

Ashen Gulfs



A SOURCEBOOK FOR
VAMPIRE: THE DARK AGES®



Ashen Cults™

AD 1215

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VAMPIRE CREATED BY MARK REIN-HAGEN

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ABOUT THE DATES

Ashen Cults, like **Bitter Crusade** and **Iberia by Night** before it, is marked on the title page with a date, indicating the assumed "present" of the supplement. **Dark Ages** is advancing from its longstanding start date of AD 1197 and these dates are here to help you keep track. Almost all the material in **Ashen Cults** is usable as is in 1197 or at any other time in which you want to set your **Dark Ages** game. There are a few parts that portray aftereffects of events in **Bitter Crusade**, however. Hence, the 1215 date.

Just thought, you'd all want to know.



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Ashen Cults™

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Patron Saint of Lies

O cunning enemy,
that to catch a saint
With saints dost bait thy hook!
— William Shakespeare,
Measure for Measure.

It had always been dark, and wet, and often cold for us. After all, I have often heard visitors from other countries claim how dour and phlegmatic we Poles are. Surely, something must be to blame for our defeated disposition, and the weather should bear its own share of the responsibility for making us who we are.

But it is more than the cold and wet that makes us look over our shoulders after dark. I understand the night people have traveled all across Europe. Nowhere, though, do I suspect that they have had such a shuddersome effect on the uncursed folk as they have here in Krakow. Even in those blighted lands beyond the forest, where the witches still prowl the night openly, the average man knows that his lord and master is a dreadful monster. Here, we are a worldly people. It is with a dry mouth that, by day, we smile at the assertion that the blood-drinkers walk among us, while, at night, we leave a dram of salt on the eaves so that the *upier* will pass us by. We know all too well that such things can only be shrugged or cried away, as was the case with Grezgorz, who lived near the chapel, and my own brother over a dozen years ago. The night marauders take as they will.

Yes, the vampires have come here, too. Usually, we can stop our own from joining them, but too often, our hands are tied if one alights upon Krakow from abroad or a man is so wicked that burying him face-down doesn't prevent him from digging his way back up from the grave.

A good man — a just man — will never become one of these *upier*, and God willing, he will never have to suffer their touch. Krakow is a modern city, though, and home to the greatest market in all of Christendom. I will not lie to you and claim we are saints. Almost all of us are stained with the filth of the earth from some deed or another, some crooked transaction or some

declivity of character that moral men proscribe but the rest of us, in our simplicity, indulge.

It was on such a wet, cold, dark night that I myself ran afoul of the vampire. By trade, I am a saltcutter. I am responsible for a few dozen men, who take the raw salt mined by the workers and prepare it for use. I supervise my men when they break the salt from the heavy blocks in which it arrives, and I take it to the market, where I sell it or trade it. It is not a glamorous trade, but it is a necessary one. Without me, the people would not have this precious spice with which to cure their meats or season their foods. I would not have guessed that a vampire would have need of salt, owing to the fact that their kind subsist on blood and not on meat, but their kind are cagey and unknowable. I knew that I dealt with one of the night people when he arrived at my hall

he had no cloud of breath, as did I in the cold, wet air, and his eyes never blinked. His exposed skin was smooth and pale, like alabaster, and not ruddy or rough like that of my men and I.

I had just closed the cutting hall for the evening when this unholy guest arrived. The men had all taken their leave, and I was putting the last of the day's cut in bags on the shelves, to be gathered and taken to market the next morning. I have before been in the habit of selling after hours while technically against the principles of the market, I am not so cruel a man as to turn away a wife who needs salt for her family's evening meal.

This, however, was no mild wife. I have noted before his pale skin and his unmoving breast. Those details, though, were minor compared to his gaze and the predator's mien with which he appraised me once he had quietly closed the door.

I honestly thought that I was to die then. This wicked creature, crawled out of the thick-

ening night to my own hall, had surely come to take long draughts of my blood and leave my lifeless body for the men to find when they arrived to cut the day's salt in the morning. This was a night-creature from the Pit itself, its body wrapped in the dirty rags that remained of the shift in which it had been buried, no doubt. Its limbs were long and spindly, its stomach distended as that of a hungry cotter.

I breathed out. It breathed not at all.

"May I help you this evening?" I asked, keeping enough of my wits about me not to panic at the sight of this creature.

To my surprise, it could talk. I had expected only snarling and hissing. "You are Estek." A simple statement, but given my surprise and foreboding, a grave one. How did this *upier* know my name?

