

Gaime's Chosen

The Black Hand



A sourcebook on the sabbat subsect for
vampire: the masquerade®

Caine's Chosen™

The Black Hand



By SARAH ROARK, C.A. SULEIMAN AND JANET TRAUTVETTER
VAMPIRE CREATED BY MARK REIN•HAGEN

CREDITS

Written by: Sarah Roark, C.A. Suleiman and Janet Trautvetter. Vampire and the World of Darkness created by Mark Rein•Hagen.

Developed by: Justin Achilli

Editor: Ellen Kiley

Art Director: Richard Thomas

Layout & Typesetting: Kieran Yanner

Interior Art: Mike Danza, Ken Meyer Jr. and Kirk Van Wormer

Front Cover Art: David Leri

Front & Back Cover Design: Kieran Yanner



1554 LITTON DR
STONE MOUNTAIN, GA
30083
USA

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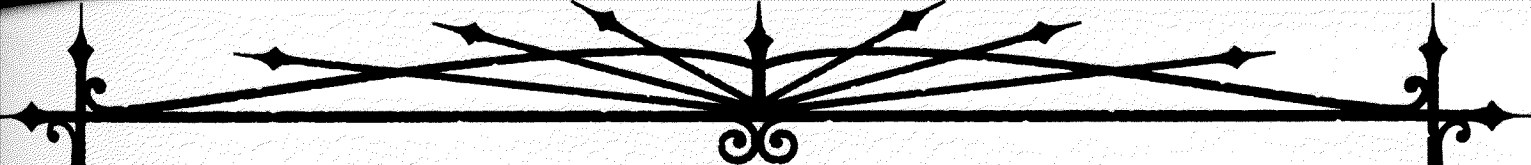
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the black hand



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INTRODUCTION: MYSTERIOUS WAYS

*There will come a time
When the hidden will be uncovered
And the shadows shall rise and reclaim what is theirs
And out of the tempest, there will come a black storm
And it shall rage against the gates — and overcome them...
There will come a time.
— from the Chronicle of the Lost Tribe*

Few enigmas in the World of Darkness are as ubiquitous yet simultaneously impenetrable as the Black Hand. This sect of fanatics has worn a shroud of mystery from its very beginnings. While it is true that its members are part of the Sabbat, even what the Sabbat knows for certain about the sect is limited to a fleeting wisp of rumor here, a foggy conjecture there. This secretive sect, truly more of a modern vampiric death cult than many might care to imagine, fills even time- and battle-hardened Kindred with an all-too-mortal dread at the very mention of its name. To the average Camarilla neonate, this cabal of inhuman assassins, soldiers and generals isn't just the fearsome paramilitary arm of an inhuman and fearsome sect. To a Camarilla neonate — and to no few elders — the Black Hand truly is the Sabbat.

No vampiric cabal has earned its reputation more legitimately (or more thoroughly) than the Black Hand. But why the dreadful reputation? one might ask. What makes this group so terrifying as to make even the Damned scurry for their boltholes with a shiver? The reasons are as numerous and clouded as the sect's shadowy members, and it is this very obscurity — this pervading mantle of uncertainty — that maintains the infamy of the sect, working both enemies and allies to a fever pitch. Its exact numbers are unknown, its visible involvement in Sabbat affairs rare, its practices and internal workings a closely guarded secret. The sect contains

some of the most violent and dangerous Cainites who yet walk the night, but its leaders can and do demand — and receive — the absolute loyalty and obedience of those very same remorseless killers. Membership in its ranks gains a Sabbat member considerable status in the eyes of his less privileged packmates, yet many members keep their association a deep secret. The leaders of the Sabbat do not entirely trust the Black Hand, yet they do not hesitate to call on the sect's warriors when need arises, and the Hand has always responded faithfully. The Sabbat Inquisition makes no secret of its deep suspicions of the Black Hand and its secretive ways, yet its attempts to investigate the sect in any depth have always been mysteriously thwarted.

So what is the Black Hand, truly? A small but disproportionately powerful faction among the Sabbat? A fanatical Noddist cult that diligently prepares for the coming of Gehenna? A corps of efficient assassins, brilliant military strategists, skilled martial artists, ruthless politicians, and dedicated veterans of the Jyhad? Truth be told, the Black Hand is all of these things...and much more.

The Black Hand is also a cultic secret society whose roots are far older than the Sabbat itself. It preserves an ancient mystical tradition based in hidden Noddist lore, whose mysteries are taught only to those members who earn the right to be gifted with such knowledge. Its political goals range far more

widely than the regency and consistory, and the vision of its founders continues to guide its leaders long after those founders have gone to ashes. It has played — and been played — on the chessboard of the Jihad for centuries, and now, finally, the very last pieces are moving into place for the endgame.

The Black Hand is a faction of Caine's Chosen, a faithful warrior elite determined to not only fight for survival in these Final Nights, but to *win*...and ultimately claim their reward from Caine himself.

THEME AND MOOD

Almost every historical fanatical warrior cult has some concept of reward in the afterlife for the deserving. Any warrior who died in the cause knew that he was going to a well-deserved paradise in exchange for making the ultimate sacrifice. It is this belief that allows warriors to face death without fear — because they know death is not truly the end, but rather a new beginning.

However, one of the underlying themes of *Vampire* is that vampires are, by their own definition and under the beliefs of the mortals from which they come, Damned. For them, the afterlife holds only torment, emptiness and horror, for their curse cuts them off forever from the paradise of their mortal ancestors. The longer they exist, the more terrifying the prospect of Final Death becomes, to the point where elders, Kindred or Cainite, go to great lengths to avoid putting themselves at any risk whatsoever. Cainites of any significant age are simply not the kinds of creatures of which martyrs are made.

For the Black Hand, many of whom tend to be ancillae or older, and whose mission is to eventually win the final battle with the Antediluvians, this presents a bit of a philosophical dilemma. For the Black Hand to truly be the fanatical, death-defying cult of Caine's Chosen, they must cling to their concept of reward or rebirth after Final Death with all the faith their damned souls can muster. Ultimately, it's all they've got. And this concept, the notion of a final reward — the belief that all their toil, dedication, and faith exists for something — is central to the theme and the mood of the sect as a whole. For these grim fanatics, the end thing truly is the only thing, and thus does the end truly justify all the means.

When the reward is an eternity at the side of one's creator, is any price truly too high?

WHAT'S IN STORE

This book offers a number of different perspectives on this complex and multi-layered sect, many of which come directly from several in-character sources — voices of those within the Black Hand itself. The sources provided impart a healthy dose of subjectivity, the core to all *Vampire* books and stories. We don't want readers operating under any illusions where the Hand is concerned: The sect is far too interesting and involved in the struggles of the Final Nights for any one book to be able to hold the answers to all of its mysteries. For some, what follows will be more than enough to convey the wonder, the mystery and the dread that trail this cult like a shadow. For others, the material presented

herein will only scratch the surface, leaving them frustrated and hungry for yet more answers. To them we can only say...

It's your secret. Make of it what you will.

Chapter One: Movements of an Unseen Hand discusses the long and tradition-steeped history of the sect, from its origins as a Middle-Eastern death cult to its acceptance in and eventual critical importance to Sabbat affairs. The cult has survived centuries of civil wars, political strife and internecine turmoil to get where it is tonight — in the vanguard of the army while the bell tolls the knell of Gehenna itself.

Chapter Two: Form Follows Function examines the sect itself, from the inside for a change. See how the group is organized; what sorts of duties are expected of its members; and perhaps most importantly, the underlying mindset of this long misunderstood sect.

Chapter Three: Tactics and Methodology explores the sect's *modus operandi* and the various ways in which its members carry out their orders, in addition to providing a detailed look into the military and political strategies employed by the sect's leadership.

Chapter Four: We Are Legion gives players a look at how to build the perfect beast, discussing methods of character generation with a focus on background and character motivation. Also included herein are a handful of Black Hand powers, including high-level and combination Disciplines and the secret behind the sect's facility with ritual.

Chapter Five: Storytelling provides Storytelling tips on running all types of Black Hand games, from integrating the Black Hand into ongoing chronicles to using it to maximum effect in chronicles that may or may not have the sect as the focus of the plot.

A BLACK HAND LEXICON

A number of terms are used throughout this book, some of which even faithful readers may never have seen or heard before. Thus, we've compiled them here, for ease of reader understanding and reference. Some of these terms are significant to the night-to-night functioning of the sect; others aren't "mandatory" in any way, but are included to evoke further richness in tone and to fulfill the cult's thematic promises.

Blooding, The: informal ritual used to initiate a member into full membership status.

Cadets: Black Hand trainees; the lowest of the low in the sect.

Column: a permanent *kamut*.

Ductus (pl. *ducti*): in Black Hand terms, an actual job title; the leader of a *kamut* or a *column*.

Dominion: a title of status and respect within the sect, second only to a *Seraph*.

Emissary: a position serving as the eyes, ears and mouth for the sect at all political levels.

Hulul: title of the leader of the Assamite *antitribu*, currently held by Nizzam al-Latif.

Kamut: a temporary Black Hand pack assembled to accomplish a specific sect mission.



Mustajib: “deserving ones;” newly initiated members of the Black Hand.

Remover: Hand member who eliminates sect obstacles, often confused with *shakar*.

Second: another title, used to refer to the trusted right hand of a **dominion** or **Seraph**.

Seraph: one of the four (currently five) generals of the Black Hand.

Shakar (pl. *shakari*): Assamite term for the most feared assassins in the sect.

Watch: geographically based cell of Hand members, usually assigned to a given city.

Watch Commander: leader of Hand operations in a given area (also known as a Field Marshall).

Watchtower: a state of general sect readiness, similar to military defense conditions.

REFERENCES

There are a number of good sources one can turn to seeking information or inspiration on all the subjects at the core of the Black Hand’s role in the World of Darkness. While a great many books have been written on the nature of secret societies, a significant number of those are either too over-the-top to be of any real use or are simply the paranoid polemics of deluded minds (and sometimes both). Included below are some of the most engaging and widely read of such books (if not the most reputable).

- Umberto Eco, “Travels in Hyperreality” — a deeply profound essay on the nature of cultural death obsession by the Italian master of post-modern philosophy.

- Stephen Knight, *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* — the book that inspired Alan Moore to create *From Hell*, this book astutely examines not only the Freemasons’ possible role in the Whitechapel murders, but also the very nature of murder itself.

- Jasper Ridley, *The Freemasons: A History of the World’s Most Powerful Secret Society* — like the title says, an exhaustive history of the Freemasons and a good look at the real world cause and effect of the cult of personality evoked by secret societies.

- Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* — an absolute classic and a must-have for anyone interested in exploring the mindset of the Black Hand as a whole. The oldest true treatise on military philosophy still extant, its wisdom has been read and followed by nearly every major military leader in history.

- Robert Anton Wilson, *Everything is Under Control* — a terrific guide to the many differing approaches to conspiracies and conspiracy theorizing. A true find for those interested in pursuing the origin and nature of the secret society at work.

- Robert Anton Wilson, *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* — in many ways the seminal work on both conspiracies and the notion of the powerful secret society. Not for the easily offended, but at least it was crafted specifically to offend (if that lessens the blow at all).



CHAPTER ONE: MOVEMENTS OF AN UNSEEN HAND

Things that are done, it is needless to speak about; things that have had their course, it is needless to remonstrate about; things that are past, it is needless to blame.

— Confucius

From the journal of Piotr "Peter" Andreikov:

Codename "Winter." Yeah. I probably could've come up with something that sounded less like the evil henchman from the Monday Night Movie if they'd given me a little more time to think, but no. They wanted an answer right that minute, and I just flashed back to police academy and that little fuck Paulson always calling me "Iceman" and "Mr. Freeze." Nobody else in my life ever nicknamed me. At least Winter isn't *quite* as idiotic as Mr. Freeze. Anyway, I'm stuck with it now. I guess it'll have to work. I only have to use it on assignment.

Under the circumstances I don't think it'd be all that bright of me to go on using the tape recorder as a journal, but I still need someplace to get my thoughts out where I can see them, poke at them, etc., etc. So I'm running this through a ciphering program, then encrypting it on top of that, then renaming the file as a .dat so hopefully nobody would even think to look at it in the first place.

THE LOST TRIBE

When Chang brought me into the Hand, he told me I'd become part of a great and honorable heritage. Of course. What else would he say? I don't doubt his word, but it's just not in my nature or my training to leave vague remarks

alone. Fine, it's great and honorable; I still want to know the details. Even back when I belonged to Clan Dorito I knew history was key. History is the father of motive, like Kornbluth used to say. So I decided to do some digging. Jafar said he was good with it, as long as he could still get a hold of me if he needed to, and Chang even gave me some cards to take with — "calling cards," he said, just his codename engraved in a certain font on a particular card stock. You have to love the Emily Post mentality. It's a rare *vato* who's not ashamed to show his age.

But while I quickly found Hand operatives who could tell me what the organization's been up to for the past couple centuries (though due to the Seraphim's tendency to go on a "need-to-know" basis, these were mostly bits and pieces of story that I still had to puzzle together), there don't seem to be too many folks walking the night who can remember before that — nothing specific to the Hand anyway. So I kept hitting a dead end right around about the beginning of the First Sabbat Civil War (1767 being the good-as-anyplace starting date for that).

Well, at least I'm no stranger to dead ends. I did what I always do and started going back over what information I had so far. I figured if I could come up with some kind of starting theory, even if it turned out to be wrong, that'd at least give me some direction. Right now I was asking vague-

ass questions and getting nothing useful back. Looking through my notes again, a realization hit me. The kind that seems absolutely obvious in hindsight.

We're a Gehenna cult.

If some Ivory Tower bastard ever does get a hold of this he'll probably laugh his ass off when he reads that. As far as the Camarilla's concerned the whole Sabbat is one big Gehenna cult, or at least that's what they supposedly tell their childer. After all, we have these bizarre *ritae*, right? And prophecies and fire-and-brimstone sermons about the Apocalypse? But of course if that's what you start out with from night one, you're not going to think of it that way. It's not a cult, it's just the way things are.

But what I mean is that the Hand specifically has things about it that struck me as being pretty damn cultish. The Weeping Stone, for example. Not so much the fact that it exists or that operatives are supposed to make a pilgrimage to it, but just how big a secret it is. Handers don't talk about the Stone, aren't allowed to talk about it — not even to other Sabbat who would probably be more than happy to join in the fun. Then there's this crescent moon logo we all sport. I remember hearing a Sermon of Caine where the priest kept going on about "she who wears the mark of moon," the "last hope of nations." So maybe this symbol is its own thing. Maybe it was important to the Cainites long before the Sabbat.

Anyway, looking at it this way helped, because I stopped asking people about "history" per se and started asking them about the Stone instead. What is it, is there a story behind it, does anybody know where the blood comes from, how come we don't tell the rest of the Sabbat about it, and the like. I got a lot of different answers, but over a couple months I was able to grope backward through these little scraps of legend till I got to a dominion who said she could give me the rest. I met her at her library-haven near the Huaca Huallamarca in Lima. She says there was a Gehenna cult, just like I'd suspected. It called itself the Lost Tribe.

IDEOLOGY

From my interview with "Boudicca," Toreador dominion operating in Peru:

Bear in mind, Winter, I got all this secondhand. My sire wasn't actually part of the old cult, but he was a good four hundred years old when he finally blew away on the wind, and he knew a couple of the original members. I've dug through his papers here and there as time permitted, learned a few more things. Since Chang's vouching for you, I'll tell you all I can. None of this is a huge secret anyway, it's just obscure. And largely moot. *We are* the Tribe, or what it grew up to be. It hasn't really changed much. It just got bigger and more sophisticated.

From what I've been able to gather, the Lost Tribe came into being somewhere between the fifth and the eighth centuries, and it believed more or less what the modern Sabbat believes. What they'd damn well better believe, anyway: That the Antediluvians betrayed Caine, disobeying his command against kin-slaying, murdering the Second

Of course, precisely which Antediluvians were guilty of disloyalty to Caine and which were not depends upon who is being asked. As your lordship must know, the Lost Tribe always had a large H'samite contingent; therefore it suited them to think of H'agim as the one exception to the rule. This belief has faded out among the H' and during its centuries of estrangement from Hamut, and I have noted that your lordship is not currently at pains to reestablish it. They also entertained some kindly thoughts about Saulot, whom H'agim was supposed to have admired. H' however, to this very night one can find Y'entrue even among the Sabbat who hold that it was their Founder, not H'agim, whom Caine entrusted with the stewardship of his brethren. Then, my Khan, there are those who say that your own forebear sought the wilderness in order to remain aloof of her siblings' rancorous backbiting.

As for he who was my master till late, he and his compatriots had long since arrayed themselves against Hamut and the will of H'agim; indeed, he insisted that it was H'agim who had betrayed Caine with the sin of parricide, while the greater part of the Third Generation had remained true and worthy. Thus, as your lordship can plainly see, he was always opposed to precisely those tenets that the Lost Tribe hold most dear....

Generation who were Caine's first beloved. And if we don't want to suffer the same doom that awaits the Antediluvians, we must disavow them, turn once more to our Father and prove our loyalty by taking his side in the last battle. The Sabbat knows this only because we taught them, and there are still a few secrets the sect has never learned.

THE WEeping STONE

I remember reading somewhere that mortal Bible scholars think Iraq was the site of the Garden of Eden. If so, that's good, because it means our Stone is exactly where it should be: East of Eden, at or near the site of the First City, where the clan founders rose up and slew their sires. Or supposedly did. The Tribe's legend actually had an added wrinkle. It said that the founders succeeded in killing just two of their forebears, Enoch the Wise and Irad the Strong. When Zillah the Fair saw that her brothers were dead and she was next, she wept and cried out to Father Caine. He heard her pleas and took pity on her, changing her into a stone so that she wouldn't be found and killed. But still she continued to mourn, and her blood-tears continued to flow from the Stone, just as they do to this very night.

Yeah, I know. It's all terribly archetypal, but you know the mortals had to have gotten their old myths from somewhere. Maybe this was the original story. I'm certainly not going to try to convince you now. You haven't tasted the Stone. Look me up again when you have.

The point is, to taste the Stone is to taste the last remaining Blood of the faithful generation. To taste the Stone is to share in the promise Father Caine gave to his beloved Zillah, that she would walk the night again at his side when all was mended. The Lost Tribe took this very much to heart, which is why they named themselves the way they did. They also called themselves Zillah's Tears. And they guarded the secret of the Stone most closely, only revealing it to those few who had proved absolutely faithful to Father Caine's word.

My former master once told me he had heard an alternate theory of the Stone's origin - that it was the rock with which Caine had struck down his brother Abel, and the Blood that flowed from it was the original Blood of the Innocent. When I asked how this could be possible given the Stone's size (and I personally suspect that the Stone's larger portion is in fact underground, since it seems well-rooted in the earth), he shrugged and said that if men regularly lived several hundred years in that remote age, as legend has it, then it was not unreasonable to suppose that they could lift boulders as well if they pleased. Moreover, perhaps the Stone had grown over the years, batten on all the innocent blood spilled on the earth since that first murder. From his tone I could not quite tell whether he was amusing himself with this heresy, or seriously believed it.

THE CRESCENT

Yes, the famous crescent moon. Well, the symbol, as you've guessed, is pretty damn ancient. It's linked with a number of goddesses throughout mortal history (also gods, but mainly goddesses). For our kind, of course, the closest thing we have to a goddess is Lilith. I trust you know that legend. That it was Lilith who originally wakened the powers of Blood in Father Caine? No? Here, read this.

The crescent moon in particular speaks to secret powers, hidden mysteries, because there's a lot of moon that's not showing but we know it's still there. The moon as goddess, the moon as the occult; put it together, that's why I suspect a strong Lilith connection. No, you're misunderstanding. We're not Lilins. Lilins worship Lilith to the exclusion of Caine. They disavow Caine. We hate the Lilins just as much as the Inquisition does. And as far as I know, we don't have an official stance on Lilith herself. If she's on the outs with Father Caine, she's on the outs with us. If not, that's fine too — one less thing to worry about.

Hold up your hand. Now you'll notice that the crescent points to the right. That means it's a waning moon. This is why I disagree with the people who think our sign has something to do with the Last Daughter of Eve. A crescent moon for a young woman, for the "last hope of nations," really should be waxing, not waning. Maybe I'm off base there, but it's just my instinct. Waxing is for arrivals,



renewals. Waning is for destruction, for war, which certainly fits the Hand well enough. But when I look at this symbol, what I mainly see is one thin sliver of light holding fast against the engulfing darkness. That's us, soldier.

As for the actual tattoo, I know it's been in use at least since 1550, because that's about when my sire was brought in and tattooed. Before that — no idea. I'm afraid you'd have to ask Jalan-Aajav himself, because the only other Licks I know of who could have answered that question are now M.I.A. or out of commission. Personally, I'm not in that much of a hurry to set it straight. I'd guess the crescent moon was always a part of the Lost Tribe's symbolism, but it probably took a while to develop the blood-rite for making the tattoo stick. Of course, according to my sire the old Tribe was mostly Assamites (some of whom were sorcerers) and Ravnos — and I'll readily admit I'm not up on what Ravnos can and can't do. So I suppose they might've had the tattoo from night one. I'm just going on what I've seen of how hard it is to invent new blood-rites.

The point is, no, I don't think it was the Black Hand's Assamites who brought in the crescent. I suspect the First and Second Cities revered the symbol long before Islam ever did. Definitely before Constantinople adopted it as the emblem of their city. Now *that's* a connection that could be worth exploring. I've heard some weird stories about the goings-on in old Byzantium. You're Tzimisce, have you ever heard anything about this Dracon character? I just thought I'd check.

THE ANARCH REVOLT

You're too young to really know a lot about Gehenna cults. Let me save you some research: Most of them are very small, most of them self-destruct within a few decades — most, in short, never get anywhere. True, the Lost Tribe was special in that it actually had this real, physical phenomenon it could point to as proof of its beliefs. But even so, I'm pretty sure it would have gone the way of a typical cult if it hadn't gotten involved with the anarchists.

THE LASOMBRA DIABLERIE

Some of our old Noddists say the whole Anarch Revolt was nothing more than the wheel turning round yet again, that there have been waves of vampire parricide down through the ages, ever since the Third Generation consumed the Second. It's just that some incidents made the "history books" and some didn't. Written by the victors and so on. But the Anarch Revolt was the first such wave the Lost Tribe had been around to witness. More importantly, it was the first time they'd ever heard anybody seriously talking about breaking into the haven of a clan founder and drinking his heart's blood.

Now Dastur Anosh, who was the high priest of the cult at the time — here, this is a letter to my sire that mentions him. Supposedly he was an Assamite, and from the name I'm guessing he was Persian or Zoroastrian or both. Appar-

My master claimed that his own cult, the Tal'maho Ra, had known of the Lost Tribe from night's long past, as they were near neighbors in that region of the world; and not only of the Lost Tribe but the order that preceded it, which was led by the teacher of Dastur Anosh and not its doom in an ill-fated struggle against the Followers of Set. The Tal'maho Ra had indeed hoped for some time to satisfy their curiosity regarding the fabled Weeping Stone. Certainly they had no wish to see what ever power it might hold remain with the enemies of the Antediluvians. However, it was not until they learned of the plot against the Lasombra Ancient that they decided to act. Unsure as they were of the strength of Dastur Anosh and his followers, they chose to infiltrate rather than conquer, with what success you yourself have seen....

ently Anosh got word of Gratiano's plot from a clanmate who'd just returned from the "lair of the barbarian invader," meaning Malta. After watching three ships disgorge something like a score of Lasombra all in the same week, this guy was bright enough to recognize something in the works and got in on it by offering his sword to the cause.

Well, Anosh took this to his fellow cultists as something he thought they also should throw their weight behind. After all, they'd been talking trash about the Antediluvians for years; here was a chance to actually do something. And the Lasombra founder was rumored to be one of the nastiest of the bunch. According to the letter, "most" of the cult agreed. "Most" is not "all," of course. Unfortunately I have no record of whom the dissenters might have been or what happened to them. But I like to think we would've noticed if anyone else were visiting the Stone over the past several centuries, so the odds of some kind of splinter cult still wandering around tonight seem pretty remote. Thank Caine.

Okay. Details get foggier here, but what I can tell you for sure is that Anosh and Appius Claudius Corvus — his Lasombra lieutenant — did not just walk up to Gratiano and say "Hola! We're the Lost Tribe and we're here to help!" Instead they buried themselves among a contingent of Lasombra from al-Andalus and their Assamite allies.

They did not join the band that actually went into the Elder's haven. Or at least there's no mention of it, and I'd think they'd want to claim such a thing if it happened. I suspect Gratiano took along only the Cainites he felt he could really trust, and that would have been a damned small number. But the Lost Tribe definitely helped talk up the rebellion, and Anosh in particular was such a hell of a preacher nobody even thought to ask him how old he was. More importantly, they made contacts in the movement. They were in the loop.

THE TZIMISCE DIABLERIE

I don't want to give you the wrong impression. At this point, leaving Gratiano and his knot of hardcores aside, the "movement" was more a concept in the minds of paranoid elders than a reality among the neonates. A lot of the packs running around Europe were clutches of childer who'd spontaneously risen up, inspired by all the stories going around, and killed their sires without really any help from anybody...packs usually combined with other packs only after they'd lost enough of their original number to need reinforcements. So the only real network among these people was the usual six-degrees-of-separation phenomenon that held true in most of Cainite society anyway.

It's at this point in the story that Parvati starts coming up. See this? This is a lock of hair she gave my sire back when he was a neonate. So obviously they were close, for a while anyway. In fact I have a feeling she's how he got into the Hand in the first place. Now Parvati, who also called herself Chandrakanta, was one of the younger members of the cult, but she was learned. I mean frighteningly learned. Came in with a whole trove of scrolls she'd gathered from India and points even further east — both Cainite and mortal lore. So Anosh made her his think tank.

I think Parvati's responsible for a lot of how we operate, actually. At a time when much of the world was indulging in a chivalry fetish (not that people actually behaved that way most of the time, but that was what you were supposed to aspire to), she was teaching the Tribe the virtue of practicality. A tall order for a bunch of fanatics who probably thought Gehenna was right around the corner, but she did it. A lot of the Admonitions you learned in training are direct quotes from her. She believed — well, here. See for yourself.

From a letter signed "Parvati," translated from the Arabic, dated New Year's, 1621:

My dearest love Mambrino,

Well before Machiavelli made his comments about lions and foxes, I was teaching your brethren as I have always taught them. Still, his way of speaking can serve us in our converse. You, my love, are accustomed to being the lion: As a mortal, none could stand against you in the field; in the halls of the great houses your birth and bearing made you lord. The Blood has only enhanced your gifts. But what, I ask, is the lion to do when confronted by the dragon? If he approaches it with a bold roar of warning, then he will be devoured in a moment. Know that the forays against the two Ancients succeeded due to the guile, not the power, of the anarchs. Lugo and his tutor Velya knew enough not to wake the dragon before they slew it.

I also ask you this: Although the lion may kill a pack of jackals with ease, could he stand so easily against ten thousand? And how many are the minions of our enemy? Is it truly wisdom to fall in glorious battle against their massing number, knowing that if they prevail their masters will return to the world bearing an evil that has but scant equal? Can we, or anyone else who loves our Father, afford the luxury of such pride?

The story about Gratiano and Appius Claudius Corvus is, of course, a convenient fiction with which the H and has innocently amused itself for centuries. My master told me he could not, at that time, personally go among the Lost Tribe and their anarch allies to spy. It would have been impossible for him to disguise the fact that he was many times as old as Dastur Anosh (and that latter worthy was rather long in tooth for an anarch himself, so to speak).

*I instead, he sent his young acolytes, one of whom succeeded not only in joining the Tribe but in winning the confidence of Anosh. It was this acolyte who first suggested to Anosh that the Tribe should take another name to use on those occasions when it must reveal its existence to an outsider, and further recommended as a suitable alias *manus nigrum*, "black hand" — a name which the Tal mahe Ra had been using for many centuries in the West. One must suppose that this acolyte thought to hinder the Lost Tribe by causing it to become confused with its very opposite. Indeed, my H, I myself have seen the dark fruit of this heinous deception more than once. The H and approaches some elder Cainite of the independent clans with an offer of cooperation, and is rebuffed due to the cruel tales that elder has heard of the true and ancient *Manus Nigrum*, meaning the Tal mahe Ra...*

In any case, I should relieve you of some illusions about lions by sharing with you what I saw on a night long ago, when one of the wah'sheen took me to observe their doings. I learned to my astonishment that it is the lioness, not the lion, who is mighty in the hunt, and her method is as follows. She drives the herd toward a few of her sisters who have concealed themselves in the tall grass, and when the time is right, they spring out with claws spread wide; nor do they try to bring down the whole herd in a stroke, but instead they worry at the one they have chosen, winnowing it out of the stampede. Thus you see that it is the guile, patience and collaboration of the lionesses, not the solitary strength of the lion, that wins them all the meat upon which they grow sleek. If a lion you are, my love, you should not be ashamed to learn from your namesakes....

From my interview with "Boudicca," Toreador dominion operating in Peru (continued):

Anyway, when the Tzimisce decided to do unto their progenitor as the Lasombra had done unto theirs, they certainly didn't want to reinvent the wheel. So Velya the Flayer and Sascha Vykos went to Gratiano and made an offer: Vykos' followers would band together with Gratiano's for mutual defense (unsurprisingly, they were on a lot of elder hit lists by that point, and Gratiano's name headed most of the lists) in exchange for advice on going after an Antediluvian. Gratiano pointed them to his own circle of counselors, whose ranks Corvus had by now joined.

I understand Velya and Vykos had already pretty well figured out the Ancient's location. So they'd cleared that rather vast hurdle. But these guys were scholars, not spies or warriors. They had no idea how to go about the reconnaissance, especially since the place was apparently well off the beaten path. Nor could they really use their Tzimisce sorcery against the ancestor who'd bequeathed it to them in the first place and cherish any real hope of success. And that's where our people came in. Corvus and Parvati put their devious little heads together and came up with the ace in the hole that made the whole plan foolproof. Wanna guess what it was?

I'll give you a hint. It starts with a T, ends with an E, it's not "Tzimisce," and if Vykos ever finds out we went behind its back on this one no small few of us will probably wind up with permanent close-up views of our own intestines.

Don't give me that look. Just think about it for a second. Repugnant as it may be, put yourself in a Tremere's shoes. Wouldn't you have jumped at the chance to help ash the Tzimisce founder? Or at least a Tzimisce Methuselah, because actually I'm not sure Parvati told them the whole truth about whom their target was.

Anyway, it wasn't a question of trusting the little maggots to do anything past what was clearly in their own best interests. And what they had, that magic of theirs, it was a whole new abomination. Nobody knew anything about it. Presumably the Founder sure as hell didn't, because the last time anybody could remember it actually being up was around the time the Romans were whomping on the Getae. Now I'm certainly not saying the Tremere did it all. Actually, it looks like they did very little. Something to do with screwing up the way the earth-energies in the area were flowing, I'm not exactly clear on this — the point is, it was a vital distraction at the right time, drawing the Founder's attention over to the esoteric while the real, very physical threat just marched on in.

As for the reconnaissance, that was just plain logic. Like the Admonitions say, you can always follow the blood. It seemed pretty safe to guess there was some kind of guard on the place, and either it'd be Cainite, in which case they were going to have to bring in juicebags from somewhere, or else it'd probably be those whaddyacallem, the big war-ghouls, in which case somebody was going to have to make trips out to feed them. Either way, the thing to do was have the routes to and from civilization watched, continuously and quietly.

Naturally this took a little more patience than the anarchs were used to exerting. Even with the help they were getting from us and Gratiano's people, I'm not sure they would have managed without Jalan-Aajav, who seems to have just, well...showed up right there at the foot of the mountain to join in the fun. Yeah. I know. But you probably won't ever get the straight story on that one even if you do go to the old Mongol himself. The anarchs definitely knew better than to ask. Not only was he a brutal warrior, but you just can't beat Gangrel for pure road-savvy. Anyway, to-

gether with Jalan-Aajav they eventually caught the poor bastard who was maintaining the war-ghouls, got what they needed from him, dumped his ashes in a well just outside the walls of Timisoara — and the rest is history.

Here's a postscript that could be pure apocrypha, but I've heard a couple elders repeat it now: The story goes that after watching Corvus in action during all this, somehow Gratiano figured out the man had more and weirder associates than he was letting on. So one night he barged in and demanded an explanation. Poor old Corvus had to just come up with something on the spot. Well, he admitted to being part of a secret cabal but he still didn't want to give out the real name. It doesn't take a lot of brainpower to figure out that "The Lost Tribe" has to be some kind of Noddist reference, and at this point Gratiano's rebels still didn't give fuck one about Gehenna. So instead he just said he was part of something called "The Black Hand," which sounded nicely spooky yet vague; and he made it out to be just another conglomerate pack with more on the ball than most. And the name stuck. So. There you go.

THE TREATY OF THORNS

Now for the anarchs, the "peace" of Thorns was just the dregs of a long, bitter draught. Most of them tucked their tails under and returned to their elders' tender mercies right then and there. But the rest exploded into the chaos of the Silchester massacre; and the next night, when they woke up from that fever dream of blood and fire, they realized this time there really was no going back. In no uncertain terms they'd rejected not only their sires' false offer of reconciliation, but the whole idea of Masquerade around which the new world vampire order was to be built. Never again would they be part of the "Kindred"...and never was suddenly looking a long goddamn time.

Now they actually had to come up with something.

Well, like I said, this was bad news for the anarchs. However, for the Tribe — excuse me, the "Black Hand" now — it was just the moment they'd been waiting for, the hour Dastur Anosh had foreseen. The time was finally ripe to take these fractious, clueless, greedy spawn of fractious, clueless, greedy elders and try to forge them into something better: an army to march against the Antediluvians in the final nights. And the anarchs seemed ready to listen to just about anything that promised them some glimmer of hope, purpose, pride, whatever.

Sounds great, huh? Unfortunately, the Hand wasn't the only group running around with this bright idea. Members of the Hand weren't even the only Noddists in the bunch. Some of the anarchs had gotten into some pretty peculiar creeds during their years on their own. Then when the whole vampire world started slowly polarizing into Camarilla and non-Camarilla (that is, the Camarilla and what became the Sabbat), the anarchs found themselves joined by a bunch of Lasombra and Tzimisce elders and their loyal broods who didn't feel

ROOTS AND BRANCHES

To many a Storyteller and player, the Sabbat seems an utter self-contradiction. How can it preach against the Camarilla's dominating elders while allowing its own elders to dominate? Are its members selfish, Darwinian predators who relish tearing each other down, or are they fanatical loyalists who guard their packmates' unives with all the passion shared blood can inspire?

Well, yes. Exactly. The Sabbat is, and has always been, composed of extremely disparate elements, most of which came together out of necessity rather than affinity; and each of these elements has contributed its own legacy to Sabbat culture. So it should come as no surprise that the culture itself is a mishmash.

- **The Anarch Movement:** The anarchs are the "official" forerunners of the Sabbat and the earliest contributors to its ranks. Anarch ideology ranges from the populist to the utopian/Carthaginian to the meritocratic to the plain old hedonist (sometimes all at once, whether it makes sense or not). What its adherents have always agreed on is that freedom is to be valued above all else — a quaint notion which the Sabbat nevertheless took up for itself. The anarchs also gave the Sabbat the institution of the pack and its attendant ethic: absolute loyalty to packmates, but everyone else better by-damn watch their asses.

- **Clan Assamite:** The Unconquered have always been one of the smaller populations of the Sabbat. However, while they've enjoyed an accordingly scant influence over the sect's internal realities, they have had a disproportionate impact on the Camarilla's perception of the Sabbat — largely through the activities of the Black Hand as both assassin-cult and warrior-elite. Indeed, many Camarilla don't even distinguish between "The Black Hand" and "The Sabbat." Moreover, because the Lost Tribe and the Tal'mahe'Ra both had large Assamite contingents, and the Black Hand went on to become very influential in the Sabbat, Assamite culture could be said to have had a strong secondhand effect on the sect's development.

- **Clan Lasombra:** The Sabbat's first Lasombra were anarchs, but later their "mainstream" clanmates found themselves obliged to join as well, a result of Gratiano's diablerie and the formation of the Camarilla. Among the Lasombra, pride, subtlety and fierce competitiveness are not only virtues but cardinal ones; they transmitted these virtues to the Sabbat, particularly its leadership. The institution of Monomacy, especially, is a direct outgrowth of the *Amici Noctis* and its system of sanctioned Amaranth.

On the other hand, there's also a long clan history of taking religion extremely seriously. The Lasombra are partly responsible for the profusion of Christian borrowings (both sincere and mocking) in sect culture: Monçada's "dark faith" and its faction of adherents, the use of clerical titles, the Sabbat Inquisition, etc. Some of the sect's most zealous Noddists are also Lasombra, carrying forth a tradition of scholarship nearly as old as the clan itself.

- **Clan Tzimisce:** Like the Lasombra, most Tzimisce eventually had to shelter under the Sabbat's aegis. Their thoughts and beliefs have profoundly shaped the sect's ideology. The Metamorphosist legacy manifests in most Sabbat vampires' fervent need to prove they've evolved "beyond" humanity — the idea is certainly not unique to Metamorphosists, but they're among its staunchest supporters. The rite of the Vaulderie was soon mortared over with a crust of Noddist mysticism, but older sect members remember that it began as a simple act of rebellion on the part of anarch *koldun*. The *koldun*, anarch and otherwise, also brought their shamanic heritage into the sect, heavily influencing the development of the *ritae*. They latched eagerly onto Native American shamanism (so far as they understood it, that is) upon their arrival in the New World, which helps explain why the New World Sabbat has such a different "feel" from its Continental counterpart. Moreover, many Tzimisce, particularly those of the old Obertus lineage, have eagerly participated in Noddist scholarship over the centuries.

- **The Lost Tribe and the Tal'mahe'Ra/"True Hand":** The efforts of the Lost Tribe to influence the Sabbat's development are covered elsewhere in this chapter. The Tal'mahe'Ra was an ancient death-cult devoted to the worship of a cabal of beings, the Aralu, whom it believed to be Antediluvians, and who slept in the ghost-city of Enoch deep within the lands of the dead. During the Anarch Revolt, the Tal'mahe'Ra began infiltrating the Lost Tribe in an attempt to subvert and influence it (see the sidebars throughout this chapter). The modern Black Hand is the result of this odd conglomeration, but the Tal'mahe'Ra portion of the conglomerate recently collapsed with the destruction of Enoch. Storytellers seeking more information on the Tal'mahe'Ra and its fate should consult Chapter Seven in the *Vampire Storytellers Handbook*.

- **The Lilins (Bahari):** Although Lilin beliefs are incompatible with most other strains of vampiric mythology, particularly Noddist strains, Lilins still found their way into the sect; no concerted effort was made to purge them until the mid-twentieth century. They have influenced the development of some Paths of Enlightenment (not just the Path of Lilith), but never gained much sway past that. Their fabled oral legend, *The Cycle of Lilith*, remains just that — fabled.

ROOTS AND BRANCHES CONTINUED...

• **The Cainite Heresy:** The Cainite Heresy has its roots among the Lasombra, but it found adherents among many clans before its demise. Its membership was routed by the mortal Inquisition during the Albigenian Crusade; however, most of those few who did survive joined the Sabbat. They soon found it wise to keep their old faith secret, especially after the formation of the Sabbat Inquisition, which has done its utmost to eliminate this seductive rival over the years. By 1900, most Sabbat Inquisitors asserted that the Heresy was extinct, and yet elements of its credo keep surfacing in otherwise orthodox Sabbat communities; the Path of Cathari, for example, began as a heresy of the Heresy — not of mortal Catharism, as many incorrectly assume. Reverence for Caine as patriarch can be very difficult to distinguish from worship of Caine as Gnostic exemplar....

• **Various Gehenna cults:** As Boudicca points out, the vast majority of Gehenna cults are tiny and short-lived. On the other hand, they also seem to breed like rabbits, particularly during times of great upheaval or in backwater regions. Many Sabbat to this night cherish bits of apocrypha they've picked up at various esbats and *ritae*, never knowing that their original source was not the "true" Noddist tradition (whatever that is) but some two-bit fringe outfit that imploded two hundred years ago. Or at least, they don't know it until the Inquisition comes to correct them.

they had any place else to go. And a lot of these Lasombra and Tzimisce had their own proud old Noddist traditions that they'd been handing down from sire to childe over the eons. So to make a long story short, the Hand didn't get the monopoly over the forming Sabbat ideology it would've liked to.

RITAE

Still, the Hand was there right from the beginning, and it did what it could. Several of the Sabbat's oldest *ritae*, as you've probably noticed, have echoes in the Hand's own practices. Actually, it's the other way around. The *Festival dello Estinto*, for example, was originally supposed to be a time for facing death without fear — not a fucking vampire game show. And the *Stealth Ritus* was a practice of our spy *kamuts* long before it was a *ritus*.

Most Sabbat say the whole idea for the "shovelhead" Embrace, especially the rising-from-the-grave part, came out of old Tzimisce ceremonies for newborn childer — which I think is partly true, because I've talked to a couple old *koldun* about it and they were halfway convincing. But the old koldunic rite was a really complicated deal with special grave-offerings and ritual implements, and the timing had to be favorable to the spirits and what have you.

What the modern Sabbat has is much simpler, and it's most often done at the start of a crusade, an eve-of-battle thing. Well, think of your initiation into the Hand, which was also very simple, right? And the whole speech about how he who has died need no longer fear death, and can go forth to meet the enemy's talons as though they were his Father's embracing arms, because they are, and so on. It's basically a wartime pep-talk, isn't it? Anyway, that just seems like a stronger connection to me. But draw your own conclusions.

THE UNCONQUERED

The Thorns treaty also decreed the famous Tremere curse, and here's the silver lining behind that cloud: The anarchs witnessed their first real influx of Assamites (not counting the Tribe, of course, and the other two dozen or so who'd been in on it since Gratiano). And cresting this little tide of refugees was a Babylonian sorcerer named Izhim and his student Djuhah. Now, I have to admit I have no idea when those two actually joined the Hand. All I can tell you is that they definitely must have been part of the outfit by the time the lost colony at Roanoke was founded.

Check out this old dispatch to my sire, who was gallivanting around the West Indies with some Lasombra privateer at the time. It's from a "Tacquadighi, domine," domine simply meaning "lord," i.e. field commander, which obviously later became "dominion"; and Tacquadighi has to be bad Italian for some Indian word. Anyway, I can't quite make out what it's saying about Croatan Island, but it ends with a request to forward the news on to "the Bronze Bow" in Seville, and that's an old codename of Djuhah's. If Djuhah was in the Hand by then, I can't imagine he beat Izhim to it.

It was only with the disaster of the Tremere curse and the Assamite rebels' dark rite at Chocoma that my master gained his opportunity to approach the Sabbat as a postulant, without his motives being questioned. He cannot have chosen to accept the curse in any case; even at that date his age was so vast that nothing but the blood of other Cainites could sate his thirst. As for his entry into the order that already unwittingly bore the name his agent had bequeathed it, your lordship can no doubt make better account of that than I. Plainly, he already knew what to say, how to put on a guise that the Sabbat would find attractive, and I do not doubt that the prospect of having such ancient power in service to his holy cause must have tempted Amos greatly.

MANIFEST DESTINY

From the journal of Piotr "Peter" Andreikow:

So that's most of what I got from "Boudicca." There wasn't really time on that visit for me to stick around and really dive into that library of hers, but I won't pass up the chance if I ever find it again. It looked like there were all kinds of crumbly old files and letters and journals that probably had the details she was just summarizing. I sure as hell don't buy that she inherited it all from her sire. If you ask me, she's done way more than just "a little digging here and there." Anyhow. I actually got most of my best information from the colonial era forward from Teresita, the famous "drill sergeant" of Mexico City, whom I'd already planned to interview on other subjects. I decided to go ahead and sound her out on the history too, and what do you know....

From my interview with Teresita, Nosferatu dominion of Mexico City and acting Seraph, translated from the Spanish:

Oh, I'm so sorry. I did not notice the spot of blood on that chair in the poor light. A person could go blind in here! Wilhelm! Kindly remember that all of us are not Gangrel, *querido*. We cannot see each other properly when all the bulbs but one are out, and we cannot let our guests sit in filth! Ay-de-mi. You have never seen anyone shoot like my Wilhelm, but honestly, a hundred years old and he still forgets his chores.

Here is a much better seat. No, no, I'm fine, really, don't worry about me. You take it. If I stand and you sit, we can look each other in the eye! Yes, I remember when the New World was wild. I was not Sabbat yet, alas, but I saw much of them and their ways. Although the land itself was open and vast, the actual colonies were still very small and squeezed-together. The undead of both sects dwelt almost on top of each other....

