet and called loudly. I don't remember what the creature's name was, but it bellowed a reply and came to do battle. It was huge, like a kraken, but larger, with glowing skin and many more arms. It came close to shore and a forest of tentacles reached up to drag me under. I knew I would lose if pulled me under the water. I fought with a spear of burning gold and many javelins. For each

THE CHALLENGE

I was some manner of champion. I lived in a sprawling city, huge, with tall towers of brilliantly colored glass — it might have been Chiaroscuro before its fall. Winged people and strange chariots flew through the air, and even the poorest inhabitants seemed to live in greater luxury than modern princes. Someone came to me and told me that the contest was ready to begin. I knew I was to fight some powerful being in single combat. It or something allied to it had a dispute with the ruler of this great city, and I was to decide the issue by fighting the creature. tentacle I stabbed, three more reached up to grab me. Soon it had me in its cold, slimy grip and began to drag me towards deeper water.

I hacked off dozens of arms even as the remaining ones tightened around me. I swung and stabbed my spear almost faster than I could see. The creature still managed to drag me further into the shallows. I don't know how I did it, but just as the water came over my knees, the last tentacle let go. The creature was still there in the water, but its few remaining tentacles were busy grabbing up all its severed limbs and reattaching them. It spoke in my mind then. This huge, horrible thing congratulated me on an excellent battle and



金まっしい

Dace

OTHER SOLAR EXALTED

My Circle had been talking about making an alliance with the Deathlord Mask of Winters. We needed someone who looked tough and impressive — that was me. We also needed someone to do most of the talking, because the court etiquette of the dead isn't my strong suit. Swan has no trouble with that sort of thing watching him make all the bows and touch all those jeweled skulls in just the right order made it clear he was just as good at his job as I am at mine. Having an obvious, firm division of labor is the way to get things done right. I'll plan the military campaigns and fight the battles — the others can take care of everything else.

Besides, having a Circle is one of the best things that ever happened to me. I love my soldiers, but there are some things about me that even my closest sergeant shouldn't know. I've changed since that last battle as a mortal, and some of those changes are fairly serious. Most people don't have vivid memories of living in First Age ruins or fighting duels against seven-armed dragon spirits that no one alive has ever seen. The men don't need to know about that, but it's good for me to have someone to talk it out with.

FAIR FOLK

Mostly I try to avoid the fey. The Wyld is our natural enemy — it sits in opposition to our entire world. Humanity and those of us who watch over it need stability, order and proper discipline. The Wyld is the opposite of all that. You can't build there or even exist without powerful magic. The Fair Folk who dwell in the Wilderness are no better. They bring chaos to everything they touch. They feed on us and drive mad those they touch.

We ran into a band of Ravagers once when we were traveling from Nexus to Gethamane. There's little worse than Ravagers — this band was leading children, human vermin and deluded madmen off to their collective doom. Other than the children, I didn't care about the victims, but Ravagers are like rats — if you don't kill them, they'll spread. The leaders had once been human, so they and the hobgoblins working with them put up a good fight. They used some sort of foul magic to force their prisoners to fight for them.

Having to kill kids who don't have any choice about fighting is simply wrong. The only way to be certain we're safe is to wipe out every last Ravager and every one of the Fair Folk we find. Once we've gotten them, then it will be time to go after the Wyld regions themselves. That's a job for the magicians, but one I'd be more than happy to help with.

There really isn't anything to be done about the Fair Folk except to kill them or drive them off. If we let them run loose, soon we'll all be living in the Wyld. When you have an enemy you can't coexist with, it eventually comes down to a fight to the death. If we don't destroy them, they'll destroy us.

There are a few Fair Folk in and around Nexus who actually seem to live among people without causing too many problems. They've left the Wyld and settled down among us. Most are nasty vermin, but a few of them manage to avoid making too much trouble. A scholar I talked to once claimed that the Fair Folk are extremely flexible — given where they live, I imagine they have to be. This scholar went on to say that if Fair Folk dwell in pools of raw boiling chaos, they become dangerous monsters like everything else that lives there, but if they come to live among humans, they gradually transform into creatures more like us. I don't really believe that — I certainly wouldn't let them live in any city I ran — but maybe a few of them can adapt to life here. We'll see, after we've wiped out all the Wyld areas.

SHADOWLANDS

I still remember my first glimpse of a shadowland. My company was guarding a noble going to Sijan for his brother's funeral. The town was as gray and depressing as you'd expect, but the actual shadowland was like nothing I had ever seen. The ebon spires of polished crystal and the vast black basalt walls were magnificent. I have never seen anything so beautiful as the rain of water and quicksilver coming down upon us. It scared the hell out of me, but also took my breath away.

Death is always a loss. Sometimes it's heroic, but far too often, it's sad, pathetic or useless. I've seen more of it than most, and it can still leave me shaking in my bed late at night. Being Exalted doesn't get rid of the fear. Anyone who doesn't feel that cold, tight terror in their gut when they pass near a shadowland has something wrong with them. Shadowlands are terrifying and glorious — visiting one is an experience you never forget.

For all that most people fear them, the shadowlands are here to stay, and most of us can look forward to eventually moving there. Like it or not, death is not going away. So, what are they like? I've only seen two: the one at Sijan and what Thorns has become now that it's Mask of Winter's domain. They're both creepy, and Thorns is certainly not someplace I'd ever live, but they also have a dark beauty that haunts me.

What you can see of existence in a shadowland is often disturbing, but some of the Deathlords are beings we can learn to work with. I've heard the stories of souls forged into blades and ghosts who offend their masters being tortured for centuries. I'm convinced those stories are true, and that other, worse horrors all happen in the shadowlands every day. On the other hand, Mask of Winters and the Abyssal Exalted I've dealt with appear to be creatures of honor. If you offend a Deathlord, you can look forward to a fate far worse than death, but they keep their word and deal well with their allies. They're not ravening monsters or beings of insane chaos.

Deathlords are always trying to expand their lifeless domains, but they're given to slow and careful planning rather than lightning-fast attacks. Usually you can predict what they'll do next. I can't say I enjoyed it when the walking dead were hoping I'd step off the traveler's road into Whitewall and become their meat. However, they rigidly honest in making and keeping their bargains. That and their predictability allows us to safely deal with them after a fashion. And we'd better get used to it, because death isn't going to vanish any time soon.

Working with the Deathlords is a perfect example of how the enemy of your enemy is your friend. The conflict between the shadowlands and the Realm is ancient and

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Blood Swan's light kindles my Essence and I blaze bright, hot, battle hunger like wine in my blood. I know I shall die, but I don't care. My own blinding light illuminates the spells of death and destruction traced on the walls of the room, knotted into the blankets, smoking in the sweet incense that burns beside my bed. My wife is tangled among the bedclothes, ill-aspected sheets wrapped around her throat. Every heartbeat that passes costs me time and strength, but I go to her, lay a kiss upon her lips and fight the spells that cling like a greasy film to her pallid skin. Blood Swan pulses in my hand, jealous, her orichalum blade blood-red in the faltering light of the glistens.

The death magic is powerful, and suddenly, I recognize it. It is Saturn's own dark magic. My own kind are murdering me — they are the only ones strong enough to do it. I pour my strength into the healing spells anyway, fighting for my mate's life. Obligation demands it. I know from my dream that she isn't the target of this treacherous attack. I am. Kneeling beside the bed, I trace the healing patterns on her skin; it is the last time I will touch her. She comes awake, gasping, lips blue, and throws my hands off, long teeth bared in half-conscious panic.

"Feather. It's me. Don't —" I duck her sudden clawed swipe and wonder if she too, is among my betrayers. Blood Swan hums reassurance, *her* edge remains loyal. "*Feather*!"

"My husband." Her voice is thick, her throat halfchanged to some inhuman thing, but she doesn't attack me once she recognizes me. "What's happening?"

"Betrayal. The Sidereals, our own kind. Or some of them. You must escape and warn — whoever survives tonight."

She shakes her head, her hand stealing to the orichalcum marriage collar locked around her neck, mate to mine and the symbol of our oaths. "No. I can't leave you. I won't."

"Now's no time to discover a sense of duty!" I snap as I lash out with Blood Swan, severing her collar without touching her. My sword cries for Feather's blood and strains under my control. The two of them have always been jealous of each other. "Get out of here! Find a way, take some shape — a mouse, a hawk — something!"

"How?" She throws aside her broken marriage collar and snarls at me, blue fur spilling down her back, hackles rising in sudden anger. Now that it is too late, far too late, I see the hurt and anger — and love — in her doublepupiled eyes. It was not her oaths that kept her by my side all these decades. I never guessed. "How?"