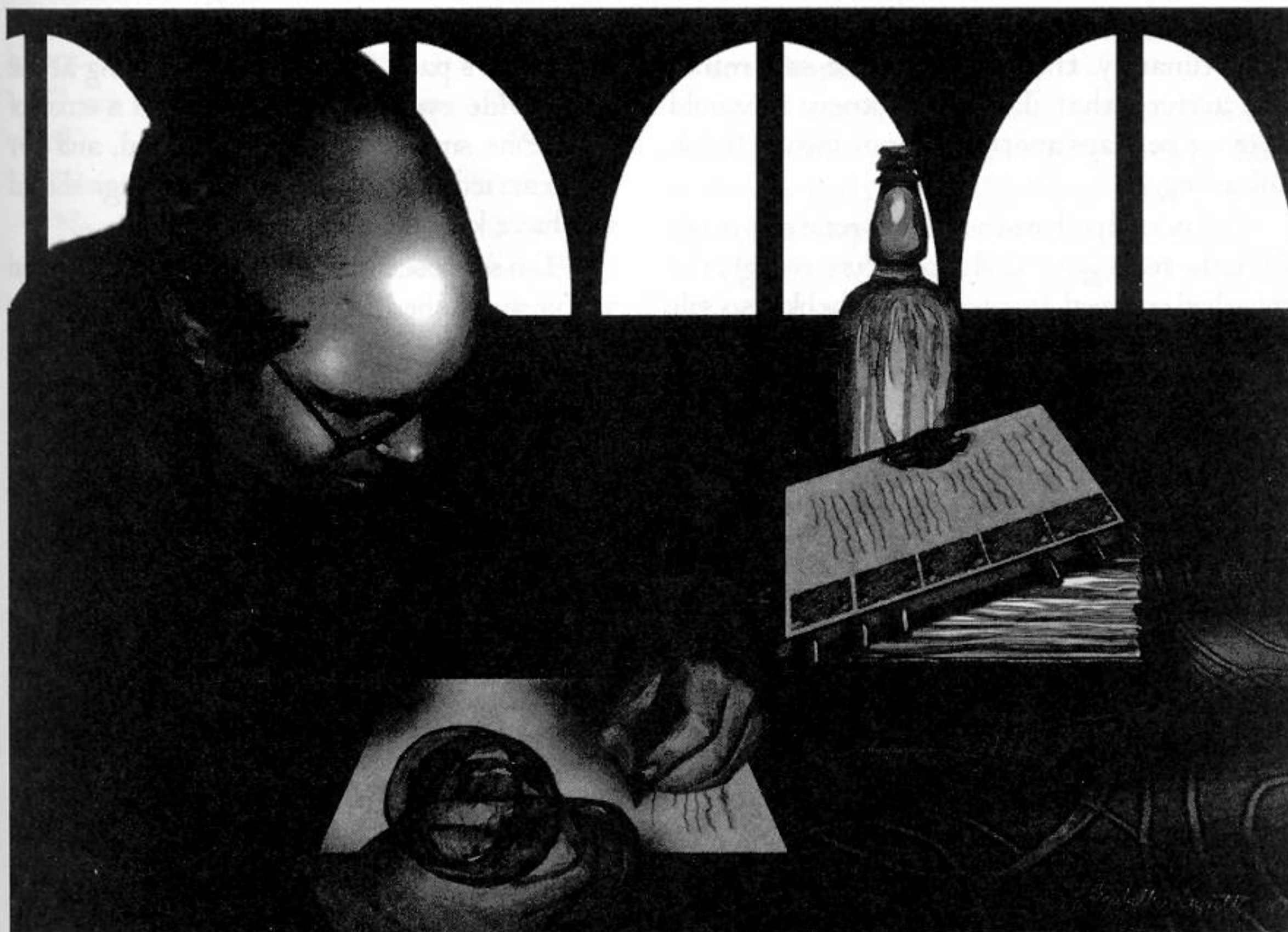
"I am."

"Your wife is Rega." The accursed thing knew about me, and upon its utterance of my wife's name, I felt dread grip me. This was no ignorant monster, this was a thinking, speaking thing, and most frightening of all, it had taken an interest in me. It knew my family, and it had somehow gathered that knowledge without my knowing it stalked me. It felt almost like a pronouncement of damnation, like my hard work to make a safe home was all for nothing if the Devil could come forward at his whim and menace me with one of his servants.

"That is her name." I felt compelled to reply honestly. It would know if I lied to it, I suspected, so I took no such risk.

"I will be back," it said. And then, it left.

In its absence, the air smelled musty, not unlike the salt mines do. It had left a filthy



A PATRON SAINT OF LIES

claw-print streaked across the door of the hall where it had exited the building. What did it mean that it would be back? When? Was I to wait for it? Should I leave some salt by the door to appease it when it returned? Or would it think I was trying to bribe it to go away and become resentful?

In the end, I went home to my wife, for safety's sake. I knew that, should the night person wish, he could take us both, for such are their powers. But I would not make it easy for him. He could have the salt or my tools if here was where he chose to return, but he could not have my Rega.

I slept fitfully that night.

†††

The *upier* did not, as I had feared, seek me or my wife at our home. I saw him the next night when he returned to the shop. I had planned to leave early, perhaps with the men, in hopes of once again protecting my wife. Unfortunately, the cart from the salt mines had arrived that day, and I knew it would take me perhaps another hour or two to finish unloading it.

As I neared perhaps the halfway point of my task, I felt the room grow chill again. Sure enough, the thing had returned. It took a seat on the blocks of salt that I had already unloaded and tilted its head, regarding me curiously.

"What would you have of me, *upier*?" I asked it.

It smiled, if that's what such a crack across its face could be called. "Why do you stop, *Estek*?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you don't finish unloading your cart, your men will be behind tomorrow morning."

"What concern is that of yours?" I dug my hooks pointedly into the block of salt, lifted it and carried it slowly over to the creature. It refused to move.

"If your men cannot work, your widow will receive no stipend."

With that, it swung a block of salt — a block no man could lift with a single hand — at my head. The speed and violence of the act were the last thoughts in my mind before I lost consciousness, collapsing on the cold, bare floor.

†††

When I awoke, I knew something was terribly amiss. I could hear a low chanting, almost like a dirge, coming from somewhere in the distance. One of my eyes was scummy and stuck — ah, yes, the blood. A feeble fire flickered near me, giving off a small amount of heat, which was less than what the rough floor robbed from me.

Looking about with my open eye, I saw that I was in a tiny cavern that had been rudely converted to some sort of den. A blanket lay wadded in one corner along with a tattered book and a small bundle of cloth, not unlike a wanderer's pack. Opposite me, staring at me with wide eyes, a little girl sat on a stoop of rock. She smiled, her face smudged, and her face carried a sorrow someone her age should not have known.

"I'm supposed to let the master know when you've awakened," she said, one hand twisting her shift.

"Who's the master?" I asked, rubbing my sore head and face. I noticed the whiskers on my face were longer than I remembered them being. I must have been out for at least a day. The dirge slowed a bit, swelling away to make room for a ringing in my ears that rose as I did.

"The master. The lord." The girl said, not moving. If the master was the creature that had brought me here, it was evident that she felt the same way about him that I did.

"Why is he the master? What is he the master of?"

She turned away, moving to leave through the kinked egress from the tiny cavern. I realized that the chanting came from there — and that there were no other places it could have come from. I had no choice. I followed.

The tiny room opened into a larger cave that I recognized immediately. We were in the salt mines. Before me, a dozen or so dirty people had prostrated themselves on the rock floor. One lay on his back, his skin pale, gulping for air, eyes bulging as he stared at the ceiling. The creature that had attacked me sat against the wall, and the girl ran to him, though it looked as if she were trying to resist the urge but was betrayed by the motion of her limbs. She walked toward him, slowly, awkwardly, a plodding gait that inevitably ended at his side.