But you know all this. As you surely learned in your training — tell me, how is young Jafar? He is such a sweet lamb — it was the Sabbat that brought the first children of Caine to these shores. The Lasombra were always seafarers, and so many of them were Spaniards and Portuguese. When they heard the tales their mortal countrymen brought back across the Atlantic, they could not resist. And their packmates among the antitribu sailed them. I understand the Tzimisce took a little longer to be persuaded. Homebodies, they are, and the poor dears get seasick too! Can you imagine? Oh, I suppose you can.

At any rate, hungry Sabbat and other anarchs flocked here to claim their territory, carried on the tide of human settlement to the far corners of New Spain. Unfortunately things were not so easy further north. I won't say that the wolf-people were protecting the northern tribes, exactly, but they did make Herd-gathering frightfully difficult up there.

Being many years your lordship's junior, it seems incredible to me that the Black H and should have greeted the promise of the New World with trepidation rather than joy, but evidently this was indeed the case. I suppose it is true that by emigrating to the New World, the Sabbat were also retreating from the very clan founders whom the Lost Tribe had hoped one night to slay with their aid. I am told that Anosh himself voiced to both my master and your lordship his fear that the plenty and safety (as he imagined it) of the New World would seduce the Sabbat, making them comfortable and indolent.

It was then that my master suggested ensuring that the blood of the native peoples remained out of reach to our kind, by ensuring that any Sabbat who dared venture forth to seek it should find himself facing the claws of the Lupines instead. This proved disturbingly easy to arrange in many instances. The Lupines were far more plentiful then than now, and their beastly cunning required but the slimmest evidence of a Cainite interloper to begin the hunt. Alas, they remain on the hunt to this very night.

No doubt your lordship has since marked this in memory as a tragic error, the inevitable result of interfering from too great a distance. An error it undoubtedly was for Dastur Anosh (Caine keep him), but I regret to say that my master always claimed this as one the triumphs of the Tal'maho Ra. Because the spread of their dominion in the New World was hampered — and yet the steady immigration continued nonetheless — the Sabbat of New Spain turned in on themselves, set against each other, and never gained the strength they might have otherwise had by the time the Camarilla arrived on the shores in large numbers; with what sad results, we all know.

THE SABBAT CIVIL WARS

Unfortunately, *querido niño*, the Sabbat has been at war with itself more often than not for as long as I can remember. The only good that ever came of this is that it did force us to become more organized. True, we already had something of our present hierarchy, and no one argued anymore with Gorchist's claim to regency; then again, as long as he was half a world away, and not actually bothering us, his regency didn't mean that much to us either. But it was those rare bishops who could keep the peace in their areas who finally won real respect for the whole notion of officials.

THE FIRST CIVIL WAR

Once upon a time, most of the Camarilla of the New World were so young and adventuresome they were practically anarchs themselves, and some of them were even happy to collude with Sabbat if it helped them resist their sires overseas. More than one American prince has that little skeleton in his closet, *chiquito*! Unfortunately, some of them became so disobedient that the elders had no choice but to send over their archons — and then, even worse, they made the journey themselves. I suppose it's all for the best, in a way, that the two sects didn't have a chance to get too cozy.

There were Hand here then, yes. I know, because I joined them. What is the saying? "I was not Embraced Sabbat, but I came as quickly as I could?" And when the Hand saw the Camarilla finally gaining real ground, of course they hoped that would bring the Sabbat together. Instead, it shattered apart. People accused each other of the most horrible betrayals; vendettas decimated whole archbishoprics. Why, things turned so bad that both Jalan-Aajav and old Dastur Anosh crossed the oceans to come help, but by then it was far too late to stop the slaughter.

THE SERAPHIM

In fact, I'm afraid Anosh got himself killed in rather short order. We never did find out by whom. And it was then that the title of Seraphim came to be, you see, because we simply could not settle the dispute over whether Jalan-Aajav or Izhim should lead us any other way. I don't remember precisely who suggested it, but the idea of four Seraphim, archangels, certainly appealed to us. It went the archbishops one better, didn't it? And so Izhim became First Seraph among equals, since he was eldest I suppose, and Jalan-Aajav the Second, Corvus the Third, and Wanyan the Fourth.

(What? No, duckling. Djuhan was the very last Seraph appointed, after Wanyan disappeared...I want to say it was 1952, though I'm sure Izhim would have liked it to happen earlier. Poor Wanyan. To this night I'm not sure what clan he was. Jalan-Aajav still won't say. I once heard Wanyan had sworn on the Stone to kill every last Tremere on Earth. I presume they had something to say about that. And as for Elimelech, I'll get to him in a moment.)

...I can only swear again, on my worthless existence that lies wholly in your august hands, my Khan, that it is not I who hold the heart's blood of your anda. Nor do I know who does. I regret I cannot recall, though I have combed through my memory again and again, a single word my master ever spoke on the subject. If there is aught I can undergo that will finally satisfy your lordship in this, I beg your lordship but to say it, and I will meekly obey....

Parvati? Parvati who — that Parvati? Seraph? No, no, *querido*...it's just you amuse me. I am not sure it is possible for one of the, hmph, "frailer sex" to become Seraph now, much less then. Dominion, yes, and even "acting Seraph," obviously. But you must understand: I think when Jalan-Aajav was alive, clunking a girl on the head with a club was still an acceptable form of courtship!

Hmph.

THE PURCHASE PACT

Now we all know how useful the Pact really turned out to be in preventing further war among the Sabbat. True, it induced Gorchist to come to the New World, and the poor Cainite was a bastion of strength while he lasted. The Hand saw a way to profit from the agreement as well: Since it forbade open warfare among members of the Sabbat, why, that merely meant that everyone resorted to covert attacks against their rivals. And of course, the Hand had become rather skilled at doing things covertly. It had been assassinating Camarilla vampires for centuries. But it was only after the Pact, *querido*, that we really began to offer our services to Sabbat against Sabbat — and serve the Sabbat in so doing. Oh, we were so very choosy. Our employer had to be the sort of Sabbat who could truly contribute to our struggle, a valuable ally and a true believer; or the victim had to be someone who had truly hurt the sect, who betrayed his sectmates and foolishly allowed our enemies the advantage. Now, I am one of those many among the Hand who agree we have become far too indiscriminate lately in accepting contracts — something I will change, my pet, if they ever give me half a chance — but it was not so then, I assure you.

THE HANDPRINT

From an interview with Yazid Tamari, Assamite dominion and acting Seraph:

So, your old domitor from when you were mortal did not seem to know the difference between "Black Hand" and "Sabbat." Well, this is not an uncommon mistake among the Camarilla. It began during the Revolution in France, with a Lasombra *shakar* called Croquemitaine whose method relied on a slow campaign of terror, forcing his victims into acts of foolish desperation. He employed his darkling powers to the fullest in this enterprise, of course, but his most brilliant innovation was to leave black handprints of tar, ash or paint for his victims to find. On their bedsheets, on the inner wall of a carriage, on a vessel's belly — all to demonstrate just how close he was drawing to them. When at last they bolted and he caught them out, he would often leave a handprint at the scene for the other vampires to find as well, sometimes within his victim's very ashes. Needless to say he quickly developed a reputation among the Camarilla *ancien regime*, and it came to pass that the mere sight of a black handprint could send a shiver down the spine of any elder in Europe.

It is quite easy to see how things developed from there. A few other *shakar* adopted the tactic, but they were far outnumbered by the many ordinary Sabbat who also employed it, not always with such subtlety. Thus, long before hardly any of the Camarilla knew of the *manus nigrum* as a specific order within the Sabbat, the symbol itself was widely recognized (yet mistaken for a symbol of the entire sect, a confusion that has persisted for many years). It is a mixed blessing, to be sure. The prowess of the Hand is sometimes ascribed to the Sabbat at large, but conversely, Sabbat stupidities may be misattributed to us. A wise *shakar*, of course, knows how to ply this to his benefit; we have become adept at causing the enemy to over- or underestimate us as the particular mission requires.



THE SABBAT INQUISITION

Well, *querido*, I hated the idea of a "Sabbat Inquisition" the moment I first heard of it. We'd had the damnable mortal Inquisitors in New Spain since the beginning. Can our Cainite brothers honestly have thought the mere word would frighten us? Well, no. Unfortunately, it was not a matter of trying to frighten us, so much as a delusion of grandeur. Monçada really did think himself the agent of

God, I fear. He had his disciples combing Europe practically from the night of his Embrace, looking for heretics to burn; and when they couldn't find any more of those, they fed the flames with Sabbat infernalists.

Eventually, Nahir and his own little cabal of Keeper and Tzimisce Noddists joined forces with Monçada. I want to say that was back around the same time that Gorchist claimed the regency. I hear they caught at least a few Hand in their nets, but they must have been little ducklings who knew nothing too damaging, or else they used the Kiss of the Asp. Thank Caine! No, we've never gotten along with the Inquisition. Although they're certainly better than the Camarilla or the demon-worshippers, their brand of Noddism takes issue with ours on several points, and they just don't seem capable of agreeing to disagree.

In fact, just before the First Sabbat Civil War started in earnest, the Inquisitors lodged a formal complaint in the consistory that we were growing too powerful, our packs too numerous. That's when Gorchist ordained that no templar could become a member of the Hand, or vice versa. He also ordered us to disperse our numbers among the other Sabbat packs, theoretically so the packs could keep an eye on us. Honestly, we were just as happy to do so, since it also put us in an excellent situation to keep a better eye on them — not to mention a better situation for recruiting. I think the Inquisition realized after the fact that they really hadn't managed to hurt us at all, but it would have looked even worse to complain again.

Meanwhile, we in the Americas were happy to have avoided the Sabbat Inquisition completely; and then in 1808 an old Lasombra named Charles Delmare swooped into Peru to take the cardinal's title for the Southern Sabbat. Yes, that Charles. He brought the Inquisitors to these shores, my pet. They arrived on the very same boat with him. I understand it's simply that he's a staunch anti-infernalist, and goodness knows I can't argue with that — besides, the Cainite is our best hope for the regency now. But let's just say I don't celebrate the anniversary of the landing with piñatas and noisemakers, either.

THE SECOND CIVIL WAR

Ah, yes. The Second Civil War. Our era of glory, is that not what you've heard? Well, there is truth to that. We took considerable advantage of the confusion and backstabbing going on in the Ivory Tower's ranks up north. Lots of burning going on in that mortal war they were having up there, lots of grabs for vacated domain. No, we did not have Lincoln shot, that is a very old slander from a fortunately very late Bishop of Detroit.

We did, however, recruit more Nosferatu and Malkavians into the Sabbat and the Hand than had joined over the past three centuries. A signal improvement, if I may say so. Our intelligence broadened immensely. For the first time we could really learn — not just guess from the mass movements of "Kindred," or the babbling of

neonate converts, or the pinpoint data our own spy-agents fed us — but really learn which elders hated each other, and why. We could finally fill out the family trees of the New World Camarilla, even track down the likely locations of a Methuselah or two. Naturally we also continued to carry out assassinations, but now there was more rhyme and reason to it. And timing. Far better timing!

Yes, I know, *querido*. But you must remember that many Malkavians sneak and spy almost as well as my blood do. What's more, they have a funny way of noticing things other folk overlook. The only liability is the obvious one, and there's an important difference between mad and *barking* mad. Take the Colonel, for instance. Didn't you say you served under him in the conquest of Philadelphia? Ah, you didn't realize he was Malkavian. Well, did he do anything crazy? Crazy like the fox, perhaps. So there you are. And he's been with us since he was a childe. Not six months after he completed his training, he was in Canada launching one raiding party after another downriver, shipping himself and his *kamut* as cargo from Lake Michigan to Chicago, St. Louis — even Memphis! They caught St. Louis completely by surprise, in fact; they killed the prince and would, I'm quite sure, have taken the city if old Lodin hadn't personally intervened. At any rate, his successes against enemies many times his age shamed more than one misbehaving bishop into putting grudges aside long enough to do something useful.

Then around the same time Seraph Corvus, who seems to have gotten on uncommonly well with the Brujah *antitribu*, went to Baja and actually managed to repel a Camarilla incursion from the north. He did this by operating from a theory that was then unheard-of among his clanmates, which is that Brujah are not stupid, merely tragically undereducated. The young Brutes and Hunters in those parts diablerized each other almost as fast as they were Embraced. Corvus quite simply showed them something better to do with their energy. It turned out that once they were taught effective methods, they were just as happy to diablerize among the Camarilla. Some of our better removers tonight came from those ranks...your Chang, for example.

As for Jalan-Aajav, he devoted himself to diplomacy. Well, that's not precisely correct. The new regent, Galbraith, devoted herself to diplomacy. Jalan-Aajav devoted himself to standing beside her and bristling with ferocity, the stick to her carrot. He was quite effective at this. Not only did they calm the feuding packs of Mexico City, making it safer for other Sabbat to move through, they then proceeded to turn the place into our version of the Hague. The Seraph called in favors the Hand had earned in the last war and convinced bishops and prisci to sit down together who would have sooner spit blood in each others' eyes. I won't go so far as to say the war would never have ended without us...but we don't like to think how much longer it might have continued. The Sabbat truly owed the Hand. And for once, everyone agreed on that.

THE CODE OF MILAN

So you can see that the famous clause in the Code was simply the long-overdue fruit of many labors. (The Inquisition will never forgive us for it. I'm sure they would have liked an obedience clause too, but they just didn't have the grass-roots support.) We had kept our existence fairly quiet back when we were valued chiefly for our stealth and our political advice. But now the word of our talent at strategy and military training was getting out, and this time we didn't resist the process. Why, dominions who'd distinguished themselves in the field could walk around enjoying something very like hero-worship.

Ordinarily the sheer glare of the spotlight would have deterred us, but luckily, it was all remarkably uncritical attention. Even those who might have liked to do some sort of "exposé" on us knew that in that climate, the mobs were just as likely to turn on them for their evil slanders. Besides, none of them, supporters or critics, really knew much about us except what we deliberately let slip.

Such love affairs don't last. These nights, the Sabbat feels toward us what the Americans feel toward their CIA: We are far more popular in wartime than in peacetime, and while few would argue that we are both necessary and extremely skilled at what we do, those who most admire us are also those who most often suspect us of using our skills on other Sabbat.

How well I remember the night that the Code of Milan was formally brought to Mexico City — written in prince's blood on tanned Camarilla hides, of course. You know how we love the theatrical. Several dignitaries appended their signatures then (after the fact, the cowards). Then Galbraith stepped forward with Jalan-Aajav at her right side. At the left was Elimelech. Of course I had never seen this stranger before. Imagine my surprise when he was announced as Seraph!

He spoke for a moment, after Jalan-Aajav stilled the outcry with a glare. In heavily accented Arabic, which Galbraith translated, he explained that he had killed our Corvus the month before in legitimate Monomacy. He did not say who challenged whom. But he explained that he felt moved by a sense of duty to an honorable fallen foe to take that foe's place as Seraph of the mighty and stalwart Black Hand. And that he, like Jalan-Aajav, would give his last drop of blood in defense of the regent and the Regent's Peace...and so on and so forth.

Well. I know dominions who still haven't gotten over the shock. But what could we do? Do you have any idea how old this Elimelech is supposed to be? Didn't you ever go to Sunday school, *niñito*?

THE THIRD CIVIL WAR

Ay-de-mi. I tell you this. Even if we had had some part in the Third Civil War, we wouldn't take credit for it. Remarkably lethal stupidity from beginning to end.

THE FINAL NIGHTS

Yes, well, the better question is what *hasn't* happened recently. But duckling, you've seen a lot of it yourself. Surely you are not asking me to tell you what I have been made privy to as acting Seraph? No, I am afraid you will have to go elsewhere for your secrets.

THE EAST COAST CAMPAIGN

A fine showing, but I am not calling any Blood Feasts just yet. The Sabbat is up at the end of the first half, that is all. We haven't gained any ground that the Camarilla can't overtake. Remember we enjoyed great ascendancy in the New World once, and lost it. We can lose the Eastern cities as well. No question. Why, look at New York. I hope that swaggerer Polonia has learned his lesson. As the Admonitions say: When it comes to the independent clans, make very sure you're the highest bidder!

We did, of course, do our best to help the recent offensive. Most notably by luring out and trapping a cabal of anarch spies that had planned to sell advance news of Sabbat maneuvers to Prince Vitel. We also sent one of our best experts on Tremere to the front lines to consult. But you know how I feel about Polonia, and as for Vykos — it's incredibly clever, but it has a distressing habit of moving on when things are no longer sufficiently stimulating to its intellect...and taking all the glamour with it. I do not think it has the makings of an administrator.

And we still haven't bridged the gaps between the East Coast and Detroit and Montreal, which the Council of Seraphim explicitly told me was to be a major objective. Then again half those Seraphim up and *vanished* in the middle of the campaign, along with a several dozen of our oldest and canniest Assamites. What can I tell you, *querido*? Whatever the paranoiacs may say, we were not expecting a mass desertion at the height of battle! All sorts of lovely maneuvers were supposed to go off that didn't. And it certainly hasn't helped our dealings with other Sabbat. Bishop Sutphen in Atlanta doesn't trust us anymore; he won't even receive our emissaries despite the fact that he freely admits he's neck-deep in idiots and half the displaced Camarilla on the eastern seaboard have come to camp out on his doorstep. A bad business all round, mark my words.

ALAMUT RISES

Well, of course I cannot confirm or deny the rumors. Did Seraph Izhim and Seraph Djuhah fall in battle, or have they answered Alamut's *muezzin* call as many claim? Would they have done so willingly, or is it possible even one like Izhim could be compelled? And what of the other deserters? The whispers that the "Unconquered" have all been quislings all along?

When the Council speaks out to clear up the mysteries, I will join them. Till then, mind your duties and don't fret. Stand fast with your Assamite brothers that remain. Jalan-

I was left behind, along with a few others of my master's inner circle, to tend his household in his absence. Whether he truly went to the ghost-city to rule and rebuild as he claimed, or fled to Alamut — though I cannot begin to imagine why he would flee to Alamut, as he would surely have much to explain when he got there — I do not know. I know that I have since felt some painful tuggings at the seat of my heart, the home of the Vaulderie I once held with him. And in my daytime sleep, I see a terrible face looming over me, blackened and scarred as though by a great fire; and yet still it quickens, and speaks words in some dreadful tongue I cannot name yet feel I should recognize. I cannot say if this be a vision of past, present or future. But it seems possible, O my Khan, that Izhim and Izrael of the Tal mahé Ra, Izhim un-Baal the traitor, is now beyond the reach of even your mighty vengeance...or, at any rate, that there is a prior claim.

As for his onetime student and erstwhile rival Djulah, he came to me once after Enoch's fall, demanding after the whereabouts of a few of the columns he had so recently created. For my part, I was astonished that he should be seeking this information of me, not the reverse. He fell into a terrible wrath but contented himself with breaking my spine over his knee, and left. Then a few weeks later I received another mysterious visit from a coal-black Saracen I did not know, who handed me an unsigned note inquiring after Djulah. I could tell him no more than I have just told you, but he seemed satisfied and disappeared into the night.

Then there is the matter of the additional desertions, regarding which your lordship has repeatedly questioned me. Again, I tell you that I can only recall, at most, five Tal mahé Ra who also belonged to the H and were likely in Enoch at its hour of catastrophe. I believe that most of the other desertions your lordship has marked are in fact cases of children of H again deciding to return to the ancestral fold for whatever reason; however, I also allow that some may well be my former brethren who have fled in fear or despair. As for the rest of the Tal mahé Ra, I agree that some of them must surely remain within the H and's ranks yet, silent, perhaps debating with themselves as I did what the future holds for them. I again swear that I will do all that your lordship bids in determining who they are and where they will choose to stand....

Aajav is satisfied of their loyalty — he wouldn't have defended them to the rest of the Sabbat otherwise. He even swore on the Grand Inquisitor's Iron Reliquary! So that settles it. For me, for you, for all of us. I will be very disappointed if I hear otherwise.

THE PILGRIMAGE

One thing that's certain: Whatever is really going on at Alamut with the reported change of management, it's made the traditional pilgrimage to the Weeping Stone nigh impossible. Some of our guides we haven't heard from in months. A couple have come back to us with tales of being set upon by gangs of murderous rafiq. If we can't even keep them safe, what possible business could we have sending our young operatives out there?

Obviously, this just won't do. I can hardly bear to think of that creature at Alamut hearing of the Stone from the lips of our own deserters. But more importantly, we simply cannot allow our initiates to be deprived of the sacrament. It would be like...like being Catholic and never taking Communion! So there will have to be a renewal of the pilgrimage. No two ways about it. Whether that is renewal is accomplished by diplomacy or by battle, I don't care. But first we must find out what's going on. I am thinking this may be an excellent chance for some of these Assamite fledglings Jalan-Aajav so bravely spoke for to repay his kindness and prove that his trust is well-founded....

We stand in the shadow of Gehenna. I won't deny that, querido. But unlike the rest of our race, we have been preparing for many centuries to face the hour of despair. In

fact it is the very hour for which we were created. We have suffered setbacks, yes. I promise there are more setbacks to come. There will be great pain and terror before the end. But I know that none of you will flinch now, at the crucial moment. Will you?

Of course not. There's my brave boy!

Dear Ondine,

I think I need not sign this letter, for you will recognize the hand, however hurried; surely you have seen much of it in your sire's library. No doubt you have assumed me long dead. Soon, you will at last be correct. If my faith can only hold fast this little while longer, and if Caine is merciful, perhaps I will wake again on a night darker still than this. Perhaps, I dare dream, the young knight of Lombardy who parted from me so cruelly so many years ago will be at my side. I fear I dream too wildly. For the past three nights maya has overflowed itself in its effort to beguile me, and I must stop writing every few minutes because my pen turns into a tiger's tail and smears my script. The karma of a million lies comes back upon me, and even my senses lie to me now. Pardon me, the servants have clumsily set the table for thirteen, I must remonstrate.

But I do not think I imagine the footsteps I hear in my sleep, the white burning, the parting thirst for kin's blood—which I shall seal myself in with an avalanche rather than sate. And still they will find me, somehow. My blood sings to them as theirs to mine. Farewell, goddaughter, and if you ever honored your noble sire I beg you to tell the Seraph, our warlord, that the hour he awaited at my bidding is here. Tell him it does not matter if he takes black or white, he has already missed his chance to make the first move....





CHAPTER TWO: FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

*There will come a time
When four shall rise and ride forth
They shall wield the sword of Caine's will
And they shall call the Chosen together
Who have been anointed with the Blood
They shall be as wolves among you
And they will hunt
And even the greatest, the stag with many tines
The eagle on his eyrie
The sentinel on the watchtower
The king on his throne
The dragon in the bowels of the earth
Shall fall, and wolves will feed
On his heart's blood, and be made strong.
— from the Chronicle of the Lost Tribe
I, Piotr Andreikov, am dead.
— from the Oath of Initiation, Ritus Mortuum Secundum*

From the journal of Piotr "Peter" Andreikov:

The rest of the Sabbat knows surprisingly little about the Black Hand. Well, perhaps not so surprisingly, given that our mystique only adds to our reputation as the baddest bunch of motherfuckers on the whole damn planet. Coming from a bunch of self-aggrandizing bloodsuckers who would like to think they're the worst thing to happen to humanity since Sodom and Gomorrah, this ought to tell you something. What it really means is where the Code of Milan says "All Sabbat shall support the Black Hand," there's this unwritten subtext that adds "or they'll tear your withered guts out through your asshole, hack off your head and stomp what's left of you into a bloody pulp."

The good thing about a rep like that is that half the time, the average Lick is too scared shitless of you to even think about finding out if it's true. The bad thing about it is the other half of the time, he can't decide whether he'd rather be your number one groupie or challenge you to Monomacy to demonstrate how hot shit he is. Or even worse, he thinks he's a pretty tough badass himself, and wants to join the club and get in on the action. Hell, he's even got his own katana. Give me a fucking break here.

I've come to the conclusion — based on my conversations with a number of Black Hand veterans and dominions — that more than a little of that ignorance is intentional. Familiarity breeds contempt, after all, and the less the *vatos* and *chicas*

really know about how we operate, the more omnipotent and terrifying we look. But that's the view from the outside — those of us who wear the mark of the sable crescent had damn sight better know exactly what we are, and why the subject operates the way it does.

That's why I've compiled these files, based on several years of research, discussions with other brothers and sisters in the Hand, and my own observations. If these are indeed the Final Nights, we don't have a lot of time left to get ourselves ready, much less train new cadets and mustajib in our hallowed traditions. The time for oral traditions and seven-year apprenticeships has passed; we no longer have the luxury of eternity before us.

Because, ready or not, Gehenna is coming.

End of journal entry

ORGANIZATION

The true strength of the Black Hand has never been in numbers. Being small, several hundred members at most, I guess, it has never had an elaborate organizational structure. Flexibility is of far more value to the subject's leadership than tiers of hierarchy. Most of its agents are distributed throughout the Sabbat as members of ordinary Sabbat packs, and are only called into active duty as needed. When the Black Hand acts, it acts primarily at the level of the *kamut*, a pack summoned into existence for a specific and finite purpose and then disbanded, its members dispersed once again to their original Sabbat packs. Extraordinary circumstances might call for more than one *kamut* to be assembled for a more complex mission, such as the recent (and highly successful) Sabbat drive up the East Coast, but such occasions have not been frequent in the faction's history. Only two intermediary tiers of command stand between the common Black Hand member and the Council of Seraphim: the dominions; and the ductus of their *kamut*, if they're on active assignment, or the local Watch Commander for those who aren't.

THE SERAPHIM — GENERALSOFTHEJYHAD

The Seraphim are the Black Hand's generals, who answer only to the Regent of the Sabbat, and who collectively have absolute authority over all members of the Black Hand. They determine what assassinations should be carried out, what requests for assistance from Sabbat leaders should be answered and how, and assign dominions as needed to see it all done. They pass judgments on Black Hand members accused of any disloyalty, disobedience to their superiors, or any offense against the Sabbat's Code of Milan. They also judge their own members on accusations of infernalism, refusing to surrender them to the authority of the Inquisition. Historically, the Seraphim have not always agreed on matters of doctrine, policy or action, but when the dust settled and a decision was made, it was usually the will of Izhim ur-Baal that prevailed. Now Jalan-Aajav holds the rank of First Seraph, and thus far, none of the acting Seraphim have attempted to thwart his will — though that compliance is not likely to last forever.

While echoing the same mockery of Church hierarchy as the Sabbat with its ecclesiastical titles, the founders of the Black Hand reached even higher for the source of their authority, and took their name from the loftiest ranks of the angels themselves: the Seraphim. As Heaven has only four archangels, so the number of the Council of Seraphim has always been four. They have led the Black Hand through the coalescence of the bitter survivors of the anarchy wars into the Sabbat; the Sabbat's migration to the New World; and three Civil Wars that, except for the Black Hand, might have torn the sect asunder. With such leadership, the Black Hand has remained a constant through the rise and fall of archbishops, cardinals and even regents.

But the Final Nights have come, and portents of Gehenna are everywhere. The Tremere curse on the Children of Haqim has shattered like a brittle sword, and many of the once-faithful Assamite *antitribu* have abandoned their vows to Caine's Chosen and returned to their ancestral home. The leaders of the Gangrel clan — such as they are — have turned their backs on their former allies in the Camarilla, taking a good portion of their clanmates with them and depriving the Sabbat's hated foe of some of their fiercest fighters. And but a few years ago, the eternal night was shattered with the screams of the dying — mortal and undead alike — as one of the ancient Antediluvians rose from its long sleep and, in the space of but a week, all but wiped out its entire bloodline.

The events of the last few years have wrought a series of rapid shifts in the Black Hand's leadership and direction. The loss of many of the eldest Assamite *antitribu* left tremendous gaps among the ranks of the dominions, emissaries and Watch Commanders, offering opportunities for sudden advancement among the experienced operatives whose ambitions had been long frustrated by Assamite domination. The ranks of the Seraphim themselves have been radically thinned; of the four who have led the subject for the past half-century, only Jalan-Aajav remains. Without Izhim ur-Baal to moderate his strategies, or Djuhah to challenge his decisions, the scarred Gangrel warlord has become the undisputed leader of the entire subject, a position he no doubt plans to take full advantage of while he can.

MISSING IN ACTION

No one in the Black Hand has seen or heard from the ancient Assamite warrior Izhim ur-Baal in nearly two years. While Izhim has always been as mysterious as any elder with his comings and goings, rarely speaking of his intentions even to his most trusted associates, it is hard to imagine that the wisest and most cunning of the *shakari* could himself have been outmatched, or would have abandoned the subject he helped to found. Yet in the wake of the mass desertion of so many of his brothers, Izhim's continued absence is a silent void in the Hand's leadership that Jalan-Aajav by himself cannot fill.

The fate of Djuhah, the other Assamite Seraph, is equally uncertain. Rumors of the powerful warrior's Final Death have spread like storm winds among Hand operatives, based on the description of ashen remains found in the ruins of his haven. But as his seconds and an entire Black Hand column led by the legendary warrior Taliq are also currently unaccounted for, some questions yet remain. Particularly with Izhim missing as

well, Djuhah's failure to reappear speaks far louder than the protests of acting Seraph Yazid Tamari, Djuhah's charismatic grandchilde, who struggles to maintain Assamite solidarity among the Chosen.

The fourth Seraph, Elimelech, has never been entirely reliable — or for that matter, rational. Given the old one's sometimes tenuous grip on the realities of night-to-night existence, and his propensity for casual violence when even mildly annoyed, his absence from even his known havens comes more of a relief than a matter for concern. Jalan-Aajav, in fact, would doubtless prefer that Elimelech remain among the missing for the rest of eternity.

FOR THE STORYTELLER: THE ASHES OF ENOCH

The destruction of Enoch and the collapse of the ancient sect known as the *Manus Nigrum* has had but a limited obvious effect on the Sabbath's Black Hand — most of the Hand, including Jalan-Aajav, never knew the "True Hand" existed, much less how much the *Manus Nigrum* had interfered with Black Hand operations over the past several centuries. However, with the disappearance of both Djuhah and Izhim ur-Baal, some of these long-secret connections are being uncovered, or revealed by surviving *Manus Nigrum* agents such as Kazimir Savostin, who has thrown his full support and loyalties to the Black Hand and Jalan-Aajav in exchange for his own unlife and protection from his former masters' revenge. The secrets Jalan-Aajav has learned from Kazimir are not — and likely never will be — knowledge he will share with the consistory or even most members of the Black Hand. But it is likely fair to say that should either Izhim or Djuhah ever return, they're going to have more than a little bit of explaining to do.

The actual number of *Manus Nigrum* agents in the Black Hand was never high, and Kazimir did not know them all. The few members of that cult who still remain hidden within the Black Hand, including the members of a few of the controversial columns, now face their own personal crisis of loyalty and survival. Where each of them goes from here, only time will tell.

For more information of the razing of Enoch, see the *Vampire Storytellers Handbook*.

THE NEW COMMAND

In the Final Nights, Jalan-Aajav, or Aajav-Khan to those who know him well, stands as the de facto First Seraph of the Black Hand. Already his leadership has borne significant challenges, such as the abrupt and unexpected desertion of the eldest of the Assamite *antitribu* in the middle of one of the biggest Sabbath offensives in its history. It was Jalan-Aajav who initiated an investigation into the nature of the treachery, and presented his findings to the consistory. His quick response to the crisis doubtless saved many Assamite members of the Black Hand from the retribution of their fellow Sabbath over the betrayal of the Assamite elders.

More recently, Jalan-Aajav has acted to preserve the Black Hand's internal stability by appointing not three, but *four* experienced and qualified dominions to fill the seats of the missing Seraphim — at least for the duration of the present uncertainty. He chose four, rather than three, for political reasons. First, he can potentially offer the future regent the opportunity to select which three would keep their title and position on the council. Second, the competition between the four juniors on the council will hopefully keep them from uniting in an alliance against him — Jalan-Aajav will permit no further thwarting of his vision or his plans for the Black Hand in these Final Nights. His choices included the Nosferatu dominion Teresita, a staunch Ultra-Conservative, but also a resident of Mexico City and a well-respected strategist; Yazid Tamari, an emerging leader among the remaining Assamite *antitribu*, whose political savvy (and apparent ignorance of his grandsire Djuhah's secrets) is an asset when dealing with the consistory; Banjoko, a Lasombra whose reputation among the traditional Noddists and even the Inquisition is that of a conciliator and pragmatist; and finally, the Tzimisce Kazimir Savostin, an experienced spy, *shakar* and Noddist scholar — and a former associate of Izhim ur-Baal, but whose loyalty to the Hand Jalan-Aajav has declared unassailable.

The acting council has elevated more veteran operatives to the ranks of the dominions, and redistributed the Black Hand's membership among the Sabbath packs as needed to fill the weaknesses the Assamite desertion left in the Hand's eyes and ears.

The disappearance of three Seraphim has not gone unnoticed outside the Black Hand. Before the truth about Galbraith's Final Death was revealed, talks among the consistory regarding selecting the successors had already begun. There is no precedent (as if that mattered to the Sabbath) for the consistory (the cardinals and prisci of the Sabbath) to choose a new Seraph of the Black Hand; the Hand's leaders have always been appointed from within, with the blessings of the regent. Fortunately, in the sudden vacancy of the regency, the consistory is currently far more concerned with its own political affairs than those of the Black Hand, which most view as far less threatening in its present apparently leaderless state anyway. Until the crisis of the regency is decided and the resulting political fallout settled or eliminated, not even the prisci are likely to have the audacity to attempt to appoint a Seraph and risk the wrath of the one Seraph who still remains — or the power of the forces he commands.

DOMINIONS

The only level of permanent rank between the Seraphim and the rest of the Black Hand's membership, the dominions are the senior executive officers, the mission commanders who oversee anything from a small operation involving only a single *kamut* to a full-scale siege. They are proven leaders, usually with a century or more of experience, and have demonstrated a good sense of strategy, the ability to improvise successfully when plans fail, the capacity to lead and inspire those under their command, and of course exceptional combat abilities. To be raised to the rank of dominion is considered a high honor, a recognition of decades — if not centuries — of stalwart and selfless service to the Black Hand and the Sabbath.

Most dominions do not serve under the command of a particular Seraph, but obey the orders given by the council as a whole, which allows for flexibility in assignment, and also theoretically prevents any one Seraph from developing his own personal officer corps. When the necessary number of Seraphim approve a mission, one Seraph takes ultimate responsibility for overseeing its completion, and appoints one or more dominions to carry it out according to their particular specialties or backgrounds. In practice, each Seraph has his own opinion of which dominion is right for a given job, and tends to use the same list of proven dominions from one mission to the next. Some dominions have been selected by different Seraphim for different missions, though the choice may be as motivated by the Seraph's own political agenda (or even clan bias) as an honest assessment of the dominion's abilities as a leader in the field.

Dominion is a rank of honor, not a job title. While many dominions still belong to Sabbat packs — in fact, those who do often lead them as ducti — some others do not, dedicating all their nights to the Black Hand. A dominion may lead a *kamut* on a particular assignment, captain a permanent column, or command a Watch; she may represent the Black Hand as an emissary to the Sabbat leadership, be assigned to a particular Sabbat leader as an military advisor, or serve as an aide or second to one of the Seraphim. Dominions oversee the recruitment, training and initiation of new Black Hand members, and serve as the messengers and intermediaries between the Council of Seraphim and the membership at large. A dominion may be sent with a *kamut* of advisors to provide strategic advice and support to a Sabbat siege, or given an assignment that she must accomplish alone. More than anything, a dominion is a highly effective operative in her own right, who can be trusted to carry out an assignment to completion no matter what obstacles stand in her way.

A Black Hand operative is raised to the rank of dominion by the recommendation of other dominions and the approval of the Seraphim. A sizeable number of the dominions have been freshly promoted in the wake of the Assamite desertion, and the attrition from the East Coast war or the fall of New York. However, none are neonates by any means, and all are eager to prove themselves worthy of their new rank and responsibilities.

POSITIONS OF NOTE

Most members of the Black Hand, known as operatives, agents, *rafiq*, brothers, sisters or even comrades, do not hold any special rank; they are all equal in the service of Caine. Even so, there are a number of positions within the Hand that even "ordinary" operatives — if there is such a thing — can aspire to. Each carries its own particular set of duties which, if performed well, can prove an operative worthy of additional responsibility or even advancement to dominion.

DUCTI AND WATCH COMMANDERS

Unlike the Sabbat, in the Black Hand, ductus is a job title which refers to the leader of a *kamut* on a particular mission. In recent years, the slang term "alpha" has become even more popular, as much to distinguish the position from the ductus of a Sabbat pack as it is a reflection of the relative youth of many operatives. While this position is often filled by the dominion

SECONDS: AT THE SERAPH'S RIGHT HAND

A second serves a dominion or Seraph as his trusted right hand and second-in-command (a Seraph's second has the rank of dominion), whose responsibility it is to see that her supervisor's orders are carried out. In some sense, a second acts almost as a templar, serving as bodyguard, aide and messenger; also, a second is presumed to speak with her supervisor's authority. Her level of status relates directly to the status of the one she serves. A second is a member of her dominion's Sabbat pack (if he has one), and shares a Vinculum bond with him (and likely the pack as well). A dominion may take one second; any larger number must be approved by the Seraphim. A Seraph can have as many as three seconds (the number of the second Generation, the childer of Caine). A second can be a childe or a loyal packmate, but the duty cannot be imposed; it must be accepted freely.

A second is expected to be absolutely loyal, to give all of his energy and attention to his dominion's business and personal safety, and to be gladly willing to give his unlife for that of his dominion or Seraph. This devotion far surpasses that engendered by a traditional blood bond. The basis of their extreme dedication lies in Eastern traditions of selfless service, where a sultan might order one servant to jump from the top of a minaret and be obeyed, while another servant might take an arrow meant for his lord or even gladly drink poison, as the supreme demonstration of his devotion. In displaying a similar degree of loyalty, a second also demonstrates the loyalty of a childe to his sire — or the loyalty the Antediluvians themselves should have shown their master, Caine. Thus does a second prove both the worthiness of the one he serves, and his own, for the final night of Caine's judgment on all his childer. A dominion whose second is slain in her defense must make answer to the Council of Seraphim as to the causes of that faithful servant's Final Death; only if she is cleared of blame is she permitted to take another. A second who survives when his dominion has perished is likewise judged, and if found at fault, is executed as a traitor to his vow. In the long, violent history of the Black Hand, two seconds are known to have committed themselves to the sun rather than face the shame of their failure to die in their dominion's defense.

commanding the mission, at other times the dominion may also give the position to the most experienced member of the assembled *kamut*, particularly in a large operation involving several packs. An operative who serves successfully as ductus for one mission may well be chosen to lead another, and might eventually rise to the rank of dominion himself. Those chosen for such positions of responsibility are usually seasoned veterans, who have served the Black Hand for decades, and often lead their own Sabbat packs.

A Watch Commander, however, fills a more permanent (or at least, long-term) position with similar responsibilities — to oversee and lead a territorial cell of all Black Hand members residing in that area. The Commander keeps an eye on local Sabbat politics, and ensures that all Black Hand members partake of the *Vaulderie* with each other, in addition to the *ritus* with their own packs. She is the *de facto* superior officer for all members under her Watch not assigned to a *kamut*. She also serves as the official conduit for communications from the Hand leadership down to the local members, including updates to the codes in current use, watchtower level (see Chapter Three: Tactics and Methodology for a discussion of watchtowers), and news about other Black Hand actions (as appropriate); she may be a teacher of Black Hand philosophy and catechism as well. She may recommend a promising candidate for initiation to the dominions (even if she is not a dominion herself); report on local political affairs to the Seraphim's emissaries; or provide recommendations to dominions looking to fill a *kamut* as to the skills and qualifications of members of her Watch. If asked to command a *kamut* herself, she is responsible for appointing a lieutenant to command the Watch in her place (though as a rule, Commanders are not asked to lead *kamuts*, given their responsibilities locally). Watch Commanders are generally (but not always) the senior Hand member in a given city or region. Often they hold the rank of dominion, though sometimes not, depending on the territory involved. Watch Commanders for major Sabbat cities are almost always dominions,

as are those assigned to build up Black Hand strength in areas bordering Camarilla-dominated territories. Commanders are appointed by the Seraphim for their strong leadership ability and administrative skill, but they often demonstrate political sensitivity, though they are not necessarily the known emissaries for the territory they oversee.

EMISSARIES

While the Black Hand makes good use of its muscle, it also needs members with real social and political acumen to serve as the eyes, ears and mouth of the subject at all levels of the Sabbat's political hierarchy. From the councils and quiet back rooms of the consistory and the entourage of the regent, to the *esbats* of the local bishop, the Hand sends its official — and unofficial — emissaries to be the public face and voice of the subject's leadership and its hidden members. They serve as advisors to local or sect-wide Sabbat leaders, trade subtle insults with Inquisitors, and maintain a visible and politically active presence in Sabbat domains. While emissaries to the consistory and cardinals' retinues tend to be experienced dominions, at local levels that responsibility may be given — or even simply effectively claimed — by any sufficiently ambitious and politically astute operative who knows his way around and is willing to take on the role.

Emissaries also serve the very vital function of the Black Hand's official liaison, for any Sabbat leader who wants to call on the Hand's services "for the good of the Sabbat." To this end,



THE BLACK HAND CENSUS-TAKERS

What at first looked like just another wild idea from a Malkavian emissary has become one of the most useful tools in the Black Hand arsenal of political intelligence. The census-takers are low-level emissaries assigned to become familiar the Sabbat packs in their local area, ask questions about their political views, pack customs, their members, their experiences in the last siege, new members, or how deceased members met their Final Deaths. In short, any question that occurs to the census-taker (and that she thinks she can get away with) may be asked, and results duly recorded. The census serves two vital purposes for the Hand (which does not share the data it collects with the local bishops). First, it makes the *vatos* and *chicas* feel like their opinion on the state of the Sabbat actually matters to the almighty Black Hand, and thus reinforces the myth of Sabbat egalitarianism. Second, it gives the local Watch Commanders and other Black Hand officials, who see the data and have the opportunity to ask the census-taker questions about what else she observed during her visit, a very detailed picture of the state of Sabbat morale, politics and readiness for future operations.

they must be able to not only identify and balance the different factions and interests of the local Sabbat, but know when and how to take appropriate action to best benefit the subject and themselves. And for those whose understanding of factional agendas and leaders is keen, but whose ambition is of a more subtle nature, the Black Hand can also find a use for clever spies.

ASSASSINS

The formal (Assamite) term for an assassin is *shakar*, but among the younger operatives of the Hand, slang terms such as “eraser,” “hit man,” and even “terminator” have become equally popular, particularly among those who do not actually function as assassins themselves. The Black Hand’s reputation as a faction of silent and highly efficient killers is deeply rooted in Sabbat folklore. Among some Sabbat, admiration of the skill and deadly art of the assassin, whether perceived as *ninja*, *shakar* or Mafia hit man, has nearly become a cult in itself, though influenced far more by popular culture and creative speculation than the truth. The real assassins of the Black Hand, most of whom keep their affiliation with the subject a closely guarded secret, avoid any contact with their would-be devoted fans.

Most — but not all — of the Black Hand’s *shakari* are Assamite *antitribu*, who have made a thorough study of the skills that have made their clan name synonymous with assassin in both major sects. But the real skill of the assassin isn’t her ability to kill her target. All Black Hand operatives are more than capable of killing another Cainite, even one of considerable age and power, if given sufficient opportunity. What sets the assassins apart from their fellows in the Hand is their ability to kill their target on his home ground (sometimes even surrounded by allies and formidable defenses), to do so quietly and efficiently, and to just as quietly depart without

THE FABLED EXPLOITS OF THE EBONY FOX

Among the stories passed around the fire at Sabbat *esbats* or at the communal haven are the exploits of the Black Hand assassin known only as the Ebony Fox. Most stories identify the Fox as an Assamite of great skill and tenacity, with a quick wit and clever tongue. A master of disguise and all forms of weaponry, the Fox can appear to be either male or female, of any clan or physical shape; his (or her) real identity is unknown. Stories feature daring escapes, dazzling martial arts and the gruesome details of the killings. Incredible odds are always beaten, the target (and anyone in the way) always gets hit, and the Fox keeps up his signature wisecracks right in the face of his enemies. The Ebony Fox has become a veritable legend, particularly among the assassin groupies who make collecting the known lore and tidbits about the elusive *shakar* almost an obsession. Some even claim to have “relics” touched by the master assassin.

In truth, the Ebony Fox does not exist, *per se*. The stories, greatly exaggerated to spice them up for the intended audience, are an amalgamation of missions carried out by Black Hand *shakari* with the addition of ideas drawn from literature, traditional folklore, movies and a vast library of Hong Kong videos. The Ebony Fox’s creator is Tarbaby Jack, a Nosferatu *antitribu* with a fondness for storytelling and a keen sense of how to keep the interest of even the most jaded Cainite audiences. The tales serve to impress on the listeners the grace and terrible skill of a Black Hand assassin in terms they both appreciate and admire — and to shape Sabbat expectations of the assassins such a way that their real work can continue without interference from their most devoted fans.