There's no window in this room. I used to be afraid of the changes that came over Feather under the touch of Luna. The door — it was warping slowly, silver inlay corroding under the touch of *something*. It was the only way out. My hand tightened on Blood Swan and I called on my magic, shaping it into an impassable shield. I felt my aura shift and transform into the quicksilver flicker of protection, gliding over my body in a familiar caress. I let my will flow into Blood Swan. She hummed sweetly and the blade tuned itself to my aura, becoming a part of me, an extension of my body. The room seemed to grow smaller, confining, and I could count every particle of air as it drifted slowly past me. My desperation fed my Charms. It wasn't just a good death I was fighting for now. I had to give Feather a chance of escape somehow.

"When you see a chance — take it. Don't hesitate and don't — don't look back." I turned away from whatever she might have said and put myself in front of the faltering door.

Darkness was seeping like syrup between the growing cracks in the door. The ivory groaned, eaten away by rank acid. The smell hit me and I gagged, eyes watering. As the door rotted away, I saw a black, slow fire. No monsters, no warriors, not even the hallway beyond — just a throbbing, blazing mass filling the corridor from top to bottom. Like a slow-motion bonfire, the stuff lurched through the opening, thick tendrils reaching for me.

It spread across the floor, eating away the silk carpets, trying to find a way past my defenses. I felt its power then, and knew it was strong enough to overcome me. Spells were laced through the fore, designed to kill — designed to kill Solars. Designed to kill me.

I didn't know what it was — some Fair thing from deep in the Wyld, perhaps, fed Sidereal strength to keep it fluid and formless in the heart of an Exalted stronghold. It didn't matter. Blood Swan's shrill cry was deafening and the glare from her warding eye scorched the shapeless mass. I bulled my way forward, using my Essence as a shield. Where fire and sunlight met, green flames burst out, hissing like snakes. Smoke crawled over the floor, half-alive under the weight of magic in the room. The carpet beneath my bare feet began to smoke. Behind me Feather began to cough and call on her own defenses. Then her voice became an animal roar as she took shape to beat back the oozing flames that were filling the room. There was so much of it — even as the leading edge smoked and burst into ash, more flowed in to replace it.

I plunged Blood Swan deep into the mass and something within it exploded. The viscid flame spattered me, burning me with spreading wounds. A blazing tentacle whipped past my defenses and struck me. I dodged the worst of it, but it scorched my shoulder to the bone. I felt the shock of poison eating away at my flesh, but had no time for it. I slashed again, cutting the mass apart, using myself as a shield, as a battering ram, hoping to clear enough space so that Feather might escape this. But there was only more fire seeping under my feet, eating away at my body. Bones grew visible in my hand as muscle and sinew melted away. I could barely feel Blood Swan.

All my delight in battle had left me. There was no joy in this, no heroism, and my god had turned his face from me long ago. I threw my fading strength at the voiceless, faceless flame, fighting to clear the hallway — enough for a mouse, a hawk, something. There was only wet heat and pain, terrible pain and, beyond that, something worse.



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NEW CHARMS

ARCHERY

BOLT OF FIERY DEVASTATION TECHNIQUE

Cost: 10 motes, 1 Willpower Duration: Instant Type: Simple Minimum Archery: 6 Minimum Essence: 6 Prerequisite Charms: Solar Spike

The character pulls a bolt of fiery Essence across his bow. The character makes a normal Dexterity + Archery roll, but the base damage is equal to the character's Permanent Essence. This damage is aggravated. The bolt moves as quickly as a stroke of lightning. Its deadly power is not subject to penalties for range or wind, though poor visibility can hamper shooting. These bolts can be fired to a distance of (firing character's Essence x 100) yards.

INEXHAUSIBLE BOLTS OF SOLAR FIRE

Cost: 10 motes, 1 Willpower Duration: One scene Type: Simple Minimum Archery: 5 Minimum Essence: 4 Prerequisite Charms: Solar Spike, Rain of Feathered Death The character can fight an entire battle without needing to worry about arrows. For the rest of the scene, every time the character shoots her bow, she fires a bolt of concentrated solar Essence that does the same base damage as any type of arrow she desires. These arrows are not subject to penalties for range or wind, though poor visibility can hamper shooting. These bolts have the normal range for arrows fired from the type of bow the character is using.

SHOT WITHOUT DISTANCE EXERCISE

Cost: 4 motes Duration: Instant Type: Supplemental Minimum Archery: 5 Minimum Essence: 4 Prerequisite Charms: There Is No Wind

The character's Essence propels the arrow at the speed of thought. Environmental penalties do not apply to the character's Archery attack, be they for range, high winds, bad weather, bad ammunition, exceedingly difficult called shots or any other external factors. In addition, this shot has no range limitations. As long as the firing character can see the target, even if it is only a tiny dot near the horizon, the shot can hit this distant goal. If the character enhances her sight with a Charm such as Unsurpassed Sight Discipline (see Exalted, page 196), she can literally shoot the hat off of the head of a target five miles away. As with the Charm There Is No Wind, splitting a dice pool for multiple actions is not considered an environmental penalty.


BRAWL

KNOCKOUT BLOW

Cost: 3 motes + 2 motes per additional die Duration: Instant Type: Supplemental Minimum Brawl: 4 Minimum Essence: 3 Prerequisite Charms: Ox-Stunning Blow

With greater skill and Essence comes greater power and control. This Charm allows the character to precisely gauge the amount of damage he is causing. Punches enhanced by this Charm cannot accidentally do lethal damage to the target. If the player rolls more health levels of damage than the target has remaining health levels, all remaining damage is ignored. If the damage rolled is insufficient to knock out the target, then the attacker can roll additional dice in an attempt to do enough damage to knock the target out. The character may buy additional damage dice at 2 motes per die. These dice are bought and rolled one at a time as a Reflexive Action, and a character can continue buying and rolling them for as long as he can pay for them. A character cannot buy dice to gain additional damage levels beyond those required to knock out the target.

Characters can easily run out of Essence if they use this Charm repeatedly. If a character runs out of Essence while using this Charm, count all damage dice that have been paid for. This Charm cannot be used if the character is wielding Tiger Claws or any other weapon or magical effect that causes his punches to do lethal damage.

POUNDING HAMMER OF DEVASTATION TECHNIQUE

Cost: 7 motes Duration: Instant Type: Supplemental Minimum Brawl: 5 Minimum Essence: 5

Prerequisite Charms: Heaven Thunder Hammer

The character concentrates vast amounts of Essence around her hands, allowing her to inflict terrible wounds. The character's blow does lethal damage. In addition, when used against a living target, this Charm adds a bonus to the base damage of the attack equal to the attacking character's Permanent Essence. However, this Charm is far more effective when used against inanimate targets. If the character attacks an inanimate object, add a number of damage levels equal to four times the attacking character's Permanent Essence. A single such punch or kick can knock down a sturdy oak door or break a hole in a ship's hull large enough to walk through.

ADAMANTINE FISTS OF BATTLE

Cost: 7 motes, 1 Willpower Duration: One scene Type: Supplemental Minimum Brawl: 5



Minimum Essence: 6

Prerequisite Charms: Heaven Thunder Hammer, Hammer on Iron Technique

Essence concentrates around the character's hands, infusing them with great and lasting power. For the next full scene, the character adds a number of levels of damage equal to twice her Permanent Essence to all Brawling attacks. When this Charm is performed, the caster can also specify whether these attacks will do bashing or lethal damage. Using this Charm, the character can even choose to do bashing damage when wielding a weapon that would normally cause his blow to do lethal damage.

MARTIAL ARTS

TIGER-STYLE MARTIAL ARTS

TIGER'S CLAWS

Characters may use Tiger's Claws freely with all the Charms in the cascade derived from Crimson Leaping Cat Technique.

CRIMSON LEAPING CAT TECHNIQUE

Cost: 3 motes Duration: One turn Type: Supplemental Minimum Martial Arts: 2 Minimum Essence: 2 Prerequisite Charms: None

The character charges her form with Essence, moving with the speed and agility of a leaping tiger. During the turn when this Charm is activated, the character adds her Martial Arts score to her Dexterity for purposes of determining how fast she can sprint, run or jump in a single turn.

STRIKING FURY CLAWS ATTACK

Cost: 2 motes Duration: Instant Type: Supplemental Minimum Martial Arts: 3 Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Crimson Leaping Cat Technique

The character charges her anima with Essence, which in turn infuses her hands with the power of a tiger's deadly claws. Her blows do lethal damage even if she is not wearing tiger claws. If she is using tiger claws, she may add a number of damage dice equal to her Permanent Essence score to her raw damage for the attack.

TIGER FORM

Cost: 6 motes Duration: One scene Type: Simple Minimum Martial Arts: 4 Minimum Essence: 2 Prerequisite Charms: Striking Fury Claws Attack The character adopts the attitude and stance of a raging tiger — crouching, ready to spring on its prey. While using the Tiger Form, he adds his Martial Arts score to his damage when making Martial Arts attacks and adds his Permanent Essence to his bashing and lethal soak totals. The damage bonus applies only if the character is attacking barehanded or wearing tiger claws. Also, the character's Martial Arts attacks automatically do lethal damage even if he is not wearing tiger claws, and the character suffers no penalties for fighting while prone. This Charm is incompatible with armor. Characters cannot use more than one martial arts form-type Charm at a time.