"Welcome, Estek. I hope you are well?" it asked with the same snagged smile I had seen before.

"I am not well. My head hurts. What is this?"

"This is a salt mine, of course," it sneered.

"No, this," I spread my hands open. I saw a butcher from Wawel hill, a porter who helped me carry salt to the market once and a lay brother recently vanished from Kosciol na Skalce, the Church on the Rock. On the wall had been etched some sort of two-headed bird.

"Why, this is the house of the Faithful of Stanislaw." The *upier* eyed me almost sideways and hopped down, lifting the girl to his rough wall-seat. "The eagles flew my limbs here and reassembled me, so that my killers could not return their murder upon me."

"You are Stanislaw?" I cried, unwilling to believe what so obviously was a lie — and yet explained much about the unseen world. Who was I to say that St. Stanislaw had not returned from the dead or what price he must have paid to do it? But such a thing was

madness! I shook the thought from my head. "You are *not* the murdered saint. You are a monster of the night. You have only fooled these people."

"Oh, but he *is* our saint," came a parched voice from the monk on the floor. "I was pledged to the Kosciol na Skalce, and when this patron revealed himself to me, I left my post there to follow him."

"Then you are nothing but a deserter," I sneered at the fallen monk.

"It is true. he is that saint. I found the bones of the birds that flew his holy remains here outside this very shaft," said a dirty miner, obviously one of the first converts to this blasphemy. "He drank of their life to return to his."

"Dead birds convinced you of this... *thing's* divinity?"

"He is St. Stanislaw," the little girl stated matter-of-factly. Such conviction! Either that — or so impressionable...

"He is *not* Stanislaw, nor is he any kind of saint. Look at you! Cowering here in the dark with your foul patron!" My head throbbed; my vision wavered.

"Oh, Estek, why do you doubt us? Why do you doubt me?" grated the creature's voice. "Witness here that you have denied me three times, as Peter denied Christ. It is a sign!" A murmur of praise arose from the small flock. "What more do you need to convince you that I am who I say I am?"

I had no answer. In my mind, I knew that this was absurd. How could it come to pass that the former Bishop of Krakow could be reduced to this defiled thing? That he could have even returned to life in the first place? And yet, saints and miracles go hand in hand — I could not know that he wasn't. I certainly wouldn't be the first to witness this wonder, as all of these others here before me — equal or greater men to myself in

every case — believed in this miraculous incarnation. So why couldn't I?

I had no answer for the saint's question. And in that moment of doubt, he plucked my soul from the precipice over which I had left it and claimed it as his own.

I faltered in speech, stammering, as he led me back into the smaller cavern from which I had emerged. There, away from the sight of the assembled congregation, the *upier* bit into the flesh of my neck and nothing less than rapture overwhelmed me. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears as the world around me, this dingy cave, became great with blackness.

†††

For what may have been as much as a week, I lay there, unfed, given only chilled and dirty water to drink. My mind swam with visions brought on not only by the severity of my condition, but also by the monstrous angel with whom I had been confronted. I tossed and turned during the day, left with fits of delirium and yet too weak to rise and flee, guarded by one of the faithful. At night, the vampire rose and fed from me — just a very little bit! — enough to leave me in my crippled state for another day.

By the end of that week, I am shamed to admit, I had been broken. Sleep came on black wings, and day greeted me only with a hazy and half-crazed vision of the salt-tomb around me. As I ceased my struggle, St. Stanislaw came to me and smiled. "You are certainly the lamb, *Estek*," it said, and it opened its wrist with a claw and poured the vile fluid that issued forth into my mouth.

With that, I felt a vitality I hadn't known since before vanishing from the surface of the earth into this hole. All of the exhaustion and pain I had suffered since being here dissipated as well. It was the Blood of the Grail! To be sure, in my ecstasy, I overlooked its noxious scent and flavor and that it spilled from the wrist of some hellish

monster instead of from the Christ's cup. For then, my mind still deluded and my body weak with neglect, I saw nothing other than a chance at redemption, and though I know now that it damned me, I took it.

†††

Thereafter, I grew to be one of Stanislaw's favorites, alongside Bena, the little girl. I learned she had been liberated from a prostitute mother and instructed in the ways of this new church. It had become my duty to return to Krakow proper, with some concocted explanation of my absence ("I fell down a mineshaft while retrieving enough salt to fulfill an order, and a mining detachment found me."), for the purpose of resuming my old job. It was Stanislaw's desire that his church would mine during the day and I would sell the salt, while he slept and spent the bright hours in contemplation. At night, I would return for a few hours and then go and stay with my wife, resuming as much as I could a normal life without exposing the secret of the great saint's return.

I didn't question him, for such was not my place. I had tasted once again of his divine blood and trusted him more and more. It was devilishly clear to me that he must be protected. To hear that St. Stanislaw had returned would incense the king, he said, and only when enough people had joined the faith could we present ourselves with any hope of not having our patron murdered again by a vengeful monarch. I never bothered to explain the situation to my wife — she simply assumed that I had to keep later hours at the salt quarry to make up for time I had lost in my "accident." I chose not to mention any details to her so that she could better enjoy Stanislaw's return when the time was right to let the rest of the world know.

This idyll was to be short-lived, however.

†††

One afternoon, before the sun had risen, my men had finished cutting the salt early and I had

collected the profits from the sellers in the market. I went to the saint's chamber to await his rising for the night so I could deliver the money. Bena greeted me with a smile, curled up at his side. Now that I recall, her eyes seemed a little sunken into her fair head, her movements languid, as if she suffered a similar fate as I for my first week as the saint's guest. I thought nothing of it at the time, though.

What did catch my eye was the saint's bundle, which I had until then assumed was filled with relics and other things that the saints carry about with them. Perhaps it was my damned soul seeking redemption or the ultimate goodness of God that prodded me to act uncharacteristically, but I was overtaken by a pique of curiosity. I'm not sure what I expected to find. The reliquary in the church has the finger of another saint and a fragment of Christ's cross. I'm not sure why I expected this saint to be carrying the relics of other saints, but the urge overtook me to find out.