Tarbaby’s greatest success came when the Camarilla Justicar Cock Robin declared a blood hunt on the infamous Ebony Fox after the Final Death of his mentor and sire, Petradon. Needless to say, the Ebony Fox has thus far skillfully eluded all attempts to capture or destroy him. Tarbaby Jack, on the other hand, was recently elevated to dominion, and plans to do the same for the Fox, as soon as he comes up with a sufficiently spectacular story.

raising even a hint of alarm. The goal of a competent *shakar* is to be totally unnoticed, even by his intended target. In many cases, the assassin also sets up another Lick of the target’s acquaintance, either a rival or avowed enemy, so the death will be blamed on another party. This focuses any attempts at vengeance away from the truth, and keeps the Camarilla from realizing how serious a threat the Sabbat’s assassins really are.

Despite the extreme awe in which the Black Hand’s faceless assassins are held by their Sabbat brethren, they do not succeed nearly as often as popular urban legend would have their fans believe, and many never return. The survival rate of assassins is tied very closely to their degree of success in

avoiding notice while on a mission. Since the assassin usually is working alone or with minimal support from a *kamut* that is waiting for him outside his target location, he's totally on his own should he be discovered. A successful assassin is one of the most careful and cautious operatives in the Black Hand, and dislikes dealing with the unexpected. He puts considerable time and effort into investigating, observing and planning the strike, leaving nothing to guesswork or random chance. It may be noble to die in the cause of Caine, but no assassin wants to earn that honor through stupidity — his own or anyone else's. If something goes wrong, it's the assassin's call whether to continue and improvise, or scrub the mission and regroup. Most prefer to err on the side of caution and survive to plan again.

REMOVERS

Removers are the brute strength and paramilitary muscle of the Black Hand, the Cainites whom the dominion can point at an obstacle — whether it's a fortified bunker, a couple of archons, or the private security forces guarding the primogen's estate — and simply tell them to "remove" that obstacle. The mission of removers is not subtlety but results, and results they achieve — usually in the most direct, blunt and violent way possible. Removers are the front line, in-your-face troops in a siege: They are sent to "soften up" Camarilla resistance before the regular war parties arrive, or to go after the "hard targets" — the archons, notable elders or primary havens of the elite. Needless to say, the removers are the most visible of all Black Hand operatives, and the most respected by their fellow Sabbat. You'd better respect a remover, anyway, or he's likely to remove your face. Some of them don't have much of a sense of humor.

This is not to say that removers are brainless grunts (at least, not most of them). While many owe their position in the Hand to their combat abilities and courage under fire, they often have alternate skills as well. Removers may be skilled drivers or pilots, sharpshooters, demolitions specialists, radio operators or even security systems hackers. Leaders of remover *kamuts* need to be able to think fast and give orders that advance the mission's objectives, including coming up with a new plan of action when the original one (as often happens) fails to survive contact with the enemy.

While real military experience is a plus for a remover, sufficient front line experience with Sabbat war parties can serve just as well. Remover *kamuts* are the most common (or at least, the best known) of all Black Hand missions; they're found in the heart of the action in any siege, they take on the worst the Camarilla — or anyone else — has to offer, and kick their asses clear back to hell. It's no wonder removers really love their jobs.

ROOKIES

Newly initiated members of the Black Hand are formally known as *mustajib*, "deserving ones." The informal slang is simply *rookie* — no matter what their age or level of experience in the Sabbat may have been. A rookie is a member of the Black Hand who has participated in less than three missions. Rookies are the lowest ranked members of any *kamut* or Watch, and must obey orders from any senior member of the Hand; in addition, they are not permitted to decline an assignment or challenge a tactical decision. For many Sabbat used to being the biggest badass in their pack, suddenly being reduced to the

status of a shovelhead is hard to stomach, and there are those among the Hand who make sure that rookies get the message. The rookies must prove themselves worthy all over again, and the bar has now been raised. What passes for badass in the Sabbat doesn't even merit a nod; the aspiring new Chosen must push himself beyond previous achievements and strive toward higher, tougher standards of physical, mental and spiritual prowess in order to earn the respect of his new peers.

Rookies are often used to "fill out" a *kamut*, essentially being the extra guns (and sometimes the expendables) on a mission. While a rookie isn't yet trusted with mission-critical tasks, he may well be guarding the back of someone with that level of responsibility, who is trusting the rookie with her unlife so that she can concentrate on her work. Rookies may also be given potentially hazardous assignments such as scouting ahead, covering a retreat or guarding the *kamut*'s escape route or vehicle. Many dominions look for opportunities to test a rookie's dedication and courage under fire, and consider a higher level of risk acceptable if it allows a "deserving one" to prove just how deserving he is.

Rookies who survive and perform well in their first three missions are informally initiated into full Black Hand membership by the dominion and the *kamut* they have served with. This ritual, known as the Blooding, is considerably less formal and serious than the one used to initiate a new member into the subsect. While a Vaulderie and Blood Feast are traditional in addition to the formal announcement from the dominion of the new operative's advancement from rookie status, the nature of the actual "initiation" is left up to the *kamut*'s twisted imagination (though in theory, the former rookie is supposed to survive the experience). The Blood Feast and celebrations afterward can be pretty wild indeed.

CADETS

Cadets are trainees, accepted as candidates but not yet initiated into full membership in the Hand, even lower in rank than rookies. Cadets rarely interact with Black Hand members, except in training exercises. Half a dozen or so "boot camps" for cadets operate throughout Sabbat territories, though their locations often shift due to the need for secrecy, political upheavals, or the desires of whatever dominion is the resident commander of that camp. One such camp is located in Mexico City, and run by the dominion Teresita; another, run by a Gangrel biker known as Shaggydog, is completely nomadic and is rumored to make a full circuit of North America every year. The Colonel, a Malkavian remover, oversees an elite camp for his hand-picked cadets hidden in the swamps of South Carolina. An Assamite camp, newly re-established in the wake of recent events, now teaches its clan's *antitribu* fledglings somewhere in the southwestern United States. A cadet's training lasts several years (anywhere from four or five years to seven for Assamite neonates), and involves a good deal of field work; however, the instructing dominions keep a watchful eye on their charges and step in quickly to prevent any interference with the educational process.

KAMUTS

The basic unit of the Black Hand's operations is the pack, usually referred to as the *kamut*, to clearly distinguish it from the ordinary Sabbat packs that Black Hand operatives are also

a part of. A *kamut* can be as small as two or three members or as large as a dozen, depending on the mission involved. Most *kamuts* are one-shots, assembled by a dominion for a particular mission, and then dissolved when the mission has been completed. In theory, any combination of Black Hand members can be asked to work together as a *kamut*. In practice, a dominion often tends to select the same individuals for particular missions, those she has worked with before and feels are reliable. For some missions, particularly those called on short notice or that require a strong familiarity with local territory, the dominion in charge of a mission may simply call in whatever local operatives are in the same city or general area.

Dominions generally can select any Black Hand member they want for their *kamut*; they sometimes compete with each other over particularly talented operatives. There is also some status involved among the membership as to which dominions they have served under, based partly on the dominion's personalities, rumors of their relationships with the Seraphim or Sabbath leaders and their leadership abilities in the field. Impressing the right dominion can take a Black Hand operative far, and lead to more plum assignments, greater responsibilities and possibly even advancement to the rank of dominion. Technically, an operative does not have to accept a call to join a mission, but few refuse. Turning down a selection can make the operative look less than totally dedicated to the subject's cause, afraid of possible risk, or simply rebellious and disloyal — none of which bode well for a member's future existence, much less status in the Hand.

Kamuts generally start each mission with a *Vaulderie*. The *ritus* of sharing blood helps knit the group together even if some members don't much like each other. Black Hand operatives who frequently serve together in the same *kamuts* tend to have stronger *Vinculi*, since a *kamut* that works well together in one mission may be reassembled again in the future for another. As a general rule, soldiers who know and trust each other tend to

have higher levels of courage and cohesion as a group and can thus accomplish more; this same principle holds true for Black Hand operatives as well. Veteran *kamuts* that are assembled again and again are called reunion packs. Some reunions even adopt informal nicknames not unlike regular Sabbath packs, and develop their own reputations and level of prestige, particularly among the younger members of the subject.

The old-soldier network among dominions and experienced, well-known operatives can make it difficult for a newly sworn member to "break in" with one of the experienced reunion *kamuts* or be chosen for high-prestige missions or, more importantly for some, to have a chance at a low-generation target. Having a good mentor can make this easier, but generally, the best chance a young member has is to be assigned to a one-shot *kamut*, and do well enough to catch the eye of the dominion in charge or impress some of the veterans. For various reasons, one-shots tend to have the lowest success (and survival) ratings, partly because they tend to be given more potentially hazardous missions. One-shot *kamuts* also have a larger proportion of rookies or younger operatives, who are often included simply to add the weight of numbers to the mission, and can be considered potentially expendable should things go to hell in the field. Not that the Black Hand deliberately sets even its rookies up as cannon fodder (that is, after all, what Sabbath war parties are for), but the youngest and least experienced operatives are the most likely to make a fatal mistake under pressure — and, should worse come to worst, they're also the easiest to replace.

COLUMNS

Columns are a relatively new development for the Black Hand. They are permanent *kamuts* that function both as a Sabbath-style pack, with frequent *Vaulderies* and communal resources, and a highly effective military unit, already mobilized and ready for any mission required of them. A number of

FOR THE STORYTELLER: REFUGEES OF THE SEVERED HAND

The Seraph Djuhan established the first columns when he grew frustrated with the *Manus Nigrum*'s recruitment rate. He selected the members for those columns based on the probability that they would accept *Manus Nigrum* initiation and serve that sect's agenda over that of the Black Hand. Izhim, suspicious of his protégé's motives, then established a few columns of his own that were personally loyal to him in response.

The remaining columns are in an awkward position, left on their own without guidance from their respective Seraphim. For those who are also members of the *Manus Nigrum*, the silence from Enoch and the events of the Week of Nightmares have all but shattered the cult, leaving it bereft not only of leadership but also of purpose and direction. While some of the columns have kept in contact with other members of the Hand, and have responded to directions or orders from Jalan-Aajav and the acting Council of Seraphim, a few columns hold loyalty to either Djuhan or Izhim above their allegiance to the subject. These renegade packs, such as the Sword of Night led by the young firebrand dominion Nizzam al-Latif, pursue their own agendas in their leader's absence and are potentially dangerous wild cards in the Jihad. Those columns that feel a commitment to the subject rather than an individual Seraph feel their best bet is to solidify their position within the Black Hand, and convince Jalan-Aajav of their usefulness...and more importantly, their loyalty.

The very existence of the columns is not widely known; if discovered, it could easily become a political hot potato, particularly with the regency in doubt. No one can predict what will happen once a new regent is finally chosen. Given the current tension over the open regency, the last thing the consistory needs to be reminded of is that the Black Hand has broken its long custom of integrating its agents among the Sabbath packs — and that packs of highly trained Black Hand operatives exist who owe allegiance only to a pair of Seraphim whose current whereabouts are unknown (and, Jalan-Aajav suspects, were traitors to boot).



columns were established by Izhim ur-Baal and Djuhah in recent decades, which some feared looked like preparation for some kind of coup or war between the two powerful Seraphs. While some of those columns vanished along with other Assamite *antitribu*, a few yet remain; it is unclear what they are doing in the absence of their respective commanding Seraphs. Jalan-Aajav is said to be more than a little suspicious of the remaining columns, but has not yet made any attempt to bring them back into the traditional fold.

Columns have the structure of a regular Sabbat pack, but maintain a tighter disciplinary order, with a permanent commanding officer (a dominion rather than a ductus), and a clear chain of command within the coterie. When on the move (as they most often are), they are experts in finding safe havens for the day even in enemy territory. Members pack light, hunt stealthily and quickly, and dispose of all evidence of their presence. Unless intending to mount an attack, their goal is to avoid notice from any other Licks in the area, of either sect.

While the columns were originally all nomadic, in the past year or two a number of them have settled down, particularly in the newly conquered East Coast cities, awaiting further instructions from the Seraphim. Members share a common haven like a barracks, hunt cooperatively, and keep an otherwise low profile, even from other members of the Black Hand. To the local Sabbat around them, they are a Sabbat pack; their affiliation with the Black Hand is kept a tightly guarded secret.

THE WATCH

With the Black Hand's membership dispersed and scattered, sometimes as members of rival Sabbat packs, keeping the necessary levels of focus, strength of will, and unity of purpose among its operatives is a matter of real concern to the Hand's leadership. To keep the troops' edge, and to maintain communications from the Council of Seraphim down to the last operative, the Seraphim instituted the Watches. The Watches are a network of geographically based cells, usually one to a city, state or other logical regional area, made up of all the Black Hand operatives within that area, regardless of pack affiliation. Cities with high Sabbat populations, such as Miami, Montreal or Mexico City, may have more than one Watch; domains where the Camarilla still dominates, or where even mortal numbers are low, will likely have but one, or even one spread out over several adjacent cities. The Watches serve two purposes. They provide a direct channel of communication between Black Hand members in a local area and their sometimes distant leadership, through the person of the Watch Commander. They also keep Black Hand members in contact with each other on a regular basis, to participate in the *Vaulderie* and other secret *ritae*; to conduct weapons and mission drills to keep skills sharp and teamwork polished; and to discuss subsect mysteries, prophecies, Gehenna and Noddist lore, so they don't forget what it is they're fighting for. When the operatives are members of rival Sabbat packs, this also

serves to remind them that their real loyalty is to the Hand, and to put petty Sabbat rivalries aside when they conflict with their greater mission.

The Watches meet in secret. Meetings are arranged through clandestine signals, whether coded messages on an Internet bulletin board or newspaper ad, graffiti painted on a particular section of wall, packets left at known drop points or even messages sent through animal minions. Members are expected to attend without attracting suspicion from their Sabbat packmates, which can sometimes require a fair bit of ingenuity, particularly if the operative's packmates do not know of her Black Hand connections. In times of need or crisis, calling the Watch can bring the full strength of the Black Hand in a given domain together fairly quickly, meaning the entire subject is capable of mobilization on relatively short notice.

RANK AND RESPECT

Now let me make sure I'm hearing you correctly. You trapped a dozen homeless bums in a warehouse, hunted them between the stacks and crates using automatic weapons, and when you were tired of that game, you finished them off and burned the place to the ground...

Tell me, am I actually supposed to be impressed by this?

— Katherine Stoddard, Black Hand remover

To be a member of the Black Hand is to be an exceptional and highly talented vampire by definition. While the vast majority hold no special rank, they all take great pride in being one of Caine's Chosen, and in the responsibility and status that membership carries. That bit of bullshit aside, among their peers in the subject, status is measured by an entirely different stick.

Like the Sabbat, the Black Hand values courage, cunning, kick-ass toughness and even pure chutzpah; but chutzpah alone, without actions to back it up, is meaningless. They also greatly admire efficiency and results—the ability to finish a job quickly and subtly with a minimum of effort for maximum possible results. They see more skill inherent in the finesse of a stake and dagger than a spray of automatic gunfire; more mastery in penetrating the enemy's stronghold, doing the deed,

and escaping without notice than in charging the front gate with half-a-dozen Sabbat packs in warpaint at your heels. A Cainite is judged by her peers for what she has done, whom she has served under, and not only whom she has killed, but how well.

The strength of the opposition matters, too. Killing mortals is so easy, some of the Chosen say, even the Camarilla can do it. Therefore, unless the circumstances are unusual, killing mortals gains an operative no particular accolade. The more powerful and experienced a Black Hand agent is, the more powerful and dangerous his adversaries need to be in order for him to earn any respect for destroying them. Degree of risk counts for something too, especially among the younger, more competitive removers—hand-to-hand combat with blades or bare hands is simply far more impressive than blasting away with a sniper rifle from a safe distance. So too is taking on a Cainite of age and experience and not a mere fledgling.

The most respected (and feared) Black Hand operatives, particularly the *shakari* and the most experienced removers, rarely seek notoriety. They are so focused on their mission, their loyalty to the Hand, and their duty to Father Caine, that status means little to them. Such concerns are for those who still hold fast to the trivialities of unlife. These fanatics are so dedicated to the Hand's core beliefs they are fearsome even to other Hand agents. To the average Sabbat, they're terrifying, simply because they are totally without fear (some say, even of fire or the dawn). Those who truly follow the Hand's more esoteric philosophies are often granted a good deal of status and respect from their fellows simply because they do not seek it—and their dedication is greatly admired. Surely they will gain Caine's favor before his Throne.

JOINING THE BLACK HAND

From the journal of Piotr "Peter" Andreikov:

I admit Chang's invitation to join the Black Hand took me by surprise. After all, it was my packmate Druze who had been trying to attract their notice, not me. From all I had heard,

NO SHIT, THERE WE WERE...

The Black Hand never talks about its successes—or failures—with outsiders, but its members do talk to each other. The oral tradition begun with the Admonitions has expanded into its own very private folklore, of which the more public tales of the Ebony Fox represent only the tip of a dark and deeply submerged iceberg. Stories range from historical anecdotes such as Izhim ur-Baal at the Council of Thorns, or speculations as to the outcome of a duel between Jalan-Aajav and Karsh, the Warlord of the Camarilla. Others involve clever feats or even dark humor, such as the assassin who had himself shipped overnight to the haven of a Ventrue expecting a delivery of his special vitae, and the inevitable chestnut of the remover who was attacked on the subway by a foolhardy (and now deceased) gang of young toughs. Others come from the personal experiences of the agent telling the story to the only audience that's allowed to hear it.

An operative's reputation among his brothers and sisters in the Black Hand is based on what they know about him, though most stories mention only his code name. An ambitious operative finds it to his advantage for stories about his incredible feats to get around. The Hand is not a large organization; it numbers a few hundred Cainites at most. It is not unusual for an operative who has been around for a few decades to know a good many other operatives by their code names, if not by sight, simply from the stories she's heard of them. War stories told among Black Hand members can make or break an operative's reputation—and it's believed that the dominions do pay attention to the tales they hear.

THE ASSAMITE EXEMPTION

The Assamite *antitribu* have always been a breed apart in the Black Hand, holding to their clan identity and maintaining their own private social circles. Until recently, they dominated the Hand leadership, with half the Seraphim on the council and a good third or more of the dominions. This created a considerable amount of resentment among other Hand operatives and dominions, who felt the Assamite domination of the subject meant that others were often disregarded and undervalued. This was exacerbated by Assamite recruiting practices: The older Assamite dominions very rarely selected non-Assamite candidates to be trained and initiated into the Black Hand. In fact, they usually selected mortals, then Embraced and trained them separately for seven years in their own private camps (giving as the reason for excluding others that the cadets would be using their clan Disciplines in most of their training and non-Assamites just couldn't be expected to keep up).

Now that the Assamites no longer dominate the Council of Seraphim or other posts of leadership and most of the elders who espoused the separatist policies have departed, how these practices may change remains to be seen.

the Black Hand was rather like being in a perpetual war party, only more so, and what I had seen of their removers in the siege of Charleston had not led me to believe otherwise. And I knew it was an invitation-only club, rather elitist in fact. Or so Druze had told me. As it turned out, he was right — just not in the way he would have liked to be.

LOOKING FOR A FEW GOOD CAINITES

From my interview with Jafar, Assamite dominion and shakar:

I'll tell you, there are times I think my job would be a lot easier if the Hand just flat out Embraced all their own recruits and trained 'em from their first night like we do, instead of having to sift through the chaff of the Sabbat looking for the one or two that have the right combination of skills, brains, guts and commitment to be an asset to us. I'll tell you what I look for, though. And if you run into any Licks who seem to have what it takes, you let me or Chang know. We could sure as hell use 'em right now.

First, they have to be True Sabbat, and been around a while, kicked some ass on their own, maybe been on a siege or a war party or two. No point in initiating anybody who can't survive as Sabbat first, that's just common sense. Second, they need to be pretty well grounded in Caine, and believe. The fine points of detail we can work on, but that belief's part of what we are, it's where we get our strength. It's gotta be there. If they don't buy into the history, the whole concept of Caine and the Antediluvians and Gehenna, then

how are they going to manage the rest of the truth or commit their unlives to Caine's service?

Third, they have to know when to keep their mouths shut, and when to follow orders. This is where we really start sifting out the shitheels. Most Sabbat think that freedom means that nobody, not even an archbishop, has a right to tell them what to do. But that's not the way we do things, and any Lick who can't handle it, we can do without.

That's the basics, but there's more. Intelligence. Courage. A certain drive, ruthlessness, ambition, strength of will, and cleverness. And just plain all-around toughness, to handle yourself against a stronger foe, to know how to use your strengths instead of letting your weaknesses overpower you. Every dominion has her own list of such traits, of course. I just use that particular combination, and it seems to work for me.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Any Hand member can recommend someone to be considered, of course, though you shouldn't nominate anybody you wouldn't want in your *kamut* or guarding your back. Keep in mind that we're taking you on faith too, not just the Lick you say's got the right stuff. If you're right, that's a credit to your judgment — if you're wrong, it makes us wonder what the hell you were smoking. Don't put your rep on the line like that for just anybody unless you're willing to stand behind them all the way. And don't nominate a packmate. We never listen to those, there's too much bias in sharing blood. If your packmate's so great, ask somebody else to put in the word, someone who doesn't have a blood tie to him.

Once we're given the name of a likely prospect, some dominion comes and checks her out. Everybody's got a particular style. Some just listen to gossip, get the scoop from the local rumor mill. If someone's that good, chances are other Licks notice. The Watch Commander's usually a good source of information, or the emissary or even the census-taker if there is one. They're supposed to keep an eye out for promising candidates. That's how we heard about you, in fact — yeah, that was Morales. He had the Watch in Charleston then. He was the one that put Chang on to you. Morales and Chang, they go way back.

Anyway, some recruiters, they like to be a bit more proactive. They'll test the candidate, maybe arrange for a little trial by fire, an ordeal or something like that. Maybe they'll snatch the *vato* and drop him in Camarilla territory, or out in the middle of nowhere on a night with a full moon. Or maybe get a few of the Hand together and have a little hunt, with the candidate thinking he's running from a pack of Camarilla or something. See how good he is under pressure, how he reacts, thinks, fights back.

Eventually the dominion makes up his mind, and if he likes the candidate, he makes the offer. You remember how that goes. If he says yes, we have him swear the first oath, and send him to be trained and initiated. If he says no, we're supposed to let him go, and that's it — he only gets one offer, and if he's really got what it takes, he won't let that offer go by.

You weren't so easy to convince, I heard. But then, Chang ain't never been the kind who takes no for an answer.

MENTORS

From the journal of Piotr "Peter" Andreikov

I owe a hell of a lot to Chang. He was the one who got me into the Hand, even when I wasn't sure I wanted any part of it. He was there when I was initiated, too. And he introduced me to Teresita and some of the other dominions who handled strategic ops, so they'd know who I was, what I was good at, and more importantly, what I could do for them.

There's no job bank for the Hand. No "Removers Wanted" section in the newsletter — hell, there's not even a newsletter. So the only way to get anywhere, to go where the action is and find the slot where you sort of fit in, is through word of mouth. You have to know the right people. Or know someone who does, who's willing to tell some dominions what he knows about you.

So that's usually where the mentors come in. There's nothing really organized about it. Well, the Assamites are organized. Damned cliquish, actually; if you're not an Assamite, you aren't worth their time, but don't tell Jafar I said that. Some of the other clans kinda watch out for the rookies of their own Blood too, to make sure they have a fair shake at things. If the Tzimisce have any kind of organized anything, though, I've never seen sign of it. Organization doesn't seem to be our strong point. Just as well Chang took a liking to me, I guess.

But even if you haven't got the clan network going for you, you're not up shit creek. Chances are, whoever recommended you is keeping tabs, whether they're a dominion or just ordinary Joe Hand. If you do well, that makes them look good, 'cause they discovered you, or some bullshit like that. So most of the time, they're the ones most willing to show you the ropes or tell you the tricks you didn't learn in training, like who's really who among the *shakari*, which dominions you really don't want to piss off, or who the best removers are to learn from. Maybe they figure out what you might be good at, and drop your name to a few of the dominions who might be putting a *kamut* together for something. So one of them gives you a shot, and then it's up to you.

Some mentors are more helpful than others, obviously. To do you any good, they sort of have to have contacts of their own, and you just hope they're the right ones for you. I got lucky. I can handle myself in a fight, but that's not where I can best serve the Hand, and Chang knew that. And he's been around a long time, and he has a lot of contacts, him and his fancy calling cards. He placed me in a scouting foray or two, where we were going into a Camarilla city and poking around, setting a few fires and seeing who turned up to put them out. I did some interrogations, then did some digging — it helps to be an ex-cop because you know how the paper trail works. I figured out who the most likely mook in the precinct office was to be doing blood on the side, and what kinds of access he had. Then I typed up a report for the dominion in charge of the operation. That made her happy, because it gave her some results to show up the line, and that made Chang look good. So I've been doing work for strategic ops, and he's been real good about indulging my curiosity, getting me in to talk to other agents for this research of mine.

TRAINING, ORDEALS AND INITIATIONS

From my interview with Teresita, dominion of Mexico City and acting Seraph, translated from the Spanish:

Ah, such innocents you are when you first come to us! So fierce and proud, so sure of yourselves, so certain you know everything there is to know about being a hunter of the night! That is the first thing we take away, of course. We show you that you are only childer, and against the enemy we face, you are a kitten challenging a lion. Once you are convinced you know nothing, it is then you begin to learn.

It is not an easy process, nor a short one. Some learn faster than others, of course. The Assamites train their fledglings for seven years, or so I have been told; be thankful you are not Assamite. Here, in five years or less, my cadets are either worthy to bear the sable crescent, or they are dead. And once they leave my care, they know the meaning of their service to Caine, and to the Hand.

BOOT CAMP

But you learn. We teach you the Art of Memory, so you can use your imagination and brain in tandem to sort and store your memories for easy retrieval when you need them. An ancient art it is, once practiced when few could read or write. We had no tape recorders then, *niño querido mio*, save what you could record up here, in your head. We teach you languages: Spanish, English, Arabic and others. We teach you the history of our kind, the traditions of Caine, and of course, the Admonitions — you remember them all, yes? Of course you do. You're a good boy.

And you work hard on other things: to extend your skills as a hunter and warrior, to call on the powers of your Blood, to stretch your physical and mental limits, to master the Disciplines that are part of your clan's legacy from Caine, and to learn to awaken new ones. To use what you have in the most clever and imaginative way possible; that is in truth the most important thing. For in each of you is the potential of our Father, but to reach that fullness takes patience and discipline, and many, many long years. Know, however, for each task you undertake, what you then possess — whether you are young in the Blood or have seen many centuries of the night — what you have will be adequate for the task, if you use it wisely. It is not the Disciplines of the Blood, but the discipline in your body, mind and soul that makes you worthy of Caine's blessing, and gives you the strength to prevail.

You learn tools — the tools of this modern age, and those before it. Weapons, from claws, fangs and rocks, to daggers, swords and firearms. Did you know that the wooden dagger was once the weapon all Cainites carried, no matter what their clan or rank? It is still of use tonight, for when you need to subdue an enemy quietly and completely. In this, the blade still has advantages over the M-16 or the shotgun. If you have a chance for but one blow, a sword is a far more effective weapon against our kind than a handgun, and better yet, it makes no noise.

And we teach you even greater things, as you grow in your new knowledge. We teach you to work as teams, to trust and rely on each other, to hold fast to your loyalties. We teach you the *ritae*, both those common to all Sabbat, and those for the Black Hand alone. You learn the codes of recognition, the signs we use to mark our drop points, the means to find and communicate with each other. You learn codes and cryptography, and how to hide this information so that our enemies cannot easily delve into your mind and find what you have hidden there.

TESTING AND ORDEALS

But it is not so easy, this training, as you remember. For a sword is strong only after it has been tempered, beaten, and tempered again — and you are strong only after you have been tested with fire. We must test you, even more harshly than our enemies will, for it is better that you fail now than later, when much may depend on you. This is when we winnow out the unworthy; for those who cannot hold fast and prevail must be destroyed. And in that you are all equally responsible — you remember your first hunt, yes? In the purging of the weak, you all become stronger. Always remember, your testing does not end with your final initiation. We will continue to test you, even if you reach the rank of dominion — for your vows are sacred, and your soul is sworn to Caine.

And what you have learned, we test and refine in the field, for experience is truly the greatest of all teachers. As the Admonitions say, if you learn from your own mistakes, you may attribute that to luck; but if you learn from the mistakes of others you demonstrate true wisdom.

You learn the use of strategy, how to plan a strike and carry it out, how to expect the unexpected, to anticipate the need for contingencies and prepare for them. To use every individual in your pack according to their strengths, and to

recognize and accommodate their weaknesses. You learn the patience of the hunter, judging when it is time to attack and when to retreat; you learn to value good intelligence, what questions to ask and where to find the answers. You learn to find shelter and sustenance in unfamiliar territory, to hide under the enemy's very nose, to find your way to any destination or back to your base. You learn to work as a *kamut*, to follow orders, and maintain discipline and continue on your mission even if your dominion is destroyed. You learn judgment, to know when to carry out a mission even if you are the only survivor of your *kamut*, or when it is better to retreat and await reinforcements. You learn to blend in unnoticed among mortals, and even among the Camarilla.

Your tests grow harder and more challenging; you infiltrate enemy territory and practice your *shakar* skills on small game — the clanless and castoffs on the fringe of Camarilla society. We do not coddle our cadets, as you

FOR THE STORYTELLER: TRAINING GAMES

The dominions of the Black Hand believe that nothing teaches like experience, and it is best for cadets to make their most grievous errors of judgment (especially potentially fatal ones) in training, rather than on a real mission. As cadets advance, they are sent on increasingly more complicated and dangerous training exercises, often in competition with cadets from another camp, or against experienced Hand operatives who take their job of playing the opposition very seriously. No holds are barred, save Final Death — though accidents do sometimes happen.

A training exercise may involve a cross-country race from New York to Tijuana, starting with nothing but the clothes on the cadets' backs — and possibly with a Black Hand *kamut* in hot pursuit to pick up any stragglers. Cadets may be dropped inside Camarilla or even Sabbat territory with a list of items to acquire and a deadline by which they are to present themselves and their booty, usually at a location at least an hour's drive away. Cadet packs may simulate sieges or war parties, in which one pack is the attacker and the other defends. They race over obstacle courses — a timed trek over a pre-laid route filled with skyscrapers under construction, abandoned factories, or even a Ventrue primogen's country estate — where the cadets must pick up markers left there by a previous team. Traditional war games like capture the flag are played both in remote wilderness sites and in urban centers, with live ammunition. The cadets hunt each other — where points are awarded to whoever can evade capture by his fellows the longest, or even pick off his hunters, one by one. And in all their training, they are always careful to not be caught in the act, not by the Camarilla or other Sabbat packs — honing their skills for when discovery will likely mean their Final Death.

FOR THE STORYTELLER: THE POWER OF PARANOIA

The Black Hand takes its members' vows extremely seriously. All Hand members, from cadets and rookies to experienced operatives, are told to expect their loyalty to be tested at all times. Paranoia sets in — one can never be certain, should anyone come to them with a tempting offer to become a double-agent or betray the Hand in any way, that it is not a test...and so few are likely to consider that offer worth the risk. All members remember at least one "hunt" in their training, where they were required to hunt down, capture, interrogate and then destroy one of their fellow cadets — and realize how easy it might be, in a society of elite predators, to become the subject of such a hunt themselves. Only the most astute operatives, in comparing boot camp experiences with their comrades, make the observation that the "hunt" exercise always seems to occur at about the same point in the training cycle, almost as if it is actually part of the traditional curriculum....

remember. It is better to train with live steel, the Admonitions say, and suffer pain, than to lack the experience that only live steel can give. When the blade bites or the claw slashes deep into your own flesh, you are then motivated to improve your own defense. If you can survive what we will throw against you, the chances of you surviving any future mission have been greatly increased.

INITIATIONS

And finally, it is time for the final test...but I will not speak of that to your machine, *querido mio*. Some things should never be spoken of, but only experienced, and experienced alone, in the darkest recesses of your heart. Yes, turn it off, for now...*gracias*.

End of interview transcript

THE RITUS OF INITIATION

Ritae are already an important part of Sabbat culture; every True Sabbat has undergone Creation Rites and the *Vaulderie*, among others. The Black Hand makes use of the Sabbat *ritae*, but has always had its own set of secret *ritae* as well, both formal and informal.

The formal rite of initiation into the Chosen of Caine is simple, but filled with symbolic meanings. Only one cadet is initiated at a time, so the full impact of the ritual may be felt by undergoing it alone (though other cadets may be initiated that same night, in separate rituals). The initiate has already passed the final tests (Storytellers, see Chapter Five for suggestions), and is ready now to swear her allegiance to Caine and his Chosen. She has spent the day in a stone tomb to symbolize surrendering her unlife and self-determination, lying naked save for a linen shroud. When the proper time comes, she is taken on a bier to a place of ritual; a circle of stone is traditional, though the site may be either outdoors or deep underground. There, in the presence of at least three dominions, one of whom may be her sponsor, she answers the questions put to her about her willingness to sacrifice her unlife, blood and soul to Caine's purpose. Some of her blood is put into a *Vaulderie* vessel, along with that of the other participants and witnesses, which is then ritually blessed. She is given a robe of black to wear, and is sometimes even given armor. Then, kneeling before the senior dominion with his sword point to her throat, she takes the oath, swearing by her own blood. He accepts her oath formally as well, dipping a finger into the cup and drawing a mystical sigil in blood on her forehead to seal her vow. The initiate offers her right hand, palm up, relying on willpower to steady her as a dominion with skilled in blood sorcery uses an sharpened awl dipped in the contents of the cup to cut the crescent into her palm. The initiate is the first to drink from the *Vaulderie* cup. It is a potent draft indeed, for it activates the thaumaturgical ritual. The wound in her flesh burns itself painfully deep, then heals, leaving a perfectly shaped black crescent. The cup is shared among all participants, as witnesses to her oath. A Blood Feast follows, attended by as many of the Hand as can be there, to introduce themselves and meet their new sister in Caine's service.

I, [Piotr Andreikov], am dead. As on the night of my First Death and Embrace, I gave up all claim to the mortal world, so on this night of my Second Death do I relinquish all claim to my own eternal existence. I am dead, and in death I submit myself to the judgment of Father Caine, to accept his words as my law, his true childer as my brothers and sisters, my clan, my blood. I submit myself to the leadership of the Seraphim, the dominions, and all they may place in authority over me, to be obeyed without question or hesitation. From this night forth, I am dead, and so death holds no power over me; for I am in the service of Caine, a warrior of the Great Jyhad, from death reborn into the company of Caine's Chosen, his own Black Hand.

Should I fail in this my most sacred oath, may all who share in this cup and witness my oath tonight hunt me down as one foresworn, unworthy of the gift of Caine's Blood, and destroy me without mercy.

This do I swear by my name, by the Blood by which my sire made me, and by the Blood I accept this night. So let it be remembered, so let it be done.

THE OATH OF INITIATION

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Apocalypse Now: The Way of the Black Hand

Victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival.

— Winston Churchill

From the journal of Piotr "Peter" Andreikov:

So, we're a Gehenna cult. So what? What makes us different than the rest of the Sabbat or any of those other loony fringe types? Other than the fact that we're obviously right, and they're fucked? Because we have a couple chapters of the *Book of Nod* that somehow got left out of their editions? How do we know the *Book of Nod* isn't a total forgery to start with?

That's the trouble with prophecies. You can't tell what's genuine prescience and what's total bullshit until the things being prophesied are already happening, and then it's too late to do you any good. Or maybe it just looks as though that's what the words meant, but maybe it's just wishful thinking on the part of someone who wants to prove something. You know the saying, to the man who has the hammer....

This stuff's even harder to pin down than the history, and what documentation there is...well, I don't know who the hell this Aristotle de Laurent is, or what his qualifications are, so how am I supposed to know whether his research, much less his translation, is valid or not?

I mentioned this to Chang, and he gave me a phone number to call in South Dakota, of all places, and a couple of code phrases, so this expert he was sending me to would agree to talk to me and not skin me alive and tan my hide for a bookcover. I honestly thought he was joking.

That was before I saw what this guy was working on in his back room. And he isn't even Tzimisce....

THE BOOK OF NOD— A PRIMER FOR GEHENNA

From my interview with Blackhorse Tanner, Ventrue shakar and Noddist fanatic

Let me see your hand. Yes, good, good. And Parvati's First Rule? Yes, and the thirteenth? Very good, yes, there are only twelve. And how is my esteemed brother Mr. Chang? It has been a while since he came this far west—I imagine affairs in the east and in Mexico keep him busy these nights. Let me clean these tools and put them away. Wouldn't want them to get rusty.

There. Let us sit out on the porch, where we can see the stars. What was it you wished to discuss?

Well, I wouldn't say the *Book of Nod* is a forgery; that's probably going too far. De Laurent is crazy, but sincere enough in his scholarship. I'd say rather that it's incomplete, which even he admits, if you pin him down on it. But that's not entirely his fault; Caine's Promise is not intended for everyone, but only for his true childer, born of his blood, not those of the traitorous Third Generation. Zillah's childer, born of her tears—ah, you have not tasted the Stone? Do so soon if you can, Winter. The Final Nights are short.

But the most commonly known fragments of the *Book of Nod* do agree in principle, if not in exact verse. The Camarilla would like to treat it as a fable, more of a morality play than our Father's plans for eternity. Although I see signs that perhaps they are not so sure of themselves now. But as they have done before, they believe that if they can suppress the truth, that will stop the future from happening. I've heard there's an archon who burns all copies of the *Book of Nod* he finds—I'm sure he would burn De Laurent too, if he could catch him. But no matter how fervently the chicken believes the fox is a myth and the farmer is her friend, she's still going to end up as somebody's dinner.

As I said before, what you have learned of the Antediluvians, the Final Nights, Gehenna...that is the first step on the road to wisdom. And we who have died the Second Death, we are more than Ventrue, Brujah, Assamite, Tzimisce. No longer merely the childer of our sires, we are Caine's true childer, his chosen warriors, and the instrument of his vengeance against the kinslayers of old. Yes, his vengeance. The Third Generation condemned itself by its own actions, but we can redeem ourselves of its treacherous blood by our service to Caine in the Final Nights.

This is what it means to die the Second Death. In one of the lesser-known fragments of the *Book of Nod*—one that De Laurent apparently never saw—it speaks of those who have died twice, and been thrice reborn...ah, let me recite the full verse for you:

*Beware the Cainite who forgets his Curse,
As to dream of mortal harmony.
For all his cities will become ash
And all his dreams shall be scattered to the winds
A new enemy attends him now,
The childer of his arrogance
Twice born, thrice reborn, hungry for death
Nurtured on devoured souls
Savoring war as substance.*

The passage before it speaks of the seven who are joined for five hundred years, seeking unity among the Damned—clearly the Camarilla, who are seven no longer. And as for the new enemy, I think you need look no further to find the answer to that than your own right hand.

CAINE'S PROMISE

So that is our holy purpose, to stand against the Antediluvians at Gehenna, and so shall the worthy of Caine's blood be saved. So then we may stand proudly before the black throne and face Caine's judgment, for we have done his will, and proven ourselves his true heirs.

As his heirs, inheritors of Caine's blood, we have his promise: That he who partakes of the true blood of Caine and serves him faithfully, even though he may perish, he shall not be lost. For it is written:

*His children will be reborn from the ashes,
The blood shall call them forth,
Even from the land of shadows,
From ashes they shall rise and walk again.
So let none of the faithful fear death,
Zillah's tears shall nourish them,
Blood of the Second Generation,
Shed in sorrow for the loss of her brothers.
So shall the faithful become Zillah's childer,
And share in Caine's triumph,
And rule at their Father's side.*

That is his promise to us, Caine's promise. Those who are faithful, who have partaken of Zillah's Tears, those he shall recall from death in the night of his triumph, and from their ashes they shall be remade, to serve him, and rule over the children of Seth — and that is why you must seek the Weeping Stone. Oh, yes, I know you don't believe it now. But when you taste it...then you will. Then you will understand.

NURTURED ON DEVoured SOULS

Diablerie was the crime of the Third Generation; it seems odd, does it not, that we have taken their crime and made it all but a sacrament? Yet look at the difference between murder, which is to cause the death of another in times of peace, and the job of a soldier, who kills in wartime and is judged a hero for it. In murder, the victim is innocent — as were the childer of Caine, innocent at least of any crime as terrible as the one perpetrated upon them. Kinslaying is abhorrent to Caine, and so we do not kill each other; you know it is not the will of our Father that we challenge each other in Monomacy. We are brothers and sisters of one Father, reborn into his blood, and so we honor that blood in each other, and do not seek to repeat our ancestors' sins.

But the *Book of Nod* in all its fragments speaks of diablerie as retribution, the just punishment upon those who disregard the words of Caine. And we are the instruments of that punishment, Caine's retribution against those who defied him. Their blood we reclaim as Caine's true childer, and grow closer to our Father in power for it. Thus we are made stronger in his image at the cost of his enemies.

As warriors, it is our duty to seek any means to better our skills, and also then the strength of our blood, so we might better serve our Father. Do not challenge needlessly, Winter, as the Sabbat do, thinking only of their own advancement or indulging their spite. Use your strength wisely, for true power, like true wisdom, is not gained in mighty leaps, but in incremental steps. For he who leaps may reach the summit sooner, but he may more likely fall; while he who ascends one step at a time will surely reach the top.

Of course, if one of the Sabbat challenges you, then by Caine's beard, kill the little bastard and drink him down. Arrogance of that sort cannot go unpunished, and we must occasionally remind them what it means to be Black Hand — and that they should be grateful we're on their side.

THE ROLE OF THE SABBAT

Ah, yes. The Sabbat, the Sword of Caine, the soldiers of his army who harry the pawns of the Antediluvians. They, too, have their part to play, as all soldiers must. And it is our part, as the officers of that army, to lead them into battle, and keep them focused on the final goal.

But your guess is correct...their part is not ours, or perhaps I should say, our inheritance, Caine's Promise, is not theirs. Are you surprised? Ask yourself, my brother, how many of them are truly worthy of it? They talk of freedom, but do not want the burden of responsibility; they savor violence for its own sake, but act without purpose or cause; they hold to their pride and Darwinistic arrogance, so certain they alone know the truth, but seek only their own glory. They profess advancement by merit, but their leaders are corrupt and cling to power as tightly as any Camarilla prince. Those who can rise above their own appetites,

master the discipline to seek something more from eternity than indulging every petty impulse, those may yet prove themselves worthy, as you did. Keep your eyes open for such a one, so that he may also be elevated to the ranks of the Chosen. As for the rest — their fate is in Caine's hands, not ours.

Of course we don't tell them. Perhaps I should not even have told you, but you had already figured it out. I don't know for certain myself. I'm not a dominion, and I'm certain there are parts of the chronicles, the prophecies, even the Admonitions and Commentaries, that I've never seen. And I've seen more than most — like you, I ask too many questions.

GEHENNA IS COMING

But Gehenna is coming. You remember back in '99, right? When the Seraphim called *The Greatest Fall*? Right, I've heard it called that, as well. I had nightmares too, dark and terrible things. But that was no mere typhoon, as if you need me to tell you that — though the cover-up was very good, I'll grant you that. I was there with a special *kamut* less than a week later, and already most of the evidence had been cleaned up or washed away in the floods. Over a million dead, they said, and that was just the mortals. And believe me — I examined the bodies, pulled them out of the sewage that was once a river. They didn't look like drowning victims to me, not all of them. I know a drowned corpse when I see one, even when it's been in the water rotting for a week.

And the Ravnos are gone now. Almost all of them; I know a couple who survived because their packmates staked them from the first night, but as a clan they're broken. Only one thing could have caused what happened. Right. That's what most of us think. A pity we didn't get a chance to investigate closer while it was happening. We're not sure what the hell killed it, yet. But you can be damned sure it wasn't the weather. A pity, too, that it happened in such a remote place — too easy to believe a couple of faked satellite photos and tales of a natural disaster. Too easy to ignore the warning, the evidence of what is to come, to dismiss it as a freak occurrence rather than the herald of Gehenna!

Forgive my outburst, my brother, you are in no danger from me. As you see, I believe these are indeed the End Times, and it angers me that they cannot see the obvious — refuse to see it, just because it happens on the other side of the world and can be so easily explained away.

The next time, I guarantee you, they won't be so lucky.

All the Signs are coming together now. The thin-blooded exist, and their numbers grow every year. Oh, yes, they exist. Believe me, you'll know if you taste one. Their blood's practically mortal — Caine's potency thinned down to the dregs. I've drunk down ghouls that were stronger in the Blood.