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RAGING TIGER POUNCE

Cost: 2 motes Duration: One turn Type: Supplementary Minimum Martial Arts: 4 Minimum Essence: 2 Prerequisite Charms: Tiger Form

The character can use her Essence to guide her attacks in imitation of a tiger leaping on its prey. If her attack strikes her opponent, she automatically knocks that opponent down. Only Charms like Immaculate Balance or other similar magical effects that maintain the target character's balance can prevent the victim from falling.

SPINE SHATTERING BITE

Cost: 3 mote + 1 mote per die Duration: Instant Type: Simple Minimum Martial Arts: 4 Minimum Essence: 3 Prerequisite Charme: Baging Tig

Prerequisite Charms: Raging Tiger Pounce

The character can infuse his hands with Essence, hardening them to the degree that they cause massive and deadly wounds. The character's hands do base damage of 4L if he attacks unarmed, or add 4 to his base damage if he is attacking with tiger claws. For each additional mote of Essence spent on this Charm, the character may add one die to a single attack, up to a limit of double the character's regular Dexterity + Melee dice pool. The attacker's hands leave deep furrows in the target; they can even claw through wooden or iron-bound doors and deeply score stone in a single blow.

STALKING CAT MOVEMENT MEDITATION

Cost: 3 motes + 1 mote per die Duration: One scene Type: Simple Minimum Martial Arts: 5 Minimum Essence: 2 Prerequisite Charms: Tiger Form

Like the tiger, the Exalted can stealthily stalk her prey. Whenever she sneaks up on an opponent, the character may add one die to all Stealth and Awareness rolls involved in the ambush for every two motes of Essence spent activating this

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Charm. The effects persist until the character ambushes her target or she is detected. The character cannot spend more motes to increase her dice pool than she has points of Permanent Essence. This Charm only works when a character is actually sneaking up on an opponent; no bonuses are gained if the character is attempting to sneak away from danger or for any other purpose (for example, stealing something or scouting enemy positions).

LEAP FROM CLOAKING SHADOWS ATTACK

Cost: 5 motes Duration: Instant Type: Supplemental Minimum Martial Arts: 5 Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Stalking Cat Movement Meditation The Exalted can spring from cover with the deadly force of a tiger leaping onto the back of an unsuspecting gazelle. When attacking a target unaware of the Exalted character's presence, the target's lethal or bashing soak score is halved before the raw damage of the attack is applied. If the target knows the attacker's location, or is aware of an impending attack, this Charm does not function. A target's successful use of the Surprise Anticipation Method (see Exalted, p. 197) completely negates the effects of this Charm.

CELESTIAL TIGER HIDE

Cost: 5 motes, 1 Willpower Duration: One scene Type: Simple Minimum Martial Arts: 5 Minimum Essence: 2 Prerequisite Charms: Tiger Form

Infusing her skin with the toughness of a tiger's hide, the character strengthens it against all forms of damage. The character may add her Martial Arts score to all bashing and lethal soak rolls for the duration of the scene. This Charm is incompatible with armor and has no effect on aggravated damage.

ANGRY PREDATOR FRENZY STYLE

Cost: 7 motes, 1 Willpower Duration: One scene Type: Extra Action Minimum Martial Arts: 5 Minimum Essence: 4

Prerequisite Charms: Spine Shattering Bite, Leap From Cloaking Shadows Attack, Celestial Tiger Hide

Burning with the passion of an enraged tiger, the character can lash out in a rain of deadly blows. A character using this Charm may make two attacks every turn, so long as she uses her Martial Arts ability. In addition, whenever she is successfully attacked, the character may immediately (before damage is determined) make a Martial Arts counterattack with a dice pool equal to her Martial Arts ability plus the attacker's extra

successes from his attack. The damage from the opponent's attack and his own counterstrike are applied simultaneously. This Charm cannot be used to retaliate against any other counterattack Charm. Each blow does lethal damage even if the attacking character is not wearing tiger claws. If desired, a full parry or full dodge can be substituted for one or both of the character's two normal actions. However, the character cannot split any of these dice pools to obtain further multiple actions. This Charm is incompatible with armor. A character using Angry Predator Frenzy Style cannot use any other Extra Actions-type Charms while this Charm is active.

MELEE

WHIRLWIND OF SEARING BLOWS

Cost: 7 motes, 1 Willpower Duration: One scene Type: Supplemental Minimum Melee: 4 Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Fire and Stones Strike

The character increases her mastery of her power and learns to charge her weapon with Essence for an entire battle. Filled with devastating might, the weapon can deliver punishing blows to all opponents. Add the character's permanent Essence to the weapon's damage for the rest of the scene. Any weapon save one of exceptional quality will fall to pieces after the end of this scene, and only weapons made of the Five Magical Materials can stand up to repeated uses of this Charm. A character can benefit from the effects of only one application of this Charm at a time.

PROTECTION OF CELESTIAL BLISS

Cost: 7 motes, 1 Willpower Duration: Special Type: Reflexive Minimum Melee: 5 Minimum Essence: 6 Prerequisite Charms: Heavenly Guardian Defense, Fivefold Bulwark Stance

The character may block, without rolling, a number attacks against him that he is aware of equal to his Melee Ability, even if the attack is not normally blockable (like a bolt of acid or a hurtling boulder). Blocking even a single strong attack by a powerful spirit or a Yozi will cause any non-magical weapons to perish, but the Charm will blunt the attack at no harm to the blocking character. Characters wielding magical weapons can parry any number of incredibly powerful attacks without risk.

THROWN

RICOCHET WEAPON TECHNIQUE

Cost: 1 mote per ricochet Duration: Instant Type: Supplemental Minimum Thrown: 2

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Minimum Essence: 2

Prerequisite Charms: Precision of the Striking Raptor

The character can bounce any thrown weapon off of an object and have it hit its intended target without penalty. Each additional ricochet increases the cost of the Charm by one mote of Essence. Bouncing a weapon of off a wall behind a target normally allows the character to hit her target from behind, denying the target the protection of cover or shields. Multiple ricochets can even allow the character to hit targets hiding around corners. When using this Charm, rolls to hit targets that the character cannot see are at +1 difficulty if the target's exact position is known, or at difficulty +2 if the character is aiming by sound or intuition.

REAPING THE BLOODY WHEAT

Cost: 6 motes Duration: Instant Type: Extra Actions Minimum Thrown: 4 Minimum Essence: 3 Prerequisite Charms: Ricochet Weapon Technique

When a character makes a Thrown attack using this Charm, the weapon ricochets from one target to the next, until it finally returns to the character's hand at the end of the turn. The weapon makes a number of separate attacks equal to the character's Thrown score. Each target must be in range and no target can be hit more than once per turn with this attack. Each attack is made at the character's normal Thrown dice pool, with no subtractions for multiple actions. If an attack misses, the weapon continues on to its next target. However, if any of these rolls botch, the weapon hits an unintended target and drops to the ground. Rolling a botch means that a character may be hit by her own weapon.

WHIRLING RAZOR GUARDIAN TECHNIQUE

Cost: 7 motes, 1 Willpower Duration: One scene or special Type: Simple Minimum Thrown: 5 Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Reaping the Bloody Wheat

Once thrown, a weapon using this Charm continues to strike targets for the duration of the scene. Bouncing off of trees, walls, targets and the ground, the weapon makes one attack on a target each turn. Once the weapon is in motion, the attacking character need not worry about it, and can act normally without any penalty. When the weapon is thrown, the character must decide whom it will attempt to strike each turn. This choice cannot be changed once made, and the weapon cannot be recalled once set in motion. If a target dies or moves out of range, the weapon continues on to its next target. Each attack is made at the attacking character's normal Thrown dice pool, at the character's initiative for the turn.

This Charm ends if the caster flees or dies, or once the weapon has failed to inflict damage on a number of attacks equal to the attacker's Permanent Essence score. Such failure may stem from the target's dodge or parry or because the



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weapon struck successfully but did no damage. The weapon can be attacked at difficulty 4; if successfully struck, it is batted from the air and its deadly rampage ends. If an attack roll for the weapon botches, the weapon strikes an unintended target — a person or an object — and the Charm fades. If the Charm is used on several successive turns, a character can fill the air around him with deadly blades.