When I opened the bag, a brief confusion struck me, and then, the full horror of what I had seen settled in. When I looked in the bundle, I saw a small locket and a knife.

The locket had a charcoal drawing of my mother inside.

The knife once belonged to my father, who had given it to my brother.

My brother, who had been carried into the night so many years ago.

My brother... my brother was this vampire.

And the horrid revelation didn't end there. Certainly, he had been dragged somehow into this damnation. What was worse was that he stalked me. He pulled me into it as well.

This elaborately crafted story of Stanislaw's reincarnation was merely a vanity of his, a ruse set up so that he might prey on the citizens of Krakow with ease and quiet. He chose me because he knew me; he knew how I would respond to him, and he knew that I

could be trusted. He availed himself of my money. He drank my blood.

He swallowed my hope. I admit this sin: I despaired. I left the money there in the chamber and ran for home.

†††

My sleep that night was turbulent. That my brother did not come for me did not surprise me; he had no reason to suspect anything wrong, and I had left his money. In all likelihood, he merely thought that I was ill or that I had a family affair or some pressing business kept me at the hall.

In truth, however, I was sick, or sickened is perhaps a better word. As I slept, I worried over what I should do. A priest, perhaps? Surely that would be best for my immortal soul. But that was impossible, for even before my ghastly fate had revealed itself, I felt a growing love for the twisted "saint." I am not unfamiliar with love, however, and with the truth revealed to me, I can remember that this was an emptier, more hollow love than what I felt for my wife. It felt false... wooden, even. Still, I was drawn to the *upier* and was reluctant to do anything to harm him. I'm not sure why this was, but I must acknowledge that the emotion was there. I knew that a priest's desire would be to destroy the creature, but I couldn't bring myself to allow that.

And so I come to you, a traveler and a merchant. I tell you because you must know about these horrible things that prowl our streets. Witness my disgusting situation. I am the brother to a false saint returned to Earth by the Devil. I spend each day in toil for this satanic master, and I spend each night in a consumptive worry that he sees the secret within me, that he knows of my betrayal. I cannot kill him. I cannot kill myself. That I exist at all has become a favor my brother holds in his horny fist.

Now go. Take my tale before I bring you to him and let him decide how best to preserve his hidden life.

Go.

A PATRON SAINT OF LIES





Chapter One: Hierophants of the Night

Woe is me,
I think I am becoming a god.
— Emperor Vespasian,
upon his impending death

LETTERS TO THEODOLPHUS

My Sanguine Master,

These letters were found among the goods of the Caitiff Theodolphus, after his lair was raided. It appears that their author is Theodolphus' sire, although he does not sign his name. This means that, as you suspected, Theodolphus was the agent of another, this nameless sire. He claims to be Caitiff, like Theodolphus, but I lack your wisdom in these matters. Certainly, the author of these letters knows much about the society and interests of the Children of Caine and must have had a purpose in instructing his (or her, perhaps, we cannot even say whether the author is man or woman) childe in the ways of creating cults.

I have begun making discrete inquiries as to those Theodolphus might have had dealings with, to see how he received these letters and with whom he might have shared them. Given that the baron's men are still investigating the destruction of his manor, all such questions are looked upon with suspicion, so we must tread carefully. I will inform you immediately, should any information come to light.

I remain, yr. obedient servant,

— Jean

Greetings, my childe,

You have done well in carrying out my instructions, and you are now ready for the next step in your education. This and other letters constitute that next step. Read them carefully, and guard their contents because they represent a power that can be used against you.

This work is my legacy to you, the knowledge I have gathered of how our race moves among mortal society and, more importantly, how we take it and shape it to suit our needs. It concerns an important element of the balance between our society of night and those who still breathe and live under the sun, and it comes from harsh experience and painstaking study. I have not embellished with fine words or honeyed phrases, but have spoken plainly of certain truths of our existence. Consider them carefully, on their own merits, and I believe you will see their value. Follow my advice, and you may yet rise to become a true master of the night.

My subject, then, is the creation, maintenance and use of cults. Call them heresies, cabals, secret societies,

whatever you will. Cults have long been a tool of our kind for maintaining our place as lords. Not just as princes but as hierophants, if you will, princes of a faith that binds others in our service more strongly than any oath of fealty sworn to a mortal overlord — hierophants of the night.

ON THE NATURE OF CULTS

What is a cult? It is a following, a gathering of those devoted to something they consider greater or more important than themselves. The cults I speak of are devoted to us, whether they know it or not (and there are certainly many reasons for keeping worshipers ignorant of our existence and true nature). A cult is more than mere retainers or servants because a cult, by definition, involves a measure of devotion greater than that bought by gold or silver. A cult's followers must believe, and believe strongly, if their loyalty is to be assured.

THE CULTS OF THE PAST

Since the very beginning of our kind, when Caine ruled Enoch and begot the second generation, we have been objects of both worship and fear — the keys to commanding the mortal heart. It might be said that gathering mortal followers around us is part of our nature, like the divine right of kings (although granted by no divine source, in my opinion). Our fitness to rule comes from our blood and our strength of will but also from our hunger and need for the mortal herd.

The first cabals of followers gathered by the Children of Caine were literal cults that worshiped the first generations like the gods of old. Blood flowed in sacrifices to feed the ancients, and they placed their dark blessings upon their followers, making them strong and powerful. From time to time, a willful hero would rise up among the herd to foment rebellion or strike at the dark overlords or the mortals would rise up en masse out of fear, with torches burning, but for the most part, they kept their place and served their gods.

For untold generations in the ancient world, our kind ruled thus. We stood at the center of cults in Babylon and Egypt (the desert home of the Followers of Set). Cainites ruled over cults to the ancient gods in Greece, and orgies and pageants in Rome were dedicated to us, although only our true followers knew it. The ancient tribes of Europe knew the strength that came from the blood, and I'm sure more than a few berserkers felt our vitae burning in their veins (and perhaps do so still, thanks to Gangrel wanderers).