You've seen the Star — of course you have. It pulses like a beacon in the night sky, yet it remains invisible to mortal eyes or their mighty telescopes. It is not a natural thing; it does not obey natural laws, any more than we do. We don't know why it's there, but it was not there before 1999. I know every star in these skies — this one is different.

Yes. It is. Even we, as terrible as we are, know it is evil, a thing to be feared. Is it that Star that woke the Antediluvian in Bangladesh? Perhaps. Again, we do not know. But if so, it shall not be the last.

THE HUNGER OF THE ANCIENTS

I have come upon something that may answer at least one of the questions yet remaining from the events of July 1999. One of my agents has procured for me a stack of letters, written in Sanskrit, recovered from the ruins of what he believes was once a Ravnos haven. The owners died and the building burned, but by chance these documents were concealed in a fireproof safe hidden under the floor.

The letters speak of a war, an ongoing struggle between the Ravnos of India, and some kind of Eastern devil-creatures coming out of China. The term used is "the hungry dead," though they do not sound like Cainites to me, but something more like a ghost that can take material form, either as a human or animal, and wield some kind of potent magic.

What is most interesting about the descriptions, however, is the mortality rate. The Ravnos were losing their war, and embracing hundreds of new fledglings to send against the invaders. Almost all of them, of course, died. The last letter speaks of losing several packs of their new fledglings before they even got to face the enemy...they simply disappeared, along with those who made them. Whole blood lineages, from the highest to the lowest in generation, apparently wiped out.

Perhaps it was not the Red Star that evoked the Antediluvian at all, but the loss of so many unlives of its own blood occurring in so short a span of time. It may be there is some truth to the old myth about the destruction of a blood-lineage from youngest to the oldest surviving founder....

The Final Nights are coming. But it is for the Final Nights that we exist. That is the war we are preparing for; for which all our sieges and war parties against their pawns in the Camarilla are but training missions, to temper us and hone us to face our true foes, to purge out the weak and empower to the strong. Are you prepared to die, Winter?

Ah, good answer. You know your catechism well. Yes. We are already dead.

CAINE'S CHOSEN — THE WARRIOR ELITE

The samurai warriors of Japan followed a way of thought they called *bushido*. They considered themselves dead men — therefore, death held no fear for them. Having no care for their own lives, they were capable of many great things, but their only purpose in this un-death of theirs was to die in their lord's service. They didn't care about titles, or promotions, or material things. Death was their purpose.



Sound familiar? It should. Our way is based on much the same concept. The major difference being, of course, that we were dead to start with. We know something about death...we've all been through it. But that mortal death, our Embrace into unlife, what does it truly change? A man who was a bully in life remains one in unlife. A liar still lies, a coward is still afraid, those whose souls are hungry for power merely adapt to the kinds of power now available to them, and learn how to use their new talents to gain it. The bloodthirsty monster you see at the Fire Dance, or the haughty, manipulative tyrant in a Camarilla Elysium, each is merely a once-mortal soul, freed of the restraints of humanity. And as wretched, fearful and hollow as their existence may be, still they cling to it with all their strength — and the older they grow, the tighter their grasp becomes, the greater their fear of losing it.

That is where they are weak, Winter. And that is where we are strong. Because we are already dead, death holds no power over us. Think it through. See how tremendously liberating that is? To know that for us, every night, every moment of our current existence is a gift, given us by our Father Caine. Not something we need defend or worry about. We're already dead. Whatever we do beyond our Second Death, it is no longer for ourselves we act.

And that's our strength, because a man who is already dead need fear nothing. They are afraid, little brother. Afraid of the kine, afraid of their allies, their own childer, their own Beasts. All they do is based on fear. And they are very, very afraid of us, because we have no fear, and they cannot fathom it — cannot rationalize it.

They know we can destroy them, because we have no fear. And so we will.

It is our duty to purge the weak, and reclaim Caine's blood from the unworthy. It is our task to destroy the pawns of the Antediluvians, so that when they call, there will be no one to answer. And it is our sworn duty to our Father, whose blood we all bear, to destroy the faithless Third Generation, or meet Final Death ourselves in the attempt. That is who we are, and why we exist. Like the samurai of old, we are dead, and death is our purpose. We cannot afford to pamper the weak, nor show mercy to those we have defeated. The stakes are too high. Gehenna will come whether the Sabbat is ready or not. But we will be ready, and waiting, when it does.

May it be soon.

TRIVIAL PURSUITS

From the journal of Piotr "Peter" Andreikov:

I guess if Blackhorse wasn't a vampire, he'd be considered criminally insane. But since we're all vampires here, he's just...well, even for one of us, he's a bit over the edge, but the Hand has a lot of Licks like that. So we do the logical thing: We just hand them a weapon and point them at the enemy.

He showed me some of his "work," in the back. I already figured him for a headhunter, and I was right. There was a row of grinning fanged skulls, all a bit off-proportion in some way or deformed. Nosferatu, I guess. And at least one...well, I'd call it a hide, it still had hair on it. But not animal hair. Gangrel, maybe. And there were two more human-sized skins stretched out over a rack, where he'd obviously been working. But you get used to seeing weird shit in Sabbat havens. Bones, fangs, skulls,

you name it. Although I think my own clan still has the corner on taste-free decorating, if you know what I mean.

But it wasn't the skulls or tanning projects that caught my attention, or even the poor naked bastards he had hanging from meathooks in the corner, staked and awaiting their turn.

It was the books. Tomes, really, big massive things. Nicely bound in fine leather...I could guess what kind. I opened the one on the reading stand. The pages were loose, not bound inside yet, I suppose so he could add more as he did his research. They weren't paper, either; they were too stiff, with an odd texturing — some kind of parchment or vellum, like they used back in the Dark Ages. This book was all Ventrue, showing lines of descent, sire to childe, sometimes as many as nine or ten generations. I've heard the Ventrue keep track of things like that. Some of the names were familiar to me: Hardestadt, Pieterzoon, Mithras, Lucinde. And others I'd never heard of: Gaius Marcellus, Valerius, Jurgen, Doran. Many descendants on each page were marked as deceased, some with dates — and some were quite recent, too. Some of those had little checkmarks by them — maybe that's how Blackhorse keeps score.

I noticed there was an equally thick book for the Toreador, the Nosferatu, and a bunch of the other clans. None for the Tzimisce, though. Or the Lasombra, either, now that I think about it.

Too bad. Would have been interesting to see.
End of journal entry

THE BLACK HAND IN SABBAT POLITICS

The Black Hand is officially neutral in Sabbat politics; however, that has never meant it is not involved. Still, the Hand as an organization is reluctant to take a public stand on any issue unless the security of the entire sect is at stake; its primary directive, as far as the rest of the Sabbat is concerned, is to back up the regent and sect leadership as a whole. When two Sabbat leaders are at odds, the Black Hand does not become involved in their dispute. This public neutrality preserves the Hand's independence — the consistory doesn't have cause to fear its interference in political matters — and also saves face, in that the Hand has never been known to support a losing side. If and when the Hand does feel obliged to step in, it does so with all the force at its command, as it did when supporting Galbraith's call to end the Second Civil War. If the Black Hand takes a stand, it's there to win, and the entire Sabbat knows it.

Needless to say, that's far too heavy-handed an approach to use unless the situation cannot be resolved with anything less. The Black Hand's greatest political asset is not its reputation as the military elite of the Sabbat, but its web of connections that go down to the grassroots level of the individual Sabbat packs. The Hand leadership knows, far better than the consistory, what's going on at the local level: the leanings of bishops and ducti for or against a particular Crusade; which prisci are feared, and which ones simply avoided or ignored; which packs have suffered the greatest losses in the last siege. Black Hand agents, both known and unknown, listen to their

packmates and report what they hear to their superiors. Even more importantly, they talk, and present the Black Hand's agenda to the Sabbat rank and file as simple common sense, couched in terms the Sabbat will buy into. An emissary advises a bishop on political as well as military strategy; a dominion teaches more than guerrilla combat techniques when she lectures a war party; the Seraph has the private ear of a priscus or cardinal he has helped in the past.

More than any other faction, the Black Hand has the most organized internal intelligence network in the sect, and through its widely distributed membership, an unobtrusive means of seeding its ideas among the Sabbat at large. In a sect with frequent turnovers in leadership, where a mob is a legitimate power base, being able to influence grassroots support is a formidable political tool, if it is used carefully and at exactly the right moment. It's not guaranteed, of course; the number of actual operatives in any given city is small, and they aren't necessarily as skilled as the local bishop is at persuading their fellow Sabbat to do things. The most recent time the Hand actually used their leverage was in the defense of the remaining Assamite *antitribu*.

However, in these Final Nights, that will most certainly not be the last.

CLANS AND POINTS OF VIEW

In theory, a member of almost any Sabbat clan is a potential Black Hand member. In practice, since the dominions do the recruiting, and the subject's agenda requires a high degree of martial ability as well as intelligence and ruthlessness, most of the membership is either Assamite *antitribu*, or of the City or Country Gangrel *antitribu* lines. However, every clan has something to offer, and a sufficiently talented, motivated, or competent individual from almost any background might be considered.

ASSAMITE ANTITRIBU

While the Assamite *antitribu* are no longer the dominant voice in the Black Hand's leadership, they still make up a large segment of its membership. Many who remain are less than three centuries in age, and most are far younger than that. Even so, due to the intensive (and exclusive) training their cadets undergo, Assamite operatives are motivated, loyal and highly efficient, capable of acting as removers, strategists and spies as well as their almost obligatory role as *shakari*.

Many of the Assamite *antitribu* are on the Path of Caine, which calls upon them to become the ultimate Noddist paragons, seeking diablerie to advance themselves closer to Caine and to develop their physical, mental and spiritual abilities to the highest possible level. However, their intense focus on self-development and furtherance of the cause has tended to make the Assamites seem stand-offish and elitist to other members of the subject. Previously, the Assamites fraternized (if, indeed, they could be said to fraternize at all) mostly with their own brothers; in fact, only with other Hand Assamites, generally disdaining all but a talented few of their clan who were Embraced outside the Hand's own traditions. In addition to the two Assamite Seraphs, they even had their own sub-subject leader, the *hulul*, who was said to have carried the Blood of the Lasombra Antediluvian, which was passed on from *hulul* to *hulul* every hundred years through ritual diablerie.

But the *hulul* deserted with the other Assamite elders, and none have claimed his place, or sought to repossess the ancient Blood he still carries. Now that Yazid Tamari has been appointed Seraph *pro tem* (and none doubt he will be one of those retained, as the idea of the Black Hand without an Assamite Seraph is simply unthinkable), he has begun a carefully paced reconciliation between the remaining Assamites and their fellow Hand operatives, and has even asked Assamite *rafiq* to study their non-Hand brethren more closely, and see if any might have the mettle of which good Hand agents and *shakari* are made.

BRUJAH ANTITRIBU

Somewhat notorious for always being ready for a fight, Brujah *antitribu* in the Hand often find themselves on the front lines for their facility with Presence, impressive strength and blinding speed of attack. Still, there are not as many Brujah in the Hand as one might expect. Their (often well-justified) reputation for being short tempered is not an asset where subtlety or self-control are necessary for survival. This is compounded by Sabbat culture, which often derides any attempt at self-control as weakness and a suppression of one's true vampiric nature.

This being the case, the Brujah who do make the ranks of the Hand are often exceptional individuals who have learned to balance the passion of their Beast with the coolness of intellect and the strength of will and purpose. Brujah serve as removers, but also as emissaries and trainers of Sabbat war parties — who won't put up with any shit from the troops. Brujah have also often served honorably as seconds, either to a dominion or (on two occasions) to one of the Seraphim, where their talents as soldiers, their passion for the cause and capacity for personal loyalty have earned high renown and honor, even if the recognition came posthumously.

GANGREL ANTITRIBU

Ruthless, tough and resourceful, City and Country Gangrel *antitribu* make up another substantial faction in the Black Hand. Gangrel are most commonly seen (and thought of) as removers, the roughneck frontline ass-kickers with claws. In practice, however, Gangrel have filled every job and position of responsibility the Hand has to offer, from Seraph on down, including socially prominent ones such as emissary. There's nothing quite like the flat stare of vertical-pupiled yellow eyes to keep the number of petty requests for Black Hand muscle down to a slow trickle. Gangrel also often act as forward scouts and couriers, relying on animal ghouls as spies, messengers or lookouts in their missions, or taking animal form and scouting on their own.

If a clan as widely varied as the Gangrel has a common fault, it's that the same streak of cursed independence that is their primary survival trait also leads them to be sometimes difficult to work with. Touchy, suspicious and sometimes more than a little feral, Gangrel don't always like taking orders from just any old Lick who thinks he's got some authority. Their self-sufficiency does, however, produce some excellent solo agents, "lone wolves" who can handle spying, scouting, or even assassination assignments with little or no support from a *kamut*.

LASOMBRA

The leaders of the Sabbat do not lead the Hand, but their strength, skill with shadows, and drive to succeed make them good undercover operatives. Shadows hide other operatives from easy view, and they are not picked up on video monitors — a distinct advantage in beating high-tech security systems. The most talented can become shadows themselves, or step through the Abyss and come out on the other side of a locked door or solid wall, though that talent is rarely present in a Lasombra operative willing to take his chances with whatever's on the other side of that wall without better intelligence first. A number of Lasombra become emissaries, where their political acumen flourishes with the power serving as the contact between Sabbat archbishops and their venerable masters in the Black Hand.

Since the death of Corvus, the Lasombra have felt decidedly under-represented in the leadership of the Hand, though Jalan-Aajav's appointment of Banjoko has already served to mollify Lasombra pride. As one of the majority clans of the Sabbat, several Lasombra operatives have expressed the opinion that no clan should ever hold more than one Seraph seat — and that one Seraph should always be Lasombra. If Jalan-Aajav has any opinions on this matter, he has chosen to keep them to himself.

MALKAVIAN ANTITRIBU

The Malkavian *antitribu* number few in the Black Hand; the oft-voiced opinion of Hagar Stone, a Malkavian *shakar*, is that most of his clanmates simply aren't crazy enough to want the job. The Hand's recruiters are very tough on Malkavian prospects, generally doing all they can to pin down the exact degree and severity of a particular individual's psychoses and derangements; the sooner they can figure out exactly how crazy he is, the sooner they can cross him off the list as a "bad risk." That being said, the few Malkavians who do make it past the vetting process are no less insane than their clanmates — it's just that whatever their particular brand of madness is, it generally works out as more of an asset than a liability to the Malkavian as an operative, and to the Hand as a group. Hagar's own obsessive attention to detail and perfectionist streak in his chosen profession make him a difficult and moody *shakar* for a *kamut* to work with; on the other hand, when things do go according to his carefully detailed, footnoted plan (with six contingency plans marked in different colored ink), his rate of success is fast approaching the records of some of the Assamite *antitribu* who've been doing the same job for a century longer.

NOSFERATU ANTITRIBU

Stealthy, powerful, twisted in mind and body, the Nosferatu *antitribu* of the Black Hand are, like Nosferatu everywhere, mostly unseen and vastly under-appreciated (or so they would be inclined to tell anyone who bothers to ask). In fact, the Nosferatu *antitribu* are a vital part of the Black Hand's operations, whether it is behind the scenes, under the streets or in the front line. Their inherent drive to dig up other people's secrets — and the talents for doing so — make them valuable undercover operatives, gathering or trading intelligence the Hand needs to accurately plan its missions and set its priorities.

While Nosferatu *antitribu* make a tremendous contribution as spies and information analysts, they're also valuable as removers; their strength combined with their monstrous appearance

makes them formidable psychological weapons as well as good soldiers. In the recent sieges of Durham and Norfolk, the Camarilla leaders seemed more panicked over the possibility that mere mortals might see the foul and disgusting creatures than they by the Nosferatu themselves — a situation that the Hand Creeps were quick to exploit.

TOREADOR ANTITRIBU

A few Toreador *antitribu* have proven themselves talented enough to be of great value to the Black Hand, but only a very few. This may reflect the prejudices of the Hand's leadership more than a lack of ability or dedication on the part of potential Toreador recruits — the subject has so long been dominated by Assamite and Gangrel *antitribu* that such prejudices become a matter of ingrained habit, rather than reason. The few Toreador who have so proven themselves tend to hold themselves somewhat apart from the vast bulk of their Perv brethren, and take some pride in their rare and exalted position as Hand operatives. The recent appointment of Ondine "Boudicca" Sinclair to the rank of dominion has greatly encouraged the Toreador operatives, who hope that the past biases of the Hand leadership against recruiting Toreador cadets is now due for a change.

TZIMISCE

Monstrous by their very reputations, the Tzimisce are a small but valuable minority in the Black Hand. Their fleshcrafting abilities give them an uncanny gift for disguises, both for themselves and their non-Tzimisce comrades. The Tzimisce Dr. Morrow, known as the "Skindoctor," has become particularly gifted in the delicate art of creating perfect doppelgangers, making over a Hand operative to replace a specific individual in Camarilla circles. A small cabal of elder Hand Tzimisce are some of the subject's premiere Noddist researchers and scholars, and a talented few have developed some mastery of their ancient traditions of sorcery. A number of younger members of the clan specialize in intelligence gathering, including soul-riding animals in order to gain access to places a human-sized operative cannot go. The most terrifying Tzimisce operatives are the removers, who compete with each other in creating the most fearsome and horrifying (yet still functional) combat forms for war parties, sometimes even giving their experienced packmates a shiver.

VENTRUE ANTITRIBU

While not numerous in the Hand, their leadership abilities and intense dedication make those few Ventrue *antitribu* who are chosen valuable to the subject, both in the courts of the Sabbat leadership and in the front lines. Ventrue *antitribu* have contributed both notable emissaries and removers to the Black Hand's cause; of lesser fame, but equal importance behind the scenes, are the creative tycoons who have engineered a wide variety of methods for financing the Hand's various activities. Ventrue in the Black Hand often prove to be fervent devotees of the martial philosophy of the Second Death, not only contributing to the Hand's library of Admonitions and Commentaries, but dedicating their unives to its precepts and providing inspiration for their fellow operatives to follow. The Hand Ventrue also practice an informal mentoring system among themselves, sponsoring worthy young Ventrue *antitribu* as cadets and providing advice and support to them once they are initiated.

OTHERS

The Black Hand is always on the lookout for good potential operatives; however, their strong Noddist tradition and beliefs in the purity of Caine's blood automatically disqualifies members of the "mongrel" bloodlines, who are not considered true descendants of Caine. The egalitarianism espoused by the Sabbat is of no import; the Hand has its own criteria as to who is worthy of Caine's Blood. Scions of tainted or suspect bloodlines such as the Tremere, Kiasyd, Panders, Gargoyles and Blood Brothers are deliberately overlooked by the Hand recruiters, though the Hand has not hesitated to use such individuals to further its cause in other ways. (Some particularly talented members of impure bloodlines may serve as contract employees, spies, or specialized consultants, but do not receive the benefit of Hand training or support, nor are they allowed any knowledge of Hand ideology or secrets. Still, some cherish the faint hope that their work on the Hand's behalf might yet persuade its conservative leadership to change its biased recruiting policies.)

The Black Hand has no *Salubri antitribu* or Serpents of the Light members, nor is that likely to change in the near future. The *Salubri antitribu* are certainly dedicated and fierce in their hatred of the Camarilla, but their cause is their own, and they seem all-consumed by it. The Serpents, too, have their own beliefs and occult traditions, and while they have found a niche in the cosmopolitan culture of the Sabbat, those beliefs are simply not in line with the Hand's own Noddist doctrine.

The Council of Seraphim has only recently begun investigating the bloodline calling itself the Harbingers of Skulls, uncertain of its origin. No doubt that will be a topic of interest again once the current political situation has stabilized.

QUESTIONS FACING THE BLACK HAND TONIGHT

The Black Hand has undergone some rather traumatic changes in the past few years, but remains dedicated to its overall mission: To serve Caine's purpose as warriors of the Final Nights against the Antediluvians and all their minions. A lesser group of Cainites might have buckled under such internal troubles — but a lesser group of Cainites would not be the Black Hand. Still, the course they chart is not clear and straight-forward; many issues yet need answers, or at least debate, as Caine's Chosen prepare to face Gehenna.

THE DIVERSITY QUESTION

In the wake of the defections of their elders, the Assamite *antitribu* have gone from being the dominant voice in Black Hand policies to a pitiful remnant of their former political or physical strength. Many non-Assamites are pleased by this turn of events, and want to take full advantage of the chance for a promoting a new, more widely diverse leadership. The Assamites find themselves on the defensive, between the sudden abandonment by their elders and the foreboding rumors from distant Alamut. Those who remain in the Black Hand now face the resentment of those whom their leaders had previously felt secure enough to ignore, and may find themselves reporting to a dominion or *kamut ductus* who has just a little bit of an axe to grind over past treatment.



Meanwhile, a number of new dominions have been appointed who represent a far better cross-section of the Hand's demographics, and who look forward to proving that they too are worthy soldiers — and officers — of Caine.

THE QUESTION OF THE SERAPHIM

Even Jalan-Aajav admits that this question would be easier to deal with if the three missing Seraphim were proven dead. Still, Izhim waited barely a year before initiating Djuhah as Seraph to replace the missing Wanyan — a memory that for Jalan-Aajav is especially bitter. But it is true that even if the council were narrowed down to four again and formally initiated to their new rank, any one of the three missing Seraphim could return — and Monomacy would no doubt then be the only solution. Until then, Jalan-Aajav has the power to take the Black Hand in the direction he believes best for the subsect and the Sabbat, and he will allow no one, not even the acting Seraphim he has appointed, to deter him from that path. Of course, from Jalan-Aajav's point of view, any combination of his hand-picked appointees is better than the council he has had to work with in the past. (For more on Jalan-Aajav, Djuhah and Izhim ur-Baal, see *Children of the Night*.)

Kazimir Savostin

Kazimir is under no illusions as to why Jalan-Aajav has put him in the hot seat; on the other hand, that means the Gangrel now has a greater interest vested in keeping him undead than dead. This has also given him a certain degree of power in return — for there is a limit to what Jalan-Aajav can do to him now that Kazimir's voice and opinion have just become nearly the equal of Jalan-Aajav's own, while his past remains Jalan-Aajav's private secret. Let the Gangrel believe him a submissive coward; Kazimir has no intention of swimming against the tide just yet. He has re-formed his spy network, purging it of any agents he believed were loyal to Izhim and not to himself; he has continued his correspondence with Vykos, Nahir, de Laurent, and other prominent Noddists; he studies Jalan-Aajav closely to determine how best to prove his loyalty to his new master.

Yazid Tamari

Born in the early eighteenth century in Jerusalem, Yazid is a man of many talents; poet, warrior, politician and negotiator, and has proven himself competent, clever, and when necessary, ruthless. Visually, Yazid does not fit the image most vampires have of an Assamite warrior, much less a Black Hand assassin: He's portly and not particularly tall, with a jovial face and ready smile more in keeping with a prosperous merchant than a warrior. His manner is always smooth and courteous, even to his enemies — right up until he cuts their throats.

Yazid is keenly aware of the identity crisis facing his brothers and sisters, and knows to his sorrow that their answers do not lie with Alamut. If the monster who now sits on Haqim's throne is but the Herald of the Antediluvian, how much more terrible must its master be? To this end, he seeks to rebuild the pride and unity of the clan, first among the Assamite *antitribu* in the Black Hand, and then reaching out to their kin in the Sabbat as well, even those the departed elders once scorned. Perhaps some night, if Allah permits, his message will even reach the schismatics who have sought sanctuary in the Camarilla...a goal he will not propose just yet, for his position as Seraph is not yet secure, and Yazid is far too pragmatic to allow his greater goals to be thwarted by untimely idealism.

Banjoko (Francisco Ruiz)

Banjoko was born to the Yoruba people, but was captured in a raid in the early nineteenth century and shipped as a slave to Cuba. He proved to be a difficult slave, cleverly wreaking his revenge against his master's family and catching the attention of a Lasombra who tested his ingenuity even further before granting him the Embrace. Banjoko's sire was of Montano's line, a fact he does not advertise when dealing with other Lasombra, though he has since turned his back on his sire's Path of Night and Abyss mysticism to embrace the Path of Honorable Accord.

Banjoko is a canny and resourceful agent whose Noddist orthodoxy is well established among the Hand, yet he is not well known by the Sabbat leadership, making him a long-odds candidate to retain his position as a full-fledged Seraph. His political agenda is to have everyone working together in the advent of Gehenna; as such, he is willing to even negotiate a truce of some kind with the Sabbat Inquisition. Being Lasombra, he has had more success in dealing with the (often Lasombra) Inquisitors than most of his Hand peers. He also tends to use his Spanish name, Francisco Ruiz them (a more dignified version of Pancho Ruiz, his old slave name), when dealing with. Among the Hand, his primary duties have been those of an emissary, and as such, Banjoko has begun his own political networking strategy, making it as clear as he can that long-odds be damned, he plans to be in the race all the way to the finish.

Teresita

For the diminutive Nosferatu dominion and trainer of cadets, the appointment to acting Seraph is an opportunity she has been lobbying for (not entirely subtly) ever since Izhim was first reported missing. An experienced strategist, privy to many secrets and known to most of the consistory due to her permanent residency in Mexico City, she seems a logical choice, and if Jalan-Aajav had any doubts about giving such a post to a female, he has wisely kept them to himself. Teresita has a great deal of popular support among Black Hand operatives, having personally trained a good number of them, and who remember her...well, if not fondly, then with profound respect. Teresita is also an ardent Ultra-Conservative, and strongly in favor of supporting the Jihad, even if it means kicking some high-ranking Sabbat asses into line along the way. (For more about Teresita, see *Mexico City by Night*.)

THE REGENCY QUESTION

The vacant regency is naturally an issue of great concern to the Black Hand, which owes its exalted position among the Sabbat to the support of the regent and the consistory. Galbraith trusted and relied on the Hand to carry out her agenda, and otherwise left the subsect independent of outside authority — which is how the Hand liked it. Of the three candidates, the Lasombra Charles VI seems the most likely to support the Hand's agenda against the Antediluvians — on the other hand, he's almost too cozy with the Inquisition, and might not give the Hand the freedom to pursue its goals as it wants. Venere Carboni, a Toreador, was one of Galbraith's supporters, and is likely to continue with her style of leadership — but if these are indeed the Final Nights, would business as usual mean stability or stagnation? Szechenyi Jolán draws her support from the moderates, but she has no clear agenda regarding Gehenna.

The Hand remains officially neutral on the candidates at present, waiting to see if one appears to be gaining strength and a clear majority among the consistory; it is better to wait and back the winner than make a decision too early and be wrong. The other option, should none of the three appear to hold a clear lead, and to prevent a crippling fourth Civil War, would be to carry out a Praetorian coup — pick a strong candidate, and install that candidate by force, using whatever means necessary to quell protests from the consistory or any surviving rivals. This would leave the new regent very much in the Hand's debt, though whether that might also backfire on them in other ways must also be taken into consideration. Until then, the Hand will do what it has done successfully for centuries — apparently nothing.

THE GEHENNA ISSUE

Few in the Black Hand disagree that Gehenna has begun, or at least the first signs of its coming have occurred. The questions arise as to how bad are things going to become, and how fast — which is an important consideration. How much time is left to prepare? Should the Hand be accelerating the recruitment and training of new cadets, in order to build up strength in numbers? Is the Sabbat going to be more of a help or a hindrance in the Final Nights? Should the Hand be at a different watchtower level even now? Are the watchtowers as originally conceived by the founders adequate for the reality of the Final Nights?

Indeed, the watchtowers have been revised in the past (particularly in the light of advancing military technology), and may well be under revision even now, as new data from the incident in Bangladesh continues to be accumulated and studied. Several high-level Noddist projects also continue, including careful examination of current translations for possible misinterpretations, determining what events may have already occurred and seeing how close the speculations of two centuries ago were to the mark.

Gehenna is the breath of the dead — and also the purpose of the Black Hand's very existence. In these Final Nights, it is very much on their minds. Some say it would actually be better if Gehenna would start now — or if the Hand could find a way for it to occur on the Hand's schedule, and not the Antediluvians'. For, as the Admonitions say, the more factors of a battle you can control, the better you can also control its outcome....

THE SEPARATISM ISSUE

The Black Hand has always been a loyal servant to the Sabbat leadership, but that doesn't mean it always feels the Sabbat leadership is truly worthy of its service. From the viewpoint of the Hand, the Sabbat may be the best they have to work with, but in many ways the sect has become as corrupt and jaded as the Camarilla. The archbishops and cardinals talk a great deal about fighting the Antediluvians, but in reality their primary concern is their own comfort, security and power base. Even the Sabbat themselves seem content to thrill in the violence of the moment, indulging whatever urges of their Beasts strike their fancies without thinking of eternity or any greater purpose for their unives.

With Gehenna looming so close, a small but vocal faction of the Hand has proposed a radical idea: Split from the Sabbat entirely, essentially forming a third (but extremely small) sect.

Then the Hand would be free to make contacts and alliances with knowledgeable and worthy members of both the Camarilla and Sabbat, free of outdated entanglements, in order to pursue its war against the Antediluvians as it sees fit. Jalan-Aajav has publicly condemned this viewpoint, even though he himself is rumored to have one of the largest stables of Camarilla agents and spies in the Hand. Other Hand strategists declaim the notion of secession as suicidal, pointing to the incident only a few years ago when the Assamite elders walked out, leaving their younger members behind to face the fury of rank-and-file Sabbat. Surely it is better, they say, to work on improving the Sabbat's focus and potential from within, particularly now when the End Times are upon us? Better the Sabbat is with us, with all its flaws, than against us.

Unlike most other Cainite groups, the Black Hand has never suffered too greatly (or at least, obviously) from factionalism, thanks to its strict training, fanaticism and service ethic. However, in these latter nights, that specter may yet threaten the Chosen of Caine, at the very time they need their unity most.

THE PILGRIMAGE QUESTION

The recent upheavals among the Assamite clan have created a number of difficult problems for the Black Hand. Not only did it lose a good portion of its most experienced elder agents, but the new power in Alamut has also presented a very real threat to one of the Hand's most sacred rites. Many believe that one of the most likely settings for Caine's (if not some Antediluvians') resurgence is the Middle East, the cradle of ancient civilizations. It is also the location of the Weeping Stone, the sacred relic that all members of the Hand revere and pilgrimage to in order to seal their initiation as one of Caine's Chosen.

However, the presence of the powerful Methuselah ur-Shulgi, who is apparently an avatar of the Assamite Antediluvian itself, has made the pilgrimage difficult if not outright impossible. Assamites guard the lands surrounding Alamut with even greater vigilance than before, and are less likely to look the other way if their *antitribu* brethren pass by. Should the Black Hand go to war with Alamut in order to protect its sacred site, or is it possible to negotiate? Should that even be a priority with Gehenna so close? If the Hand decides to spend its strength elsewhere, is it fair to ask all the new initiates to face Gehenna as true Chosen of Caine when they have not partaken of Zillah's Tears?

Brother,

We must not forget who made us, and whom we truly serve. Our future lies neither with Alamut, nor with the false *manus nigrum* and the fat fool who aspires to a title he does not deserve. But our time is not yet come. When the Seraph returns, he will know who has been truly loyal.

As for the hawk you spoke of, remember that a spirit born in captivity is never as strong as one born free. When the door of his cage is opened, then we shall see which way he flies. By that we will know where his heart truly lies.

N.





CHAPTER THREE: TACTICS AND METHODOLOGY

We all want to live. And in large part we make our logic according to what we like. But not having attained our aim and continuing to live is cowardice. This is a thin dangerous line. To die without gaining one's aim is a dog's death and fanaticism. But there is no shame in this. This is the substance of the Way of the Samurai. If by setting one's heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he gains freedom in the Way. His whole life will be without blame, and he will succeed in his calling.

— Tsunetomo Yamamoto, *Hagakure* (The Book of the Samurai)

A crucial thing to remember about the Cainites of the Black Hand: For them Gehenna is (as the Admonitions say) the breath of the dead. That is, Gehenna is what animates them. It endures long past the guttering flame of Humanity, the dimming coals of Path ardor. Long after there are no more packmates to share the cup with or lovers to clasp or scriptures to savor, Gehenna remains. While most of the vampires who believe in this apocalypse at all tend to think of it as an incomprehensible, inexorable, all-devouring Fate — and thus, something that one couldn't plan for even if one were foolish enough to try — the Hand has not only planned for it, but planned in a fair amount of detail. Like the Americans of the 1950's who dutifully crouched under school desks during drills and stacked cans of Campbell's Soup in their backyard bomb shelters, Caine's Chosen are not about to let the singularly unhelpful (if often appropriate) emotion of despair stop them from doing all they can.

THE WATCHTOWERS

Accordingly, the Hand has devised a sort of warning system, a method by which its members can very quickly communicate to each other the subject's general state of alert, along with the accompanying shifts in priorities and strategy. The name of each "watchtower," each step on the ladder, is taken from the lines of a prophetic poem that appears in *The Chronicle of the Lost Tribe*, a Noddist scripture known only to the Hand. Only the assembled Council of Seraphim may call the watchtowers, but once they have handed down the word, they expect their subordinates to spread it as rapidly as possible. Misrepresenting the state of alert to another operative is, of course, a treasonous offense few loyal Hand agents would ever knowingly commit.

THE FOUR RIDE FORTH

This watchtower is the “base” level of vigilance for the Hand, which, needless to say, still surpasses that of most vampire communities. At this watchtower, operatives may propose any potential contracts or assignments they wish to their superiors, and those superiors have a fair amount of latitude in deciding what avenues to pursue. Of course, assignments explicitly handed down from above still take priority over anything else. What’s called “Noddist intelligence” (this generally means information on things like artifacts, scriptures, prophecies, omens, Gehenna cults, Methuselah tombs, etc., but can also refer to extremely high-level political intelligence) is to be sought out only during times of relative leisure or by operatives whose main duties lie in that area. Hand members may use any of the usual means of communicating with each other, provided they can assure reasonable security.

THE CHOSEN ARE CALLED

At this watchtower, vigilance increases. Watch Commanders must keep a quarter of their operatives on standby (that is, free for assignment at a moment’s notice, ideally brushing up on their fighting skills while they wait). Dominions should also propose appropriate intelligence missions to the Seraphim. Some of the operatives in areas where there’s nothing really “appropriate” to do locally may be sent to the more troubled regions, or to another officer or commander to receive new orders.

Contracts come under much closer scrutiny than usual. Assignments trump any and all outstanding or proposed contracts (even if said contracts have already been approved), unless a Seraph specifically rules otherwise. Superiors must make every effort to communicate news to their deep-cover agents about the change in watchtower, provided that can be done without compromising their covers. Agents should whenever possible avoid “less secure” communications media, including cell phones, electronic mail, regular mail, and animal couriers bearing written messages.

Noddist intelligence also becomes of greater interest. While operatives need not go *looking* for it at this stage, they should bring any and all new information, rumors, etc., that they come across to the immediate attention of their superiors. In addition, they are expected to remind their superiors of any known Noddist mysteries in their area that have been left uninvestigated due to lack of resources or interest. Dominions compile and analyze all this information and make formal reports on the subject to the full Council of Seraphim.

The Council has set in place various contingency plans that the dominions and Watch Commanders are to carry out the moment they hear this watchtower called. Most of these plans have to do with the movement and assignment of operatives; but plans may also include an assassination scenario that’s been held in abeyance for just this occasion, or a scheme for a Masquerade breach or other major distraction—the sort of thing that wreaks maximum disorganization upon the enemy with minimum effort. The Hand has been at this watchtower more often than not since late 1997.

THE GREATEST FALL

This watchtower has only been called twice in the subject’s history, the last occasion being during the Week of Nightmares. (A number of dominions pleaded with Jalan-Aajav to call it during the recent wave of mass desertions, but he refused, claiming that he needs to finish his investigation first. The acting Seraphim seem to have accepted this decision for the moment, but many wonder how much longer they’ll be willing to wait — and they can certainly force him by majority vote.)

At this watchtower, agents may not pursue or accept any contract without the approval of the full Council of Seraphim, no matter what the rank of the Sabbat official requesting the contract. Superiors must pull operatives off all nonessential tasks as soon as those tasks can safely be terminated. Operatives of whatever rank who have been formally assigned to Noddist intelligence temporarily gain the rank of dominion, and have the authority to recruit assistance from other operatives as needed without reference to chain-of-command — though they had better be able to justify such action to the Seraphim later. Deep-cover operatives will quite likely be ordered to either take immediate (possibly suicidal or extremely hazardous) action, or pull out without any regard for maintaining cover.

The Seraphim have set additional, rather more mysterious contingency plans for this watchtower. Rumor has it that one of the order’s chief sorcerers casts some dire ritual to protect the Weeping Stone whenever the watchtower is called, but what precisely the ritual does and what cost it exacts in return, none can or will say. During the Week of Nightmares, a heavily armed crack troop of removers and Noddists was sent to Bangladesh, but couldn’t get close to the trouble’s source owing to the flooding. Instead, it remained just outside the area, “cleaning up” the frenzied vampires and other less classifiable menaces that came rampaging out of the maelstrom. The Black Hand has become reasonably certain that what happened in Bangladesh was indeed the arousal and destruction of an Antediluvian — the first in many centuries. Accordingly, it studies every scrap of data it can find on the episode so that it can revise its contingency plans for this watchtower (and the next) accordingly.

THE WOLVES FEED

The Seraphim have never called this watchtower to the recollection of any Black Hand agent currently walking the night — or at least, if any *do* recall it, they’re not talking. Elder operatives say it’s held in reserve for that inevitable night when Gehenna ceases to merely threaten one nation, region or clan at a time (like Indonesia or the Ravnos) and actually becomes an imminent global threat. At this level of alert, operatives must not be surprised or regretful to find centuries-old standing orders overturned without an instant’s hesitation. No contracts may be accepted or pursued, period. Suicide missions become far more frequent and operatives may not appeal up the chain of command. Operatives have standing permission to send any Cainite (of any sect or affiliation) who interferes with carrying out Hand orders to the Final Death. All communications between Hand members must be not only in code but in Hand-specific code, and failure to adhere to this rule is punished as treason.

Theories about the contingency plans for this watchtower range from the common-sense to the utterly fantastic. For instance, some Chosen insist that the subject has long been capable of commandeering weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical and biological), but refrains because of the political damage such a move would do. If this watchtower is called, however, such plans will go forward, politics be damned. Others whisper of horrible blood-plagues, capable of affecting vampires, sitting in vials in an enormous network of caverns large enough to house not only the entire membership of the Hand but also enough uncontaminated mortals to feed them for two years. (Nosferatu operatives scoff at this rumor. They insist that if such a gargantuan cave system existed their clan would certainly be aware of it.)

One story even holds that one or more high-level officials of the Camarilla are actually deep-cover Hand agents — or even Manchurian candidates — planted into the sect many centuries ago. For now, if the story has any truth to it, these agents confine themselves to subtle sabotage, but on the proper night they will rise to deliver a sudden and devastating betrayal to the Inner Circle itself.

Some Hand agents deliberately keep aloof of all this conspiracy-theory buzz. They say they're content to find out what the final watchtower brings simply by seeing it for themselves. The opportunity's coming soon enough.

NIGHT TO NIGHT

Even with Gehenna not just rounding the corner but grinning hello and opening its arms, unlife goes on. While many operatives do currently pursue missions dealing directly with the events of the Final Nights, most continue with their customary occupations, performing their duties in the customary ways — not that what's "customary" to the Hand could be described as "ordinary" even by Cainite standards.

COMMUNICATIONS

With the exception of the columns created by Seraph Djuhah before his disappearance, Hand operatives are spread

rather thin throughout the sect. Few Sabbath packs can boast more than one Black Hand member. Moreover, the packs themselves are sometimes nomadic. Hand members can contrive to meet during large sect gatherings, Blood Feasts and the like, but generally must be cautious in doing so. (Wouldn't do to make the plebes nervous for no good reason.) The subject's leadership encourages operatives to make themselves hard to track: varying travel routes, maintaining multiple havens, avoiding routine habits. It also does its best to prevent any one operative from knowing current contact information for too many of her associates (though operatives are required to keep their Watch Commanders informed of their whereabouts, and most come to have a fair idea where to look for the others in their Watch). Given these obstacles, the Hand must exercise creativity in coming up with ways for operatives to contact each other safely.

DROP POINTS

The Hand has been using drop points for message delivery almost since its inception, but it took many years for the tradition to develop into something like a real network. These nights, most major Sabbath cities have a few drop points whose locations are fairly common knowledge among Hand agents, in addition to numerous more obscure ones: sandwiched between the pages of the "Madagascar" article in the city library's *Encyclopedia Britannica*; taped to the underside of a dumpster behind the Ethiopian restaurant; magic-marked onto a mirror in a mall restroom. The messages left at drop points usually consist of what looks, to the casual observer, like a few lines of poetry in Arabic or Spanish. Of course the "poetry" is really a series of code phrases and words that refer to persons, places, instructions, and so forth. Information left at drop points is almost always information that Hand members can safely distribute at liberty within the subject.

The Hand's lexicon of code "poetry" is quite large; most agents need fair proficiency in the Art of Memory (see sidebar) to remember even the essential body of phrases. Hand legend has it that the code phrases have never been written down anywhere. The code phrases bear only the most slender cognitive connections to the concepts they're meant to represent —

CODES

Cryptography is the art of code, beginning with the *cytale* rods and simple substitution ciphers of classical civilization and ending with photonic quantum encryptions so secure one would have to break the laws of physics to crack them. Steganography is its sister art of camouflaging information, which can range from ancient tricks like tattooing messages on a slave's shaved head and then letting the hair regrow, or writing on the wood beneath the blank wax on a wax tablet, to the ultramodern — such as a digital watermark on a graphic image which operates via differences in pixel brightness too minute to be detected by the human eye (but not, perhaps, beyond the reach of Auspex).

Like any spy network, the Hand cherishes an abiding interest in such techniques. However, it understands quite well that in this field, like many others, mortals outstrip Cainites in sheer creativity and speed of innovation. Rather than trying too hard to actually advance the state of the art, the Hand simply does its best to stay as close behind the leading edge of human invention as possible. It has deliberately recruited those who worked as spies or cryptographers in life — such as the Nosferatu dominion Ingram Frizer, whose time in the Elizabethan secret service brought him into contact with the cryptographic musings of visionaries like Dee, Bacon and Raleigh; and the Malkavian Roger Farnsworth, one of Turing's codebreakers. Storytellers who plan to make espionage missions a central element of their Hand stories are encouraged to do a little research on both cryptography and steganography. Rather than simply telling players "you decode the message, and realize it's an order to put constant surveillance on the Toreador primogen," why not enhance the feel of the story by actually giving them a prop message to puzzle out?

CONTRACTS

Getting hold of the Hand is relatively easy for Sabbat officials and Sabbat officials only. (This is entirely intentional. The Hand knows of many ordinary Sabbat it would be happy to deal with, but it has no desire to entertain the countless frivolous petitions from every *vato* and *chica* with an axe to grind.) Some Hand agents make their affiliation public simply because they choose to, but others — the emissaries — do so because that is their function. When an official has a target she wants assassinated, or a planned siege she'd like the Hand to bolster, or information she has reason to believe the Hand can obtain, she simply contacts the emissary and presents her request. The emissary, in turn, presents it to his superiors.

The Hand tends to prioritize those missions it has chosen for itself over those others choose for them. This is built into the rules that govern the process of contract approval. If a mere bishop requests a contract, it must be approved by the full Council of Seraphim; if the petitioner is an archbishop or cardinal, the approval of two Seraphim is sufficient; if a priscus or the regent makes the request, however, then only one Seraph need sign off on it. The age, power, and importance of the proposed victim (or the strategic importance of the target city, in the case of a siege) is also taken into account. For the most part, it's easier to take out a contract on the Toreador primogen than it is to persuade a *kamut* to come lead your takeover of London. If an important contract goes through more quickly than expected, that's almost undoubtedly because it happens to fit in with the Hand's current agenda.

Although the Hand certainly indulges in sect politics (in fact, its occasional attempts over the past few centuries to play Illuminatus have come back to haunt it more than once), it has also deliberately cultivated a reputation for wasting scant time on ridiculous proposals, no matter how exalted the source. Although the Code of Milan obliges all loyal Sabbat to support the Hand, the requirement doesn't explicitly go the other way. Emissaries can, and frequently do, either turn down contracts outright or refuse to bring them to the Seraphim until the plan has been improved considerably, perhaps with the Hand's help.

for instance, a reference to a coin or coins usually means Camarilla, *fakka* being an Arabic expression for "small change" which puns on *al-Fakka*, i.e. the star Alphecca, part of the seven-star constellation of the Corona Borealis, seven being the number of Camarilla clans (until recently). As a result, the phrases can prove rather difficult for an outsider to decode, particularly an outsider unfamiliar with Arabic and Arabic literary conventions.