RETURNING WEAPON CONCENTRATION

Cost: 4 motes Duration: One scene Type: Supplemental Minimum Thrown: 3 Minimum Essence: 1

Prerequisite Charms: Precision of the Striking Raptor

Any thrown weapon used by the character in this scene returns to his hand at the end of the turn in which it was thrown. Even if the weapon hits and damages an opponent, it flies from the wound to its owner's hand. Using this Charm, a character need not worry about running out of weapons to throw. However, a botch on any Thrown roll prevents that weapon from returning.

PERFORMANCE

COMMANDING THE IDEAL CELESTIAL ARMY

Cost: 3 motes Duration: Instant Type: Simple Minimum Performance: 4 Minimum Essence: 3

Prerequisite Charms: Heroism-Encouraging Presence

One of the greatest dangers of warfare is troops being out of touch with their commander. This Charm allows the caster to shout a short message to every soldier under her command. All friendly troops within a radius equal to the caster's Essence x 100 yards will hear the message. The message must be possible to call out during a single turn of combat and cannot contain more than a dozen words. In general, only its intended targets can hear it; opponents will not hear the message unless they are within earshot of the character using this Charm.

GENERAL OF THE ALL-SEEING SUN

Cost: 4 motes Duration: Instant Type: Simple Minimum Performance: 5 Minimum Essence: 4 Prerequisite Charms: Commanding the Ideal Celestial Army

As with Commanding the Ideal Celestial Army, a character using this Charm can give an order audible to all troops under her command. In addition, the instant before she gives the order, she receives impressions of how the battle is going on every front. The character is aware of any weakness in her lines and of which troops (if any) can safely be moved elsewhere. This knowledge combined with the ability to give a short command (two dozen words or less) to either the entire army or to any section of it — for example, "the cavalry" or "the troops on the left flank" — enables the character to exercise amazing control over her soldiers.

IDEAL BATTLE KNOWLEDGE PRANA

Cost: 10 motes, 1 Willpower Duration: One scene Type: Simple Minimum Performance: 5 Minimum Essence: 6

Prerequisite Charms: General of the All-Seeing Sun

The fog of war is banished for those who are truly blessed by the Unconquered Sun. For the rest of the scene, a character using this Charm knows how all areas of the battle are going and is instantly aware of any weakness in his lines or of any troops who have crushed their opponents. The character can, at will, speak messages that will be heard by his entire army, or by any specific portion of it to which he wishes to give orders. This ability to continuously direct the battle gives all soldiers under the character's command one additional die for all combat-related rolls and reduces by 1 the difficulty of all Valor rolls made by those same troops.

PRESENCE

PREY-FREEZING GAZE

Cost: 4 motes Duration: One scene or special Type: Simple Minimum Presence: 3 Minimum Essence: 2 Prerequisite Charms: Harmoni

Prerequisite Charms: Harmonious Presence Meditation

When the character uses this Charm, she impresses a single target with the overwhelming power of her commanding nature. Targets who fail a Valor roll at difficulty +2 are frozen in place, unable to move for the next scene. This paralysis is emotional rather than physical, but cannot be broken as long as the attacking character continues to gaze intently at the target. While keeping this eye contact, the character can be no more than five yards from the target. She also cannot move faster than a walk or perform any complex or difficult actions. The target receives additional Valor rolls whenever anyone harms or obviously attempts to harm him. If the character ceases to gaze at the target, the paralysis continues for the next three full turns, but the target instantly breaks free if anyone harms or obviously attempts to harm him. This Charm has no effect on targets whose Essence is higher than the casting character's.

COMMAND VOICE

Cost: 8 motes Duration: One scene Type: Simple Minimum Presence: 5 Minimum Essence: 4 Prerequisite Charms: Hypnotic Tongue Technique

The character surrounds herself with a potent aura of authority. Unlike Terrifying Apparition of Glory, this Charm does not produce an obvious or overwhelming effect. Instead, everyone who is inclined to follow orders - including peasants, servants, shop assistants, enlisted military personnel and similar individuals — will obey the character as if she were in a position of authority over them. Any target that makes a successful opposed Willpower roll against the character realizes that the character does not have the authority to command him. Everyone else will obey all reasonablesounding commands given by the character. Orders to commit suicide, go on killing rampages, or requests to give the character most or all of the target's money or possessions will end the character's influence over the target. However, requests for information or admittance to otherwise restricted areas will be instantly granted, as will demands for moderately expensive merchandise (up to Resources ••) in a shop, even if the character does not pay for it.

Targets may make another opposed Willpower roll to disobey the character if a recognized superior contradicts the character's orders. Targets who fail this roll will ignore their actual superior's requests. One of this Charm's most potent and useful features is that others observing the interaction will see nothing odd or magical about the character or the target's reaction. This Charm has no effect on beings with an Essence greater than 1, though it has proven effective on Fair Folk commoners and other supernatural creatures of an inherently servile nature.

ENCHANTED] TEMS

HEARTHSTONES

HEARTHSTONE OF AIR:

STONE OF AIRWALKING (MANSE ••••)

Whenever the bearer of this stone desires, she can walk on the air instead of the ground. Although she still moves at her normal movement rate, the character can move safely across water or quicksand by walking on a layer of air lying above the surface. In addition, the character can walk up or down the air as easily as others walk up or down a staircase. With sufficient climbing, the character can walk along for miles above the ground. However, if the character trips or is knocked down, she may fall to her death unless she can get her feet under her by making a successful Dexterity + Athletics roll at difficulty 3. Also, the stone only allows the character to move in this fashion. Any steed she rides must still travel along the ground. This stone is a soft white with brilliant sky-blue veins and swirls, resembling a tiny solidified cloud.

HEARTHSTONE OF EARTH:

THE JEWEL OF STABILITY (MANSE •••)

This stone is solid inky black and slightly rough. Any character bearing it cannot lose his balance or fall down as long as he is standing on the ground. In addition to being immune to knockdowns and knockback, the character will never slip or fall while running along a narrow ice-covered mountain path or sprinting along a slick walkway of small, wet, moss-covered stones. The character also cannot be picked up while standing on the ground. Even when standing on one foot, he remains firmly rooted to the earth. All forms of movement while climbing ropes and ladders or on upper stories of a building are unaffected by this Hearthstone.

HEARTHSTONES OF FIRE:

GEM OF PERFECT MOBILITY (MANSE •••••)

Any Exalted bearing this Hearthstone moves as swiftly as a racing fire. A character attuned to the stone can take two normal actions per turn without any penalties and may divide her dice pools normally to gain additional actions. By taking both actions as movements, the character can also walk, run or sprint twice as fast as normal. Sorcery still takes the normal time to cast, and using these additional actions makes the character appear inhumanly fast. Anyone seeing the character move or react this rapidly will know she is not human. This Hearthstone is a brilliant red and glows as bright as a candle. The additional action gained from using the stone is incompatible with all Extra Actions Charms. The character can use one or the other, but never both.

HEARTHSTONES OF WATER:

THE BLOODSTONE (MANSE ••)

This stone purifies and controls the blood of any Exalted who carries it. While carrying such a stone, the Exalted is immune to all poisons and diseases. She also never bleeds. Although all wounds do normal damage, the character never loses blood and so never need worry about bleeding to death. The stone is a deep sea-green liberally speckled with blood-red flecks.

STONE OF AQUATIC PROWESS (MANSE •••)

This Hearthstone appears to be a smooth ovoid of pure water bound into a solid shape. It is completely invisible if placed in water. Anyone attuned to this Hearthstone becomes fully amphibious. In addition to being able to breathe water and survive swimming in near-freezing seas without harm, the user can also swim at a maximum speed equal to her normal running speed. Also, all fatigue and mobility penalties for armor are reduced by -1 while in water. Characters wearing light or medium armor can swim



normally. Those wearing heavy or superheavy armor cannot swim, but can comfortably walk along the bottom of the lake or ocean. The user can also fight normally in the water and suffers no penalties when battling aquatic creatures. Most examples of this Hearthstone are found in Manses that are partially or completely submerged.

HEARTHSTONE OF WOOD:

THE MONKEY STONE (MANSE ••)

This Hearthstone is a rich reddish brown, with a surface that looks and feels like soft, furry bark. It gives the bearer the agility of an arboreal primate. Any character who possesses such a stone reduces the difficulty of all Athletics rolls involving balance, jumping or climbing by 2 (to a minimum of difficulty 1). In addition, the stone doubles the character's climbing speed and the distance she can jump.

MAGICAL ARTIFACTS

THE MAP OF AZURE VICTORY (ARTIFACT •••)

Almost every Dawn Caste who hears of this item desires it. Anyone using this map can clearly see the terrain and the troop movements occurring around her in battle. Spending 5 motes of Essence activates this map for a full day. Once activated, the map's mirror-smooth silvery surface reshapes itself into representations of every feature of terrain within two miles of the user. In addition, the map indicates the locations of all troops and civilians with various colors of jeweled sand that glide gently from compartments concealed within the artifact. Each grain of sand represents a single solider or civilian. Troops allied with the caster always appear as bright azure sand, civilians are white, and the user verbally assigns enemy and neutral troops any of the remaining six colors. Grains of sand representing Exalted or other magical beings glow. Different colors and intensities of glow indicate different types of beings. The map is a relatively thin, twofoot square of solid silver. It weighs 10 lbs. and can fold down to a block 8 inches on a side and 1 inch thick. It can only be used when fully unfolded. Legend claims that six such maps were created, and the armies of the Realm are known to have two. The fate of the other four maps is unknown.