But the Lord is a jealous God and would have no others before Him. After the coming of His Son and the

ASHEN CULTS

founding of His True Church, the ancient cults weakened, and a powerful tide of faith swept them away. Heresies were denounced, and the heathen was converted. Where the Church found our kind, it brought fire and sword to dispatch us. Although some of the ancient cults wormed their way into the Church itself, many others fell to the steel and torches of its faithful, decimating the ranks of our followers and thinning our ranks as well. In the centuries since, cults have slowly grown again under the protection of secrecy and darkness, but those who grow complacent in their power may face the servants of an angry God once more.

After the rise of the Church, cults within the bounds of Christendom hid themselves beneath a heavy veil of secrecy. They became smaller, and most Cainites were more cautious in administering their herds. The festivals and blood orgies of Rome are a thing of the past, although I hear tales of some princes that attempt to match them in the security of their own strongholds. Most cults must go unnoticed by priest and king to survive, unless one or both are brought into the fold.

So, you can see why we must move cautiously, my childe, and why I have schooled you in patience. We have nothing if not time in which to work our plans.

Farewell.

ON THE DIVERSE TYPES OF CULTS

Greetings, my childe,

I'm pleased by your interest in the topic at hand, since there is much for you to learn. There are perhaps as many kinds of cults as there are Cainites to create them, but in my studies, I have noted certain similarities between diverse sects separated by many years and leagues distance. Each has its own purposes, its own strengths and its own weaknesses, and each appeals to its followers for a different reason.

BLOOD CULTS

Perhaps the simplest of cults in purpose, a blood cult exists for the sole purpose of obtaining that which we need and desire most in this world: vitae, to sustain our existence. Such a sect is often little more than a single Cainite's mortal herd, carefully managed to assure there will always be the required supply to slake its master's thirst. The adopted families of the Ventrue and the ghoul families of the Tzimisce are cults of this sort, although quite different from one another, as you shall see.

What do the mortal followers of such a cult gain? In some cases, only the patronage of their master and the rapture of the Kiss. This is enough for some, since we are

able to grant a measure of protection from the dangers of the world and pleasure greater than most people experience in their brief lives. With the use of silken words and wiles, such mortals consider themselves fortunate to be chosen for such an honor.

Many Cainites strengthen the bonds of a blood cult by giving their followers a small taste of the hunger that burns within us through a sharing of blood. Ghoul families are built on mortal followers tasting the vitae of their domitor, and a lesser taste of the blood seals a follower's loyalty with the blood oath. These followers are more than willing to help sate their master's hunger in order to secure a steady flow of vitae for themselves. The blood is their reward for loyalty and service, and each taste only strengthens their desire to serve. Little wonder ancestral ghoul families, such as those serving the Tzimisce, are so fanatical in their devotion.

CRAFT CULTS

One of the greatest bonds is the one between master and apprentice, allowing the secrets of various trades to be passed from one generation to the next. Master craftsmen guard the secrets of their trade jealously, and guilds exist to further protect such arcana and to ensure the trade's survival and growth. Such secrecy serves our interests, and more than one guild or circle of crafters has come under our sway.

A craft cult may be a small guild of workmen in a town or it may extend to the most powerful guilds and associations, such as the Masonic guilds, orders well suited to our needs. The members of a guild are not so highborn that their activities are of any great interest to the nobility. But they have more influence than any common peasant does, especially when taken as a group. Powerful guilds can sway barons and princes, and even the Church is dependent upon them for their crafts. Such a combination of secrecy and influence is very useful.

Some use that same secrecy to influence the cult from within. If an order respects the wishes of its masters, you need only control them to control the guild. If a guild requires all craftsmen to join, you can be assured a steady flow of new recruits. But a guild is often vital to the community, so be cautious: interfere too much and you may draw attention to yourself.

Some Cainites have more to offer a craft cult than blood and majesty. There are those of us who remember the philosophers of the ancient world, of Greece, Rome, Egypt and more. Some of us have secrets that craftsmen and scholars today would offer anything, even their souls, to possess. Oftentimes, all it takes is the promise of such secrets and a few tricks to make them seem

BEGGARS AND THIEVES

One sort of "trade" that often draws the attention of Cainites is a city's criminals, particularly the beggars, cutpurses and thieves who live off the wealth of others. Such people have need of protection from the law, and they have little else in the world. Many are willing to obey a Cainite master in exchange for a measure of safety and the opportunity for greater wealth. Nosferatu often control clutches of beggars and thieves in the great cities, using them as their eyes and ears in the daytime and their messengers and envoys when dealing with other vampires. Particularly adept ghoulish thieves sometimes manage to learn enough Celerity or Obfuscate to enhance their trade. For more details on such practices, see **The Ashen Thief**.

genuine. By the time they realize your promises are false, your servants are already utterly loyal to you.

DIONYSIAN CULTS

In the ancient world, mortals often worshiped our kind through ecstatic rituals of drinking and revelry, such as those of the Greek cult of Dionysus, which understood the similarities between wine and blood. Pleasure is a powerful goad for driving mortals on to things they would not otherwise do, and it can become a yoke around a follower's neck as strong as iron. Many of our kind, particularly the Toreador, found their cults on pleasure of one sort or another. Indeed, among our dead-hearted race, Artisan blood seems to grant a unique insight into the rapturous power of pleasure.

But even those of us dead to all pleasures save those of the Kiss can still remember the mortal hunger for pleasure and satisfaction. The simplest of these cults use the gross pleasures of the flesh as a lure; fine food, drunken revels and depraved orgies can turn the head of any man (or woman, for we are wise to remember than women have needs that may be as strong as than any man's). And what if some reveler, lost in a haze of spirits or drugs, should experience the pleasure of the Kiss as well? Will they even recall it as anything more than a dream when the sun rises the next morning?

Of course, such crude methods often result in vessels with tainted vitae as well as followers who are soft and indolent, unable to rouse from their stupor to care for themselves, much less the needs of their master. A wise master does not overindulge the appetites of his followers. Better for them to be hungry most of the time and occasionally sated, making them long for their next

reward. Though many Dionysian cults are based solely on seeking pleasure, they often combine with heretical pagan faiths in seeking spiritual as well as physical ecstasy.