COURIERS

Operatives sent on courier missions naturally tend to be those who can move between cities without arousing too much suspicion: Country Gangrel, the few surviving Ravnos, neonates who pass for anarchs, etc. The Hand also uses ghouls couriers, although, like other Sabbat, its members don't keep ghouls nearly as often or as long as their Camarilla cousins do. It is not at all uncommon for such couriers to have their messages and even their route embedded via Dominate, such that they don't know where they're supposed to go until they get there. Ordinary Sabbat would take great umbrage at undergoing such an invasion of privacy and autonomy. But fortunately (for the subject), Hand training and ideology succeeds reasonably well in instilling the notion that no true devotee would shrink at giving up his unlife, his liberty, even his sense of self for the good of the Hand.

The Hand also makes fairly frequent use of animal couriers — as one might well expect of any group with a large Gangrel population and substantial Tzimisce and Nosferatu contingents. Animal couriers range from the pedestrian (carrier pigeons) to the decidedly preternatural (a cat that has been both fleshcrafted and selectively bred from generations of ghouls forebears to the point where its intelligence matches the average four-year-old's, bearing a telepathic message that can be unlocked only by a combination of Dominate and Auspex).

NETWORKING

Information also travels among Hand operatives via the same informal webs that proliferate in any community, however widespread. While *kamuts* are ad-hoc by nature, operatives who prove exceptionally well matched often find themselves put together again and again, thus the term "reunion *kamut*." Such Cainites usually keep in touch with each other even during the sometimes-long gaps between missions. Operatives who share a specialty or a field of expertise also come to know each others' names and stomping grounds. Usually three degrees of separation, at most, link any one Hand agent to any other. The trick is knowing exactly who or what those degrees are. Still, with careful detective work (at which many Hand excel) one can often track down whomever one seeks.

GATHERINGS

The Hand tries to limit the number of mass gatherings it holds for reasons of security; witness the fate of the Tremere *antitribu*. Still, some occasions are simply too momentous not to gather for: initiations of graduating cadet classes, for example, or promotions. Seraphim will frequently hold a ceremony to commend the survivors of a recent offensive and honor the fallen. While Blood Feasts usually accompany such celebrations, the Hand prides itself on its lack of hedonism relative to the rest of the Sabbat, and things don't generally descend to quite the same depths of bacchanalia as in the sect at large.

On the local level, members of a Watch come together as regularly as they can manage to take the Vaulderie. *Kamuts* also share the cup repeatedly during their missions.

THE TATTOO

The tattoo, being itself a mystical mark, makes an excellent focus for spells and rituals of all sorts. The Seraphim do have access to certain powerful blood magics that can reach operatives through the tattoo, though they generally employ those magics only when the matter is truly urgent and no other

ARS MEMORIA, THE ART OF MEMORY

Long ago, so the story goes, the poet Simonides was hired to compose and recite verses for a banquet. Unfortunately, he was pious or traditional enough to begin his recitation with a few lines praising the gods before moving on to what he certainly knew to be his real job for the evening — flattering the host. The host paid Simonides only half his fee, snorting that he could just look up the gods for the rest.

Moral number one: If you ever find yourself in a fable, watch your mouth.

A servant told Simonides that two young men on horseback were at the door asking for him. Simonides went out front but saw no one. As he stood wondering, the banquet hall collapsed behind him. When the townspeople went to bury the dead, the bodies were so mangled as to be unidentifiable. But Simonides found he could recall precisely where every guest had been sitting, and was able to identify everyone from their position in the rubble. Castor and Pollux (the two young horsemen) had seen to the gods' half. Thus was the Art of Memory born.

Moral number two: Gods needn't pay cash.

The Art of Memory is a mnemonic system well known from Classical times through the Renaissance, a common accomplishment of the clergy and educated gentlefolk that died out only with the advent of the printing press. Many Cainites born before literacy was widespread have a capacity for memorization that amazes their childer. It is said, however, that true masters of the Art of Memory could perform such feats as memorizing every article, price and purchaser from a day-long auction and call them back without effort days later.

The Hand has preserved this ancient art for obvious reasons. The fewer secrets written down, the fewer secrets for enemy eyes to stumble across. Operatives working deep in hostile territory must travel light and can't count on being able to contact their fellows for reminders on often-complex mission data.

The Art of Memory relies on the fact that the brain recalls visual images, particularly vivid or unusual images, more reliably than other sorts of information. A practitioner selects a building she knows very well, preferably one with lots of nooks and crannies — say, the cloister at her old convent — and mentally walks herself through it. At each nook or cranny she then visualizes some striking image that she can associate with an item on her list of things to memorize. Such images frequently rely on wordplay for the association, and if they also evoke a strong emotion such as laughter or disgust, all the better.

When the practitioner wishes to recall the items on her list, she simply revisits the mental locale and does another walkthrough. With practice, the information can be recalled even after many months. The especially adept might have any number of such mental buildings, each storing a different kind of data; it's easy to erase and "write over" old data that's no longer needed. True masters do not even need the crutch of buildings. Instead, they use dizzyingly complex systems of interlocking circles or other abstract constructs for their framework. The old rhetorical expression "In the first place... in the second place..." comes from the Art of Memory.

Storing information in this way has the side benefit, for Hand agents, of providing a possible confusion to anyone that might be trying to strip information from a practitioner's mind. Since everything is stored symbolically, and the symbolic language is often quite idiosyncratic, this forms a layer of abstraction that the would-be mind-reader must break through in order to get at the actual meaning ("I keep asking him for the passwords and he keeps giving me an image of the Louvre, except the paintings are all wrong!").

In addition, the information stored in the imaginary buildings is not always harmless: The practitioner knows to skip over a certain alcove whenever she walks through the "convent," but if an interrogator stumbles across it, it triggers a Dominate command to forget all the data completely. The visualization that captured operatives use, *in extremis*, to set off the Kiss of the Asp (see the sidebar later in this chapter) is also stored using Art of Memory techniques.

means of communication is possible. They can send out a sort of telepathic "general bulletin" (which comes in the form of a vision or "daymare") to any and all Hand members worldwide. Few yet walking the night can remember the last time this was actually done, but it has happened. If the Seraphim have some further link to an individual — such as a sample of blood, hair, flesh or perhaps even handwriting or a True Name — they can also use the same magics to contact that individual instead. Indeed, some Hand agents with an inkling of blood-sorcery say that the Seraphim can probably do much more than simply touch someone's mind; if sufficient power is in the spell, they might very well be able to kill an operative from a distance. None, however, can point to a specific occasion in which they know this to have happened for certain.

TECHNOLOGY

Because Sabbat tend to have shorter unives than their Camarilla counterparts, the sect boasts a statistically younger population. Unfortunately, this comparative youth doesn't necessarily translate to a better grasp of technology and other innovations; many Sabbat disdain mortal gadgets and ideas just as they disdain everything else about mortals (except for their blood, of course). Even those who feel no particular discomfort around mortals don't, for the most part, actively seek their company. As a result, Sabbat often fall behind the times even more quickly than their enemies.

The Hand certainly has no great desire to mingle with its food supply either. However, it has a far easier time admitting that mortals are still good for a few things besides that precious

vitae. Too much pride in this regard is a luxury the subject doesn't feel it can afford. War, assassination and espionage have always both driven technology and been driven by it. A vampire who has no idea that his cell phone calls can be intercepted or that a Blood Doll can carry a mini-camera is just that much easier to kill; the Hand has seen this truth in play from one side of the equation, and doesn't intend to be caught out on the other side of it.

Accordingly, Hand agents strive to stay on the forefront of technology, if of nothing else. Some swallow their revulsion and consult with mortal experts (Embracing or making ghouls of those who prove particularly useful); others take night classes or online courses, or subscribe to *Soldier of Fortune* and *Wired*. A surprising number buy computers and wrestle with network cable and C++ tutorials for the sake of breaking into some Nosferatu cabal's clan intranet, only to discover in the process that yes, in fact, they *do* Yahoo!

Neonate operatives communicate online quite frequently now, coming together on secure servers to exchange posts and instant messages in a mishmash cant of Hand code-poetry, hacker-speak and hitmen's slang. Hand elders are not alone in expressing alarm over these developments, particularly those who understand just enough of the technology to realize how hard it is to secure. But some young initiates practically evangelize the idea of a Black Hand network and database — promising of course that nothing of real sensitivity will be stored on any machine connected in any way to the Internet, not even behind the firewall....

DISCIPLINE

When it comes to keeping discipline within its ranks, the Hand believes an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The screening of candidates, the heavy indoctrination, the long, arduous and hazardous training process — everything prospects must endure serves to make it unlikely that troublemakers will even get initiated in the first place.

Still, no system is perfect. The occasional mercenary, subversive or quisling does manage to slip through. And even Hand agents whose only desire is to prove themselves faithful and obedient servants of the order might end up running afoul of their superiors due to a misunderstanding or a flat-out screwup. Although no formal code of punishment exists, the leadership does hand down certain traditional penalties:

- **Death:** This is actually the most common punishment for any offense that was clearly intentional. Even honest mistakes that result in the needless death of multiple Hand operatives might require expiation via the Final Death. After all, one who is truly vindicated before Caine need not fear death anyway, because of the sacred Promise extended to all the faithful. Those who are unworthy of the true Blood, however, will surely meet their just reward before the Black Throne of judgment. The Seraphim make no excuses for their harshness in this. As initiates are told upon their induction, their unlives are forfeit already; they have given themselves up to whatever fate the Hand sees fit to mete out, whether it seems "fair" or not.

Only the assembled Seraphim can hand down a sentence of Final Death. If a Hand operative is believed to have committed a crime worthy of such a sentence, her superiors will likely stake her until the Council can be convened. In many cases, the

convict may (if she wishes) regain some small measure of honor by committing suicide, but one way or another, die she will. In the exceedingly rare instances where the Council convicts someone in *absentia* because she's evaded capture, a Hand-wide Wild Hunt is called and no effort is spared to slay the miscreant. (In fact, bolting in order to escape a lesser punishment is in itself an offense punishable by Final Death.)

- **Loss of the Hand:** In this terrible and relatively rare punishment, the hand bearing the sacred tattoo is severed with a silver blade and the wound cauterized with fire. The operative then undergoes a blood ritual that makes him easy to find at the Council of Seraphim's pleasure. On pain of Final Death, he may not heal his wound until he has made amends. This is a form of excommunication, leveled on only those whom the Seraphim consider valuable enough to be worthy of a second — and last — chance. An operative who deliberately disobeyed a single direct order but served the subject loyally for many years up till that point, for example, might be considered for this fate.

Stripped of his identifying mark, the convict is not considered to be of the true Blood for the duration of the punishment, and should he have the misfortune to die in this state, the Promise will almost certainly not apply. He has a year and a night, no more, to make adequate restitution for his misdeeds. If he fails to do so, or in any way betrays the Hand during this time, then he reaps the Final Death. If he succeeds, however, he may heal his wound and be welcomed back into the Hand with a formal ceremony in which the tattoo (which reappears when the hand does) is traced over with the blood of the Seraphim.

- **Binding of the Tongue:** The Seraphim also have a ritual which can "bind the tongue" of the recipient, preventing him from talking about the Hand to outsiders, but this ritual is not used very often. Operatives whose loose lips pose a genuine threat to the subject simply aren't long for this world. However, the Seraphim have been known to grant clemency to extremely competent operatives whose only fault is a tendency to brag too widely or unintentionally let things slip. Such operatives are almost certain to be removers rather than spies or *shakari*; after all, for the latter, discretion is the *sine qua non* of their jobs. More often, the ritual is cast on outsiders (especially Camarilla mercenaries recruited to spy on their own) whom the Hand, for whatever reason, has chosen to entrust with more sensitive work than usual.

- **Flogging:** Dominions and, occasionally, Watch Commanders administer this penalty when some operative under their authority has made a mistake that unnecessarily jeopardized his *kamut* or caused a mission to fail. (Again, intentional misdeeds, even relatively "minor" ones, tend to be punished by Final Death.) Truthfully, this punishment exists more for the sake of the punished than the superior. Most Hand agents feel horribly guilty when they learn that some action of theirs has caused the Hand trouble or embarrassment, and suffering in public (for the flogging is always administered before witnesses) helps them purge themselves of that guilt while simultaneously providing a strong disincentive to re-offend. In order to properly mortify the notoriously hardy flesh of a Cainite, the whip is usually steel-tipped and the steel tips themselves honed to a wicked edge before each stroke.

- **Assignments:** Much of the practical power Watch Commanders, dominions and Seraphim enjoy really comes from their right to parcel out mission placements as they see fit.



Some assignments and contracts are decidedly more attractive than others. As a rule, operatives jockey for important missions rather than safe ones or even prestigious ones (though despite all the indoctrination, some measure of desire to earn glory, at least in the eyes of one's fellow Chosen, still remains in the unbeating hearts of most). Some, however, make no secret of their ambition to make dominion or even Seraph some night, and such folk are even easier to control than the humbler sort. If a superior becomes displeased with one of her operatives, she can send the message quite clearly enough simply by cutting him out of the work she knows he wants to do. Neglecting to assign an operative to a reunion *kamut* he's already served in successfully before is a particularly stinging and humiliating rebuke.

- **Appeals:** When the subject is at the first watchtower (*The Four Ride Forth*), Hand agents of any Rank may appeal any decision, including decisions about assignments or punishments, up the chain of command. In practice, however, the leadership sees to it that this process is as unpleasant for the complainant as possible. The Hand's culture being a combination of mystery cult and elite military unit, there simply isn't much social support available for a whiner, even if the whiner has a point. So what if your dominion's a bastard? Of course he's a bastard — all the dominions are supposed to be bastards, willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done no matter who gets pissed, hurt or ashed en route. A few times in the subject's history, an official has gained a widespread reputation for wasting operatives and resources needlessly, for alienating everyone of talent or skill, for turning into a loose cannon, etc.;

in such a cases, appeals have historically gotten further and been heard more sympathetically than usual. At higher watchtowers, however, even justifiable appeals become harder and finally impossible to make.

- **Unofficial Punishments:** The Hand's philosophy is one of fanatical pragmatism, or pragmatic fanaticism, depending on how you like to look at it, and under many circumstances pragmatism becomes the more visible facet of the two. Most Hand agents know and tacitly accept that sometimes when an official wants to rid himself of a troublesome operative, rather than make a formal proceeding out of the matter, he sends her on a suicide mission instead — or simply ever more hazardous ones, hoping the subject's enemies will take care of the problem for him. Waste not, want not. Why let a death go to waste when it can serve some useful purpose? Such logic is entirely consistent with the spirit of the Admonitions.

Of course, many Hand consider it an honor to be sent on a dangerous or fatal mission, albeit an honor the recipient doesn't get to enjoy for very long; so one should not visit this particular punishment on a victim unless one is ready to hear her trumpeted as one of the glorious fallen martyrs from now until Gehenna. There's also always the chance that she will survive to wreak revenge, or worse yet, betray the Hand. If she does, however, it will probably be a matter of luck rather than choice, because even the most disaffected Hand agents would rather take their chances in the field than suffer the shame likely to be heaped upon them if they try to appeal even the most baldly politically motivated suicide assignment.

THE ADMONITIONS

War is of vital importance to the State, the province of life and death, the road to survival or ruin. It is therefore mandatory that it be thoroughly studied.

— Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The oral tradition of the Black Hand treats the Admonitions — a body of sayings regarding strategy, tactics, and philosophy — as the foundation of the art of war. Cadets are required to memorize them as exercises in mastering the Art of Memory; *kamut* leaders use their principles in planning and executing missions; members sometimes even quote the more obscure at each other as a kind of informal recognition code. The Admonitions have a wide range of sources, from Sun Tzu and other eastern strategists, to the eighteenth-century rules for Roger's Rangers, to the writings of Hand leaders. And while much of the Black Hand's esoteric and philosophical knowledge is considered so secret that even the mere mention of such things to outsiders is forbidden, most of the Admonitions (particularly those by deceased mortal strategists) fall into a less tightly guarded category. No dominion will care if a Black Hand member quotes Sun Tzu or General Patton to her packmates. It's nothing she couldn't have found or read on her own, or that any Sabbat with a bit of initiative couldn't discover.

In truth, there are two parts to the Admonitions: the sayings themselves, which are usually short and to the point; and the Commentaries, in which various Black Hand strategists illuminate, illustrate and expand on the Admonitions on a given topic. The Commentaries are studied only after initiation, usually with mentors or other members of the local Watch. Unlike the Admonitions, the Commentaries are secret. While a Black Hand member may take action based on anything he's learned, all he's permitted to quote are the basic aphorisms. If this makes him look like a strategic or philosophical genius — well, there are worse things for the Black Hand's reputation.

AS THE ADMONITIONS SAY...

The following are a sampling of the Admonitions commonly known to, and frequently quoted by, Black Hand operatives. Storytellers and players should feel free to create more as the situation arises (or as inspiration strikes). The truly ambitious are referred to *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu.

On the Way of the Black Hand:

- He who has died need not fear death; for him it is as the arms of his Father welcoming him home.
- Gehenna is the breath of the dead.

On Stealth and Secrecy:

- Be as a shadow on a dark night; unseen, unheard, let there be no sign of your coming in or going out, nor leave any trace of your presence behind.
- Sun Tzu said, Subtle and insubstantial, the expert leaves no trace; divinely mysterious, he is inaudible. Thus he is master of his enemy's fate.
- Leave no evidence behind. Not so much as a cigarette butt, your comrade's ashes, a shell casing, or any eyewitnesses. If you can't take it with you, destroy it by the most expedient and thorough method possible.

On the Value of Espionage:

- Sun Tzu said, Whether the object be to crush an army, to storm a city, or to assassinate an individual, it is always necessary to begin by finding out the names of the attendants, the aides-de-camp, and door-keepers and sentries of the general in command. Our spies must be commissioned to ascertain these.
- There's no such thing as too much intelligence before an operation. There is, however, such a thing as bad intelligence, so check your sources; don't trust any information that conflicts utterly with other verifiable sources. If something sounds too good to be true, there's probably a good reason for that.

On Assassination:

- Parvati said, The death of a single man at a critical moment can defeat an army of thousands in a single stroke.
- Ar-Rashid said, A true assassin has no ego, which is well, for he receives no glory.
- Massacres are sloppy and draw attention. It's better to select specific targets whose loss will most cripple the enemy. If a massacre is truly necessary, call in a War Party and let them do the dirty work.

On Loyalty to Comrades:

- Leave no member of your *kamut* behind, neither wounded, staked or captured, unless there is truly no other choice; do not even leave his ashes if they can be recovered. Do not assume a member of your *kamut* is dead until you have his ashes in your hand.

CONTINUED ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE...

BLACK HAND MISSIONS

From the War Party training lectures of "Vassar," aka Katherine Stoddard, Black Hand remover:

Okay. Anybody else want to explain how much they already know about taking down Camarilla? Marvelous. We don't have all that long here. Anybody check the almanac or the Web? When's sunrise? "Like, around 6?" Are you kidding me?

Try 5:41, asshole. Always, *always* know *exactly* when sunrise is. Clearly I'm starting from scratch here. Everybody sit and for Caine's sake get comfortable.

FIRST PRINCIPLES

Obviously I can't teach you to think like the Hand in three nights. So I won't promise that. What I can do is give you a place to start, a few grains of sand to shove deep into your delicate brain tissues in hopes that something like pearls of wisdom will eventually coalesce around them. Your bishop wants me to explain some of the major differences between what you do, which is what seems to ensure that more than half of you have been killed every time you've gone after this prince to date; and what I do, which gets me this: forty-one pairs of fangs on a silver chain and counting.

- **Make sure you really did leave your ego at home.** I can't emphasize this enough. I do not operate from the desire to have a story to tell at the next Fire Dance while I'm working up the nerve to jump. I do not operate from the desire to prove I should be pack ductus. I do not operate from the assumption that if Private Thwack got two of the bastards, I have to get three and it doesn't really matter how that happens. I realize that's all terribly important in the quotidian milieu — yeah?

Then look it up — but in the field, your priority is to do your part the best way you know how and worry about making it look good later. Getting ashed in a posthumous pissing contest doesn't look very good, much less letting your whole pack get ashed because you didn't think sitting tight and keeping lookout like you were supposed to would cut you a big enough slice of the glory pie.

- **Have Heaven and Earth on your side.** This is poetic-speak for, "don't fight circumstances that are bigger than you are." If it's summer, your plan should take advantage of the time squeeze. If it's winter, your plan should benefit from the extra hours. Don't use a winter plan for summer. If your target dwells in a space-age fortress, you could either spend thousands of dollars buying spiffy burglary equipment and weeks doing reconnaissance, or you could just figure out a way to just get him out of the damn thing. Don't keep to a plan that hinged on fact X once you realize you've been gravely misinformed on fact X — back off and get a new plan. More on this later. You get the picture.

- **Make your enemy's proficiency irrelevant. Make his weakness the heart of the mission.** This is the extension of the Heaven and Earth principle. If your target was the finest swordsman in the court of Louis XI, for Caine's sake, nail him from a distance. If he thinks he loves his childe, use that. Do not feel obliged to test your mettle against his when you already know the likely outcome. Everybody whose opinion should matter to you probably also knows already. I realize this is a far cry from the tilting-windmills kind of rhetoric you get at your pre-battle rites. That's because in the Hand we teach vees to win. If you want to be cannon fodder, go right ahead and act like cannon fodder. If you're more interested in the enemy being dead, whatever happens to you personally, then listen to me.

- **Always know something the enemy doesn't.** You may not think you can do this in every case, but believe me, you can. Get something; anything. Ideally you'll find something you

THE ADMONITIONS *CONTINUED...*

On Monomacy:

- Do not resort to Monomacy over trivialities, especially with another member of the Black Hand. Only the Seraphim may authorize a duel between the Chosen, and *only* when no other solution to save honor is possible. One of the Chosen who kills another outside of an authorized duel shall be cast out from Caine's Chosen and then put also to Final Death, for the Chosen are better off without such a one.

- If one challenges you to a Monomacy duel, and is not of the Chosen of Caine, you must show no mercy; but send that one to Final Death, for he has challenged one of the Chosen. If an outsider slays one of the Chosen in Monomacy, and sends the Chosen to Final Death, that one may be given the option of initiation to take the place of the one he has slain; otherwise, let him not see another night.

Mission Imperatives:

- Know the plan. Know also the plan is likely to fall to pieces within the first minutes of the mission, so know the contingencies, and be prepared to think fast and shoot faster.

- Don't fuck up your part of the job. Your comrades are relying on you to do it right. If you think you have to bail, report to your *kamut* leader, and if she says bail, then you bail. Otherwise, you're just gonna have to get creative.

- Always return by a different route than the one you went out by, to avoid ambushes, and make sure nothing follows you home.

About the Obvious:

- Do not reveal Black Hand secrets, oaths, passwords, signals, identities of your comrades, codes, or the Mysteries of Caine to anyone outside of the Chosen. He who betrays his oath shall find no mercy; let his blood and soul be devoured by one more worthy, and his Name stricken from the rolls of the Chosen.

know how to use right off, but if you don't, then be humble enough to settle for something you might conceivably figure out a use for later on. Note that this is quite obviously something you have to do *in advance*. Example: My old mentor was in a war council once where the resident Malkavian kept babbling "Don't look directly at it, don't look directly at it," so he went home and fished out his old astronomy books and discovered there was a solar eclipse with a totality of over four minutes due to come up later that year. Four minutes of night in the middle of the day. Took him a while to devise a plan that took full advantage of those four minutes, but man, was his victim surprised. Ashes, ashes, they all fell down.

- **Conserve energy.** Your energy is precious. There are times when nothing else will save you. So don't spend it when you don't have to. If you ever see a chance to screw up the enemy by not doing something, that's a beautiful thing. If you can get somebody else to do your work for you, even better. Again, more on this later.

- **Conserve any resource that's scarce or nonrenewable. Be prodigal with the rest.** The trick is knowing what's scarce. Among us vees, time is usually cheap, except on those occasions when it isn't. Like at 5:30 this morning. Blood, likewise, is really cheap, except when it isn't. Talk is almost always cheap. Your black-market rocket launcher is not cheap or easily replaceable. So don't lug it out in the middle of a firefight. This logic applies to Licks too, I'm afraid. Take a look at your pack, pretend you don't share the cup with any of them and that you're not all dewy-eyed over Chiquitita because you have a thing for bottle-blondes still. Some of them are clearly more use to the Sabbat than others, right?

- **Remember the blood.** Oh boy, is this important. And obvious. And so very, very easy to overlook. The fact that the Camarilla Licks do a good job of pretending to themselves that they're not hemovores doesn't mean we have to indulge them in their delusion. I'll talk about some ways you can use the blood against them. Just remember, if you control the blood situation, you can take down even an elder no problem, because you can make her weaker and stupider and she can't do a damned thing about it.

- **Never assume.** Ever. Ever.

ESPIONAGE

Intelligence is crucial before, during, and after any operation. Read Sun Tzu. He describes five kinds of spies. Well, really in ancient Chinese thought there's five of everything, but this is a good way to conceptualize it. The "local spy": just meaning one of the locals, like, for instance, you buy one of the Nosferatu in the Camarilla warren, or maybe the lone Setite in town. The "inward spy": meaning somebody who actually has some pull with your target, like the prince's eldest child. The "converted spy": That means if you catch some snot-nosed anarchy who's trying to infiltrate us to get in good with his prince, you offer him the bigger better deal and turn that dagger around. The "doomed spy": That's when, whether or not you recruit Mr. Anarchy, you let him see something he can take back to the prince and make sure it's as far off the mark as possible. And the "surviving spy": someone you send among the enemy who actually is supposed to make it back in one piece.

THE KISS OF THE ASP

Hand spies and assassins are highly trained in the hallowed art of not getting caught, but still, it does happen occasionally. When a Hand agent falls into enemy hands, his *kamut* will stage a rescue if that seems at all feasible. Unfortunately, however, it may well not. While many Hand are also trained in resisting torture and mind-invasion, if the interrogator is skilled and powerful, such training at best delays the inevitable.

Accordingly, the Hand has instituted a ritual known as the Kiss of the Asp, which is performed on agents whose duties bring them particularly (and dangerously) close to the enemy. The exact source of the ritual is unknown — rumor lays it at the doorstep of everyone from the old Assamite sorcerers to the Setites to the Tremere *antitribu* — but once in place, it's fairly simple to set off. Using the Art of Memory, the captured agent visualizes a certain sequence of images (the most common sequence involves walking into a room, opening a desk drawer, taking out a vial of poison and swallowing it, but the details are always highly personalized). This mental "combination" unlocks the ritual. None ever survive to describe the exact effects, but supposedly a painful venom of some sort spreads through the Cainite's veins, turning blood to fire and flesh to smoking ash in a matter of seconds. There's more than one apocryphal tale of a Hand operative, in the midst of this heroic self-immolation, managing to seize the arm or foot of a captor and set him afire as well.

MANAGING SPIES

If you're the one employing the spy, realize that you are inherently not in a good position to control him — so don't try. Instead, just remember: What are the priorities of the spy? What does he want above all? A: to feel secure in the support he's getting from you. B: not to have his cover blown. If it's a suicide mission, you want to be damned sure of one of two things: That you've been open and honest about that fact, or that there's absolutely, positively no way in hell that he could survive and get you back for it later.

If it's not a suicide mission — especially if your spy is supposed to stay in place while you use his information — for Caine's sweet sake don't use it in a way that makes it obvious where you got it. Provide the enemy with some other explanation for how you figured it out. And if your spy wants a certain piece of equipment or some money or needs you to make a phone call or whatever, don't bust his balls about it unless it really truly is something you can't do for him. He's out there putting his ass on the line to get you what you need. You're supposed to be holding the other end of the safety rope. If he gets the idea you're not really holding to your end, the information you get from him is going to go into a definite quality slump.

CASE STUDIES: ESPIONAGE

Case Study #1: Warwick's Hoard, New England, 1990

From an interview with "Falstaff," Nosferatu dominion and shakar:

You may call it a success if you like; I say 'tisn't done till the old canker-blossom is made to greet the dawn. And I shall be sore disappointed if the Camarilla are first to seize that privilege. But aye, my spies were there. They turned up that old witch, Prudence Stone, and her little cockalorum, who wished as we all did to see the invader overthrown. Their desire burned so hot that they didn't shame to hob and nob with our base like. Together we plotted, and when our schemes were wound up, I sent a lass barely twenty years in the Blood — like the very devil i'the face, but of winsome ways — into the warren to be welcomed. A harmless little lamb among the wolves. She learned soon enough that Warwick's grandchilde was unhappy, and then that this was because he had been slaved in blood to his sire; just so, we approached the young creature and offered him the freedom of the Vaulderie if he should please us in his service.

He it was who led us through the passages to old Warwick's enormous store of gold, of bonds and shelf upon shelf of books and papers — dark secrets he'd learnt and meant to traffic in. A king's and a spy-master's trove, all in one! I knew at once that Warwick's greed would be his undoing. In the week before our allies' bold assault, I used a few of his secrets in such fashion that he would know his hoard had been discovered. The blackguard was amazed indeed! And so eager to save his precious treasure from its despoilers that instead of standing with his conspirators in battle at their very hour of need, he stayed down in the tunnels, forcing the young of the warren to move the entire store on their backs, sackload by sackload. I fear he never did manage to get away with the half of it, but alas, he did finally think to save his old tanned hide in the end. By that time, however, New England was won...

Case Study #2: Paper Tiger, Detroit, 1919

From an interview with Banjoko, Lasombra emissary, dominion, and acting Seraph, translated from the Spanish:

Well, Montaigne has always known how to look out for his own interests, but the Sabbat's at large...don't let his signature on the old Purchase Pact fool you, he's no conciliator. At the height of the sectwide infighting, far from trying to restore order in his city, he actually tried to take advantage of the chaos and install himself as archbishop. Nor did he accomplish this by murder alone. That sort of damage would have been easier to repair. He also played his fellow bishops off each other politically, promising each one protection and alliance against the others; inducing this one to betray that one in order to secure some imagined advantage, such that within two years they'd all sworn dire oaths to perform the Amaranth on each other. Worse, the Hand had recently come across certain information that suggested the Camarilla was casting its shrewd glance on Detroit. But evidently the threat was not quite immediate enough to induce the bishops to any useful action. I was sent to try to reason with them, but all my pleadings fell on deaf ears. Even for an emissary, the time comes to abandon words.

I thought that perhaps if I simply made their danger sufficiently obvious, there was some chance they might get organized by the time it actually arrived. Accordingly, I took my plan to the Seraphim, who thankfully agreed and arranged for the necessary funds. The first step was to send in ghouls to secure appropriate positions in the community: bankers, stockholders, fed on Ventrue blood; an assistant professor fed on the blood of our now late Tremere *antitribu*; an art-gallery entrepreneur fed on Toreador blood. In other words, exactly what one would expect from the advance stages of a Camarilla invasion. I didn't, of course, dare hope that these particularly shortsighted Sabbat would detect the ghouls right away — not without help — but that was all right, as long as they were found eventually. I did provide a clue or two pointing them in the right directions.

The next step, to buy a nice old wood-frame house and begin renovating it, with particular and obvious attention to the basement. Then at last it was time to move in our "Camarilla scouts," who were, of course, actually a skilled and powerful *kamut* of removers. Well, I don't know if the natives noticed anything up until that point, but then they certainly did. And the bishops knew just enough about the usual Camarilla methods to assume that the new coterie must be a clutch of youngsters. After all, everyone knew Camarilla *elders* never made personal appearances during an offensive until it was time for the coup de grace.

The removers had instructions to see to it that one survivor, and only one, escaped out of the two brainless young packs that were sent against them, and that what that survivor saw should leave absolutely no doubt that indeed there was a hoary Camarilla elder now in their very midst. Well, display the right powers of Blood and wear the right frilly outdated clothes and the illusion is easy enough. Then the appropriate level of panic finally set in. An elder had moved into town under their very noses! And look at all these ghouls already in place! What, or who, would be next? Of course I made sure I was there during the ensuing deliberations; my services were, at long last, welcome. Under my guidance, another small force was put together (with rather more care this time) and sent against "the elder and his foul brood."

The result? Victory. The elder and his foul brood were trapped and burned within their own house. A rousing sight indeed, which helped cement our newborn coalition. Hm? Oh, no, of course not, not really. Remember, we had renovated the house, and it was very little trouble to see to it there was a handy and unobtrusive escape route from the engulfing flames.

Oh. About holding the safety rope. Of course if your spy actually does get caught, you never knew a blessed thing about it. Never admit you're spying. It's not an issue of shame. It's just if you admit it, that gives any war-hawks on the other side the excuse they need to go on a tear, which is usually not what you want right then. But if you disavow all knowledge, then the doves can use that to bolster their position. Of course this is only an issue when you're actually in communication with the enemy; but that happens more often than you thwacks probably realize. Especially since while the Camarilla is always our enemy, our enemy isn't always the Camarilla. We do get into snits with the so-called independent clans.

Now in the Black Hand we have our own intelligence agents who are loyal unto the Final Death and would gladly swallow fire for the glory of Caine and all that. But we'd never get enough data to build up any real coherent picture of the Camarilla just from them. We also suborn the enemy — remember, "inward spies," "converted spies." You can do it too. In fact, it's not all that hard. But once you've got someone who's a prospect, who seems willing to sell out her sire or whatever, never be afraid to screen the hell out of her before you agree. Have someone with good eyesight check out her colors, have her followed, give her a test assignment. If she's serious enough to do this for you, you're not going to scare her off just by demonstrating a healthy skepticism, okay? Camarilla like to huff and puff a lot and make like their dignity's affronted whenever somebody doubts their word, but believe me, they know the score.

SPYING

Okay. I've been talking about using spies. If you *are* the spy — I have two pieces of advice for you. First off: technology, technology, technology. Get it. Use it. Love it. A lot of Camarilla guys try really hard to stay on top of this stuff. If discussions of wiretapping make their little heads spin, they'll just make ghouls to take care of it. You have to stay ahead of them or it's your ass. If you're on a spy mission where you aren't using a cover, what have you got going for you? Your ability to hide, your ability to sneak, and your surveillance technology. That's it. So get wired.

If you are using a cover, what have you got going for you? Above all else, the fact that you don't play by these people's rules and they don't know that. You could absolutely care less about your prestation or your standing with the prince or the fact that you've drunk from that elder twice now. You can afford to leave a mess because eventually — maybe sooner or maybe later, depending — but eventually you're going to be pulling out. Now of course you don't want to let them in on this fact until you're ready to pull out, but what it means is that all their calculations about you are going to be thrown off accordingly. That is your best and strongest leverage. Remember that.

SECURITY AND DISINFORMATION

Don't forget that espionage isn't just learning things about the enemy. It's also about making sure they don't learn things about you. There are two basic ways to do this. One, keep information out of reach. Two, give them the wrong information.



Now luckily, most Camarilla don't know enough about the Sabbat to really mount intelligent spying campaigns against us. They'll send us their neonates or anarchs or whatnot, and these rookies honestly think they're saying the things we like to hear, and we of course sniff them out within minutes. Right? Please tell me you do.

However, you can never take the enemy's cluelessness for granted. Operate from the assumption that either there are spies in place or there are spies on the way. Just like the best way to make a computer system unhackable is not to connect it to anything else, the best way to keep information secure is just to not tell people. Three can keep a secret when two are dead. If I put you in a position over your fellow Sabbat during this siege, I'm going to expect you to keep them informed on a strictly need-to-know basis. I don't care if they're your Siamese twin. You don't tell them anything they don't need to do their jobs.

Realize also that I'm going to be doing the same thing to all of you. Please don't take it personally. It doesn't mean I don't trust you, or that I'm planning to send you to certain doom, or anything like that. It just means that I'm making security a sure thing, and in the end you'll thank me for it. Again, go to Sun Tzu. A general "must be able to mystify his officers and men by false reports and appearances, and thus keep them in total ignorance."

Right. That's exactly what I'm saying. Most of the time I will be telling you stuff you should believe because it's true. Sometimes, however, I will be telling you stuff I want the enemy to believe because it isn't true. Or I may have some of you execute a fakeout maneuver, and you won't necessarily know till afterward that that's what it was. Let me offer you two thoughts to mull on that you might find comforting. One: Yes, I am a military commander, and it's my job to send Licks to their deaths. But I don't do so lightly. My first object is to achieve our goal. My second objective is to lose as few Sabbat as possible doing it. Two, I can personally guarantee that if everyone involved does what they're supposed to do, fewer of you will die than have died in either of the last two attempts, and you will finally have something to show for it all.

If that isn't good enough for you — tough shit.

CAPTAINING WAR PARTIES

Now I'm talking to the locals here, aren't I? Yes. You guys are the ones who directly stand to benefit from taking this city. But you're going to be joined in the next couple weeks by a lot of different folks. There'll be nomads, I'm not quite sure how many yet, who might or might not decide to stick around to enjoy the spoils. A couple refugees from New York looking for new homes. A pack from Charleston out to make a name for itself as an elite ass-kicking squad...sorry, kids, your bishop's already said they could come. And another pack from Nashville that's probably expecting you guys to return the favor when their turn comes. But this is what Sabbat do. We bus in to help our sectmates during sieges. Very cosmopolitan.

My job is to coordinate all you guys into something that has a shot at success. Obviously I'm not going to be making the same kinds of arrangements with you as I'm going to be

making with these others. The motives are different, the needs are different, the abilities are different. I also have to be the liaison with the bishop. She's out there among the other officials slapping backs and swapping favors and busting her ass to make sure the support is going to be there for what we're trying to do. If you're wondering why she hasn't been returning calls lately, that's why. It doesn't mean she's stopped giving a shit; she's just simply that busy. I am your conduit. You need something to get to her, let me know. I'm already on her schedule.

I am also going to be with you out in the field. That's why you can trust me. I'm not to send you into a situation and sit back on the sidelines with popcorn while you get creamed. You may have had this experience with other so-called consultants. Know that this will be different. The Hand doesn't ask anything of its fellow Sabbat that it's not willing to do. When one of us comes in to consult on a war effort, we shepherd the thing from beginning to end so we're accountable for the results. If we make the plan, we stay to help execute it.

Another thing my being here can tell you: This is a serious campaign. The Hand doesn't take orders from politicians just for the sake of sucking up. It does not waste its time

CASE STUDIES: WAR PARTIES

Case Study #1: Remember the Blood, San Francisco, 1889

From an interview with "Chang," Brujah dominion and remover:

That's true. California was always an anarchy country. I myself came into the Sabbat by way of the Anarch Movement. But things almost became otherwise. In my younger nights, there was a great push on the part of the Camarilla to settle down the West Coast from Seattle, where they had managed to gain footing. We were fortunate that Seraph Corvus came to assist in repelling the coterie that tried to make their way into Baja. Once that was accomplished, he then did me the supreme honor of asking me to lead a small force back to my old home, San Francisco, in order to eliminate their sires.

We learned to our alarm that the eldest of these was over two centuries old, which seemed quite ancient to us at the time, and it was readily apparent that we would not be able to confront him and his compatriots without having first secured some advantage. In the end, we were able to starve them out. Taking our inspiration from the recent newspaper bulletins from London on a certain Jack the Ripper, we arranged the appearance of a mad killer running loose in the darkened streets. We would observe the elder's visit to some house of assignation, et cetera, and see to it that whether or not he left a mess behind, he left a mess behind — if you follow me. We also contrived other...incidents in various neighborhoods of varying class, wherein a suspect was not sighted, but the *modus operandi* was of course the same.

CASE STUDIES: WAR PARTIES CONTINUED...

Soon this elder found that his customary places would not serve him, that his appearance seemed to cause fear wherever he went because he matched the descriptions in the newspapers, and soon he dared not show his face at all. In fact, I recall that a certain police investigator gave him a fair amount of uncomfortable attention. As for his companions, they too found that white devils were rather less welcome in Chinatown than usual, and that in the other neighborhoods people were afraid to go about at night on account of the "Ripper." Plainly we didn't succeed in sending any of them into torpor, but when we at last moved to fight this elder, his blood-strength was at a low ebb. Furthermore, all of them were remarkably easy to push into frenzy — and as you have learned, a Cainite in the grip of that lamentable state is actually easier to defeat if one can maintain command of one's wits....

Case Study #2: Roto-Rooter to the Rescue, Baltimore, 1998

From the journal of Piotr "Peter" Andreikov:

Sometimes I can't believe the things my fellow undead don't ever think of...but maybe it really is that way all over. Maybe everybody really does forget about this kind of stuff pretty damn soon after their Embraces. All I can say is I'm going to do my level best not to. Not when it can get you so dead so quick.

So there we are in the thick of the East Coast drive, wondering how we're going to knock out the Baltimore Tremere chantry. And all we've got is this poor Assamite who was just supposed to be the gofer for this other Assamite, some big muckity-muck Tremere expert — but then this expert apparently up and left with no warning a week before the whole damn thing was scheduled to go down. So the first thing this poor asshole has to do when he comes out is apologize for his boss and apologize for not being what we ordered from the catalog. And he's basically explaining to us all the reasons we can't hit the chantry now with what little we've got left. He's talking about these wards and how they supposedly work and how hard they are to bust through.

Well, I ask him, if you could just damage the house enough, like part of its outer frame maybe, wouldn't that be enough to break the ward? And he says yeah, but the problem is part of what the ward does is make it hard to damage the house. You try to drive a car into it, it veers off, bullets just don't seem to hit anything important, shit like that.

Well, then I say, what if you did it from inside? And he says that'd be fine, but first you have to get inside. That's when I come up with my little plan.

So we start messing with their plumbing from slightly upstream, so to speak, and watch to see what they do about it. I mean, either they've got a servant there in the house to fix stuff like that, in which case we just scratch the whole idea and try something else, no harm done; or else they don't, in which case they'll do what anybody does and call the plumber. Well, sure enough, they call the plumber, and the plumber comes out and takes a look and says it all seems to be back working (because it is) and hands them a bill. Or I assume that's what he does. But anyway, the Gangrel's cat sees the plumber's van drive in and out of the subdivision. Which is exactly what we were hoping to see.

So then we start messing around again. Well, sure enough, they call the same company and bitch them up one side and down the other and so the same company comes out again, only this time the guy in the uniform has been ever so gently recruited to our cause. So our guy is in the chantry, in the daytime, burying himself in the guts of their plumbing, and they probably don't even think to check him out because any checking-out they were going to do, they already did the first time. So it's no trouble at all for him to set up some nice discreet "faulty wiring," and it's right up near an exterior wall too...I tell you, there couldn't have been a better way to get the Baltimore party started.

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ASSASSINATIONS

All right. So you're not the Ebony Fox, and you know it. You can't walk over a floor full of mousetraps laid end-to-end without setting one off. You can't go nuts with a katana and an Uzi at the same time. You can't leap a three-story building in a single bound. Does that mean you can't kill an elder? No. I don't let it stop me, anyway. Why should you?

As the C.I.A. knows, the first priority of planning any assassination is reliability. Meaning, we have to be able to rely on the target being dead when you're done. You only get one chance to catch most Camarilla by surprise. And Final Death is a lot harder to ensure for Cainites than mortals, as you know. A stake, for instance, is incredibly difficult to aim at a moving target. Beheading is also difficult, though certainly less so. Even fire — if they can just get away from it for long enough, they might be able to put themselves out. So, one of the best things to do with vampires, especially elders, is put them somewhere they can't move.

CASE STUDIES: ASSASSINATION

Case Study #1: Masquerade Checkmate, St. Louis, 1927

From an interview with "Jafar," Assamite shakar:

My sire always said he was the first to come up with the idea, but I doubt that's really so. He mighta been the first to do it with automatic weapons. Well, see, there was this primogen he had to take out, and trouble was the man's haven was extremely secure. Also my sire was working alone on this contract, no *kamut* to back him up. Well, one night he was sitting in his room at the Y reading the newspaper, and looky there, there was his target's name right there on the society page. Turned out the man was one of these big-time Camarilla kine-herders who had to go to all the "functions" and rub elbows with the elite, you know, just to keep his hand in.

So the first thing my sire did was run over to Springfield and burglarize some very nice houses so he could finance the whole operation. Then he went back to St. Louis, got himself a handful of lowlifes, dressed 'em up in suits, bought 'em Tommy guns and tickets out of town, slipped 'em a suitcase full of cash and sent 'em over to the restaurant. And they just busted in and chopped that primogen down right in the middle of the awards banquet or whatever it was. So what could the Lick do? They've got this Masquerade. He had to play dead. He had to let them put him on a stretcher and pull a sheet up over him and put him in the ambulance, and that's where my sire was waiting to stake him — right through the sheet. Well, it looked just like a mob hit. 'Course the vees knew better, but again, what could they do? They got to Masquerade too. All they could do was clean it up and come up with some story to explain where the body went; and you know this primogen had come off just a bit mysterious to folks all along, being undead and all, so it wasn't too hard to convince the cops and the papers the man had connections and just got the wrong somebody pissed off at him. So it worked. Remember, if it works, it don't need to be elegant.