THE CHARIOT OF AERIAL CONQUEST

(ARTIFACT)

This well-armored flying vehicle was one of the Old Realm's most fantastic creations. The Chariot of Aerial Conquest is a large pentagonal vehicle that superficially resembles a well-armored howdah, and can carry up to a dozen infantry soldiers, five riders and their horses, or two warstriders. The chariot can travel as fast as a galloping horse and flies up to 20 yards above the ground. Windows in four of its five sides can be opened wide enough to let passengers use bows and thrown weapons. When open, these windows provide 75 percent cover (-3 against missiles, -1 against melee attacks). When closed, the resultant window-slits provide 90 percent cover (-4 against missiles, -2 against melee attacks) and limited visibility. Each of these four sides can also open wide enough to admit three armored warriors or one person leading a horse. The fifth side incorporates a magically transparent window, behind which the vehicle's pilot sits. Pilots must have a Sail score of at least 2 and must pilot the craft using a Wits + Sail dice pool. The chariot requires two full turns to take off or land. It has five retractable landing legs that can extend up to a yard. The legs function independently and allow the chariot to land on moderately rough terrain. However, this vessel is too heavy to safely landed on water, deep mud, or other terrain incapable of supporting a large, fully loaded wagon.

The battle chariot is almost silent when in motion and can be commanded to alter its color to match the hue of the sky. When the vehicle travels in this covert fashion, human observers on the ground will only notice it if they succeed in making a Perception + Awareness roll at difficulty 2. However, the craft is immediately obvious whenever it attempts to land or take off. Also, any Exalted or spirit within 30 yards of the craft instantly feels the wash of magical energy from it. This vehicle is designed for the special use of Dawn Caste warriors and can channel a Dawn anima effect. This wave of terror emanates from the chariot, while the Dawn Caste rides safely inside. Because of the massive amount of energy required, this effect can only be used when the chariot has landed. Activating a battle chariot requires the user to place a Hearthstone of at least level 3 from a manse to which he is attuned into a special receptacle inside the vehicle.

SHIELD BRACER (ARTIFACT ••)

Made as a single ornamented bracer, this item protects the wearer by guiding her arm to block missile and melee attacks. When activated, the bracer provides protection equivalent to a tower shield, reducing the number of successes from all melee attacks on the wearer by -1 and all missile attacks by -2. Anyone wearing this artifact cannot wear any other form of bracer. However, the user is not encumbered in any other fashion. Shield bracers contain a setting for a single Hearthstone. They require the commitment of 3 motes of Essence to activate the Hearthstone and trigger the bracer's own magical powers.

RAZOR CLAWS (ARTIFACT •)

Useable with either Brawling or Martial Arts, this pair of deadly weapons is a set of razor-sharp claws that strap onto the wearer's hands. Although wearing them does not impair the user's manual dexterity, they are normally only worn for battle. Few people wish to shake hands with someone whose hands are encased in lethal steel. Razor Claws always come in pairs and consist of fingerless leather gloves fitted with three slightly curved blades. Each blade extends three inches beyond the wearer's knuckles. In addition to causing horrific

CHAPTER SIX . MAGIC OF THE DAWN

rending wounds, these claws also add 2 dice to all climbing rolls made by the wearer. Razor Claws can be made from orichalcum, moonsilver, jade, starmetal or soulsteel and gain the same benefits as every other weapon made from these materials (see Exalted, p. 341, for details). Using a set of razor claws requires the wearer to commit 2 motes of Essence to them. Razor claws count as tiger claws for the purposes of practicing Tiger-Style martial arts.

LIGHTNING CHAIN (ARTIFACT •••)

The lightning chain is one of the most difficult and widely acclaimed martial arts weapons of the First Age. Lightning chains are 10-foot lengths of enchanted metal links remarkably sensitive to Essence. In the hands of an Exalted, a lightning chain can alter its form in response to the wielder's will. When used in battle, the chain can be charged with 2 motes of Essence, allowing it to perform a variety of unusual feats. Charging a lightning chain with Essence is a Reflexive Action.

Although the chain normally does bashing damage, if charged with Essence, the metal crackles with electricity and can be commanded to do either lethal or bashing damage on any attack. When commanded to do lethal damage, blades of pure Essence form along the chain's length. Charging the chain with Essence also allows its wielder to alter the length of the chain during that same scene. An Essence-charged state allows the chain links to slip against each other so that the chain can vary in length between 2 and 20 feet, depending on the desire of the Exalted character using it. Once the scene is over, the chain remains at its final length until it is charged again. Exalted who carry this weapon often shorten it and wear it as a belt. When lengthened, this weapon can strike targets up to 20 feet away without penalty.

In addition to striking, the wielder can also wrap the chain around a target. This type of attack is made at +1 difficulty against normal opponents, and at normal difficulty against stationary targets like tree limbs. If wrapped around an opponent, the user may attempt to knock down the target by making a Strength + Melee roll, resisted by the target's Dexterity + Resistance. The target receives +1 difficulty to her roll if she is mounted or on slick or unstable terrain.

In addition, characters can attempt to enwrap the target's weapon, leg or arm. All such attacks are made at difficulty 3. Entangling a target's weapon imposes a +2 penalty on its use and allows the chain-wielding character to

attempt to disarm the target. Entangling a leg limits the target to a maximum movement of 10 feet per turn and gives him a +2 penalty on any rolls to avoid being knocked down. Entangling the target's weapon arm gives the target a +2 penalty for all actions using that arm, but does not allow the character wielding the chain to make disarming attacks any more easily than normal.

When charged with Essence, the chain can also be commanded to lock itself around whatever it has entangled. In this state, the chain can only be removed by breaking it. If the chain is not locked, a target enwrapped in it can free himself by making a Dexterity + Athletics roll at difficulty 3. This attempt takes a full turn and the character can take no other action while freeing himself.

Breaking a lightning chain requires a Strength + Athletics roll at difficulty 6 or an attack by any magical weapon that does at least 7 health levels of lethal damage to the chain. Lightning chains possess a lethal soak of 7. In addition to their other benefits, lightning chains are extremely easy to climb. Using a lightning chain when climbing removes all difficulty penalties from that activity. Lightning chains require the user to commit 5 motes of Essence to them, in addition to the Essence used to charge the chain.

FLAME SPEAR (ARTIFACT ••••)

One of the virtually lost arts of the Old Realm is the forging of raw elements into solid form, to create weapons such as flame spears. The hafts of these spears can be made from orichalcum, moonsilver, jade, starmetal or soulsteel, and they gain the same benefits as every other weapon made from those materials (see **Exalted**, p. 341). The spear blades are made of solid, unquenchable fire. In addition to inflicting terrible wounds on anyone it hits, the flame spear has other uses. In its normal state, the blade burns as bright and hot as a small lantern and will ignite any flammable object as readily as a torch. By spending 1 mote of Essence, the user can bank the flames, reducing the heat to the temperature of a hot bath and the light to the glow of dim coals. Grasping the spear and willing it instantly returns the blade to its normally fiery condition.

If the user spends 3 motes of Essence, the spear's eternally burning blade will glow more brightly. In this state, the wielder can concentrate the spear's flame to burn a yard-wide hole in ironbound oak doors or thick wooden walls in no more than 10 turns. This increased heat lasts for a full scene

Weapon	Speed	Accuracy	Damage	Defense	Minimums
Razor Claws	+1	+1	+4L	+2	D••
Lightning Chain	+4	0	+5L or B	+4	D•••• MA•••
Flame Short Spear	+3 ·	+3	+6/8*	+1	S••
Flame Spear	+5	+3	+6/8*	+1	S••
Flame Lance	+12	+1	+6/8* +15/17*	0	S••



and can also be allowed to flare wildly, so that it can instantly ignite a bonfire or set a large wooden or thatched roof aflame within 2 turns. In its agitated state, the weapon also does 2 additional points of damage.

Anyone attuned to a flame spear gains resistance to flame and receives a +2 bonus to all soak rolls against heat or fire. Using a flame spear requires the owner to commit 6 motes of Essence.