Other Cainites use subtler pleasures to draw in their followers and keep them at their side. Physical pleasures in moderation but, also, pleasures to stir the heart and mind. More than one of us has stoked the fires of an artist's inspiration and gathered those able to appreciate the work that results. Once again, the Toreador excel here. In fact, they are often at their best when building a following based on art and culture rather than the crude, carnal appetites that others resort to. A following may even be built on an ideal of creating beauty and preserving it for all time, although any artist who thinks himself beyond his muse will discover that no ideal is greater than the power of the Beast.

HERESIES

Faith is a power that fires the heart and even touches with a measure of warmth the heart that no longer beats. Although I have never felt it myself, I have known Cainites whose faith burned as strong as any, perhaps even stronger for having suffered damnation. That faith is a power that can sway others — and may draw followers. Whether the Cainite "holy one" truly believes in the faith espoused seems to matter not, so long as the faithful continue to believe.

The Church works to root out endless heresies from within its own ranks and in places where such heresies have broken away altogether to form their own communities. Most of these heresies are not of our making (to the best of my knowledge), but even those that are not are still useful to a Cainite who understands their beliefs and can use them to gain power over the faithful.

We also create our own heresies to draw the faithful into our service. The Cainite Heresy is the greatest of these by far, but it is not the only one. Indeed, the Cainite Heresy itself is made up of many, many cults, often dedicated to a single vampiric "font" from whom the cult's blood communion flows. Likewise, other heresies are made up of individual cults that worship our kind for one reason or another. The Lazarite Heresy believes the Son of God showed his approval of our kind by giving Lazarus the gift of unlife and that Lazarus still walks the earth and guides his followers.

FOR MORE ON HERESIES

Ashen Cults focuses on the inner workings of cults rather than religious doctrine. For detailed information on various Christian heresies of the Dark Medieval world and how Cainites influence and interact with them, consult the **Cainite Heresy** sourcebook.



PAGAN CULTS

In times past, pagan cults worshiped our kind as gods of night, war and blood. Tribes of followers gave sacrifices to us and drank our vitae to grow strong and fierce for battle. The coming of the Church dissolved many of these cults and put many more to the torch with cries of Devil-worship. But the old ways do not die out so easily, and some pagan cults survive to this day, with others revived by Cainites seeing opportunity in their beliefs.

Pagan cults are small by necessity, since any large gathering of pagans is sure to draw the attention of the Church. Most often, the cult's members give lip service to the Christian faith, even attending Mass regularly and appearing like other folk in their community. Only on nights when the moon is full or dark do they come to secret groves and clearings to practice their true faith. From all that I've seen and heard, these cults are most common in Lithuania and the other pagan shores but can also be found in some corners of Britain.

KNIGHTLY ORDERS

More than a few childer Embraced in more recent years come from the ranks of chivalrous or ecclesiastical orders of knighthood, and other Cainites have chosen to take up the

THE LHIANNAN

Vampires of the Lhiannan bloodline (*Dark Ages Companion*, p. 68) have a long tradition of using pagan cults, especially in the British Isles. They combine their knowledge of ancient rites and traditions (which some of the Lhiannan learned firsthand) and their Ogham Discipline to set themselves up as dark gods. But the Lhiannan stand out as targets for the Church as well as rival Cainites. The bloodline is slowly dying out, and its ancient lore is passed on to fewer and fewer, with more gaps and mistakes. This fact lends an air of desperation to the Lhiannan cults, and they fight like cornered animals for their survival.

sword and spurs of knighthood since their Embrace. Some serve within mortal orders of knighthood, while others belong to entirely Cainite secret orders, such as the Order of Bitter Ashes or the White Company. Such orders are rare, usually the work of the Toreador clan, but they are already well known throughout Europe for their deeds.

To my knowledge, few Cainites seek to use knightly orders as they would a cult. With their great faith and their skill at arms, knights are dangerous prey and equally dangerous allies, should they suspect the true nature of their companion. I know of some who have taken fellow knights as retainers and even ghouls, however, particularly among the more martial orders known for their brutality in battle.

It is more common for Cainite orders of knighthood to accept mortal retainers or ghouls among them, usually as squires or new knights. These retainers are treated well, and some are eventually Embraced and made full members of the order. This is the way of the Toreador orders, to preserve the flower of young knighthood forever.

(For details on the various orders of knighthood in the Dark Medieval age and for more information on how vampires interact with them, see *The Ashen Knight*.)

SORCEROUS CULTS

In Genesis, the Lord tells Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but the serpent tempts Eve into eating, and she, in turn, tempts Adam. What is forbidden is always tempting, and there is always a serpent of one sort or another to offer the temptation. Throughout history, mortals have been drawn to the arcane arts, seeking knowledge and wisdom or eager for the power to influence and control the world around them.

The Church calls the practice of magic heresy and condemns witches to the stake, but still, men and women study the occult arts and practice them in secret. From time to time, such people gather in small groups and share their learning, working their rituals together. These things are forbidden, and forbidden

VAMPIRES AND SORCERY

Most experienced Cainites are aware (to some degree at least) of the existence of various sorcerers, warlocks, witches and hedge magicians scattered across Europe, some of them working within secret orders or covens, such as the mysterious Order of Hermes. Basic rules for representing these types of characters appear in *Liege, Lord and Lackey*, which focuses on simpler folk-magics, and *House of Tremere*, which deals with hermetic magi. Storytellers can also simply adapt the *Thaumaturgy* rules for mortals. Whatever the case, there are certain rules for the interaction of wizards and vampires in the Dark Medieval world.

The Embrace destroys a mortal sorcerer's ability to perform even the simplest magic in the way he could before. His dead heart, his raging Beast, his imprisoned and damned soul, it all makes attaining the diverse necessary trances and enlightened states impossible. Only the power of the blood remains. The neonate retains all *knowledge* of magical lore and rituals (defined by the Occult Ability) but cannot use that information to perform magic.

For millennia, Cainites of a few bloodlines have learned to draw on the power inherent in their blood to perform magic much like sorcerers do. The most ancient were perhaps the members of the Assamite sorcerer caste, but these blood sorcerers include a few Followers of Set and the

dread *koldun* of Clan Tzimisce. Sorcerers have never been numerous in their clans, and most benefited from preparation and training before and after the Embrace. In the last two centuries, the Tremere have joined their ranks and become the greatest sorcerers among Cainites. Their blood seems to be uniquely charged with sorcerous potential, but they too seek out progeny with a mortal background in the occult (most notably the magi of House Tremere).