Case Study #2: Crash Test Dummies, Geneva, 1985

From an interview with Skryta Zyleta, Gangrel shakar:

It had become painfully clear to the cardinal that we must move Tremere out from the picture, most especially that one bitch. She was clever, skilled sorceress, nearly three hundred years old (Yes! *Secretaries* in Vienna's high chantry are old by centuries). But the worst thing was that unlike many of her clan, she had a talent of making other Kindred trust her. For reasons of strategy, the cardinal wanted that we make her removal look entirely like an accident — to satisfy suspicions of the local Kindred at least, if not of the Warlocks, who are notorious for paranoia no matter what.



CASE STUDIES: ASSASSINATION CONTINUED...

Well. An accident that can kill a Cainite is difficult to arrange. But, we knew that she drove back to Zurich on twenty-fifth each month to report her progress; we knew about what time she usually left; and we knew that her car was rated low in statistics for safety...lamentably low as you consider how much she had paid for it.

So. Ingredients simple enough: convertible with young owner sitting drugged in driver's seat; petrol; four firefighter suits. All else would be in the timing. We brought in two local Sabbat on the job. One to tell us when she left, and one to tell us when she passed a certain point midway. Me, I kept watch from a ridge just above, so to make sure that she arrived as intended, and so to warn my companions of any innocents about to drive by. We were fortunate. No one passed during the five minutes this took. It was very late, which was as we had planned. We caught her as close to Zurich as we dared, since we knew the roads would be more empty if we wait till later.

Our Fiend lengthened his arms far enough for him to drive from the back seat. That was why we needed four suits, not just three; we must dismember one in order to make certain our Fiend would be fully covered. I would say they were at around 130 kph when they crashed — head-on but slightly to the driver's side, as requested — which trapped the witch nicely in a little cage of twisted metal. All the strength in the world does you no good if your arms are pinned and you haven't any leverage, and sadly, such a pinion hampers most conjuring as well. Our Tzimisce was thrown clear, just as we hoped, though we did have to chop off most of his gas-pedal arm. And thanks to the tinkering we did under convertible's bonnet, everything caught fire very nicely and in the end we did not even need to use the petrol.

I have no idea what the mortals thought when they found that one of the cars had remnants of cloth on the driver's seat, but no body. But then, that really is not our problem. We perform for vampires, not for kine.

Case Study#3: Remember the Blood II, Athens, 2001

From an interview with Blackhorse Tanner, Ventrue shakar:

It didn't matter whether it was a he, a she, or a he-she, but it had to be able to dance. That was the requirement. It took me some time to determine this. He varied his menu quite a bit past that one fact. The street children had long since learned to avoid him, but they were happy to tell me where he might be found once I made it clear I was not a friend.

I watched to see who he talked to in the ouzeries and cafes, which back-alley clubs he visited. He didn't see me. I gave him nothing to see. I looked different every evening. Later in the night I'd go in the same clubs he'd been in and pick whichever whore looked the palest — not to drink of course, just mortal rug-rubbing. In fact I fed on foreign visitors the whole time I was there, just to avoid notice.

He never took his prey back to his haven, but sometimes he would take those who especially pleased him to a certain hotel where the management knew him. I would walk softly down the hall, listening for the sound of his voice. The radio always seemed to be playing. Then one time I heard the ringing of finger-cymbals too, and I understood immediately what I had been overlooking. And I was able to confirm it. Dancers, then. The thing to do was wait for the big music festival that summer. A smorgasbord. He was sure to gorge himself on all the fresh young blood drifting in with it. He would be far less cautious.

You know the Ventrue. We all like to think ahead. Months in advance he booked his room for the weekend of the festival, so I had plenty of time to figure out which room it was, to pick the lock and be waiting when he brought in his three, yes, three for the evening. I stood quiet in the closet nook, unnoticed. None of them had coats to hang up or luggage to put away.

I waited till he was glutting himself on the third. There was no noise for him to hear as I came up behind, no noise when one of the other girls woke and tried to scream, no noise as I seized her head and twisted it. I had the stake in him before he even knew what was going on. What now? Oh no, he was far too old. If I had killed him *first* he would have been ash before I had his skin half off, to say nothing of slicing off brain tissue for the tanning. I don't like to hurry when I work....

I wasn't really there to harass the Brujah, but I decided I might as well as long as I was in the neighborhood. My victim had a bitter rival, so I approached her a few nights before the assassination with the story that he had hired me to kill *her*, and hinted that for a modest increase in my fee I would be happy to reverse that. I can't imagine it took them long to discover the considerable drop in her bank balance so shortly before the old Ventrue's death.

(Storytellers and players seeking more information on various methods for killing, tricking, despoiling, embarrassing and otherwise getting up the noses of one's vampiric enemies would be well advised to consult *Midnight Siege* for a thoughtful and detailed discussion of the subject.)

Almost as good as immobilization is getting the mark in a situation where he's very relaxed and vulnerable. Drugged vessels are an old standby for that...and so long as you know what kind of vessels your mark likes, it's not that hard to arrange. But you have to move fast. Most drugs don't last long in our systems, and some are pretty easy to taste in the blood. Then again, some aren't.

You'll think of other ways. Remember what I said about conserving your energy. Maybe there's somebody else who wants to kill your mark as badly as you do. Instead of reinventing the wheel, why not just give them a little boost? Slip them some information they need, or set up a tempting opportunity. Make it look like the mark's done something really sleazy, just to get them even angrier. The nice thing about this method is that unlike in a direct assassination, even if it doesn't work the mark won't catch on to you — not if you cover your tracks well enough. If you do end up killing the mark yourself, it's good to at least frame one of his enemies for it when you're done. That way, not only is your mark dead, but the rest of them are all at each other's throats. Maybe some more of them will wind up dead without any further help from you. That's what we call a happy ending.

SABBAT BORGHIAS

Although the Hand hardly likes to advertise the fact, it does have access to poisons that can affect Cainites. Caridad de Flores of Mexico City is only the most recent Hand innovator in the field. Although administering these poisons in such a way that they reach the mark and only the mark is difficult (especially since most of the poisons must be contact poisons; Cainites only ingest blood and most poisons that can harm a Cainite will kill a vessel), their very obscurity makes them useful for those times when the Hand must kill an enemy who is too wary to be caught out by other methods.

Shakari frame someone else for the assassinations they carry out more often than not; though if no one's available to frame, they'll often settle for an "accident" or a mysterious disappearance. The Hand needs only the occasional killing credited to it in order to preserve its fearsome reputation. And as much as the Sabbat likes to go on about the joys of striking terror into the hearts of elders, and as much as those elders like to scare their childer into submission with tales of the terrible night-monsters of the *manus nigrum*, the Hand far prefers that its enemies suffer from overconfidence rather than the opposite. A false sense of security serves its purposes better. As the Hand repeatedly tells its new initiates: If they wanted glory, they should have become templars.

KIDNAPPINGS

Why kidnap an enemy vampire? All we're interested in is destroying him, isn't that right? And besides, when you kidnap someone you have to feed him — a real pain in the ass with Ventrue — and put up with him and figure out where you're going to keep him. Why bother?

I've got one word for you: bait. Here's another one: leverage. Just try to imagine how you'd feel if someone had your packmate prisoner. Well, some of these people are in blood-bondage that makes the Vaulderie look like holding hands, okay? You just have to figure out who belongs to whom. Now usually, unfortunately, it's the childer who are bound to the sires, not the opposite, but some of these sires don't even need a bond to freak out when their progeny disappear. Childer are an investment. A big investment that they want to be the ones to dispose of when they decide to. And you can bet they're going to go to the prince and yell their heads off. If he owes them any favors, then he has to jump. And isn't he supposed to be protecting the loyal "Kindred" in his domain anyway? Now, I'm not saying you're usually going to succeed in getting people to actually risk their unlives just to save your victim. But it's a wonderful way to get them warmed up for the real attack.

ACROSS THE LINES

Although the Hand is even more fanatical than the Sabbat when it comes to destroying the enemies of Caine, they do consider some vampires of the Camarilla (and the independent clans) to be worth far more "alive" than dead. Many inhabitants of the Ivory Tower ardently pursue Noddist lore in spite of the Inner Circle's condemnations. Some are even Gehenna cultists, and some even agree with the Black Hand that the Antediluvians must be destroyed. The Black Hand engages in *sub rosa* dialogues with such Noddists regardless of sect; indeed, the Hand even observes a "hands off" policy regarding many of these Cainites, and will refuse any contract against them. After all, it makes little sense to kill those who are working toward the Hand's own goals. However, Noddists who don't meet the Hand's criteria enjoy no such privileges. When the Cainites of the Hand want information from such folk, they'll get it by any means necessary, including kidnapping and torture. Thus, *shakari* need to become as proficient at extracting enemies as at killing them.

SPECIAL BRANCHES

From the journal of Piotr "Peter" Andreikov:

Of course the whole fucking Hand is one big Special Op. Jyhad is a hobby for the rest of the Sabbat, but a full-time gig for us. We are the specialists. But what I'm coming to realize is that even in our outfit there's expert corps on this and that — specialists' specialists. A lot of these people move around a lot, and I haven't had a chance to meet more than a couple in person yet, so I haven't been able to nail down too much about it. Still, you hear them mentioned a lot.

CAMARILLA

The people we send out to train War Parties and all that crap get to know more about the Camarilla than most, but there also seem to be people who really know it, like they're defectors or something. Or maybe they've just done a lot of deep-cover missions. They don't get trotted out all that often — surprise, surprise. People understand that we kill Camarilla, so we have to gather intelligence on them, but if we seem too expert that starts to look bad. But when it comes to, say, taking out Vitel in D.C. and figuring out what the old Lick's enemies list looks like and who his cronies have been for the past two hundred years, these are the guys you call in.

TREMERE

Yeah. No kidding. But from what I've seen of the Tremere so far, I've got no trouble believing there are Hand whose whole claim to fame is being able to shut down their hocus-pocus. Most Cainites just flat don't understand blood magic — it doesn't work like the rest of our gifts. Once upon a time we had the *antitribu* Tremere, but obviously there was some kinda bad mojo there, and I don't think any of them were ever Hand. My clanmates who are *koldun* — well, most of them hate the Tremere's rotting guts all right; the problem is they hate them so much they can't even stand to look at them, much less study them in any depth.

Then there's the Sabbat's Assamites, who I guess know something about magic because they had it way back in the nights of Aladdin or whatever. Looks like we've lost a lot of the Assamites too, but of the ones that are left, most of them are Hand. And up till just recently the Hand had dozens of them. I think they're the ones who really made some effort to pick the wizards' systems apart, which would explain why the two or three "Tremere experts" I've heard of are all Assamite.

NODDISM

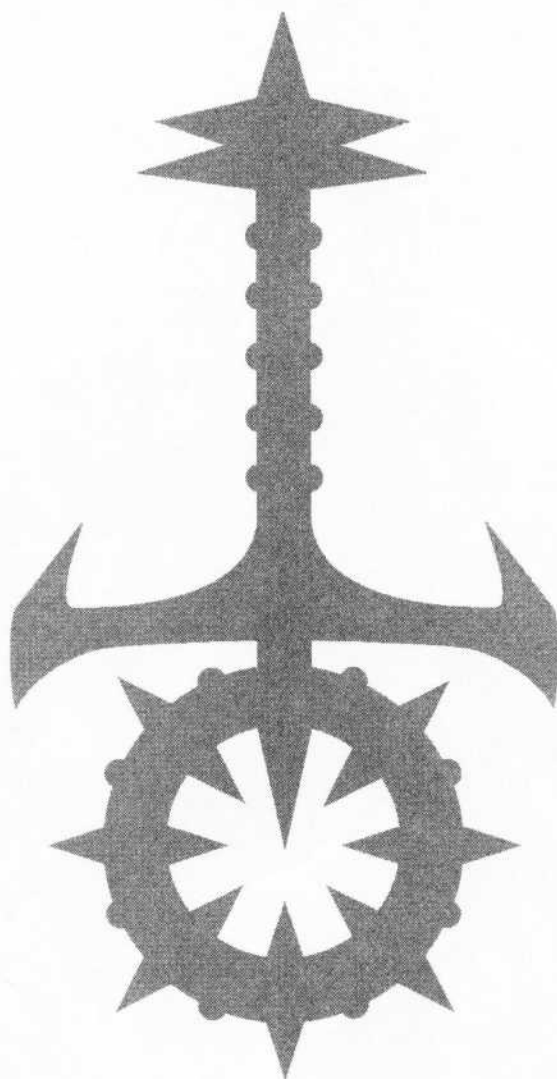
Well, of course we're all expected to be good little Noddists, but the difference between the rank-and-file Hand agent and the Noddist expert is like the difference



between a Sunday school student and a Harvard archaeologist who's been going on digs in Palestine for the last twenty years. Being assigned to this kind of work is one of the highest honors, one of the deepest gestures of trust an operative can receive. After all, Gehenna is what we're about. A serious screw-up in this field could change the fate of the world.

Unfortunately, you have to more or less be Indiana Jones: You know, you have to speak twenty languages and be able to figure out where the forbidden temple is from two lines in a 1917 *National Geographic*, and then be able to fight your way in and out of the temple with nothing but a bullwhip and a grin, and on top of that your faith in the

Hand has to be so pure it floats. Actually I'm exaggerating, but the real names in this field really are like that. Then there's another, way less prestigious group of Noddists who really excel at the research end of things but aren't such great ass-kickers. So they get shoved into the library to spend the rest of their unlives cataloging and analyzing everything the Indianas bring back; in other words, they do decades of shit-work for zero appreciation. But who knows — it could always turn out that some chance phrase in some prince's diary ends up being the key to the whole Jyhad. It could all come down to some mousy neonate with a pocket protector and a Lovecraft fetish having an on night. Now *there's* a scary thought even for a Black Hand operative....







CHAPTER FOUR: WE ARE LEGION

Ana, Nizzam al-Latif, mayyet. Elhamdulillah.
(*"I, Nizzam al-Latif, am dead. Thanks be to God."*)
— from his Oath of Initiation, 1536

Two general approaches to actually playing Caine's Chosen take center stage, with a third, more creative approach waiting in the wings. The first general approach involves creating new characters with the intent of running an exclusively Black Hand-centered chronicle. In this case, the players may create pre-existing Sabbat characters who will join the Black Hand during their preludes. Such characters will have already been Cainites for some time, having proven themselves as True Sabbat possessed of numerous experiences with war parties, sieges, and other aspects of unlife among the Sword of Caine. For such characters, the game's first sessions will be an awakening to a hidden world within their own. They will come to the subject as outsiders in every way, having been brought fresh to the entire experience.

Ultimately, the decision as to the level of play and its timing is, of course, up to the Storyteller. He may want to start the characters as ancillae, already members of the Hand and with years of unlife under their belts. This is perfectly fine. However, the responsibility for strong characterization can and should rest on both sides of the table, especially in the case of non-neonate characters. The Storyteller should be sure to spend time with each player during the creation of her character, to make sure both he and the player have a good sense of what the character's mortal life was like. In addition, both should understand the circumstances of her Embrace and her early years in the Sabbat, before she drew the attention of the Black Hand. Just as more time needs be spent developing the background and backstory of any ancilla or elder vampire, more time and effort — maybe the equivalent of an entire game session — should be put into creating that character's background and past history.

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

There's something to be said for memories. That's what a character's prelude and backstory really represents: memories of his mortal life, family, profession. Those two tours in 'Nam and that six months in rehab, the marriage that didn't work out, the boss that made — or broke — his future with the company, or the father who never thought anything he did was good enough. It's also the memories of his Embrace: the first encounter with his future sire, the terrifying night his life ended, the night when when he thought nothing could be worse — and found out he was wrong. It's the Creation Rites (if he was Embraced Sabbat), the first war party, the first time he killed either in hunger or in rage, the night he was acclaimed True Sabbat. It's the members of the pack he ran with, bled with, as well as those who died and those who survived.

Memories come from experiences, not from a few sentences on a background sheet. Help your players create memories for their characters. Come up with particular scenes in their characters' pasts, and bring a few key events to vivid life. Play through a past dialogue with their sires, or the first ductus under whom they served, or that snotty Lasombra bastard in the Bloody Sins pack who always thought the characters were idiots and told them so at every opportunity. Perhaps more importantly, help them recall their first interview with a Black Hand recruiter. Help the character come up with two or three notable achievements from his character's career in the Sabbat, incidents that might have attracted the Hand's attention. Just what did he do that was so special? Be specific, the more detail the better. The stronger the player's memory of those incidents and relationships from his character's past become, the more they are integrated into the character itself, and the more alive — or unalive — that character becomes.

The second option is perhaps the more rewarding of the two broad approaches. In this case, Storytellers may find it just as much fun to take Sabbat characters the players have already been developing and have those same characters (if they fall within the Hand's criteria) join the Black Hand as one of the "rewards" for extraordinary achievement, and for good roleplaying by the players. Joining the Hand is a rare opportunity for any Sabbat. The Storyteller should make the experience meaningful for the players by spending time on it. Who recruited them? What was their boot camp and initiation like? Who was their trainer? Mentor? What new skills or abilities did they develop? Who else was in their coterie during that time, and how did they get along?

The third, and certainly the most daring option is to run a game that is truly exclusive to the Black Hand. As the subject does not always pull its members from the ranks of the Sabbat, it is a legitimate chronicle option to run a Black Hand game centered around the subject's secret few — those characters brought into the fold from outside the Sabbat. These types of chronicles need to be handled carefully, but can often provide some very engaging roleplaying experiences. Packs of such Hand members are probably columns, rather than *kamuts*, and their members' unlife typically involve doing double-duty in another unlife, perhaps as deeply involved members of other sects. The missions of these columns will likely focus almost exclusively on their duties to their Hand leaders, and will entail none of the usual social dynamics of other Sabbat stories. However, this can and often will create a more intense mood for the players, as their column deals with deeper and deeper levels of secrecy and bureaucracy as its status and involvement grows.

Whether the players create new characters who are Black Hand members from the start, or have their current characters accept the Black Hand's invitation to join the subject, we recommend starting a Black Hand chronicle with the characters as *mustajib* — rookies on their first mission. Under the stern eye of a no-nonsense dominion, they must earn respect through their deeds and dedication to duty, and demonstrate their courage under fire. Status their characters attain in actual play will mean a great deal more to the players than dots on a character sheet, and it will integrate those characters far better into the subject's mindset, philosophy and discipline. The Black Hand is an elite organization; it takes only the best. Earning that honor in the course of a story will have a far greater meaning to the player and the character than simply spending the freebie points on it during character creation.

JOINING THE RANKS

Regardless of how a character ends up joining the Black Hand, a number of considerations emerge for both the character and the player. Although character creation is much the same for a Black Hand character as for any other (excepting, of course, certain age and experience factors), the Traits merit reexamination from the subject's perspective. A vampire who succeeds in making the cut and becoming a member of Caine's Chosen soon finds his priorities shifting, simply by virtue of the new set of requirements imposed upon his unlife due to his duties to the subject.

ATTRIBUTES

Although it would stand to reason that Physical Attributes would be most highly prized for would-be Hand members, such is not always the case. Like any good paramilitary organization, the Black Hand requires initiates from all walks of unlife, possessed of a wide variety of skills and innate predilections. Were the subject composed of only the biggest,

the fastest and the toughest of Cainites, it would suffer in other critical areas and wouldn't be the well-rounded (and feared) organization it is tonight. To this end, subject recruitment officers are trained to look for those whose natural qualities best serve the tasks at which they excel. "Play to your strengths" and other such aphorisms are heard commonly around the subject, and few warriors would begrudge a small but strong-willed fellow who knows his role and strives to fill it as best he can. Thus, the Hand's reputation for only inducting the best of the best is indeed a well-earned one; the subject simply does so across the board, for all those it would dignify with the honor of being Chosen.

ABILITIES

As with Attributes, it is a fallacy to presume that only Abilities of a certain type or other predominate in a subject like the Black Hand. While it is true that many recruits are chosen for their exceptional Talents and Skills, knowledge is power, and those in the know are equally prized candidates. That being said, however, a number of Abilities are prominent in most Hand members, due to the subject's primary function. Such Abilities include Alertness, Dodge, Firearms, Investigation, Linguistics, Occult, Security, Stealth, Streetwise and Subterfuge. Secondary Abilities are quite popular as well, but not nearly so commonplace as some might think. Rather, the Hand picks a select few who excel at the more obscure capacities and encourages them to grow to master their abilities. For the rest, the Hand is content to allow each individual the freedom to pursue his or her own specialties as befits their strengths. The exceptions to this rule come in

matters of subject-wide policy, such as the indoctrination of certain information or the learning of key codes. Along these lines, certain Secondary Skills and Knowledges, such as the Art of Memory and Camarilla Lore, are indeed very widespread. It is a rare thing indeed to find a branded Hand member entirely lacking in either of these Traits.

DISCIPLINES

Due to the primacy of the Assamite and Gangrel *antitribu* presence, the most commonly practiced Disciplines in the Hand are Animalism, Celerity, Fortitude, Obfuscate, Quietism and Protean. However, this very fact is what makes the presence of other, more esoteric powers all the more necessary. After these six come versatile Disciplines of a non-martial nature, such as Auspex, Dominate and Presence (more or less in that order), which are prized for their broad utility, making them the most highly sought out-of-clan powers in the subject. Lastly, blood magicians of all stripes are a highly valued — almost revered — commodity in the subject. Those who go the extra mile and embrace the practice of Aljusi (see page 77) in their studies, encouraging its practice among their sorcerously inclined colleagues, are afforded even greater respect by the rank and file, who recognize that such Cainites' efforts make great strides in strengthening the subject as a whole.

BACKGROUNDS

Although it is commonly perceived as a harsh paramilitary force, the Black Hand is actually quite an involved bureaucracy and, in many cases, the focus of a great deal

MURDER BY NUMBERS

The Black Hand doesn't pick just any old vampire off the street and offer him membership in what amounts to the most elite faction of vampiric warriors, tacticians and military specialists in the world. No, the subject has considerable standards it employs when seeking out would-be candidates for induction. Although these standards are narrative in story terms, they can be broken down by Storytellers who wish for such standards to have consistency in meaning. Due to the wide variety of skill sets sought out by the Black Hand, however, we offer no numbers to establish this worthiness. If a Storyteller feels that a given character has earned the attention of the Black Hand for whatever reason, be it his five dots in Linguistics or his four dots in both Brawl and Dodge, then he may by all means proceed.

After their induction into the subject as provisional members, all initiates must go through a period of intense physical and mental training. This trial by fire (called simply "boot camp" by most of the *mustajib*) separates the wheat from the chaff, honing the attributes and skills that those who remain will need as functioning members of the organization. In terms of game mechanics, Storytellers may decide that all Black Hand initiates must first acquire, learn or develop the following during their trial before being considered fully branded Chosen of Caine: Linguistics 1 (either Arabic or Spanish, depending upon expertise and location); Black Hand Lore 1 (representing the accumulation of his experiences); Art of Memory 1 (to represent the rigorous mental training undergone during the trial). Additionally, Storytellers may wish to allow any character who survives this training period a number of dots equal to his Intelligence score to place wherever he sees fit, or wherever is appropriate to the nature of his particular training. Common targets for these extra dots are Abilities such as Camarilla Lore and Sabbat Lore.

At the end of this training period, a character may also acquire a single dot of Black Hand Status. This comes as a further Storyteller option because many Hand members do not reveal their membership to those outside the subject. If the Storyteller feels that the characters should do so, however (perhaps the dominion has plans for them), then they should get the status to represent that exposure. If not, then their Black Hand Status remains "gray," existent but inactive until such time as its revealed.

more social activity than many might expect. Backgrounds like Contacts and Influence are highly prized, as is having a useful Alternate Identity of one sort or another. Being tied to various Allies, on the other hand, is often considered both a security risk and a crutch to any Hand member worth his salt, and is generally frowned upon. Curiously, most Hand members are actively encouraged to avoid garnering large amounts of general Sabbat Status. The subject's leaders prefer those under their command to at least make an attempt at staying below radar, and making a spectacle of one's self — even due to the steady accumulation of genuine accolades — makes continued accomplishment of one's duties to the Hand all the more difficult. Caine's Chosen must be both capable and quiet, lest they senselessly strip themselves of any advantages.

Perhaps the single most important Background to any Hand member is his Mentor. Every single inductee who comes to the subject from the Sabbat, and most of the few who don't, is given or falls in with a mentor of one kind or another. This is due primarily to the fact that most Hand members arrive in the subject's hands with their Humanity more or less in tatters (see below). Although such inhumanity is often what draws the Cainite to their attention to the first place, those recruiting for the Hand have no desire to bring a raving sociopath into the fold, at least not without giving him the proper means to funnel his destructive energies toward the good of the Chosen. To this end, a mentor system exists in the subject whereby the Hand member who initially sponsored the initiate (or a willing referral from said Cainite) takes it upon himself to instruct the would-be initiate on the ins and outs of his own spirituality. Such a mentor starts by being the one to show his apprentice how to juggle one's Beast and one's duties, but the relationship often grows into something much more intimate and fulfilling as time goes by. As both mentor and apprentice advance in years and in rank within the subject, each grows to better understand and appreciate the bond between them. Indeed, even the most independent and powerful of dominions still maintain deep and humbling relations with their former mentors, even those whose stars they may have long since outshined. Such has always been the way of the Hand.

BLACK HAND MORALITY

One's system of beliefs is a critically important aspect of one's overall ability to serve the Sword of Caine. The majority of Sabbat members find it difficult to totally divest themselves of humanity (and Humanity) in favor of the painstaking dedication required to become free of said humanity, and to remain free of it. Most lack either the desire or the conviction to adopt a Path of Enlightenment, and many find themselves lacking both. Although the Hand's leaders accept this as the standard spiritual state of

being among the rank and file of the Sabbat, they cannot be so forgiving when it comes to their own — Caine's Chosen.

By virtue of the very nature of the subject, those who come to the attention of the Black Hand must be, at least on some level, cold if not downright inhumane. Being an expert at the most violent and bloody acts among a violent and bloody sect requires that one cast his former Humanity by the wayside, if not forsake it entirely. As such, the leadership of the subject is very concerned with how a prospective initiate is handling his own spirituality in the face of his advancing skill as a cold-blooded killer and fanatical devotion to the cause. Unsurprisingly, the state of a given Cainite's soul is often the barometer used for determining at what point an invitation should finally be extended. If a character has repeatedly demonstrated the lengths to which he'll go in order to prove himself, even at the cost of his own soul, then he is ready to show whether or not he is truly worthy. Waiting too long, however, and watching an otherwise promising candidate go down in flames is nothing more than a waste. Potential initiates must be given time to demonstrate their readiness, but plucked from the downward spiral of their own erosion before they disappear forever.

See *Vampire: the Masquerade*, p. 288, for the mechanics of adopting a Path.

WALKING THE PATH

Once a character has proven his readiness, he is given a mentor from inside the ranks of those already branded. Although this mentor is typically the same figure who sponsored the initiate for induction in the first place, such is not always the case. Sometimes, the mentor begins to notice a certain spiritual leaning in his new apprentice and if that leaning goes against the tenets of the mentor's own core beliefs, he will seek out a peer who follows a more compatible system. This individual then becomes the mentor figure for the new inductee. More often than not, however, the mentor is drawn to the character for a reason in the first place and can usually guide him down a shared spiritual path with little to no real resistance above and beyond the normal difficulties inherent in shedding one's Humanity and adopting a Path of Enlightenment.

Of all the spiritual roads a vampire may walk, the Path of Caine is by far the most prevalent and powerful in the Black Hand. Given the subject's focus on Caine as the father of all vampires, the Path's popularity is certainly understandable if not expected. Following the exodus of so many of the Assamites from the subject, the numbers of Noddists among its ranks did diminish some, but not significantly so. The Path still holds the position of "favored Path" of the subject and is still followed by a vast majority of both the dominions and the Seraphim.

Although a prominent and popular Path among many Sabbat in the Final Nights, the Path of Cathari holds no such sway inside the ranks of Caine's Chosen. It is the least followed of the major Paths, and only a handful of subject members claim it as their own, most of those new recruits

who latched onto it by virtue of its status as the path of "least resistance." By and large, the subsect feels that indulging in vice for its own sake is both wasteful and senseless, and in no event does it abide idleness.

The Path of Death and the Soul sees quite a few adherents in the subsect, particularly among the Tzimisce contingent, many of whom would like to see the Path adopted more widely throughout the subsect. They and their fellow Necronomists think of themselves as counterpoints to the rigid philosophy of the Path of Caine, and counsel many new initiates against the danger of soullessness in the Final Nights. On the whole, however, the relationship between the two Paths remains complementary and helps keep the subsect running on every level.

THE PATH OF SCREAMS

Needless to say, any Hand member found following the Path of Evil Revelations has much to answer for among his brethren in the subsect. For one thing, the Sabbat Inquisition casts a long shadow indeed, and a Hand member who turns to infernalism puts all of his fellows at risk. Those misguided souls who think that by giving up a portion of their souls in exchange for power they may serve the Hand all the better find out too late that their actions are ultimately the most destructive thing they might do for the subsect. Very few of them are aware of the fact that by serving the will of an infernal master, they are simultaneously forsaking all those who do not.

Indeed, the Hand's cardinal rule about not going outside the organization to discipline its own seems to apply doubly so when it pertains to those on this Path. When a suspected infernalist among the Hand is finally done away with, one can rest assured that the deed will be quiet, quick and quite thorough. The Seraphim take special pains to provide increased training for the dominions and other trusted Hand elders on the tactics and methods for spotting and neutralizing the threat these Corruptors present. There are even rumors of an elite cadre of *shakari* whose primary purpose in the subsect is to pursue evidence of infernalism among the rank and file — and to quietly dispose of any offending Cainites before they draw any (more) undue attention to themselves or to the subsect.

Aside from the Path of Carthari, the least prevalent code of beliefs in the Hand is surely the Path of the Feral Heart. Although a sizeable number of the subsect's many Country Gangrel continue to rein in the Beast in this manner, they do so at the risk of removing themselves from the favor of their superiors in the subsect. Many of those who reach the rank of dominion these nights are quite in favor of things like technology (and of course politics), and find themselves irked by such savages before long.



Although the Necronomists make a good show of being the counterbalance to the Noddists, they truly don't have the numbers to account for the weight required. The Knights of the subject, however, certainly do. After the Path of Caine, the Path of Honorable Accord is arguably the most widely followed Path in the subject, even come the Final Nights when ideas such as theirs are often strained to the breaking point.

What would any sect of vampires, especially one with a military structure, be without the cornerstone of ambition? Although it certainly has more adherents outside the subject than in, the Path of Power and the Inner Voice is still fairly well represented in the Hand, especially due to the presence of the Lasombra. A great many dominions of the subject follow this Path (secretly or otherwise) and often rely on its teachings to justify questionable wartime decisions and/or to extricate themselves from other toasty political waters.

OTHER-WORLDFLY VIEWS

The Paths of Enlightenment common to the majority of the Sabbat are not the only ones found among the ranks of Caine's Chosen. Although the subject is populated quite heavily with Assamite and Gangrel *antitribu*, the representation of the traditional clans of Sabbat leadership — the Lasombra and the Tzimisce — is certainly strong as well, particularly in recent nights. Given this fact, several other so-called minor Paths likewise see their share of activity in the subject.

The Path of Metamorphosis claims a few adherents among the Tzimisce *koldun* of the Chosen, but is certainly nowhere near as popular a system of beliefs as either the Path of Death and the Soul or the Path of Caine among those of that clan. Still, there is nothing wrong with walking this Path, so long as its Hand adherents understand that transmutation of the self must give way to loyalty to the subject.

The Path of Night is given more than lip service by the Lasombra of the Hand. Its tenets of dominance, mastery of darkness within and without, and transcendence of the flesh are all attractive notions to those Lasombra who understand the purpose of the Hand. Of the four variants of the Path, the most prevalent is the Righteous Path, while the Allied is the least popular, as its focus on the clan has no place in the subject. (For more on these variants, see **Clanbook: Lasombra**.)

Among "standard" Sabbat Paths, only the Path of Lilith is regarded an unsavory system of beliefs for a Hand member to hold, reviled unlike any other in the subject (excepting the obvious Evil Revelations). The Seraphs in particular despise the entire notion, and although they claim to respect the freedom of choice regarding this Path among average Sabbat members, they draw the line at their own. The Black Hand is known as the Chosen of Caine, not Lilith, and any confusion as to the importance of Caine is treated as near heresy for those pledged to the subject.

NEW TRAITS

The Black Hand makes use of a number of elite skills and powers that its masters and creators freely share among their own, but take care to hide from the outside world. Note that these are only a sampling of the diversified body of tricks of the trade created and employed by those in the Hand. Others certainly exist, these are simply the most common.

NEW KNOWLEDGE

THE ART OF MEMORY

The butt of the Smith and Wesson .38 slammed hard into Aurora's jaw. Although she was a Country Gangrel, and a tough one at that, this was starting to get painful. "This is pointless," said the interrogator, stepping forward. "It is plain to see that the mercenary won't talk. And this is simply fine. She doesn't have to. With your permission, I'll simply cut out the middle man."

Aurora smiled. If this posturing idiot thought he was going to get anywhere with his pushy little mind fucks, they were all in for a very, very long night....

One of the most highly prized traits a member of Caine's Chosen can possess is the ability to retain and to store vital information in the most secure place possible: her own mind. This Knowledge represents the possessor's level of dedication to this endeavor, the quick and traceless cataloging of data in the deepest recesses of the brain. The Knowledge draws upon age-old mnemonic techniques of translating facts and figures into a symbolic language of unrelated images, whereby the brain can store and quickly recall the information at a later date simply by returning itself to the basis of the symbology in question. Each piece is then translated back into its root form, allowing quick and efficient voluntary recall while simultaneously protecting the data from unwanted scrutiny. If one reads the mind of someone skilled in this Ability, all the intruder is likely to get for the effort is a jumbled series of seemingly random images, or possibly even simple shapes or colors. A character's rating in this Knowledge is added to the dice pool of any roll whose function is to protect information hidden within the mind. This obviously goes for things like Telepathy and certain applications of Dominate, but it's also apt in torture situations. The Hand encourages all its recruits to study the fundamentals of this Knowledge, and those who excel at the technique are often granted increasingly greater responsibilities in the subject, often with resultant social and political rewards.

- Novice: You know one or two tricks of cerebrally converting information.
- Practiced: You can bury significant amounts of data in symbolic code.
- Competent: It would take a skilled interrogator to uncover your secrets.

•••• Expert: Processing information symbolically is second nature to you now.

••••• Master: Moon, tin can, razor blade, mirror, thirteen. Exactly.

Possessed by: Black Hand members.

Specialties: Vast Cerebral Storage, Resisting Interrogation, Rapid Processing.

HIGH-LEVEL DISCIPLINES

CELESTIAL HARMONY (AUSPEX •••••)

This power is a little dangerous to use, but its effects are well worth any price the vampire may have to pay. It allows a Cainite to open up his mind to the river of thoughts and emotions created by the souls of those nearby, flooding his head with a torrent of unfamiliar images, voices and other less identifiable sensory input. Built in to this power, however, is a screening mechanism by which the user may be able to perceive at least general impressions of whose thoughts belong to who. This influx of information, coupled with the usual complement of skills possessed by all Hand members, provides a quick and efficient way of analyzing one's surroundings and gleaning the most useful information from them without having to expose oneself or interrogate those nearby.

For example, a Cainite with this power enters a local watering hole in a town unfamiliar to him. After activating this power, he becomes attuned to the souls of those nearby, his mind in harmony with theirs. After a few moments, he has learned that the waitress fears for his well-being (strangers aren't very welcome in this bar), the cashier behind him is single and looking, and the stocky man in the cheap suit is an undercover agent of some kind — all in addition to the unwanted realization that the burly trucker at the bar happens to be wearing ladies' underwear for some reason.

System: To activate his Celestial Harmony, the vampire's player must roll Willpower (difficulty 7). With each success garnered on this roll, the character can "tune in" for one turn. Successes and turns do not have to be used consecutively, and the vampire can turn the power on and off repeatedly throughout the scene, if so desired. If he activates the power twice in the same scene, however, or if he uses it more times than he has permanent Willpower in one night, he gains a new derangement (Storyteller's choice, based upon circumstances) that will plague him for the rest of the story. In addition, the character suffers a two-dice penalty to all Perception- and Wits-based rolls while celestially harmonizing.

Unfortunately, this brand of mass telepathy doesn't allow the user to shut out certain stimuli or "target" specific individuals. It is a floodgate into the vampire's mind, one which is either entirely open or entirely closed. If the user wishes to narrow his focus, after having received enough information through the use of his Celestial Harmony to get him started, he may simply shut this power off and activate Telepathy (Auspex •••••) instead — a power better designed for such person-to-person intimacies.

DEED THE HEART'S DESIRE (QUIETUS •••••)

This subtle but potent power cuts the user off from unwanted distractions, allowing him to better focus and to gain a heightened awareness of both himself and his surroundings. Elder Assamite *antitribu* use it as a way of isolating themselves, regaining lost mental fortitude and quickly crafting elaborate plans. Among such individuals, the power has become something of a localized Hand tradition — a custom of blood, exclusive to their bloodline. Some Hand members outside the Assamites who have heard of the power call it "the Fortress of Silence." This is a powerful ability and, unknown to many, capable of being used on others as well. When used on vampires, it causes delirium and confusion, debilitating even the sturdiest-willed opponents. Used on mortals, it causes escalating disturbance to the point of insanity, as they hear their own blood flowing in every vein and artery with a distinct and maddening thrum.

System: To activate the power on oneself, all that is required is the expenditure of a single blood point and a place to meditate. Upon activation, a zone of silence spreads outward from the character's "center," allowing him to push away all unwanted distractions. While the character meditates inside this zone, he suffers a +2 penalty to all Perception-based difficulties. His mind is too preoccupied with his own thoughts to give full attention to the outside world. This preoccupation, however, allows him to refocus his will, rejuvenating it at the rate of one lost Willpower point every 15 minutes. He need not meditate until he has regained all spent Willpower, nor must he cease meditation once all Willpower is restored. When the character does emerge from the zone, he will be at -1 difficulty to all Willpower rolls and all rolls involving a Mental Attribute for the remainder of the evening.

If the user opts to target an unsuspecting opponent with this power, his player must spend a blood point and roll Stamina + Occult (difficulty of the opponent's Willpower). The number of successes is the number of dice the target will be penalized for the duration of the scene on any roll involving Dexterity or any Mental Attribute. The target may reduce this number by spending Willpower on a one-for-one basis. If the user achieves more successes on his roll than a target has permanent Willpower, then the target acquires a derangement as well. If the target is mortal, this derangement is permanent. Otherwise, it goes away at the end of the scene or evening.

COMBINATION DISCIPLINES

CIRCUMSPECT REVELATION (CELERITY •, OBFUSCATE ••• OR VICISSITUDE ••)

This fairly common secret allows Hand members to quickly and selectively drop any Obfuscate or Vicissitude they may be using to cover their crescent moon tattoos, revealing their status as one of Caine's Chosen to a chosen target within sight — and to that target only. Any and all other onlookers will see nothing out of the ordinary take place, even if staring directly at the user of this power.

System: The user of the power spends a blood point and chooses a target within line of sight. At that moment, whatever magic that conceals the mark from public view drops, but only to the senses of the target of the power. To the chosen target, a brief "moment outside a moment" occurs, wherein he has ample time to see the mark for what it is before the power ends and time catches up to both user and target. To all others, the user simply stands there motionless during this time. Only those with *Auspex* ratings of four or higher will even have a chance to see that something supernaturally fast is occurring under their noses. Even then, the maneuver is so fast that only someone staring directly at the user's hand during the brief period the mark is exposed could even possibly see it for what it is.

This power costs 12 experience points to learn.

LESSONS IN THE STEEL (AUSPEX •, FORTITUDE •••)

For many brave Hand members, the words of Nietzsche are words of wisdom: Whatever doesn't kill us makes us stronger. Some take this idea to a cunning if fanatical extreme, developing the mystical ability to determine the relative strengths and weaknesses of an opponent by willingly suffering the enemy's blows. Knowledge is power, and any such Cainite wounded in this way is now gifted with power that may then be used against his enemy.

System: In order to invoke this power, the character must first suffer an attack from an opponent that successfully inflicts a minimum of one health level of damage of any kind. Upon taking this wound, the character's player rolls *Stamina* + *Occult* (difficulty of the attacker's *Willpower*). Each success on this roll allows him to uncover one piece of information about the attacker's martial capabilities, starting with the most relevant. For example, Aurora is hit by an enemy Brujah with a sword, suffering one level of lethal damage after her soak. She invokes this power, rolling two successes. First she learns that her attacker's blow was not simply luck (he has *Melee* 4), and with her additional success, learns that the damage inflicted was in fact a fluke (he has *Potence* 5). She can now expect any further blows he may land to hurt far more.

This power costs 15 experience points to learn.

MASQUE OF JUDAS (AUSPEX ••••, OBFUSCATE •••)

This insidious power allows the user to peel back an opponent's mind and take from it the image of someone the target loves or, failing that, someone for whom he cares deeply. The image found therein then transfers onto the user. Sadistic removers use this power to destroy opponents using the face of their own loved ones. This has the effect of shaking an opponent's confidence, sometimes so completely that he is too horrified to act at all for a time. As the user has no choice but to immediately adopt whatever likeness is found in a target's mind, this power must be used carefully outside of combat situations.

System: The chosen target must be within sight of the user for this power to work. The character's player spends a blood point and rolls *Manipulation* + *Performance* (difficulty of target's *Willpower*). With even one success, the image is pulled from the target's mind and instantly adopted by the character. Being attacked by the character while he is wearing the likeness is so jarring that the target must immediately roll *Willpower* (difficulty 6) or suffer a difficulty penalty equal to the number of successes the player achieved on his activation roll, for a like number of turns, on any actions taken against the user. Each success on the target's *Willpower* roll reduces this penalty (and the effect's duration) by one. Utter failure results in the loss of a full turn's actions as he stands helpless before the image of his loved one. In this event, all subsequent actions taken against the image of the loved one for the rest of the are made at a difficulty of 10. The target may spend *Willpower* on any given turn to reduce these penalties.

The masque itself is temporary, lasting for only one turn per success rolled.

This power costs 20 experience points to learn.

SYMPATHETIC ENCRYPTOR (AUSPEX ••••, ART OF MEMORY ••)

A number of strong powers have developed as a result of the Hand's facility with the Art of Memory, this being the most prevalent one. Using a combination of Disciplines and cerebral training, the character can reach out with his mind and pull information from someone else's thoughts, storing that data symbolically without ever knowing what it is or means. In this way, the user can only convey the stolen or stored information to someone who understands (or has previously decided upon) the symbolology used to accomplish the task. This creates, in effect, a completely impenetrable courier system, as the user of the power himself cannot divulge the stolen information even should he desire to do so.

System: The user rolls *Intelligence* + *Subterfuge* (difficulty of the target's *Willpower*). For each success rolled, one fact or piece of information is plucked from the target's mind and instantly converted to symbolic code via the Art of Memory. Truly deep secrets may be recovered only with five successes or more, and even then, only one such secret can be discovered per use (though this is often more than enough). If plucking information from the mind of a supernatural creature, the character must spend a *Willpower* point for the effort.

The only drawback to this power is that the user has no idea whether or not the information he has stolen is of any import whatsoever. Because of this, many of those who develop this power will likewise simultaneously develop their instinct for when best to use the power. The best come to recognize on an almost subconscious level when the most opportune moments to reach out will arise.

This power costs 20 experience points to learn.

ALJUSURI (BRIDGE RITUALS)

There's an old saying in the *manus nigrum*, often spoken by various superior officers and, more often than not, echoed in the hearts and minds of the rank and file: "Whatsoever helps the one must also help the many." Being vampires, most Hand members recognize — and, indeed, very much appreciate — the double meaning inherent in the phrasing of this adage. This phrase carries particular resonance inside the circles of the Black Hand's various blood magicians.

The Hand has always been a mystically inclined organization, from its simplest rites to its most complex rituals. The vast majority of the magical rituals developed by the Black Hand were created through the blood magic of the Assamite sorcerer caste. The handful of notable exceptions to this rule came from the art of Koldunic Sorcery, and with the recent rise to prominence of a Tzimisce acting Seraph, even more Tzimisce rituals (as well as *koldun* themselves) are finding their way into the limelight. Although there are no Tremere in the Hand, the subject claims a great many Muslims, a number of whom possess *Sihir* (Islamic blood magic), though these are an admittedly small minority. The subject also claims a handful of Wanga practitioners, due to the contact of its members with certain Serpents of the Light. But the majority of blood magicians in the Hand are either close fellows of the Assamites or Assamites themselves, many of whom have learned or developed Dur-An-Ki (Assamite Sorcery) to assist the subject in achieving its goals.