SPIRIT SWORD (ARTIFACT •••)

This wand-like weapon allows its wielder to perceive and attack all intangible opponents. When attuned to and holding this sword, any Exalt can perceive ghosts and other intangible spirits as vague, slightly luminous clouds. The limited perceptions provided by this item do not allow the character to notice any details about the spirit, merely its presence and location. However, this information is sufficient for the wielder to attack such beings without penalty. Also, the wielder can instantly discern if someone is possessed. A spirit in possession of an individual appears as a glowing, misty outline around its victim. A large gemstone in the pommel of a spirit sword glows whenever a possessed or non-corporeal being comes within five yards of the weapon.

These slender rapier-like blades are far more effective against spirits than against living beings. When used against a spirit, ghost or other non-corporeal being, double the raw damage of any attacks made with this weapon. A spirit sword can even be used to attack spirits that are possessing living beings. When attacking a possessed target, the character can choose to strike with the flat of the blade. Used in this fashion, the sword does normal bashing damage to the target and twice that number of levels of lethal damage to the possessing spirit. Using a spirit sword requires the wielder to commit 10 motes of Essence to it.

POWERBOW OF PERFECT ACCURACY

(ARTIFACT •••)

While most powerbows are merely tools that allow Exalted to shoot arrows with deadly force, this bow is enchanted far beyond the normal level of magic worked into such constructs. When firing this weapon, the user suffers no environmental penalties. As long as the target is within range, the attacker can fire a shot while standing on one foot with her eyes closed and still hit the target on a normal attack roll. Even at night, or when unable to see normally, the user instinctively knows exactly how to aim the arrow. This weapon eliminates all increases in difficulty, but does not eliminate reductions in dice pools, including those caused by taking multiple actions.

Using this bow places the wielder in a light trance that makes it difficult to perform any other actions. During any turn in which the character is firing this



weapon, the character's dice pools for all other actions are halved (round down). This penalty also applies if the character aborts his attack and attempts to defend himself. Often, the most effective defense by a character using this weapon is to shoot at his attacker, as such attacks suffer no penalty.

ARROWS OF DISTANT DEATH (ARTIFACT •••)

Very few of these artifacts survived the Old Realm, as they were designed to be used only once. Today, these arrows are normally found in sets of three: one target arrow, one broadhead arrow and one frog crotch arrow. Each arrow can be shot at any target, regardless of distance. To use one of these arrows, the Exalted character must have once touched or clearly seen the target, or currently possess a personal article like a piece of the target's clothing. When concentrating on the target, the Exalted fires the bow up in the air. As soon as the arrow leaves the bow, it vanishes and reappears no more than a foot from the target. In the instant that the arrow is fired, the attacker and the target have a clear vision of each other. Sleeping targets awaken in the grip of this vision.

With no warning and no chance to dodge or block the attack, many targets die instantly. Those that survive know their attacker's appearance. The nature of the magic involved prevents masks, make-up or other magic from disguising the true appearance of attacker or target; each one sees what the other truly looks like. However, this vision provides no hint of the terrain surrounding either individual. Whether the arrow hits or misses its target, it disintegrates seconds after it strikes.

Arrows of distant death are exceptionally sharp and do +1 damage. Otherwise, they perform exactly like normal arrows of their types. These arrows can be fired from ordinary bows and powerbows.

DAIKLAVE OF CONQUEST (ARTIFACT •••••)

Forged for the greatest generals of the Old Realm, this weapon is designed exclusively for use by the Dawn Caste. No other Exalted can attune themselves to this weapon, nor wield its fantastic powers. As long as this daiklave is unsheathed, all opponents and other hostile individuals within 10 meters of the bearer must make a Valor roll at +1 difficulty or flee in fear. Those that hold their ground lose a number of dice from all attacks equal to the bearer's Valor score.

As long as the bearer is using this weapon in combat, friendly troops fight with improved morale that gives them an additional bonus die to all combat-related dice pools. These soldiers also need not make Valor rolls. In addition, all opponents lose one die from all combat-related dice pools and receive a +1 penalty to their Valor rolls. Both of these powers affect combatants within a mile of the Exalted wielding the daiklave. The relevant bonuses and penalties do not apply to civilians or neutral soldiers. When used in battle, the daiklave glows with a bright, unearthly light.

Dawn Caste members must spend 10 motes of Essence to attune this blade. Both known examples of this rare and deadly treasure are heavy, straight-bladed daiklaves with settings for 3 Hearthstones.

CHAIN SHIRT (ARTIFACT ••)

While most warriors prefer to go into battle in the heaviest armor they can comfortably wear, the danger of being shot by assassins or cut down by commandos has led some Exalted to use protection that can be worn in civilian settings. Like any other form of artifact armor, chain shirts can be made of orichalcum, moonsilver, starmetal, jade or soulsteel. Each of these items has the same modifiers as any other armor made from that material (see **Exalted**, page 345). Like any other chain shirt, this armor can be discreetly worn under coats, robes or other bulky clothing.

Name	Speed	Accuracy	Damage	Defense	Minimums	
Spirit Sword	+4	+2	+4	+2	S•	
Daiklave of Conquest	+4	+4	+7L	+4	S•••	
Name A Powerbow of Perfect Accuracy	ccuracy +3	Damage Bon +3	us Rate 2	Range 350	Minimums S••	
Name So	ak (L/B)	Mobility	Fatigue (Commitment	Artifact	Penalty
Chain Shirt	5/3	-0	0		3	••

EXALTED . CASTE BOOK: DAWN

APPENDIX I SIGNATURE CHARACTERS

The Bronze Tigers are the mailed fist of the Unconquered Sun, and each of them is a hero, distinguished among their peers even before Exaltation. They are unvanquishable crusaders, whose battlefield might cannot be matched by any other being in Creation. And yet, each member of this Caste is a unique individual. Some are generous, some self-interested. Some are admirable, others less so.

This book presents the points of view and stories of five of the Swords of Heaven. This appendix provides the statistics for those narrators, described as if they were starting Exalts of the Dawn Caste. They can provide inspiration for players, characters, or they can provide ready-made Storyteller characters, either used unaltered as young solars, or with added Charms and Combos to depict more experienced Exalted.

APPENDIX 1 . SIGNATURE CHARACTERS

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DACE

Quote: If we let those Fair Folk outflank us, we're dead. Risa, get your people south now! The troops down there need reinforcing before those bastards break through our lines.

Prelude: Growing up among the Ravenous Wolves mercenary company, you dreamed of becoming a wealthy and famous mercenary captain. Your martial skill and tactical brilliance allowed you to make this dream a reality. You advanced up the ranks, from infantry to cavalry, and eventually became the commander's trusted lieutenant. When the troops under you saved the entire company, the previous captain decided he had found a suitable replacement and gave you command of the Ravenous Wolves. You had a long and successful life as captain of the Wolves for fifteen years. You led them to many victories and built them into one of the premier mercenary companies of the Riverlands. However, as you began to grow old, you could not bear the thought of stepping down and leaving the battles to younger soldiers. You became Exalted just before the infirmity of creeping age brought you to death in battle or an unwilling retirement.

Exaltation came with a price, however; it forced you to give up command of the Wolves. Realizing that many of your troops now considered you a dangerous monster, you turned command over to one of your seconds and took two dozen of the best and most trusted soldiers with you. Hoping to transform them into the nucleus of a new and even greater company, you took them to Nexus, where you have offered service to the Council of Entities in exchange for their promise to shelter you and your men from the Wyld Hunt.

Roleplaying Hints: Saved from imprisonment in an aging body by the touch of divine power, you count every day of your renewed health and vigor as a victory. You are determined to make the best of your new life, and plan to use your skill and might to change the world. However, your troops always come first, and any plan that doesn't see to their welfare is unacceptable. They know this, which is why they will follow you almost anywhere.

Image: Dace is a tall, powerfully built man who appears to be in his late 40s. His head is shaved and he wears a short graying goatee. He has piercing blue eyes and a rugged, weathered face. When not in battle, he wears pants and the padded shirt normally worn under armor. His only concessions to his Exalted status are a few pieces of heavy gold jewelry.

Equipment: Orichalcum reaver daiklave, well-made lamellar armor, a few pieces of heavy gold jewelry, a fine black horse with exquisite tack and a seldom-worn dress uniform for special occasions.

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APPENDIX] • SIGNATURE CHARACTERS

YURGEN KANEKO, THE BULL OF THE NORTH

Quote: Yield to me. There is no dishonor in it, I am the future of the world.

Prelude: You were the oldest of the Whistling Plains Elk tribe. Your wives and sons and daughters are years dead, and your grandchildren are of age to marry. Though still a skilled hunter and powerful warrior, you feared becoming a burden to the tribe. So you outwalked, following the ancient custom whereby the old and sick leave for the tribe's good. You walked into the snowfields to die, but instead you were taken into the hand of the Unconquered Sun.

Alone on the ice plains, you drew your second breath and your god-given destiny was revealed to you. Fantastic visions showed you the world as it had been, and as it could become under your rule. Samea of the Blackwater Mammoth tribe found you wandering in the snow and took you in. She, like you, has been chosen by the Unconquered Sun. She is the Zenith of your Circle and a powerful witch.