At the Storyteller's discretion, those who were mortal warlocks may have the potential to learn *Thaumaturgy* or another form of blood magic, regardless of clan. To do so, however, they must have a teacher. The older blood sorcerers are very much opposed to "adopting" such fledglings, but the Tremere are somewhat less scrupulous. They will recruit certain Cainites and teach them *Thaumaturgy* — but at a price: the blood oath. Even then, it is a rare practice — the secrets of *Thaumaturgy* are too precious (and for many too ill understood) to share.

Setting aside the Embrace, mortal wizards can be useful allies for vampires, since their loyalty can be secured with a blood oath and they can become ghouls like any other mortals. Wizards are not immune to the effects of Disciplines such as Dominate or Presence, either, although they often have high Willpower ratings and some may have magical charms and other forms of protection.

things that happen in the dark of the night in secret rooms and forlorn groves are of interest to us.

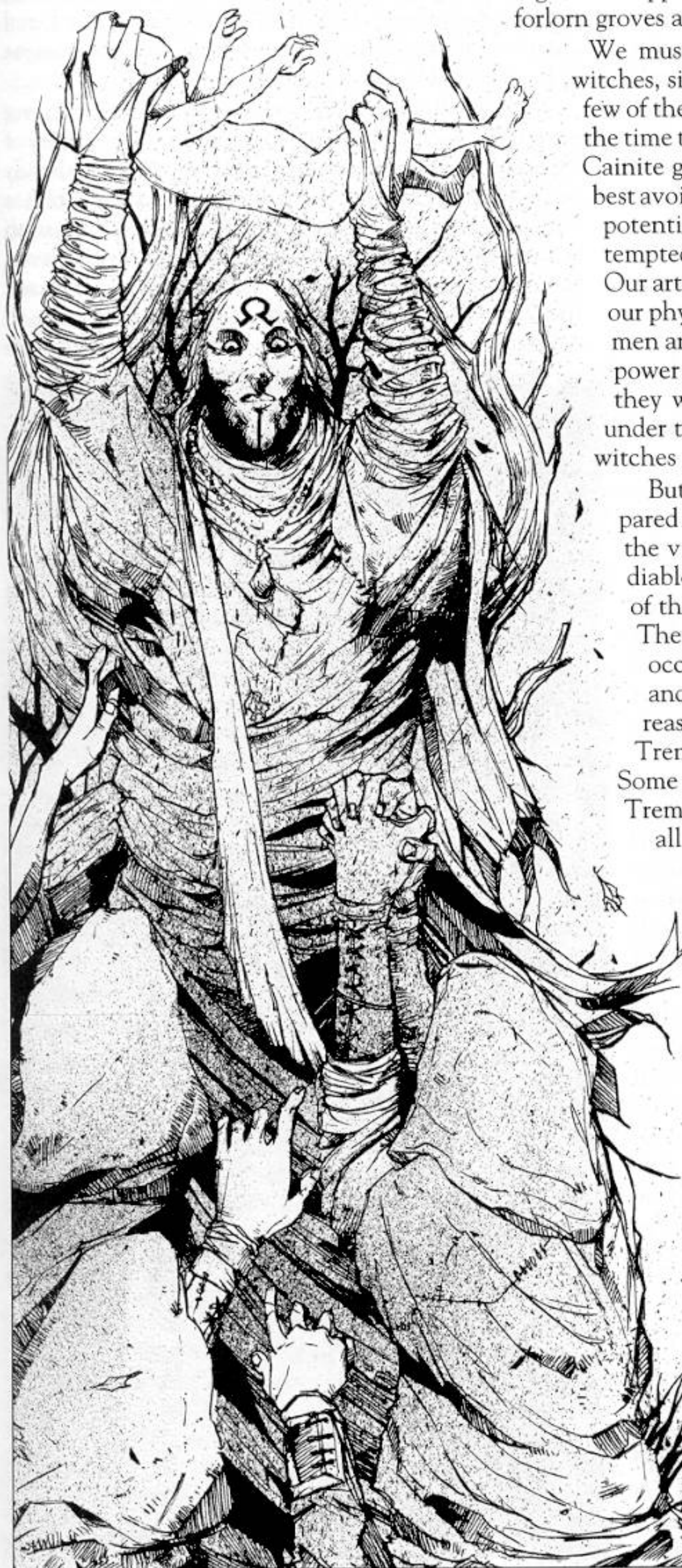
We must have a care when dealing with sorcerers and witches, since their powers can be a threat, even to us. But few of them have the power to overcome one of us without the time to prepare and work their magic, and only a foolish Cainite gives them that time. Those who are a threat are best avoided or killed outright, but there are others who are potentially useful to us. It is those sorcerers Cainites have tempted with promises of immortality and arcane power. Our arts exceed the powers of most mortal occultists, and our physical prowess is greater still. Many purported wise men and wise women have yielded to the desire for such power — and discovered that the bargain was not all that they were told. Indeed, sorcerous arts seem to wither under the power of the Embrace, relegating once skilled witches to blood-hungry shrews.

But the Embrace of a few sorcerers is nothing compared to the work of the Tremere. The Usurpers wrested the vitae and power from captured Cainites by magic, diablerized an Antediluvian and turned what remained of their magical order into a cult to serve their needs. They have drawn heavily on the mortal interest in the occult arts to attract their new apprentices, retainers and childer. Mortal sorcerers throughout Europe have reason to fear, since many Cainite princes see the Tremere in every secret coven or isolated hermitage. Some want to prevent other wizards from coming to the Tremere's aid, while there is talk of the Tremere's former allies in the Order of Hermes moving against them. I am told that the Tremere do use occult orders to gather followers but that they are also wise enough to gather them in other ways. Certainly, their magic gives them the means of creating other cults, if they wish.