Nonetheless, the strength of the Hand comes from its unity and adaptability. As such, a cabal of Assamite *antitribu* sorcerers began a practice of designing rituals that could be taught to their non-Assamite confederates with a minimum of fuss. Their success has resulted in the widespread adoption of these practices; and come the modern nights, a great many Black Hand rituals are designed with the intent that they may ultimately be "transcribed" into a foreign medium of vampiric blood magic. These transferable, pseudo-generic blood magic rituals (as well as the practice itself) are known as Aljusuri — Bridge Rituals — among the sorcerously inclined Cainites of the Hand.

The mechanism for this transference is simple. If one desires to teach a Black Hand ritual (one that was designed using Aljusuri, of course; some still aren't) to a practitioner of a blood magic that is other than the one in which the ritual originated, both the cost and the level of the new would-be ritual go up by one. If the original ritual was a level two ritual, then the vampire learning the ritual as part of his own blood magic must learn it as a level three ritual. If he desires it to be a level two ritual, he must take the time and the resources to research it on his own. But therein lies the advantage — the fact that the Cainite learning the new ritual does not need to spend weeks in study, researching the

ritual on his own, so long as he accepts the ritual at a slightly stiffer price. Needless to say, level five rituals are the common exceptions to this practice (except of course for those powerful Hand members who have no difficulty learning Level Six rituals).

The rituals described below indicate from which magical tradition the ritual first originated, but all are technically Aljusuri — designed for ease of learning, to better the subject as a whole. They represent a fair cross-section of the sort of rituals created and regularly practiced by Hand sorcerers. Indeed, the practice of Aljusuri has spread so far within the subject that the vast majority of rituals created by the Hand in modern nights are designed to be Aljusuri, and those who insist on designing their rituals "the old fashioned way" are looked at askance by those in leadership positions. After all, whatsoever helps the one must help the many....

TRUTH IN INK (LEVEL ONE DUR-AN-KI [ASSAMITE SORCERY])

The Black Hand has an almost mythic reputation for being able to sniff out impostors among its ranks, and this simple ritual is one of the primary reasons why. It is the single most common ritual found in the subject, as it is undoubtedly invoked each and every night by more than a few of the subject's blood sorcerers around the world. The ritual itself is also the oldest one specifically created by the subject, as its creation occurred concurrent with the subject's decision to brand all of its members with the mystical mark of the crescent moon. In all the long centuries that the mark has been a fundamental part of the Hand, so too has this ritual.

System: This ritual, which takes mere moments to cast, allows the user to determine the true source of any crescent moon tattoo within sight. The Cainite must be able to clearly see or touch the tattoo for an accurate reading to take place. If either condition is met, the blood magician may then spend a blood point to invoke the ritual. With a single success on the activation roll, the caster becomes instantly aware of whether or not the mark was created by the Black Hand through the official rite of branding. If not, then the target is surely an impostor. With additional successes, the caster can even glean images of the circumstances through which the individual acquired the tattoo; with five successes, the mystical equivalent of a short "film clip" plays out in the caster's mind, revealing every detail of the tattoo's origin.

Ultimately, the only way for this ritual not to work is if the caster fails his initial activation roll for the ritual itself. With zero successes, no information of any kind is imparted and the blood magician knows he has failed in his attempt. Still, he may always try again, but at the expense of yet another blood point. On the other hand, should he botch his activation roll, the information gleaned might be entirely false. In this way — and this way only — can an impostor fool the caster of this ritual into believing his false tattoo to be the genuine article.

CORPORAL RESERVOIR (LEVEL ONE DUR-AN-KI [ASSAMITE SORCERY])

This sly ritual makes use of the magic inherent in the crescent moon tattoo shared by all Hand members. It allows the blood magician to mystically store vitae in the brand itself, where it remains completely inert until such time as the bearer of the mark chooses to draw upon it. This cached blood cannot be detected by any normal means until it is drawn upon, and then it is typically too late to do much about it. Although only small amounts of blood can be stored in this manner, the rite is a staple nonetheless and has saved the unlives of more than a few Hand members on more than a few occasions.

System: After a successful activation roll, the caster carefully pours a single blood point's worth of vitae over the target's (or his own) crescent moon tattoo. The blood quickly seeps into the brand itself, during which time the tattoo briefly glows a faint red. When the mark has soaked up enough blood (one point's worth), it "seals" off and any further blood dripped onto it thereafter is wasted.

From that point on the bearer may, as a silent act of will, call upon the blood mystically hidden within the tattoo at any time. This counts as a reflexive action and does not count toward the user's blood point per turn expenditure limits. This blood point may be used for anything fueled by vitae, such as boosting Physical Attributes or fueling Disciplines. Once the blood within the mark is spent, the tattoo "unseals," allowing the ritual to be cast upon it anew.

It is important to note that this ritual works only on mystical brands such as the mark of the crescent moon. Although it is possible for one to place additional brands on other parts of the body (for use as blood receptacles), this practice is unheard of in the Hand. Only one mark is given by the leaders of the subsect, and any additional ones are fraudulent at best and security risks at worst. All the same, if a character wishes to place more tattoos on his body, there is a spatial limit to consider: For game purposes, a character can have no more than five such reservoirs at a time. Any additional "space" on the body canvas is wasted.

There are rumors of a higher-level, more powerful version of this ritual, one that allows ordinary tattoos to acquire similar properties, but such a ritual is certainly not nearly as common nor as subtle.

CRAFT WEIRDING STONE (LEVEL TWO KOLDUNIC SORCERY)

A powerful Tzimisce *koldun* named Bogumir created this ritual as a gift to the best and brightest under his command. A brilliant tactician, Bogumir quickly achieved the vaunted rank of dominion in the subsect and was eventually titled with the added wartime honorific of Watch Commander. Indeed, he is recognized for being the first ever *koldun* to have earned this latter honor. To those in the know, the reason for this promotion was that Bogumir developed rituals such as this one using Aljusuri, much to the chagrin (and frank surprise) of many of his clanmates. To give proper credit, it is due primarily to Bogumir's

unification efforts that Hand Tzimisce as a whole began to support the practice of Aljusuri as a legitimate means of furthering both clan and subsect. Although Bogumir himself has disappeared below radar in recent nights, his legacy remains — one whose impact on the subsect none can sensibly dispute.

Bogumir's most well known ritual allows a blood magician to create an object known as a weirding stone. In ancient times, the shaman or holy man of a village would use weirding stones to determine the outcome of a given situation or the solution to a particularly weighty problem facing his people. To the villagers, these stones were, in essence, guidance from the powers that be, the fingers on the hand of Fate. Millennia later, these stones are still in use, this time by the vampires of the Black Hand who call upon the counsel of these stones in much the same way as their mortal forbears did.

System: The rite for creating these stones is very high on ceremony, requiring the better part of an evening's worth of chants, preparations and gesticulations. The ritual also requires a specially prepared stone of a kind that is highly sensitive to mystical energies, such as onyx, amber or any number of quartz family members. During the crafting process, the caster must invest the stone with at least one blood point worth of his own vitae, after which the rock takes on a ruddy hue (regardless of the stone's base color). He then closes the ceremony with an investiture of Willpower; as many points as he cares to spend. If all has gone well up to this point, the caster will have a powerful little tool to benefit its crafter or those under his command at the end of the evening.

The blood invested into the weirding stone allows its crafter to always keep track of it. Although he has little discrete knowledge as to the stone's whereabouts, he has a constant sense of how far away it is and in what general direction. The more blood invested into the stone at the time of its crafting, the more detailed the information: With at least three blood points invested, the caster will know the instant the stone has been destroyed. With five blood points, he will know whenever the stone changes hands.

The Willpower invested into a stone allows the one carrying it to access the power of the crafter's will, even if he himself is no blood magician. This has two possible effects: First, by funneling one of his own Willpower points through the stone, the user may ask a question of the Fates and expect a helpful reply. The only requirement is that the question must be directional in nature, as the stone "replies" by pointing toward the answer. For example, "Which way did my quarry run off to?" would be a fair question, as the stone would then point in the proper direction, while the question "How well armed is my quarry?" would elicit only stony silence. Second, the user may opt to spend one of the Willpower points invested in the stone at the time of its creation. This allows him to send a brief telepathic message (roughly the amount one could speak with one breath) to the stone's crafter, wherever he may be. When a weirding



stone runs out of stored Willpower it loses its ability to call upon the Fates, but remains active in every other way. Wierding stones may be “recharged,” but only by the original crafter using the ritual process again.

Due to the stones’ mystical connections to their crafter, each blood magician may only have a number of “active” stones equal to his Willpower rating at one time.

KISS OF THE ASP (LEVEL TWO DUR-AN-KI [ASSAMITE SORCERY])

Many Hand members find it a strange curiosity that the most widely known ritual in subsect is the one that sees the least actual use. Of course, the word “known” in this case is used loosely, as the majority of those who invoke this ritual haven’t the first clue how to actually cast it — they merely “benefit” from its effects. The ritual itself is an embedded one, enacted through use of the Art of Memory and triggered by any Hand member who is captured, no longer has any hope of escape or rescue, or otherwise has reason to prefer Final Death to whatever alternatives lay before her. The ritual allows the despairing Chosen of Caine to voluntarily end her own unlfe by means of the magic stored in her undead flesh.

System: Once cast, this ritual is permanent until mentally triggered, the magic means resting dormant inside the Cainite until that time. Although the target can enact the ritual even while staked, the Kiss cannot be triggered by accident as it takes several steps of sequential thought to be properly invoked. Once the trigger sequence has been met, however, there’s no going back: The last step in the sequence sets off a chain reaction in the heart that explosively boils all the blood inside the body away, leaving the surrounding a body a dissolving husk. Even if the vampire has no blood in his system at the time, the ritual still works, destroying the heart inside the vampire’s chest and killing him instantly and rather painlessly. Interestingly, as the heart truly is the focus of the entire ritual itself, any vampire whose heart was somehow safely removed from his body could still destroy it (and thus himself) with but a thought, regardless of distance.

It is also important to note that part of the mystical coding of the ritual requires the voluntary, conscious will of the initial target of the ritual; it is the key that unlocks the triggering mechanism. Thus, no Hand member can be coerced or commanded to invoke the ritual, even through mystical means. Either he wills it or he doesn’t.





CHAPTER FIVE: STORYTELLING

One should know one's enemies, their alliances, their resources and the nature of their country, in order to plan a campaign.

— Frederick the Great

The Black Hand is an integral part of the Sabbat. None but the foolhardy — or the fool — questions its loyalty (at least, not openly), and no one who knows anything about the subject wants to end up on its bad side.

However, making the Black Hand an integral part of a Sabbat chronicle can be a bit of a challenge. The Hand's membership is small, elite and secretive. Most of their activities go unwitnessed by their fellow Sabbat; many of their members keep their association secret, sometimes even from their own packmates. Most of the time, a Black Hand operative is just another Sabbat, maybe with some additional skills and contacts, but who still feeds, hangs out in the communal haven, and interacts on a nightly basis with his packmates. But other times, he has a secret (or at least separate) existence from the rest of his pack that can (or should) be equally important to his development as a character; he trains with the local Watch, attends secret *ritae*, and may even go on missions into Camarilla territory.

So how do you make the character's Black Hand membership mean something to the player without leaving the other players out in the cold while one of their number sees all the action? How can the other characters involve themselves in a packmate's activities without either joining the Hand themselves or compromising the Black Hand's well-enforced code of secrecy? How can a pack of ordinary Sabbat characters interact with the Hand without becoming merely bystanders as a Black Hand death squad comes and takes over the story by sheer weight of superior firepower...or worse, ending up as casualties in the resulting crossfire?

THE BLACK HAND CHRONICLE

One obvious (and quite possibly popular) approach is to simply have all the players' characters be members of the Black Hand. This means the unifying factor between the characters will be their common membership in the Hand, rather than being members of the same Sabbat pack. The chronicle will then focus on the events that draw the Black Hand members together: the activities of the local Watch, citywide Sabbat politics, or Black Hand-sanctioned missions in support of Sabbat leadership.

FAMILY TIES

If the players' characters are all Black Hand, then it's likely they belong to separate Sabbat packs, and thus each have separate unives and Vinculum relationships with other Sabbat. In effect, this means you, the Storyteller, don't have to think about just *one* pack of Sabbat, but *one pack per character* — the sum of which may end up becoming a list of all the Sabbat in a given city. If the other Black Hand characters are the contacts or co-conspirators with whom the Hand member shares common goals, philosophy or beliefs, important secrets and dangerous experiences, his pack is his family. They may or may not know what he does when he's not with them, but they do have certain expectations regarding his commitment to the pack. He has a Vinculum with each member of his Sabbat pack, and those relationships should mean

something to him, even if those characters are only peripherally involved in the chronicle most of the time.

This doesn't mean the Storyteller has to do all the work. Unless you have specific storylines or characters in mind, let the players help by creating two or three Sabbat characters to be their packmates. These characters can be pulled out of other Vampire sourcebooks (the templates in the clanbooks or sect guides are a good start), based on a television or movie character, or even on characters from previous stories or chronicles. Concentrate on creating strong, vivid character archetypes that can be easily described in a few words. Give them evocative names, describe the pack's power structure, and ascertain the Black Hand character's Vinculum rating and general relationship with each of them.

A Black Hand character's packmates should not be merely drones or story cannon fodder, but neither should you spend so much time concentrating on any one character's "home life" in a session that the other players grow bored or restless waiting for a piece of the action. If you think your players can handle the viewpoint of multiple characters, you could ask some of them to take the part of their fellow's packmates, either as secondary characters, or just for a given scene, which will certainly make things more interesting for all involved. Relationships with pack members can also be covered in bluebooking (writing summaries of a character's interactions with his packmates between Black Hand missions in a notebook for the Storyteller's perusal), in e-mail, over the phone, or storytelling scenes one-on-one between major chronicle sessions. In any case, look at the Black Hand character's relationships with his Sabbat packmates as a means of developing the character's background in more depth, and a potential hook for involving the character involved in stories — or creating complications in Black Hand storylines where the character is least expecting them.

SECTS IN THE CITY

For an ongoing Black Hand chronicle, the easiest setup for your players' characters may be as members of a reunion *kamut* that comprises some or all of the Black Hand members in a local Watch. This permits the players' characters to not only go on missions as a *kamut*, but to also interact informally between official missions, for *ritae*, briefings by visiting dominions, training sessions, or just hanging out, drinking down a few juicebags and trading war stories. This also allows what's happening among the Sabbat, both locally and on a sect-wide scale, to become a factor in your chronicle, which broadens the scope of your stories beyond simply obeying mission directives from the Black Hand. Your players' characters are involved in the local scene both as members of their respective Sabbat packs and as members of the Black Hand — two perspectives that may very well come into conflict with each other.

Such conflicts are the foundation of stories that delve into a lesser-known arena of Black Hand interest — politics. Issues can range from influencing an archbishop's decisions on declaring a Crusade or holding a major *ritus*, to balancing the commitments between a Hand member's duty to the subsect and her responsibility to her packmates. But they are often issues that have no clear-cut answer, and where the character must make difficult choices that can potentially affect her status in one group or the other. When her pack targets an unwary Camarilla coterie that she realizes includes a Black Hand undercover operative, how can she protect the operative without blowing his cover? Or should she

just let the brawl play out and deal with the consequences? If her Hand superiors decide to redistribute their operatives, will she willingly leave the pack she's run with perhaps for decades, or attempt to persuade the dominion she's more useful where she is?

PLAYING POLITICS

The Sabbat practices a unique brand of cutthroat politics within its own ranks, and not even the members of the Black Hand are immune. However, the usual tactics of the Black Hand (or at least the usual *expected* tactics) are far less effective in the political arena than on the front lines of a siege. When the local bishop's favorite templar is chosen to lead the war parties over an experienced Hand remover, or the ductus of a rival pack starts making insinuations over just where one of the Black Hand characters was last week when she failed to show up for an important *ritus*, gutting the offender may be viscerally satisfying, but clearly a bad idea in the long run. Especially if a Black Hand member seeks to keep her affiliation a secret, or has ambitions of surviving long enough to become a dominion.

In short, at times, violence is *not* the best answer to the characters' problems, nor in the best interest of the Black Hand. The Hand prefers to keep a low profile in Sabbat affairs, saving its political muscle for times when it's most needed, and thus most effective for the long-range goals of the subsect. This is not to say the Black Hand keeps out of Sabbat politics — it merely relies on its operatives to act with discretion and common sense.

Political stories are a very broad category, essentially covering any storyline that involves the players' characters interacting with other Sabbat members in order to achieve their goals through (mostly) non-violent means. This can mean making deals (you do this for me and I'll take care of that for you), persuasion (if the bishop had really intended us to do that, don't you think she would have made that a little clearer? But if we do it this way, you see how that accomplishes her purposes and helps us both out a little too...), or simply setting up a situation so that doing what the player's character wants looks like what the other Sabbat intended to do all along.

The most important thing a political story needs is a clear goal for both the players' characters and all the other characters with whom they come in contact. Something has to be at stake — either the player's character has to want something badly enough to work for it, or he has to already have something he values highly enough to defend if it's threatened. To really work in the context of the game, this stake should mean something to the player as well as his character. Unless you have players who get into this kind of mindset easily, this will take some time to establish, but it's worth it.

For Black Hand characters, look for opportunities to explore the Hand's agenda in the context of Sabbat packs and overall society, where the characters' dual loyalties may bring them into conflict with other Sabbat goals, or the plans of a particular Sabbat leader. Black Hand missions, which are the primary means for assembling a group of Black Hand characters, can also have an indirect effect on (or be affected by) the goals of Sabbat packs or leaders. Whether the Black Hand characters seek to persuade the archbishop to declare a Crusade, attempt to end a feud between two respective members' packs, investigate a rumor of a Noddist artifact, or try to influence the selection of a new bishop who is more supportive of the Hand, they still serve their subsect's agenda.

REAL REMOVERS DON'T PLAY POLITICS

Well, actually, that depends on your definition of politics, and the focus of your chronicle. If your stories focus primarily on the missions, sieges and the hands-on violence of the Black Hand's war against the Antediluvians and their unwitting minions in the Camarilla, then the "political" aspect of your characters' unlives as members of both the Sabbat and the more secretive Black Hand will naturally take a back seat to the action. And that's fine, if you and your players are having fun.

However, you're overlooking a lot of other possibilities that being part of the Black Hand offers — for Black Hand members have as great a duty to pursue the subject's goals among their fellow Sabbat as in battle against the Camarilla. And in situations where violence is not the best solution, politics — the art of getting someone else to do what you want by non-violent means — becomes the tool of the night. Take a break now and then from the hard-hitting action and present your players with some situations on their home turf that can't be solved by the application of overwhelming firepower and combat Disciplines. Look for ways to tie in the objectives of their missions for the Hand with matters closer to home, so clear benefits entice them to get involved, and so that success in the political arena can lead to other things, including new opportunities for hard-hitting action against the Hand's enemies.

CONFLICTS OF BLOOD

One of the issues that all Black Hand members must deal with are the sometimes conflicting loyalties engendered by the Vaulderie — the one they share on a regular basis with their Sabbat packmates, the larger ones shared by Sabbat at any large gathering, and the Vaulderies shared with other members of their own subject. The Hand is, of course, aware of this potential impediment to their members' commitment, and deal with it primarily by ensuring that its operatives share blood among themselves as often as is feasible in a given situation. The Hand also presumes that the oath its members took at their initiations is binding in and of itself; the subject does not induct cadets whom it believes can be trusted only if bound by vitae. It also encourages members to participate actively in their local Watch, sharing not only the Vaulderie, but a sense of duty and mutual responsibility, and to consider membership in the subject a rare and elite privilege.

Still, the varying degrees of commitment among a Hand operative, her relationship with her packmates and her dedication to the Hand can become a point of stress for her. This conflict intensifies if she keeps her membership in the Black Hand a secret, especially from the rest of her pack. Even if her affiliation is known to her packmates, they may sometimes resent her split loyalties, and even feel as if they're always secondary in her priorities, particularly if she seems to spend more time with her Hand associates or away on missions than with them. Some packmates with a higher Vinculum level may even be seriously jealous of the Licks who share her "other life."

If some of those associates belong to rival packs, the tension may well reach a breaking point, with the Hand operative caught between the emotions of her pack and her mixed emotions toward a fellow operative, who also happens to be associated with her pack's enemies. Meanwhile, her own pack wonders why she's not ready to support them in kicking this guy's undead ass.

How the character balances her loyalties, and how she responds when she must choose between them, is a test of her character and dedication to the cause of Caine. How your characters resolve these dilemmas is up to them. It's up to you as the Storyteller to find ways of making that potential conflict of loyalties into an issue for them, both to add tension and complications to an ongoing story, and to provide opportunities for storytelling.

THE NEW JYHAD

The fall of New York to the Camarilla was an unprecedented blow to the Sabbat as a sect, and it doesn't take losing gracefully. However, the Sabbat — and the Black Hand — is determined to learn from its mistakes. Recent developments in the war between the Sword of Caine and the Antediluvian pawns of the Camarilla have taken the Jyhad to a new level of sophistication. In this, as always, the Black Hand must lead the way.

Your players' characters will likely represent the majority or possibly *all* the Black Hand operatives in the city, which puts the full burden of the city's defense against the Camarilla (well, in the eyes of the Hand leadership, anyway) on them. If they discover that Camarilla archons have targeted their city, will they be able to persuade the bishop or archbishop of the threat or win the support of their respective packs? How much support and guidance will they receive from the Hand leadership in the current political turmoil? Will they be able to calm tensions between packs, organize any sort of defense, or convince the Camarilla that attacking is not a good idea at this time?

The characters may be members of a *kamut* or column sent into another city that's considered a potential target for the next big Camarilla offensive (such as Atlanta). Here they lack both the personal motivation of being on their home ground and the support of their own Sabbat packmates, and may even be seen as interlopers by both whatever local Hand members are in the city and its Sabbat leadership. They must develop an alliance or at least an understanding with the bishops and ducti in order to do their job. Their official mission objectives may involve gathering intelligence on attack plans or enemy leadership, training Sabbat packs in guerrilla warfare techniques (particularly those involving clandestine operations rather than overwhelming force and bloody mayhem), or determining the vulnerabilities in a city's defense and convincing the appropriate local Sabbat ducti or bishops to do something about them.

As the elite strike force of the Sabbat, Black Hand characters will be called upon to play a major role in any siege or defense — whether their actions are acknowledged by the local Sabbat leadership or not.

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

In the Jyhad, as in any war, the side with the best intelligence has a keen advantage over the other. The Camarilla made good use of this in its attack on New York, but the Black Hand

is no stranger to covert operations, either in gathering information or in clandestine strikes to weaken the enemy long before an actual attack has begun.

The Black Hand may send the characters' *kamut* to infiltrate the target of a future siege, to gain what intelligence they can on the Camarilla elders, current politics, the locations of havens, Elysiums, the Tremere chantry, and other potential targets. It may seek to intercept Camarilla couriers, determine what younger childer of the city's leadership might be amenable to betraying their elders, or which elder of the city is capable of rallying the support of multiple factions to the city's defense (which makes him a prime target for assassination).

The infiltration of Camarilla territory is a delicate mission — especially since being discovered, or worse, captured, can put an entire planned siege on hold or cancel it altogether. Certain targets, such as the Tremere chantry or the most prominent elders, can be taken only if they are not expecting an attack. Once any sign of Sabbat activity is discovered, the city and its most dangerous denizens will be too much on their guard. The dominion giving the players' characters their assignment should stress heavily that their presence *must not be noticed* — this is not the time for Masquerade-breaking or indulging one's taste for Camarilla blood. In fact, should the Black Hand *kamut* discover an ambitious Sabbat pack jumping the gun and conducting a little war sortie of its own, its own mission must take precedence. That means the Sabbat had better toe the line or face the Hand's *extreme* displeasure. This would also be a very good time for a clever Hand agent to use persuasion and delayed gratification — "Tell ya what, when we do go up against these bastards, I'll tell the bishop you guys should be in the front assault. We'll pick out a nice juicy target just for you!" — in order to achieve their goals rather than beating the pack to a pulp and wasting their own resources.

The players should be encouraged to gain all the information they can, and even propose attack plans based on what they've learned, such as the best way to neutralize the Brujah primogen and his three childer, tricking the Tremere regent outside his well-defended chantry where he can be trapped, or planning the date of the first strike for an upcoming Toreador salon most of the city's elders expect to attend. And of course, if they come up with a plan, the chances are good they may also carry it out...and possibly even call on some other Black Hand operatives to help, or some of their own packmates.

If the spies have done their work, once the attack begins in earnest, the gloves come off. The Black Hand can go for the jugular and demonstrate just how the subsect earns its terrifying reputation — a fitting reward for an earlier job well done.

COLUMNS

The most intensive, straightforward Black Hand pack is the column. The columns are also the most controversial; by their very nature they are political landmines. Members of a column do not have Sabbat packmates — the column is their pack, and quite possibly the column's current haven is its only claim to domain. Columns were originally intended to be nomadic, ready at any time for a call to action from their founding Seraph. In the wake of the current events, some columns have settled down, but others — for whatever reason — are still on the move.

If your players want to have their characters be members of a column, work out which Seraph (Izhim or Djulah) was its founder, what their relationship was with him, and now that he's gone (mysteriously, in both cases), what are they currently doing? What do they think happened to him, and are they doing something about it or waiting to see if he returns? Will they consider joining forces with the rest of the Black Hand or do they intend to remain independent? How do they regard the *other* Seraph's columns — as rivals or potential allies? Will they settle down somewhere and pose as a normal Sabbat pack, or keep on the move, or just go where the fighting currently is?

You as the Storyteller need to decide what the Seraph's agenda really was, and how much the characters really know about it. Were the characters also inducted into the *Manus Nigrum*, the "True Hand"? What other mission goals does that give them, particularly in the Seraph's sudden absence? What standing orders did he leave, what did he tell them about other columns or the forces of Alamut? Are the characters all Assamites or is this a mixed pack, and how do the Assamites feel about the current affairs of Alamut? Or do they care about their clan's ancient traditions at all?

THE BLACK HAND IN SABBAT CHRONICLES

It may be that not all your players have Black Hand characters. How then do you present a chronicle in which the Black Hand members and their Sabbat packmates share the action while making the Black Hand connection meaningful, without leaving the Sabbat characters on the sidelines or running over them with steel-shod boots?

SECRET UNLIVES OF THE BLACK HAND

Most Black Hand members keep their association with the subsect a secret. However, there are many levels of secrets, and even the Hand recognizes that keeping a secret of this kind from one's own pack is often very difficult. The tattoo can be hidden, but one's frequent absences from the communal haven when a mission is in progress are far harder to explain, particularly when the Hand operative has a Vinculum with those he is trying to deceive. As a result, the Hand leaves this particular question to the operative's discretion. If he can keep his membership secret, fine; if not, no one in the Hand will blame him for revealing it. The Black Hand operative then has the responsibility of convincing his packmates to keep his connection confidential. The disadvantage is that this becomes a vulnerability; the character has a secret he's entrusted to a packmate who may hold it over him. The advantage, however, is that he can now rely on his pack (in theory, anyway) to back him up on certain kinds of missions, just as he would back them up on any project of theirs.

WHO ELSE CAN YOU TRUST?

If a Hand operative is particularly close with her pack, she may find it more reliable (and amenable to her wishes) than the wartime *kamut* compiled of Hand operatives she doesn't know personally. For some, that level of familiarity is far more valuable than years of specialized combat training. And sometimes the

Black Hand doesn't have time to put a *kamut* together, or the skills most needed for a mission are in the Hand operative's own pack, particularly if it requires knowledge of the local area. While there's a limit to how much most dominions are willing to let a "common" Sabbat pack know about what their mission is really about, they also recognize that at times, a single Hand remover and a unified pack can do a job almost as efficiently as a *kamut*, and achieving results is more important than elitism.

In sieges, many Black Hand members fight with their packs rather than assembling in a specialized *kamut*. This serves the purpose of preserving the operative's "cover" as a member of the subject and fielding a better pack due to his presence in it (some dominions have a low opinion of a Sabbat pack with no Hand members in it at all). In fact, almost any story centered around a siege, either attacking a Camarilla city (including the intelligence gathering missions prior to the attack itself), or defending a Sabbat city from a Camarilla offensive, works equally well with a Sabbat pack as a Black Hand *kamut*. Some of the particulars may change (such as how much all the characters know about their mission, or who actually gives them the assignment), but the situation itself does not.

In short, just because one player's character is a Hand member doesn't mean he needs to exclude the rest of the pack from all his interesting activities, nor that he runs off to join some elite corps of ass-kickers when it's better for the story to keep the group together. The Hand is a flexible organization that cares more about results than the method used to achieve them, and often gives a successful agent a good deal of leeway so long as the results keep happening — which means as Storyteller, you have the latitude to set up the situation so that everyone has a chance to participate.

PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY

From the Hand's strategic point of view, having a Black Hand member be able to call on his pack for backup has some distinct advantages. Particularly in regions without a strong Hand presence, or where the Black Hand must tread delicately for political reasons, an operative's pack becomes an asset rather than a liability.

The Black Hand has a very powerful reputation in the Sabbat, but its official political stance is fairly conservative, usually supporting the leadership's current policies. This does not necessarily reflect its actual agenda, but it is the reputation it must maintain in order to keep its freedom of action within the Sabbat. Therefore some kinds of missions, however beneficial they are to the Hand's political program, are too costly to be directly associated with.

In cases like these, the most efficient approach is to "arrange" for things to happen that suit the Hand's agenda but cannot be traced directly back to it, and that the emissaries can swear no knowledge of and even be telling the truth. Plausible deniability is a strong weapon in the Black Hand arsenal, and it is the aid of ordinary Sabbat (with or without a Hand member in their pack) that makes it feasible. Sometimes a Sabbat pack has no Black Hand connections at all, but might be highly motivated to take on a particular mission due to an old grudge, or desire for territory, or a special interest of some kind. Of course, it isn't necessary that one's agents in this regard be told the entire truth of what they're doing, or why — just enough to make them eager to do what's needed. In fact, they may not even know they're working for the Black Hand....

CONSULTANTS, INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS AND SPIES

The Black Hand is very secretive about its mission, schemes and actions, and more often hides even its best successes — but that doesn't mean it doesn't occasionally find a reason to call on trustworthy or talented individuals outside its own membership.

The Black Hand has allies in the Sabbat who perform services on a semi-regular basis: informants and spies; sources for weapons, ammunition or vehicles; drivers and pilots. They may also call upon local "guides" where no Hand members are available, or political allies who owe a Hand member a favor or who support the Hand's cause for reasons of their own. The Hand has its own specialists, of course, but sometimes the one or two members who have expertise in a particular field of study (such as the more exotic sciences, ancient languages, occult studies, or

BLURRING THE LINES

It is entirely possible that the "consultants" best suited for a given task are not even Sabbat. Both the Camarilla and the independent clans have noted Noddist scholars and specialists among their ranks whose expertise might be of equal use to the Black Hand. The Hand also finds use for outsiders whose skills are not so unique — as decoys, scapegoats, or sources of information on their more wary elders. Rumors sometimes surface even among the Hand as to just how many agents or spies the Seraphim actually have in the Camarilla, or what high-ranking Camarilla officials might secretly have pledged their true loyalties to Caine's Chosen.

While a Hand operative may go undercover in the Camarilla, or even convert a Camarilla Kindred to the Black Hand's cause, not all of the Hand's consultants or other contacts realize to whom they provide their information. It's rumored that a number of skilled Hand operatives have developed Camarilla or anarch identities in order to better maintain valuable contacts. It is sometimes surprisingly easy for a Hand operative to convince an inexperienced but ambitious ancilla that she works for a mysterious elder who has taken an interest in his future, or that she's an archon investigating another Kindred he dislikes anyway. Certainly in the Final Nights, Noddist scholars in both sects are eager to compare speculations and evidence, and may not inquire too closely about one another's political affiliations.

In short, if the individual being consulted or otherwise used as a source of information doesn't need to know he's talking to the Black Hand, he won't, and that refers to the players' characters as well. Not all chronicles involving the Black Hand need use the subject as a protagonist or ally — the Hand also makes a cunning and formidable adversary, both openly and in disguise. If your players' characters belong to the Camarilla, they may not even realize they're in a Black Hand chronicle until it's too late....

even high-tech weaponry or communications) are either not available or unable to travel where they're needed on time.

In these cases, the dominion in charge (possibly on the suggestion of a player's character) may find it to the Hand's advantage to bring in an outside consultant or contractor from the Sabbat, who will provide her expertise, services or knowledge as needed, either out of loyalty or for a payment of some kind, and not ask too many questions. The Hand likes to keep relationships with such outsiders simple, and reveal no more of its own agenda or greater interests than absolutely necessary, so it will fall upon one particular agent (such as the character who first suggested it) to be the sole liaison and contact for that outside consultant.

KEEPING THINGS UNDER CONTROL

The Black Hand is a very powerful group of Cainites whose reputation alone is often sufficient to give their enemies sleepless days. However, a lot of that reputation is mystique: In reality, the Hand is more feared than seen. You as the Storyteller need to reinforce that mystique, but also keep the power level (and any overly exuberant players with Black Hand characters) contained, in order to keep it from spiraling out of control. You don't want to be obliged to have Gehenna actually *happen*, just to give your players some adequate opposition. Don't let it get that far.

The Black Hand likes to keep a low profile. Stress to the player that the Hand has kept most of its activities secret for over five centuries. Subtlety in approach has become an art form, and clever, unseen actions that benefit the Hand are rewarded. Leaving a body trail a mile wide impresses no one, and may in fact get an operative into serious trouble with superiors. There's a time for all-out violence, but it will come on the Hand's schedule...or the character won't survive to see it.

Abuse it and lose it. A Black Hand character who abuses his status may receive a warning — or worse — from the local Watch Commander or a dominion; his reputation among other Hand operatives will be that of a maverick fool, and dominions will stop selecting him for *kamuts*. (See "The One Call Rule," in the sidebar) Make his status in the Black Hand count for something, either for or against him, depending on how he handles it.

Personal agenda versus the politics. Often a player's character's agenda (or Storyteller character's agenda) is strictly

personal, and therefore, while the Black Hand won't *stop* him from acting on it, it's not going to do anything (overtly, anyway) to assist. After all, a member should be able to handle "small matters" on his own, and it's not like he doesn't have a pack to help him. Help your players develop personal goals, and find ways for their characters to succeed, one step at a time. Make them work for it, but don't make it so they feel they simply must call on superior firepower in order to achieve it.

Status carries you only so far. Be careful as to how Black Hand characters (whether players' characters or Storyteller characters) can use their membership and status dots (and thus influence) in interacting with other Hand operatives. Those dots represent exactly how much "pull" a character has in convincing other Black Hand operatives to help her out. However, it's not a private hotline to Hand Central Control. The character can contact only operatives she already *knows* in the story — such as her mentor, Watch Commander, *kamut* ductus, or possibly other operatives she's worked with before and knows how to contact. Those characters are only as "available" as you allow them to be. Such characters are very useful for you to point the player characters back on track, tell them when they're getting way out of line with Hand objectives, or otherwise provide guidance — help does not need to come in the form of a *kamut* of removers when a little sound advice from a mentor will do the trick.

Reputation gets you even farther. In a less mechanical fashion, keep track of what other Sabbat or Black Hand characters have heard about what the character has done — and make sure he is treated accordingly. Respect and even awe from Storyteller characters can encourage a player to pursue status as a goal, measured not in dots, but in how his character is perceived and treated in the game. But respect in the Sabbat and respect in the Black Hand can be entirely different things; what makes a Sabbat Lick's reputation can severely damage that of a Hand operative. Whose respect really matters the most to them? And will the characters' current plan of action earn them the respect they think they deserve — or a level of notoriety they'll be forever living down?

Remember that Black Hand operatives are also loyal members of the Sabbat. They are just as likely to be involved in any Sabbat storyline as the other members of their pack, and indeed, should be. While they may have additional contacts and resources to call upon in cases of emergency (depending on their

THE ONE CALL RULE

The Black Hand does provide a certain level of support to its members; fellow Black Hand operatives pledge to lend each other aid in time of need. However, the Hand has only a limited amount of patience with members who holler for help every time they find themselves in a jam. This is reflected in terms of the game system by the "One Call Rule." The One Call Rule means that any subject member can use his dots in Black Hand Membership to call on other Hand members for help in a given story, but if he does, *he'd better really need it*. If his need is judged reasonable by those he calls upon for aid (that is, if the Storyteller decides those characters would consider it a reasonable call), then he retains the right to do so again next story. If, however, in the opinion of those fellow Hand operatives who respond to his call, he's just wasted their precious time or should have known better than to get himself into that kind of mess to start with, then his level of potential with regard to the Black Hand Membership Background is effectively reduced by one dot. In order to regain that lost status, he's going to have to do something spectacular to impress his Black Hand comrades, on his own without help. Or, in responding to another member's call for assistance, he must prove he's not quite as big an idiot as he appeared to be.

In other words, feel free to use the character's reputation within the Hand, or the response of his superior, to put a rein on his calling in the heavy cavalry every time he thinks his unlife is at risk. If he always expects to be rescued, or attempts to use the Hand as his private hit squad, he should reap the consequences of his actions.



rank and connections within the Hand itself), the Hand isn't going to come bail them out every time they find their fool selves in hot water. If they're not actually on an assignment for the Hand, they're expected to be able to take care of themselves, just like their packmates.

PLAYING THE CHRONICLE OF SECRETS

One of the coolest things about the Black Hand is its incredible aura of secrecy. More than any other faction, it plays its cards close to its chest, and keeps all its failures — and even most of its successes — to itself. The Hand's political agenda is understated, its exact membership is unknown, and its practices, beliefs, and future plans are all hidden under a well-enforced veil of silence.

But how does that work in terms of running a chronicle, either featuring the Black Hand as the centerpiece, or with a Black Hand member as part of the characters' pack? How can you make the secrets and mysterious nature of the subject part of your story...especially if your players have already read this book, including all the sidebars?

CULTS AND CONSPIRACIES

The Black Hand is a classic secret society with a hierarchical structure, and both a political and mystical agenda. It has at its core a collection of special beliefs that it reveals only to members of its society, and it reveals them in degrees as the individual member moves through the stages of cadet, rookie,

INTERNAL AFFAIRS

For the sake of keeping the Black Hand's mystery intact, we recommend you don't reveal secrets of the Hand unless all players' characters *are* members — the Hand will have a far more powerful, even ominous, presence and impact on your chronicle the less the players actually know about it. Save those secrets for an all-Black Hand chronicle, or just never reveal them at all. There are always other kinds of things in which your characters can entangle themselves.

Note that many of the same principles presented here also hold equally true for an all-Tremere chronicle, but don't tell anyone we said that.

full member and dominion, though most will never rise so high as to learn all the secrets held by the subject leaders. It teaches a code of behavior and discipline, stressing obedience to its leaders, dedication to duty, and a strong foundation of service to a greater goal. The Black Hand also trains its members in special skills that aid them in accomplishing their goals and learning the mysteries of the subject. It demands strong and binding oaths of their members — at which no vee who has any understanding at all of the powers of blood magic dares to scoff.

Using those elements, you can present membership in the Black Hand as a privilege to be worked for, where each level of accomplishment offers new possibilities, and reveals more pieces of a vast, interlocking puzzle. Note that a "level of accomplishment" does not mean that when your characters become full

members, they won't get any new revelations till they make dominion; the Hand's secrets are far more varied and complex than that. The World of Darkness harbors many kinds of secrets and revelations, and not all of them appear in the *Book of Nod*.

Depending on the kind of mystery unraveling, or the nature and origin of the "secret" slowly emerging, the same general principles apply whether the characters are all members of the Black Hand or not. Never give them all the goodies at one time, parcel them out incrementally, and always leave them wanting more.

PRESERVING THE MYSTERIES

Ask your players not to read this book, so they will truly be learning the secrets as they go. We know that some players will actually comply with the request, and some won't, but it's worth a try. Do make sure they learn whatever information they should have as entry-level Black Hand members, and give them the benefit of the doubt if things come up where the characters should have known about something, but maybe you forgot to mention it. If your players trust you enough to play without knowing all the background, then play fair — don't screw them on technicalities. (We tried to put the really secret stuff in sidebars, so you could photocopy certain pages and cut those parts out, if you wanted to give them their background that way. Or, if you've a touch of the actor in you, read aloud the appropriate in-character sections to the players as if the narrator was speaking directly to them at a training lecture.)

Come up with some surprises. If your players are going to read the book anyway, warn them you're going to change things. Feel free to change things, period. You aren't obliged to stick to what's written in this book if you have a different idea, or want to throw in a twist the players aren't expecting. Add some wrinkles, or change the reasoning behind an event. Add characters and subplots. Add a whole new level of conspiracy — maybe the *Manus Nigrum* isn't really toast, or perhaps the Camarilla has infiltrated the Hand as well. Maybe it's Izhim who's leading the Black Hand, and it's Jalan-Aajav who's missing. Maybe there's a clandestine alliance between a certain faction of the Hand and a similar-minded (and highly secretive) faction within the Camarilla, which are beginning to seriously compare notes now that Gehenna is practically at the gates. Be creative. Note that this is easiest to do on a very story-specific level — that is, base your story around something that the book doesn't cover, or doesn't tell all the details (or even truth) about. If your players are wrapped up in the doings of a mysterious dominion who gives them tantalizing clues about something nobody else seems to know about — and he never appears to talk to anyone else — does it really matter if they know about the Tal'mahe'Ra or not?

Don't let them cheat. Be firm. Keep track of the difference between what the player knows and what his character should know. Enforce the difference, but also make sure your players understand that you're really not trying to screw them through their characters' ignorance. It should be okay to learn by experience — even learn the hard way — unless they really do something incredibly stupid where lack of out-of-character knowledge was not the issue. In other words, they'll feel less motivated to cheat if they know that playing their characters as ignorant (even when they know better as players) isn't going to get them into a mess they can't get out of. You can even

demonstrate this by allowing them to meet a character who clearly knows less than they do — and play it straight.

Set a mood of revelation. Build an air of mystery and anticipation from the start. Customize the mystery or conspiracy to the characters' (and players') personal interests in the World of Darkness, whether it be an upcoming siege, finding out what happened to a packmate's sire, or discovering new Noddist revelations. Drop an odd bit of information — have the pack encounter or aid a strange Cainite about whom no one else knows anything (or have him come to *their* aid), have the characters witness some unusual (clearly supernatural) occurrence that only seems to have appeared to them, or that the one or two other witnesses refuse to talk about (or even deny seeing). Let them intercept a message or package that looks like it was intended for someone else, and is sufficiently intriguing in and of itself that they cannot resist trying to find out more about it. Have them be mistaken for someone "in the know" by a stranger and let things just get weirder and weirder from then on. In many a good uncovering-the-mystery plot, the characters don't go looking for a story, it comes and finds them.

MAKING A STORY PERSONAL

Stories matter most to characters (and players) when they focus on issues that are of personal importance to them, either as a pack or as an individual. Use the characters' personal Backgrounds, Paths, allies, mentors, packmates, special interests or goals, ambitions — anything that provides personal motivation — as hooks to lure them in, and make the secrets they learn relevant to them on a personal level. The personal hook needs to be strong enough for the character (and interesting to the player) to encourage them to become involved in a situation, even when any sane person (whether living or undead) would turn and walk away. For example, Fox Mulder's intense interest in "X-File" cases began when he was a child and believed his sister had been abducted by aliens, and at least some of the many mysteries *The X-Files* pursued followed up on that story thread.

Note that many players try to avoid providing such hooks, because anything the Storyteller can use against them is perceived as a vulnerability, a weakness, that will be exploited in game. This is true, but only to a point. What you need to convince your players of is that a character's vulnerabilities are the very thing that makes stories about them interesting. And then find ways to make it interesting, but not necessarily hazardous (not all the time, anyway). Help your players develop personal hooks that don't hinge on unlife and Final Death matters, and look for ways to draw them into a story where that particular hook also offers personal benefits worth maybe taking a risk for.

Personal stories focus on both players and their characters, and players tend to enjoy center stage. They just prefer to be the protagonist when they have the spotlight, and to have some degree of control over what happens next, instead of being the helpless victim of the plot.

MYSTIQUE OF THE MYSTERIES

It isn't easy to join the Black Hand; it takes only the best (by its own definition), and it weeds out any who don't make the grade. Black Hand trainers put their cadets through some harrowing experiences to test their dedication, courage and resourcefulness, and they insist on a far stricter level of discipline and obedience to superiors than most Sabbat would ever imag-

ine themselves submitting to. This is, of course, why most Sabbat aren't invited to join the Hand.