You returned to your own tribe, bearing a god's golden blessing in your flesh and given divine powers that you are just beginning to master. Once a warrior of wisdom and courage, now you are a godling able to bleed away the valor of your enemies with a glance. Your weapons sing the deathsongs of your foes. The avatar of the Elk has answered your call and become your ally.

Roleplaying Hints: You want nothing less than to rule the known world, to banish the shadowlands, to drive back the Wyld and to lance the suppurating wound that is the Realm. This is your destiny. The tribes are gathering under your leadership; Mammoth, Elk, and Caribou. Gethamane will fall to you soon and the Haslanti city-states will surrender or be conquered.

You will accept allies for a time, but the Unconquered Sun is your only master. You will lead the hordes of the North to the Realm and beyond, and bring the Unconquered Sun's dominion back to the world.

Image: The Bull of the North is an older man with a full head of gray hair. He stands a mere 5'6" tall, but his broad shoulders and conqueror's demeanor make him seem larger than he is. He wears fabulously expensive robes of otter fur, omen dog hide and ermine, all given to him by his loyal followers among the Icewalker tribes.

Equipment: Breastplate armor, bow, knife, lavish fur clothing, riding elk.

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APPENDIX 1 • SIGNATURE CHARACTERS

Jalith

Quote: OK, you've told me all about the wondrous rewards I'll get once I actually manage to kill this murdering scum. Why don't you tell me some more about the opposition I'm likely to face? i

Prelude: Born into a family of wealthy merchants, you were far too wild and impetuous for a career in commerce. However, you showed an early knack with animals, an interest in the occult and a love of fighting. You worked with the Haltan guard for several years, training to fight alongside specially bred animals. An excellent warrior, you won great acclaim when your actions permitted your team to wipe out a large Linowan raiding party. Unfortunately, your impetuous nature sometimes led you to take chances that

resulted in the deaths of your teammates. You also rarely conceded that anyone else's ideas or plans might be superior to your own. Consequently, you came close to defying direct orders if you believed your own plans were superior.

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If not for your family's money and influence, you would have been demoted or even dismissed. Instead, you were given solo assignments, working only with your two trained animals. You served as a commando and saboteur against the Linowan for three years. You became a member of the Dawn Caste while fleeing from Linowan warriors, after you slew one of their chiefs. Glorying in your newfound powers, you abandoned your life in the guard and set out to prove yourself to show the world that the Solar Exalted are heroes, not monsters. The process of Exaltation also fully awakened your magical gifts. A novice sorcerer, you are always eager to acquire new spells. Currently, you work out of Nexus, taking contracts that will help you prove your merit.

Roleplaying Hints: Though you love the chance to be the heroine you always dreamed of being, you also realize that almost everyone, including your family, considers you a monster. You're determined to show them all that you are a force for good rather than evil. You have little respect for any authority but your own, and are unwilling to compromise your principles for any price. You are devoted to your mospid familiar Meros and your tree-leopard companion Achal you know they will never abandon you. Also, like many Haltan, you generally feel more concern for animals than for people and will punish anyone you feel is treating any beast wrongly.

Image: Jalith is a short, slender woman with oakbrown skin and short emerald-green hair. She is in her mid-20s and normally wears plain forest-colored clothing, concealing her armor under a light leather tunic. Her mospid familiar and her tree-leopard companion always accompany her.

Equipment: Orichalcum chain shirt, pair of orichalcum bracers set with a Monkey Jewel Hearthstone,

set of fancy silk clothes for showing off, another set of sturdy forest-colored clothes for traveling, four war boomerangs, trio of throwing knives, finely made sword with a leaf-shaped blade, ancient halfdestroyed spell book with pages

of nearly indestructible metal foil, pet tree-leopard, mospid familiar, manse in the form of a vast living tree set deep in the Northeastern forest, pouch full of jewels and gold.

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APPENDIX 1 • SIGNATURE CHARACTERS

Demetheus

Quote: I'm not lookin' to hurt anyone or make trouble, but you'd best stop beatin' that kid right now — he ain't done nothin' worth all that.

Prelude: You grew up on the streets of Chiaroscuro, a member of one of the child-gangs that haunt the more thoroughly ruined portions of the city. Your large size and early physical prowess made you one of the most imposing members of the gang. You protected weaker comrades from the wrath of angry shopkeepers and local toughs. When you got older, your skill at fighting earned you the attention of a manager of the city's fighting pits. After extensive training, you spent seven years as a paid boxer. Eventually, your prowess earned you fights in front of wealthy nobles and rich traders. However, when your manager asked you to lose a fight, you paid off your contract and retired.

To earn a living, you traveled the South, performing feats of strength and accepting challenges from local toughs and would-be pugilists. You discovered that you loved life on the road, and it has been your home ever since. You also found that you like helping people along the way, especially if they pay for your assistance. In addition to fighting, you've done everything from finding lost children or livestock to chasing off local thugs and slaying wild animals. You became Exalted when you put on a pair of orichalcum bracers that you found while searching for someone's lost brother.

Exaltation has changed little about you. Unlike many Dawn Caste, who dream of world conquest, vast power or the sweet taste of violent revenge, you still travel the Southlands. However, you have become increasingly interested in righting wrongs and helping others. You normally ask a fair price for your services, but will often work for free if a poor person seems to honestly need help.

Roleplaying Hints: You are a gruff wanderer with a heart of gold. If someone deserving needs help, you'll do what you can, especially if there are children involved. You might not talk much, but you mean everything you say and you never forget a promise.

Image: Demetheus is a tall, strongly built man with ruddy, deeply tanned skin, bright amber eyes, and closecropped hair black. Large muscles bulge along his wide chest, thick arms and sturdy legs, all of which he prefers to leave as bare as possible. Demetheus wears simple, loose clothes that do not restrict his freedom of movement.

Equipment: A pair of orichalcum bracers, well-worn knapsack, sturdy boots, several sets of rough but well-made traveling clothes, a scuffed-up but well cared for buff jacket, basic camping gear.

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APPENDIX 1 . SIGNATURE CHARACTERS

LYTA

Quote: Crane, you keep talking about the need for patience, but every hour we wait is another hour the Unconquered Sun must wait for the foul Dragon-Blooded to pay for their crimes.

Prelude: The mortal daughter of a high Dragon-Blooded noble, your mundane nature was a severe disappointment to your parents. However, you showed considerable physical prowess, and so at age ten, you were sent off to study martial arts in the Immaculate Order's Cloister of Wisdom. This academy became your true home, but like the other mortal students there, you realized that you would never be as good or as respected as the Dragon-Blooded students. Instead, you attempted to lose yourself in incessant practice and eventually hoped to become an instructor.

Your Exaltation came during a training bout. As part of this transformation, you remembered the betrayal of the Dragon-Blooded and how they had subverted the will of the glorious Unconquered Sun. In a fury, you killed all the Dragon-Blooded present and then fled into the mountains. While your pursuers searched the surrounding hills, you hid in a deep cavern that had mysteriously drawn you. This powerful Manse was yours in a previous incarnation. After you emerged from hiding, a Sidereal Exalted named Crane contacted you. Crane belongs to the Gold faction and has been teaching you and helping you become more powerful. You greatly respect Crane, but you are also extremely proud and willful and are primarily led by holy visions of slaying the Dragon-Blooded. You hope that sacrificing their hearts' blood to the Unconquered Sun will return the world to its prior glory.

Roleplaying Hints: You burn with the need to make the Dragon-Blooded pay for their crimes. Starting with your parents, you want to cleanse the world of their taint. You are young, headstrong, and filled with rage and the righteousness of your holy vision. You always listen to your Sidereal ally Crane, but you don't always do what he says. You may be charged with protecting mortals, but they matter little to you. You care most about vengeance and serving the Unconquered Sun.

Image: Lyta is a tough, slender woman of 18. She appears to have partly Asian ancestry and normally wears her long, jet-black hair in a complex braid on the top of her head. Her eyes burn with an inner fire and she misses few opportunities to attempt to convert strangers to the rightness of her cause. Equipment: Shield bracer with a Gem of Adamant Skin Hearthstone, metal tiger claws, composite bow with quiver, a dozen arrows, light linen clothing, book in which she keeps a tally of the Dragon-Blooded she has killed.

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APPENDIX 11 . OTHER NOTABLE DAWN CASTE

OTHER NOTABLE DAWN CASTE

MORAY DARKTIDE

Moray Darktide is a pirate captain from Skullstone. That nation's ruling Deathlords have no special love for the Solar Exalted, but Darktide is known as a loyal subject and they find him useful. A



petty raider before his Exaltation, he has since become Skullstone's most infamous pirate captain. Moray's crew consists of a dozen of the most ruthless soldier-sailors, and two dozen zombies rented from the Deathlords. These zombies row without tiring and fight until hacked apart, allowing Moray and his crew to make short work of their mortal prey. Darktide's crew leads raids on ships from the Coral Islands and Wavecrest, but their greatest joy is attacking pirate ships belonging to the dreaded Lintha Family.

Even the Lintha's swift and deadly vessels are no match for Moray's powers. His successes have earned him a letter of marque from Skullstone's Deathlord; as long as he lives up to his brilliant record, he can call upon the ruler of Skullstone for aid and ransom. Though he must always pay his tithe to his undead masters, he fights for money and glory, and has grown rich beyond the dreams of avarice on the plunder he has collected.

As a loyal citizen of Skullstone, Darktide did not attempt to hide his Exaltation from the island nation's uncanny rulers. Although dubious about the longterm utility of a powerful Solar Exalted, Skullstone's Deathlord has decided to let Darktide continue in his service as long as he abides by the rules of the Skullstone Republic.

RANLEA OF GEM

Ranlea of Gem is one of the most infamous assassins in the South and East. Few people know that she has also been a member of the Dawn Caste for the past year. Ranlea was raised in a small clan of elite assassins based in Gem. She excels at her profession, and her services have been in demand in places as far away as Chiaroscuro and the Varangan city-states. Though she is an expert in many fighting techniques and an excellent poisoner, her trademark eventually became killing in complete silence. Often, even someone in the next room will be unaware of the murder.

Ranlea had worked as an assassin for a decade when she received a commission to slay a merchant for speaking out against the Guild. Unknown to anyone, the merchant was actually one of the Fair Folk attempting to pass as human. When Ranlea's first silent strike failed to kill him, he dropped his glamour and revealed himself as a powerful and inhuman being. Ranlea was likewise Exalted, transformed into one of the Solars. The disguised merchant died seconds later and Ranlea continued with her career, more powerful and confident than before.

Like many assassins, Ranlea maintained broad knowledge of various charms and talismans. Since becoming Exalted, she has turned these occult studies toward a more practical end and has begun learning Sorcery. The potent combination of magic and deadly skill means that no target is safe from her blades or spells. Ranlea has begun taking increasingly daring assignments. Recently, she killed a powerful spirit who ruled the small Southern city of Chalcedony. With the increase in tensions between Gem and the Realm, she has taken a number of assignments to slay members of the Dragon-Blooded. A multitude of rumors circulate about her, but because she always deals through intermediaries, no one has any proof of Ranlea's true nature.

MASTER VIKKART

Vikkart was a bastard child, unwanted and abandoned by his mother to the shore wardens of Spith, a village on the southernmost of the Coral islands. He was raised to patrol the shores and fishing grounds, protecting Spith from incursions by the Fair Folk. His eardrums were punctured once he learned the skills of harpoon, boat and net. The villagers dislike their guardians, forcing them to live in a separate community where the old and crippled wardens fish, weave and serve those still able to patrol the shores.

Vikkart saw before him a life of isolation and fear, culminating in an old age of decrepit servitude. Only the enforced solitude of his deafness kept him from abandoning Spith. He took out his resentment on the Fair Folk, raiders, and any criminals turned over to the wardens by the villagers. His few friends were deaf shore wardens just like him.





APPENDIX II . OTHER NOTABLE DAWN CASTE

Winter is always the most dangerous season in the islands, and one year, the Fair Folk made a concerted attempt to destroy the isolated village. The wardens were nearly eradicated and Vikkart was dragged off along with a dozen children. Deep at sea in the hands of the Fair Folk, Vikkart took his second breath. A newborn Solar Exalted, however, cannot overcome Fair Folk in their own strongholds. Despite possession of near-godlike powers, the inexperienced Vikkart barely managed to escape, along with only a quarter of the stolen children.

Upon return to his shattered home, Vikkart was accepted with a mixture of awe, relief and uncertainty. Since then, he has come to be called "master" in the recovering village. Because most of the other wardens are dead, Vikkart is Spith's sole defense.

A childhood of rejection and uncertainty made Vikkart an insecure and difficult young man, and his new barely controlled powers only make him more demanding. The villagers either fawn on him in hopes of gaining his favor, or avoid him in fear for their safety. The young Solar bullies those he dislikes and displays ostentatious affection on those who flatter him.

Vikkart is still young, with a wind-tangled mane of blonde curls and delicate features. Exaltation did not restore his hearing. His rose aura dances and swirls around him constantly, darkening in color when he is angry or frustrated (as he often is). He would not welcome other Solars, seeing them only as competition for the affections of "his" people.

MACHA PETHISDOTTER

Macha Pethisdotter was born in Whitewall and seemed a contented child. She seethed with inner rebellion, however, hating the carpentry work that was her family's living and the close, confining walls of her home. Her hunger for freedom and sensation was answered by a Fair One's seduction, when she secretly took a Fair Folk lover. The creature tended her carefully, and when it was time, tempted the girl to smuggle it into the city. The Fey fed on despair and fear, and Macha's family was its first target. Macha would have died there too, save for the touch of the Unconquered Sun. She took her second breath in the ruins of her home, her kin dead around her.

She spent the next few nights hunting the Fair One as it rampaged in the city, her ruddy aura blazing like a fallen star. She learned her skills from the Guardians she fought beside, and when the Fair One was dead, they offered the orphaned girl a place among them. Many Guardians of Whitewall are survivors of monstrous attacks, and they accepted Macha once they realized her new powers did not spring from either the Fair Ones or the dead. No one knows



she brought the Fair One into Whitewall in the first place; if that secret were revealed, it would cost Macha her life.

The Guardians have protected the secret of Macha's Exaltation. Even the Dragon-Blooded among them have not betrayed her; the bonds between the Guardians are too strong for that. Macha quickly rose to command her own small cohort, and her fellow Guardians compete to serve under her. Bored with the relative safety of the city, she has begun following Whitewall criminals out after dark and killing the monsters that come to attack them. Some rash young Guardians have followed her, most of whom swiftly died.

Macha is still trying to repay Whitewall for what she unknowingly did. She is a grim, silent woman, and her youthful exposure to the Fair Folk gives her occasional insight into the way they think. She is sharply aware that the only unforgivable sin among the Guardians is collaborating with the enemy.'

SENEBAU

Senebau is a slave in the heart of the Realm, and faces death should any hint of his powers be revealed. He was born a slave and has lived his entire life as one. He thought he was content, until visions of violence and wild freedom drove him half-mad and gave him his second breath. In those first vulnerable days, he would

EXALTED . CASTE BOOK: DAWN



Rahe taught her slave the beginnings of warfare and found others willing to teach him when he exceeded her limited skills. Senebau has also been well tutored in secrecy, conspiracy and deception. He serves his mistress, not from loyalty, but because she holds his life in her hands. He has little hope of escape should she betray him; the journey is too far to lands beyond the Realm.

The Unconquered Sun disturbs Senebau's dreams with visions of the freedom he has never known, and he recently began his own secret rebellion. He is drawing together other slaves, outcasts and even a few disaffected Dragon-Blooded. Senebau is preparing for an uprising to overturn not just the petty Regency, but the Realm itself.

In the greenhouses that are Senebau's domain, slaves train with mock weapons late at night. Courtesans and whores tease their clients for useful information, all of which comes back to Senebau and his inner circle of conspirators. The network of informants is spreading through the Realm, from low to high, and the chaos of the Regency is only strengthening Senebau's position. He is aware of time ticking away, and that sooner or later, a strong arm will take over the faltering Empire. If he is given enough time, Senebau intends that strong arm to be his.

He plays the obedient slave and greenskeeper by day, diligently pruning orange trees or blooming shrubs



with a hand sickle. This tool he has used all his life is also his favored weapon. Senebau is well used to hiding his thoughts and feelings behind a facade of bland submission, and few things have the power to shock him after a lifetime serving the Dragon-Blooded. He recognizes that his conspiracy will cost lives, even the lives of those close to him, and he is prepared to pay that price for freedom.

CASTEBOOK DAAT



Champions of Unconquered Sun

Elemental forces of destruction, the Dawn Caste of the Solar Exalted is the mailed right fist of the Unconquered Sun. Yet these peerless warriors are not mere bloodthirsty killers. With its mighty war-arts and terrible visages, the Dawn Caste brings the light of the Unconquered Sun into dark places. Know fear, you who would stand against the warriors of the sun, for no one can hide from the light of dawn.

Masters of the Killing Arts

Caste Book: Dawn is first in the Caste Book line for Exalted — books describing the different castes of the Solar Exalted. Within its pages are all the secrets of the Swords of Heaven, from their matchless battle-Charms and fragmentary memories of the First Age to the creeds and philosophies that unite them. This book also contains the new Charms, rules, spells and artifacts that Dawn Caste characters will need to carry out their holy mission.







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