The training is hard for two reasons: One, the Hand has much to teach and a short time to do it in, and it needs operatives who are quick on the uptake. Two, undergoing hardships (whether this is a shared experience with other cadets or a solo experience) in order to achieve membership in a highly selective and elite group has a very significant psychological effect (known to college sororities and fraternities for decades, not to mention military academies). It actually makes the cadet put a high value on belonging to the group, and feel as if he's really achieved something when he finally makes the grade. The experience binds him to the group and its members more strongly than simply reciting an oath and shaking a few hands. Black Hand training missions teach more than skills, they teach the subject's particular culture, and in his effort to succeed, the cadet absorbs the culture and values along with the tricks of the trade. The final exam in particular is a test of character (see the sidebar in this chapter), and intended to ritually simulate, along with the initiation ritual to follow, the cadet's second death — and dedication of his unlife after that experience to the cause of Caine's Chosen.

Storytellers are encouraged to play up that aspect of Black Hand training — to even start your players as cadets in their last year of boot camp. Go on a few training missions, show them what happens to a "failed" cadet (with a Storyteller character, preferably, or simply tell them of an incident that occurred earlier in their training). Then run them through the Ordeal of the Second Death (preferably one-on-one, so each one reacts without knowing the others are undergoing the same thing), and the formal initiation. Play through their "rookie" period,

when they must prove themselves yet again to experienced Hand agents. Make them earn the privilege of the membership and all the status (and duty) it entails.

REVELATIONS

The Black Hand contains its own hierarchy of secrets, revealed only to loyal members — and even then only after they earn the right to know. Some of these secrets are philosophical; the extensive library of Commentaries and other writings by Black Hand strategists and scholars covers a wide variety of topics of great interest in the Final Nights, but for very good reason these writings are kept hidden from outsiders. Some secrets are political — the goings-on at the top levels of the Hand leadership, their relationships with each other, with the Sabbat leadership (including the candidates for regent, assuming that hasn't been resolved in your chronicle), and their rumored network of agents and spies not only among the Sabbat, but perhaps even the upper levels of the Camarilla as well. Some secrets concern parts of the *Book of Nod*, signs and portents, or sources of mystical information that not all members of the subject are privy to. Other secrets are buried in the past: the manipulations of the Tal'mahe'Ra and the possible presence of yet undiscovered agents of the so-called "True Hand," whose purposes are unknown; the mysterious fate of at least one former Seraph, not to mention the more recent three whose absence is not yet totally explained; or any other past deed of the Black Hand that may yet come back to haunt someone.

How much your players' characters learn depends on their degree of curiosity — and the tantalizing nature of the clues you lay in their path. If delving into the secrets of the subject is something they'll want to sink their fangs into, take the time to

FOR THE STORYTELLER'S EYES ONLY: THE ORDEAL OF THE SECOND DEATH

As both a mystical secret society and a warrior cult, the Black Hand has developed a series of initiations through which its members must pass in order to advance in rank. For a cadet seeking to prove her worthiness to be sworn into the Hand and bear the tattoo, her training holds a high price for failure, one known from her first night with the subject: Those who do not succeed, perish. The price of failure has been clearly demonstrated in the loss of one or more of her fellow cadets, sometime during her five years of training.

The exact time for the initiation is never set in advance. The cadets do not know when to expect it, or even (at first) what is happening. At the initial briefing for a routine field mission, the cadets are told that one of them has been judged unworthy of the honor they all strive for. This mission will be a hunt, and the failed cadet is to be the prey. They will receive their specific orders individually in the field; those who are hunters are permitted to regroup at that time, and begin.

Each cadet travels to a remote location with a Black Hand dominion who hands him his orders. When each cadet opens his envelope, he reads his doom: He has failed, and is the subject of his comrades' hunt. The dominion then asks how he would like to meet his Final Death, explaining that if he simply surrenders, death will be quick and merciful. If he attempts to defend himself, he can at least die fighting. If he runs, he takes his chances with the hunt (though he knows his odds there are slim indeed). Or if he prefers, he can use the Kiss of the Asp ritual to end his own unlife.

The entire point of the test is to see what the cadet does next, faced with his own Final Death, the ultimate no-win situation — to fail after striving so hard for so long, knowing that failure is intolerable. Indeed, if the training has really set in, the prospect of failure seems far worse to the cadet than destruction. The dominions do not have a set reaction they're looking for. They will rarely actually enact a death penalty, save for abject cowardice. In almost all cases, once the cadet has either surrendered or been subdued (which is in fact all that the Kiss of the Asp ritual that has been enacted on them at this point will do), the dominion rescinds the sentence of Final Death in the name of Caine, if the cadet declares himself ready to accept final initiation, knowing that from this night onward he is truly dead, and his unlife is no longer his own.

The Ordeal of the Second Death is the final test before a cadet's ritual initiation into the Black Hand. It is forbidden to speak of it again, or to give any guidance or hint to any future cadets or would-be initiates.

But even as he takes the oath, participates in the Vaulderie, and watches as the tattoo is burned into his hand, no former cadet is ever totally certain whether his response was actually right or wrong....

build it up properly. Even Winter had to work to discover what is presented in some of these chapters, though none of it was particularly “secret,” just not commonly known. Decide what the players can learn easily and what will take more digging. Plan your information in layers, decide which Storyteller characters know what, and how easy they are to find and persuade to part with their knowledge. Make it take some effort (or persuasion, deal-making, proving themselves worthy, etc.), but don’t make it impossible. Never let them find *all* the answers in a single story, always leave a few loose ends unexplained. Whenever it looks like they’re getting to the bottom of something, be prepared to introduce a new mystery or complication. If you can manage to stay a few steps ahead, you can keep them busy for a long, long time.

STORY SEEDS

The Black Hand offers a wide range of story possibilities for you and your players to explore. The following are some ideas to get your creative juices working, and illustrate some of the different directions you can go in a Hand chronicle.

NODDIST ARTIFACT

An archaeological dig in a remote part of the world has unearthed some unusual carvings inside what appears to have once been a tomb. Depending on the size of the carvings, the artifact may be still in its original location, or may have been packed up for study at a local university or museum. While the project has been kept highly hushed-up, some photographs have been leaked and have fallen into the hands of a Black Hand member, possibly even a player’s character known to have strong Noddist interests. The character may decide to investigate on her own, or be sent as part of a *kamut* (or a single Black Hand member with Sabbat packmates) to investigate further, take pictures, and make copies of whatever documentation is available — possibly even steal the artifact itself. When they start their investigation, the pack runs into interference from a pair of Camarilla archons, who are also interested in the artifact, but for entirely different reasons; they have come to destroy it, rather than permit the truth about the Antediluvians to be known....

WOLF IN THE FOLD

One or more of the Sabbat characters develops an ongoing rivalry or antipathy with a member of another pack, who is a secret member of the Black Hand. They may notice his occasional disappearances from major *ritae*, or happen to spot him under suspicious circumstances (such as schmoozing with some Camarilla Kindred after he sneaks out one night). The Storyteller should play up his activities so as to encourage mistrust, including suggesting from recent Sabbat failures that perhaps there’s a spy in their midst. However, the local bishop won’t believe the characters without proof, and may even inform the Black Hand operative of the characters’ accusations, which will only deepen the sense of antagonism between them. The Hand agent may be working to prove the bishop guilty of gross incompetence so she will be challenged and replaced (and in that case, may well be permitting some information to “leak” to the Camarilla in order to put pressure on the bishop’s tenure). He may be searching for the spy himself, and has developed undercover contacts in the Camarilla to aid him in his mission. He may now even suspect one of the characters of being the spy he seeks.

OPERATION RESCUE

A member of the Sabbat has fallen into the hands of the Camarilla; his Black Hand packmate calls on a Black Hand character and his Sabbat pack to help her mount a rescue before the Camarilla Prince’s sheriff tortures the captive to Final Death, or worse, gets him to talk. They must either rescue the captive — or, if a rescue cannot be completed, destroy him. The story can be as simple as a rescue, or it can be complicated further. Suppose the captive was betrayed into Camarilla hands, and that same traitor will go to any necessary lengths to preserve his own undead existence? Or suppose his “capture” is really a defection to the enemy? Or could the captive be set out as bait to capture even more important prey?

ONLY A DRILL

After a significant loss to the Camarilla — a Crusade that fails, a raiding party wiped out, or even the loss of significant territory to a Camarilla offensive — the local bishop has decided the characters’ pack needs additional combat training, under the not so patient eye and demanding standards of a Black Hand dominion. Their training is hard and tough (though it can be used to justify expenditure of experience to increase appropriate traits), and they grow thoroughly tired of their mentor’s sharp orders and constant drills. But one night a practice foray into Camarilla territory swiftly turns into the real thing as a coterie of archons, who are easily more than a match for the characters, appears to have known their agenda and was waiting for them, loaded for bear. Their dominion trainer may even be seriously injured or captured in the fight. The drill quickly becomes a test of wits, newly learned skills, and survival tactics as the characters attempt either to simply escape, or to discover how the Camarilla has been keeping tabs on Sabbat activities, and perhaps even do something about it. If the characters aren’t members of the Black Hand already, success in this kind of mission just might earn them that treasured invitation, particularly if they can bring their former mentor out of danger as well.

THE SABBAT INQUISITION

The Inquisition gives almost all Sabbat the creeps in their red robes and concealing hoods, but the tension between Caine’s Chosen and the Inquisition is particularly high. Lately, the Inquisition has taken to looking for weaknesses in the Black Hand’s seemingly invulnerable facade, and they’ve found one — the hidden operatives whose status as Black Hand members is not publicly known. For surely, if the Black Hand has nothing to hide, why do so many of its members hide their identities as “ordinary” Sabbat? Perhaps if the consistory knew how many members of the Black Hand there really are, they’d realize what a potential threat the highly secretive subsect presents.

The Inquisitor’s investigation includes “routine questioning” of every Lick in the domain, individually and in private, as well as showing up unexpectedly at various *ritae*. Her cover story is investigating rumors of a Camarilla double agent, so any “suspicious” activity (particularly absences from *ritae* or pack activities, unusual success in raiding parties, or excessive knowledge about the Camarilla or familiarity with Camarilla territories), can be considered suspect. While the Inquisitor will happily uncover real double agents if she finds them, what she’s really looking to do is put sufficient pressure on secret members of the Hand so that they are forced to reveal their association in order

to prove their innocence on the other charges. Once their association is made public, the Inquisitor apologizes for her error, and lets the accused go free. However, the character's secret has now been compromised, and his use as a potential spy or hidden knife for the Hand is over.

And of course, this occurs at the same time as the Black Hand character is asked to participate in some other very secretive mission for the Hand, so his absence from *ritae* or other suspicious behavior in the eyes of the Inquisitor is almost guaranteed.

PILGRIMAGE TO THE WEeping STONE

The characters join (or initiate) a pilgrimage to the fabled Weeping Stone, in fulfillment of the vows made at their initiation into the Black Hand. They will probably not be the only Black Hand members on the same quest; for reasons of safety and security, pilgrim packs are usually somewhat larger than the average *kamut*. This also allows the Storyteller to add some of her own characters to fill out the pilgrims' pack, at least one of whom probably serves as a guide. The journey is long and full of numerous hazards, as the pilgrims must travel great distances over land and sea, through the territories of Camarilla princes; foreign Sabbat cities; open wilderness where little prey can be found; and the domains of so-called "independent" clans, including the Assamites, as they draw closer to their destination. The Weeping Stone is located somewhere in Iraq, hidden by natural features of the land and by subtle and ancient magic. It is also dangerously close to Alamut; the characters (particularly if any Assamite *antitribu* are among them), must do all they can avoid notice by the Assamite Loyalists, who are unlikely to welcome strangers in their homeland.

The journey is as much spiritual as physical; the legend of Zillah's Tears is part of the very heart of the Black Hand's apocalyptic mythology, and players should face personal tests along the way that demonstrate their worthiness for the sacrament they seek. Such tests should be designed specifically for each character, challenging their commitment to the journey, the Black Hand, their belief in Caine's promise and their own sense of where they fit in to the subject and its goals.

This story by its nature requires that all participating characters be members of the Black Hand. If not all your players have Black Hand characters, they should create (or be given) one for this story, who can accompany the "regular" Black Hand characters on their quest.

AND THE TRUTH IS...

The Black Hand is a small but tightly organized Sabbat faction, a fanatical Gehenna cult, a warrior elite — and it harbors many secrets. Some we've revealed in this book, some we've merely hinted at, and the rest we're not talking about. Seriously, why should we have all the fun here? Take what's here, think about it a while, check out some other sources — whether it's other White Wolf supplements, a techno-thriller or spy novel, or a couple of good movies. Come up with some ideas that build on the background, add depth, a twist to the metaplot that appeals to you, or take one of the ideas from this book and develop it further. Make it yours. Make it personal for you and your players' characters.

The truth is what you make it.





APPENDIX: PERSONALITIES

*How shall we rank thee upon glory's page,
Thou more than soldier, and just less than sage?*
—Thomas Moore

The following characters are meant to convey a range of ages, skills and personalities to be found among agents of the Black Hand. Use them as is, treat them as templates, or simply allow them to serve as jumping-off points for your own creativity.

PIOTR "PETER" ANDREIKOV

Emissary, code name "Winter"

Background: Peter Andreikov grew up an outsider, the first American-born child of Ukrainian parents. His foreign name and retiring nature set him apart in the Houston schools he attended. He was bullied both at home by his father — who considered any sign of emotion a failure of masculinity and punished it harshly — and at school by the other boys. The latter soon learned that it was wiser to leave him alone, however, as the frustrations he dared not express at home easily exploded into sudden violent rage whenever other children pushed him.

As he grew older, he became fascinated by tales of serial killers, psychopaths and ancient cults. This interest in the dark side of human nature led him into psychology, and then into police work. He was an excellent detective: intelligent, observant, meticulous yet deeply intuitive and above all, stubborn. These talents aided him in solving several high-profile murder cases. Unfortunately, they also began to interfere with the ambitions of a certain Toreador ancilla bent on founding a criminal empire.



The Toreador bound Andreikov in blood, and vampiric slavery frightened the young detective as nothing else ever had. It wasn't so much the servitude itself that troubled him as the odd lapses in judgment he found himself making, the irrational compulsions he found himself acting upon. His mind, his bastion, was no longer his own. He grew increasingly distracted and careless, and one night he was taken prisoner by something even harder to explain than his own recent behavior. His captor, a Tzimisce ductus named Deloris, at first thought only to amuse herself with a Camarilla pawn, but his cool courage when faced with even her most horrific pets intrigued her. Rather than let such a one be wasted on the Toreador, she decided to Embrace him into her own clan.

Andreikov adapted surprisingly well to unlife among the Sabbat. He was no stranger to violence, and as he got used to being on the other side of what he had viewed as the law, his capacity for inflicting it grew. He was never able to fully abandon himself to its pleasures as his packmates did, though. He had learned to control and channel his anger. When he realized the full extent of his former slavery, he tracked down his old master and wreaked a patient revenge, first ruining all he could of the Toreador's criminal "business" before trapping and destroying him in his own haven.

Unfortunately, however, he was not cut out to be a Metamorphosist like his sire and her Tzimisce packmates. His keen intellectual curiosity focused more outward than inward; he sought to know the workings of other minds and souls, not to delve into the mysteries of his own by continually molding and remolding himself. So it was with little regret that he severed his ties when the dominion Chang, who had also noted his abilities, invited him to join the Black Hand.

Tonight, Andreikov — known as "Winter" for his cool demeanor, white-blond hair and pale blue eyes — serves both as priest of the Druid Hill pack in Baltimore and as intelligence analyst, investigator and strategist for the Black Hand. He spends his nights studying reports from War Parties and spies sent into Camarilla territory, interrogating mortal and undead sources, and pinpointing appropriate targets for both Sabbat and Black Hand operations. These labors served the Sabbat well during its recent drive up the East Coast. He also uses his self-appointed position as Baltimore's Black Hand "census taker" to fill out his own knowledge about the sub-sect's members, activities and aspirations.

Image: If not for the intense determination in his face, Winter's pale hair and eyes and bone-white skin would give him a washed-out look. He was Embraced before his sedentary work had a chance to erase the physique police training had produced; his frame is muscular though a bit compact and short. He still tends to dress in suits, and repeated wisecracks from *vatos* in jeans that hang at permanent half-mast make scant impression on him.

Roleplaying Hints: It's not that there's nothing going on under that unflappable exterior, it's just that sharing it is not a privilege you feel inclined to grant. You regard everything and everyone with a frankly critical eye. If you note an inconsistency in what someone says, let it slide for the moment but come back to it later in the conversation. Pinning people down is such a habit you barely realize you're doing it. The last time you met a Seraph, you even caught

yourself nearly giving *him* the third degree. Good thing you caught yourself that time....

Clan: Tzimisce

Sire: Deloris

Nature: Judge

Demeanor: Judge

Generation: 12th

Embrace: 1969

Apparent Age: mid-30s

Physical: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4

Social: Charisma 2, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2

Mental: Perception 5, Intelligence 4, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 4, Dodge 2, Intimidation 3, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 2

Skills: Art of Memory 2, Disguise 2, Drive 2, Firearms 3, Melee 2, Security 1, Stealth 2

Knowledges: Academics 2, Black Hand Lore 3, Investigation 4, Law 2, Linguistics 1, Sabbat Lore 2

Disciplines: Auspex 3, Vicissitude 1

Backgrounds: Black Hand Membership 1, Contacts 2, Mentor 2, Resources 2, Rituals 2

Virtues: Conscience 1, Self-Control 3, Courage 3

Morality: Humanity 5

Willpower: 7

KATHERINE STODDARD

Remover, codename "Vassar"

Background: Born to Boston's elite, Katherine seemed destined to follow the usual program for privileged young ladies: private school, debutante ball, degree from Vassar, followed of course by marriage to some bright young man with an appropriate future ahead of him. She had an elemental wild streak, however, and she chafed under the traditional expectations. Why spend her life as an ornament and a support when she knew she had the talent to be somebody important herself? She dropped out of college and began hanging around with a rougher crowd who "really knew how to live" — bikers and street racers, who whetted her appetite for high speed and thrills.

Katherine meant only to spite her family, but as it turned out, her rebellion also simultaneously irked and intrigued one Thomas Carter Winston, an ambitious Ventrue who had just been granted the boon of siring for the first time. He found himself drawn to her excellent family background, intelligence and good looks. Her fierce independence was potentially a problem, but he was certain he could tame her. In fact, the prospect sounded enjoyable. He had his ghouls stage a kidnapping, framing her biker friends for the crime, which served the twin purposes of explaining her disappearance and cutting her off from her mortal associations. The suspects were subsequently shot while "resisting arrest," thus leaving the fate of Katherine Stoddard forever in limbo.

The first part of Winston's plan worked like a charm, and Katherine was brought over into Clan Ventrue. Unfortunately, his assessment of his own charms didn't stack up nearly as well. She was not amenable to "taming," particularly once she learned that she'd been kidnapped so that this creature



could amuse himself by forcing her into the very role she'd already rejected. A regrettably necessary blood bond cooled the worst of her fury... for a while. It only simmered until someone else noticed Katherine's situation and made her an offer she could not refuse — to free her from her sire's selfishness by bringing her into the ranks of the *antitribu*.

The Sabbat was planning a siege in that city, and Katherine was in a unique position. She had access, through her sire and the other Ventrue, to vital information about the city's Kindred, from their feuds to the likely locations of their havens. Attracted both by the risk of playing double agent and the anticipation of revenge, she agreed to play her part. Two years later, her assistance helped guide the Sabbat to a satisfying victory, complete with the requisite massacre. She herself took the privilege of diablerizing her sire.

Katherine was originally recruited into the Hand for her talents as a high-speed driver (her value as a Camarilla mole having been damaged by the black veins in her aura), but she soon showed equal aptitude for electronics, particularly the newfangled devices called "computers." In time, she learned to beat even the sophisticated security systems with which so many Camarilla vampires had rushed to equip their havens. These nights, she divides her time between her specialist work and the somewhat less satisfying (but vitally important task) of kicking nascent Sabbat siege parties into shape and teaching them to embrace the wonders of technology.

Image: Katherine is the rock upon which more than one terminally misguided Lick has dashed himself. While not thin by modern supermodel standards, she has a beautiful figure, a pretty oval face and wavy chestnut hair (which she usually puts back with a rubber band). Yet she somehow manages to radiate Old Money despite herself, even through the shapeless Army-surplus cammies and flannel shirts she wears.

Roleplaying Hints: You can be incredibly cultured when it suits you — you can play piano, speak French and Spanish, handicap Congressional races and discuss the summer weather in Athens. Of course, it rarely suits you. You're far happier swapping security holes in Java or tinkering under the hood of your little red convertible. On the job, you're completely no-nonsense, neither accepting nor dispensing any bullshit. Off the job, however, you cut loose — fast cars, loud music, black leather and late-night poker games occupy your spare time. Speak with excellent diction and use lots of vocabulary-quizz words; it makes your occasional, startlingly skilled forays into vulgarity all the more impressive.

Clan: Ventrue *antitribu*

Sire: Thomas Carter Winston

Nature: Thrill-Seeker

Demeanor: Director

Generation: 10th

Embrace: 1956

Apparent Age: mid-to-late 20's

Physical: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

Social: Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 3

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 5

Talents: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 4, Dodge 3, Intimidation 2, Leadership 2, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 2

Skills: Art of Memory 2, Demolitions 1, Drive 4, Etiquette 3, Fire Dancing 1, Firearms 2, Melee 2, Performance 1, Security 3, Stealth 2

Knowledges: Academics 2, Black Hand Lore 2, Computer 4, Linguistics 2, Politics 1, Sabbat Lore 2

Disciplines: Dominate 2, Fortitude 2, Presence 1

Backgrounds: Black Hand Membership 2, Contacts 3, Resources 2, Retainers 2

Virtues: Conscience 2, Self-Control 2, Courage 4

Morality: Humanity 4

Willpower: 7

WAH CHUN-YUEN

Dominion and remover, codename "Chang"

Background: Wah Chun-Yuen came to California from Guangdong province in 1864 to work on the Central Pacific Railroad. Leaving his wife behind to face the famine gripping their homeland was not a matter of choice but poverty; somehow he simply had to save enough money to bring her over before she starved. He took dangerous work riding a basket down cliff faces to light dynamite fuses then hurrying back up before they went off, but he kept at it and put aside as much as he could. (Sometimes, though, the temptation to take a chance on the lottery proved too much, and of course he always lost.) When the railroad was finished five years later, he still didn't have quite enough to bring over his wife and the son she'd given birth to shortly after his departure, so he took to working odd jobs in San Francisco.

Eventually, Wah was able to pay his family's passage. At that time, the tongs charged a "surtax" on the importation of prostitutes from China, and they made Wah pay the surtax on his wife, even though he protested that she was no loose woman. They made all the other husbands do the same. Wah



had already seen the power of the tongs, whose influence had extended even into the railroad workers' camps, but this experience led him to conclude that he had been working for the wrong employers all along. He took employment with the old Hop Sing tong as a hatchet-man. He was good at his job, but he realized that it was hardly a career for one who wanted to enjoy long life, so he struggled up the ranks, taking every opportunity to prove that he could keep a cool head and think as well as fight savagely when the occasion arose.

Unfortunately, he simply wasn't destined for long life — not the sort he'd envisioned, anyway. He was Embraced by a Brujah *antitribu* during a spate of inter-pack warfare among the anarchs and young Sabbat of California and Baja. Many people were Embraced at that time to replace the constant losses, and Wah realized that his new career was likely as inherently short-lived as his old one. When Seraph Corvus of the Black Hand came to the West Coast to stop the useless internecine violence and direct it to better ends (like killing the Camarilla encroaching from the north), Wah hastened to join his circle of supporters. He went on to help the Sabbat drive out a Camarilla coterie trying to lay claim to San Francisco. After the campaign, the Seraph sponsored his initiation into the Black Hand. Tonight, Wah serves as one of the sub-sect's most skilled removers. Unlike many, he has never specialized. As he points out, the job of a remover is to remove — the particular method is a secondary consideration.

Wah has a number of political and personal secrets, but chief among them is his continuing attachment to his mortal family. He keeps in touch with his descendants (usually posing as a cousin or a "son of your father's old friend"), and arranges for opportunities to befall those who particularly impress him.

Image: Wah clings to the outer gentility of the Victorian era. He wears three-piece suits and hats. He can be persuaded

to dress more casually when that seems prudent for the given mission, but even in jeans he carries his old pocket watch, a gift from the tong long ago. He is deceptively fine-featured and youthful-looking, and he moves as though he's studied deportment (which he has). His aura is considerably darkened by several diableries. He still has a very slight Cantonese accent.

Roleplaying Hints: Your mortal life taught you in no uncertain terms that under the crust of civility that society affects, humanity never really evolved beyond the jungle. If you were ever in danger of forgetting this lesson, your Brujah curse serves as a painful reminder. To you, however, this terrible truth means only that it's all the more important that folk observe the proprieties. They are all that make existence tolerable and sect cohesion possible. You are polite, you are polite, even as people push your buttons you're faultlessly polite. When you finally do snap, though — or when you are in a situation where the time for proprieties is clearly past — you are capable of astonishing savagery.

Clan: Brujah *antitribu*

Sire: "Gold Pan" Dan

Nature: Bravo

Demeanor: Traditionalist

Generation: 9th

Embrace: 1872

Apparent Age: early 30s

Physical: Strength 5, Dexterity 4, Stamina 5

Social: Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 3

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 4, Wits 5

Talents: Awareness 3, Athletics 3, Brawl 5, Dodge 2, Intimidation 4, Leadership 3, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 1

Skills: Art of Memory 3, Demolitions 3, Etiquette 4, Firearms 4, Melee 5, Security 2, Stealth 4

Knowledges: Academics 2, Black Hand Lore 3, Computer 1, Finance 3, Investigation 2, Linguistics 3, Occult 1, Politics 2

Disciplines: Auspex 1, Celerity 3, Dominate 2, Obfuscate 1, Potence 3, Presence 2

Backgrounds: Allies 3, Black Hand Membership 5, Contacts 4, Herd 1, Resources 4, Retainers 3, Sabbat Status 4

Virtues: Conscience 2, Self-Control 3, Courage 5

Morality: Path of Honorable Accord 5

Willpower: 7

INGRAM FRIZER

Dominion and shakar, codename "Falstaff"

Background: In the journal kept by the secretary of Sir Francis Walsingham, spymaster to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth I, an entry records: "I today went out and hired me a base fellow." Ingram Frizer was the sort of man he probably had in mind.

In fact, Frizer came into the service of Thomas Walsingham, cousin and assistant to Francis, before too long. For both men, the fact that they theoretically served their country in its highest-level intelligence endeavors in no way meant that they couldn't have a sideline or two, such as bilking wealthy but naïve country squires out of their life savings.

Although he himself never took the slightest interest in anything more philosophical than a few lines of poetry for seducing merchants' daughters, Frizer came into contact with

some of the finest minds of his day via his employment with the secret service. Dee, Raleigh, Marlowe, Bacon, Hariot and others rumored to belong to the mysterious "School of Night" society also associated with the Walsingham family. Collectively, their interests ranged over everything from the occult to poetry to cryptography to science to the New World.

A certain Nosferatu took great interest in these associations of Frizer's. It seemed madness to Embrace such famous men of genius, but perhaps it would be enough simply to obtain their writings and study them in secret. He bound Frizer in blood and set him to spying on his erstwhile masters and their cronies. With the gifts the vitae awakened in him, Frizer was able to sneak documents in and out of their studies and libraries. And though he never asked for the Embrace, he "earned" it nonetheless for his efforts.

Frizer had long thought himself an agent of great skill and cunning, but the politics of the Nosferatu warren in London made the skullduggery between the thrones of Spain, England and France look like child's play. Chief among the warren's scoundrels was a creature named Warwick, and Frizer soon found himself caught up inextricably in Warwick's cruel manipulations. In fact, he nearly suffered the Final Death for a crime Warwick had actually committed.

The young Nosferatu fled to the New World to join the Sabbat and, later, the Black Hand. (After all, intrigue had always been his only real talent, and what was the Jyhad but the ultimate intrigue waiting to be cracked?) But a good two centuries later, he was dismayed to find that he had not escaped Warwick after all. The infamous creature arrived in New England in 1895, and, together with his Ventrue and Malkavian cohorts, he proceeded to make all New England his exclusive hunting grounds.

Frizer therefore had an even more personal reason than most to join the unprecedented Camarilla/ Sabbat alliance that convened successfully to oust Warwick from his roost in 1990. Ever since then, he's continued to involve himself in helping the Sabbat hold on to what it has so recently gained — and to retake what it has so recently lost, namely New York.

Image: Frizer looks as though he were drowned like a rat on the night of his Embrace, and it somehow stuck. His flesh is puffy and bluish with mossy-looking encrustations, his hair hangs in plastered strips, and his watery eyes bulge out of his head. He still wears a gold earring in his pierced ear. He dresses himself in — well, whatever. A lot of his fellow agents give him their castoff clothing just because they can't stand the rotting rags he appears in otherwise. Lately he's begun wearing a Yankees cap, presumably a sign of his intent to be with the Sabbat force that re-enters New York some night soon.

Roleplaying Hints: You're definitely not dumb, but you are fundamentally unsophisticated. Actually, fundamentally, you're scum — a classic dagger-man. Secrets, lies and conspiracies are the only things that hold your interest. You learned long ago that all real questions of power and survival are decided in precisely such backdoor transactions. Your devotion to Hand ideology is genuine but self-serving; it just means that you get to feel righteous about pursuing your chosen career. Despite the recent setbacks the Hand has suffered, you keep reasonably cheerful. After all, you're in your element. Quaint Elizabethanisms still pepper your speech when you're not making a concerted effort



to guard yourself, and while you're no Marlowe (hmp!), you have quite a talent for wry insults.

Still, although would-be secret agents throughout the Hand jockey for a place in your impressive network, they also fear your paranoia (and with good reason). You're patently incapable of treating anyone as anything but a clockwork of ambitions. You mark intimates and strangers alike as traitors on the slimmest conceivable evidence, and many know, but can't quite prove, that you regularly arrange for the ignominious Final Deaths of such folk.

Clan: Nosferatu

Sire: Neville of Kent

Nature: Conniver

Demeanor: Architect

Generation: 8th

Embrace: 1593

Apparent Age: indeterminate

Physical: Strength 3, Dexterity 5, Stamina 4

Social: Charisma 2, Manipulation 4, Appearance 0

Mental: Perception 5, Intelligence 3, Wits 4

Talents: Alertness 4, Athletics 2, Brawl 4, Dodge 5, Expression 2, Intimidation 3, Streetwise 5, Subterfuge 5

Skills: Animal Ken 3, Art of Memory 5, Crafts (wheelwright) 1, Firearms 3, Melee 4, Security 4, Stealth 5, Survival 2

Knowledges: Academics 2, Black Hand Lore 4, Computer 3, Investigation 5, Linguistics 3, Occult 2, Politics 3

Disciplines: Animalism 3, Auspex 4, Obfuscate 5, Potence 3, Quietus 1

Backgrounds: Allies 2, Black Hand Membership 5, Contacts 5, Influence 2, Resources 3, Retainers 2, Sabbat Status 3

Virtues: Conviction 2, Instinct 4, Courage 3

Morality: Path of Caine 3

Willpower: 6

HENRI LAVENANT

Dominion and shakar, codename "Laocoun"

Background: Henri Lavenant keeps his mortal background a great mystery. He sometimes alludes to being Embraced in what is now Monte Carlo, but it's unclear whether that's where he was born. Cardinal Polonia has been heard to speculate that given the man's abominable manners, he must have been of low birth indeed. Then again, Polonia has been heard to say any number of uncomplimentary things about Lavenant. The two have been figuratively and literally at each other's throats ever since they first met in old New York.

Lavenant came to New York in the Gilded Age and quickly made a name for himself. Unlike many Sabbat, he wasn't ashamed to use mortals to get what he wanted, and he was equally willing to pose as a bruiser of the slums or a wealthy *parvenu* in order to cultivate his contacts. He solicited stock tips from Cornelius Vanderbilt, contributed generously to Plymouth Church, nursed a nascent Irish street gang into prominence and even bought art he couldn't stand just to keep his fingers in the city's various pies. None of this was done out of any great sense of humanity, of course. He used the higher classes of mortal society to help finance his enterprises and the lower classes to keep an eye on his fellow Sabbat without really seeming to do so.

The Hand could not fail to notice or admire the fact that a substantial number of Lavenant's enemies seemed to meet Final Death somehow or other, but that in itself certainly wasn't enough to recommend him for membership. Then a dominion visiting the city had the misfortune to end up without a decent place to stay a scant couple of hours before dawn, and Lavenant offered him hospitality. The two stayed up a little past dawn, and in the course of their long conversation, the dominion learned something very interesting about



Lavenant. Despite (or perhaps because of) all his mercenary activities, here was a creature desperately in search of something to believe in. Perhaps also feeling a little indebted to him, the dominion agreed to put Lavenant in touch with one of the local Hand watch. Lavenant could take it from there, if he liked.

Indeed, Lavenant took it from there. He succeeded in proving himself to the Hand, serving it as *shakar* for a while, then going on to become a dominion. When Polonia made his first exploratory forays into the region of the United States that he would one night oversee as cardinal, he made several trips to New York. He and Lavenant tried each other's nerves from the outset. There doesn't seem to be any particular incident behind this distaste, though. Both of them swear it was simply a case of oil and water not mixing. (Other older Sabbat smirk that this must simply mean that Polonia is far more like Lavenant than the Spanish noble would like to admit. Nevertheless, it's true that the two Cainites couldn't be more opposite in their behavior: Polonia upright, calm and soldierly; Lavenant sprawling and crude.)

Much to Lavenant's dismay, Polonia did succeed in gaining the cardinal's seat over the "Eastern Territories," and Lavenant was unable to keep the older Lasombra from interfering in New York any longer, though he certainly continued to try. Rumors circulate that his mortal network brought him advance notice of the planned Camarilla assault on New York and he tried to warn Polonia, but his advice was ignored in this matter as it was in every other. Other darker rumors suggest that perhaps Lavenant *wanted* to see Polonia lose the city, even at the cost of losing it himself. They claim that he either withheld part of what he knew or else deliberately made himself obnoxious in delivering his warning so as to elicit the worst possible response from the cardinal.

Lavenant distances himself from such talk now. People will believe what they want to believe according to their own biases. In exile further down the coast, he continues to serve as dominion and *shakar*. Although his effectiveness has been damaged by the loss of his mortal contacts who were his single greatest asset, he is still a Cainite of considerable cunning and power, and he may yet rise again... regardless of what happens to the embattled Polonia.

Image: Large and beefy (though not obese), sloppy and cursed with a permanent four-day stubble, Lavenant's looks entirely match his boorish behavior. If he's wearing a tie, it's crooked; if his socks are visible, they're mismatched (it doesn't help that he's also colorblind). Whether he's in a good mood or a bad one, his voice is always inexcusably loud, and as if none of this were enough, he also persists in chain-smoking the foulest black-lung cigarettes known to mankind. When he's not talking or smoking, however, he can actually move quite unobtrusively, a fact his victims learn only too late.

Roleplaying Hints: A lot of your fellow Lasombra assume that this is all a big act put on to make people underestimate you, which is absolutely not true. You really do want to be liked, and incredibly enough, people *do* often come to like you despite their better judgment. You simply wear them down over time. Anyone who can stand to listen to you long enough realizes that you are frighteningly intelligent, and you love the Hand as mother and father. Toward your mortal contacts, you

feel the affection of a farmer for his prize hog. You've invested in them, perhaps you even feel a bit sentimental toward them, but they ultimately exist to be slaughtered.

Clan: Lasombra

Sire: Yamina bint Galib

Nature: Child

Demeanor: Conniver

Generation: 7th

Embrace: 1835

Apparent Age: early 40s

Physical: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 5

Social: Charisma 1, Manipulation 5, Appearance 2

Mental: Perception 4, Intelligence 6, Wits 3

Talents: Athletics 2, Brawl 5, Dodge 4, Empathy 1, Intimidation 3, Leadership 2, Streetwise 6, Subterfuge 5

Skills: Art of Memory 4, Disguise 2, Drive 2, Firearms 4, Melee 3, Security 4, Stealth 5, Survival 2

Knowledges: Black Hand Lore 3, Computer 2, Finance 4, Investigation 4, Linguistics 3, Politics 2

Disciplines: Dominate 3, Obtenebration 4, Potence 3, Quietude 2

Backgrounds: (most of these were much higher before the fall of New York...) Allies 2, Black Hand Membership 5, Contacts 2, Herd 1, Influence 2, Resources 5, Retainers 3, Sabbat Status 1

Virtues: Conviction 2, Instinct 4, Courage 2

Morality: Path of Caine 4

Willpower: 9

KAZIMIR SAVOSTIN

Acting Seraph, codename "Hurul"

Background: Kazimir's earliest memories are vague images of a barracks-like dormitory shared with his brothers, but nothing of a mother or father. He remembers arduous physical exercise drills, hours bent over books, endless repetition of lessons, desperate bids for approval from the masters who tutored them. He also remembers the way those who did not meet the masters' standards would be called out of the classroom, and even their beds in the dormitory were removed as if they had never existed. By the time he was a young man, the class had been reduced by over half its number to a mere dozen. Those who were left were then taught advanced hand-to-hand combat, weaponry, riding, swordsmanship. They learned to recall entire conversations they overheard verbatim, to solve complex logical puzzles and to obey the word of the lord above all without hesitation or question. At training's end only four remained. They knew better than to ask what became of the rest.

Always before the reward for good work had been a woman, with whom to breed more servants for the masters, or perhaps a Kiss from the lord. But the final reward for the chosen four was to be gifted with the dead water and brought into the life beyond death. They were not to share the lord's domain; on the night of their death and rebirth, they were buried in foreign earth. They had been Embraced for a specific purpose: to journey across the vast deep to the New World and there spy for their lord among the vampires of the Sabbat.



It was a time of chaos, a time when a skilled young vampire could go very far very quickly. Kazimir sought and gained membership in the Black Hand within 20 years of his arrival. Then the second phase of his sire's plan went into effect. His sire's colleague, the ancient Izhim abd'Azrael, came to Kazimir and completed his initiation into the "true" *manus nigrum* — the Tal'mahe'Ra, which had wormed its way into the Black Hand in an effort to cripple it. Kazimir's double existence began in earnest.

For over two centuries, Kazimir served the Tal'mahe'Ra faithfully, obeying orders from his distant sire (though no such order has come in over 60 years now) and his mentor Izhim. It was difficult both to be a loyal son of the Tal'mahe'Ra and to seem a loyal son of the Sabbat and the Black Hand, but then he had been taught to accommodate whatever contradictions were necessary to fulfill his duty.

Although he was also taught to abhor the fleshcrafting arts as diabolic, he had no choice but to share the Vaulderie cup with others of his clan who freely indulged in shaping and reshaping their forms as it pleased them, thus tainting his own blood. One evening, he woke up and discovered that by concentrating and stretching just a little, he could lengthen his fingers... and to his vast surprise, it felt... satisfying. It felt *natural*, like an itch long neglected, finally scratched. Kazimir has since then become adept at molding his own form (he feels no need to practice on anyone else) — though he regrets having to kill the last of his surviving brothers when that brother discovered Kazimir indulging his new vice in secret. Fortunately, Izhim never seemed to care what Tzimisce arts Kazimir practiced. He cared only about absolute obedience, and that was what both duty and fear compelled Kazimir to offer wholeheartedly.

When Enoch fell, Kazimir dreamed of it during the day and woke up with his throat raw from screaming. In its aftermath, however, particularly since the Week of Nightmares, he came to a new conclusion. The almighty, all-powerful Tal'mahe'Ra, had been wrong all along. Wrong about Vicissitude, wrong about the Antediluvians, wrong about everything. The Black Hand was likely the best hope for all Cainites, and he had been helping sabotage his potential saviors for nigh upon two centuries.

After agonizing for several months, torn between fear of discovery and fear of Izhim's retribution should the ancient return and learn of Kazimir's disloyal thoughts, Kazimir finally broke down and confessed all to Jalan-Aajav in return for the Gangrel's clemency — and his protection. Jalan has granted both. Not that the Seraph has ever been a forgiving sort, but he sees how such a turncoat might be useful to him, particularly a turncoat of such deep Noddist learning. After keeping the hapless Tzimisce under "house arrest" for months, extracting the details of the confession, he has named Kazimir to the position of acting Seraph. This choice ensures that no matter what, he has sway over almost half the council. For his part, Kazimir has not even begun to think of disagreeing with this plan, however worried he might be about the Mongol's real intentions.

Kazimir has other troubles as well. A chief one is his supply of grave-earth, which has dwindled over two centuries and frequent moves. He has never discovered the source of the earth in his casket, though he was told it was taken from the New World. His brothers' caskets do him no good; their earth clearly came from different sites. He has sponsored geological soil surveys and sampling studies throughout the US, Mexico and Canada, but he has not yet found a match. As he strips naked each dawn and wraps himself in the linen shroud he wears to "bed" in his bare sleeping chamber, he wonders, frantically. Perhaps the soil is from his old homeland after all, a ploy of his sire's to guard against betrayal?

Image: Kazimir is about 5'6" (tall by 18th-century standards, which unfortunately no longer hold). He has a small, neat beard, dark shoulder-length hair, tied back in a queue, and a fondness for loose, long shirts and tight slacks or jeans. His accent comes and goes as it suits him — sometimes it's good to be mistaken for a newcomer. His slim, handsome face rarely betrays any emotion. In fact, he rarely *feels* an emotion he can truly identify.

Roleplaying Hints: You are a perfect gentleman of the Age of Enlightenment — a skilled swordsman and horseman, elegant, educated and well spoken, though your almost desperate meticulousness would not have been fashionable in the Rococo period. You have an eidetic memory, so you rarely forget anything you see or hear, however seemingly insignificant it is. But as a former revenant, you're still not used to doing a lot of thinking for yourself. It's scary. What if you make the wrong decision? Something in your crippled psyche still expects to be punished for it....

Clan: Tzimisce

Sire: Andras Tholdy

Nature: Survivor

Demeanor: Penitent

Generation: 7th

Embrace: 1790

Apparent Age: early 20s

Physical: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 3

Social: Charisma 2, Manipulation 4, Appearance 3

Mental: Perception 5, Intelligence 4, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 4, Athletics 3, Brawl 4, Dodge 2, Empathy 1, Subterfuge 4

Skills: Animal Ken 2, Art of Memory 5, Disguise 3, Etiquette 3, Firearms 3, Melee 5, Riding 4, Security 2, Stealth 4, Survival 1

Knowledges: Academics 3, Black Hand Lore 4, Expert Knowledge (Tal'mahe'Ra Lore) 4, Investigation 4, Linguistics 5, Medicine 1, Occult 4, Politics 2, Science 2

Disciplines: Animalism 2, Auspex 4, Celerity 1, Fortitude 1, Potence 2, Koldunic Sorcery 3, Necromancy 1, Vicissitude 2

Koldunic Paths: Blood Ways 3, Spirit Ways 3, Fire Ways 2

Necromantic Paths: Sepulchre Path 1, Ash Path 1

Backgrounds: Black Hand Membership 6, Contacts 3, Influence 2, Mentor 5, Resources 2, Sabbat Status 3

Virtues: Conscience 1, Self-Control 4, Courage 3

Morality: Path of Honorable Accord 4

Willpower: 6

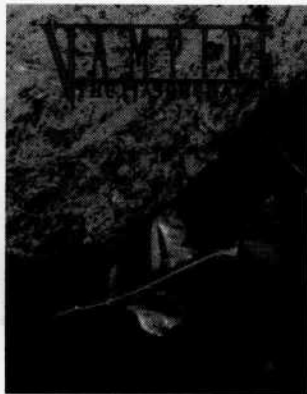
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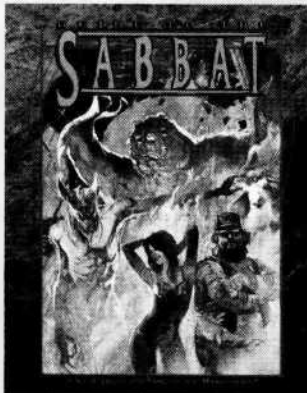


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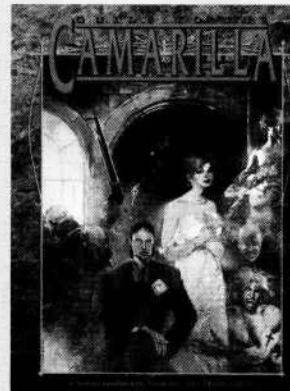
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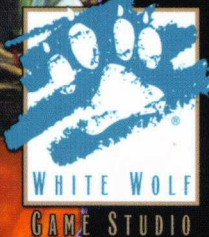
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