Some Cainites, ignorant of the effects of the Embrace, have sought out and Embraced magicians in hopes of gaining allies able to counter the power of Tremere thaumaturgy but gained only powerless neonates, some of them drawn to the Tremere in hopes of learning the secrets of their blood magic. Wiser heads have gathered mortal sorcerers as allies and retainers. The power of the blood oath does not weaken a sorcerer's powers, and a ghoul warlock can be a powerful and useful ally, indeed. Still, the work of the Tremere has sown greater distrust for the arcane arts among the clans, and sorcerous cults have fallen out of favor.

THE CULTS OF THE ROADS

If we can be said to have
faiths of our own, my childe,
HIEROPHANTS OF THE NIGHT



then it is in the Roads we walk in our unliving existences. The Road is a constant companion and catechism, but it is more than just that. We do not seek solace or salvation like a mortal pilgrim, for we are already damned. We walk the Road to win back some small part of our soul from the grasp of the Beast, whether through virtue or villainy, to grapple with the Beast and master it in our own way.

Some Cainites follow their Road with an almost casual attitude, scarcely aware of the philosophy behind it, acting only on instinct and a denial of the Beast. Others study the Roads with the care a monk gives the Scriptures, and much debate has taken place among our kind regarding the true nature of these paths and where they may lead us. But it cannot be denied that the Roads hold the Beast at bay, and that makes them important to all Cainites.

Like any faith, each Road has its zealots, particularly the Roads devoted to serving some higher power, be it the Road of Heaven, the Road of the Devil or the mysterious Road of Typhon followed by the Serpents. These believers may preach their faith—as the followers of the Road of Heaven do—or seek converts in their own way. This leads to what I call the cults of the Roads, sects and cabals built around the tenets of a particular Via, which often include not only Cainites, but ghouls and even mortals among their number.

Such a cult devotes itself to the virtues of a particular Road as seen by its leader, usually a Cainite of some standing on the Road (or at least one thought to be). Some of these sects are similar to monasteries, gatherings of like-minded individuals following their vision in isolation from the world. Others are secret cabals hidden among mortal society, even within the ranks of the nobility or the Church.

Cainites within the cult follow the example and teachings of their leader and mentor to improve their knowledge and understanding of the Road. Mortal members of such cults (including ghouls) believe that by following their chosen Road, they can emulate our kind. Some believe they are helping us seek redemption, notably those on the Road of Heaven, while followers of the Road of the Beast or the Road of the Devil seek to be more like us, perhaps preparing themselves in hopes of the Embrace.

INFERNAL CULTS

The most dire cults are those that embrace the power of the Devil and draw others, both mortal and Cainite, into his service. These sabbats and covens are the most secret of all, since they have the whole world arrayed against them. The Church hunts them as the most vile of heretics, the law sentences them to death by torture, and even the princes of our kind outlaw

diabolist cults and order their members executed, when they are discovered. Still, the temptations of the Devil are many, particularly for us, and some become caught in his infernal web.

When you have roamed the night as long as I have, my childe, you will be privy to an astounding variety of theorems regarding our damned souls. Are we already condemned to Hell, as the Cathars would have it? Are our souls dead and gone from our shells, reducing us to the status of animals? My own feeling is that even though our souls are damned, they are ours. This means the denizens of Hell would take them for their own, to devour or carry back to their fiery realm. Anyone who

ASHEN PRIESTS

While all Cainites respect and follow the Roads to one degree or another, some are particularly zealous in their devotion and believe it is their responsibility to help others to see the way. Some of these vampires were clergy before their Embrace; others find new faith in their “calling” to a particular Road. Regardless, they often style themselves as “ashen priests” of their Road.

Like their mortal counterparts, ashen priests advise and shepherd their flocks, namely Cainites following their chosen Road. They serve as examples of proper behavior and offer insight and guidance. Some also take it upon themselves to punish transgressions. The nature of the priest's Road influences his ministry, of course. A priest of the Via Humanitatis fights to keep members of his flock from falling prey to the Beast. A priest of the Via Bestiae teaches that mercy is foolish and survival is all-important.

Ashen priests may also minister to mortals, depending on their Road and circumstances. This is more common with the Roads that embrace Conscience and Self-Control as Virtues. These Roads are also the ones with the most priests, simply because their followers are more likely to feel a sense of responsibility toward others. Some roads, such as the Road of the Devil or the Road of Typhon, have priests who seek to tempt the followers of other Roads into straying, while Roads such as Paradox have few self-proclaimed priests.

Also like mortal clergymen, accomplished ashen priests often exercise considerable temporal influence. They can sway the opinions of many vampires and influence even princes, much like mortal bishops and cardinals. However, unlike the Church, the Roads have no recognized pontiff, and the priests of different Roads often work at cross-purposes.

ASHEN CULTS

bargains with demons may gain some measure of power, but for a great price indeed. Any Cainites foolish enough to believe their souls no longer have value should heed my words; traffic with demons at your own great peril, my childe.

Still, some of our kind and some mortals do serve the powers of Hell. The Baali and their accursed cults are the gravest example. They devote themselves to depravity and corruption, luring others into their foul worship and rites, often by disguising themselves as another sort of cult and drawing followers deeper and deeper in. One sort of temptation infernal cults offer to their followers are the secrets of sorcery, gifts from the Devil and his dukes. By the time the true nature of the cult is revealed to them, members are unable to escape — or no longer wish to because they have become as corrupt as their dread masters.

I leave you with this warning, my childe. Consider until my next missive the many kinds of cults and the advantages and disadvantages they offer.

CONCERNING THE CREATION OF CULTS

Greetings, my childe,

So now you know the history and diverse types of the sects we form and join. You are no doubt beginning to wonder how one goes about creating such cults. Or, more likely, you are already formulating plans of your own. Your ambition is one of the reasons I chose you, after all. But once again, I caution patience. I have tread this path before you and know it has many hidden pitfalls. These letters exist so that you may learn from me and avoid some of my mistakes, as is proper for a childe to do.

Thus, before thinking of how to craft a clutch (or empire) of worshipers, ask yourself why you wish to. To properly forge a following, you must have both the desire and the ability to lead, either one is insufficient without the other. Ability can be inborn or learned, and I have every confidence that you shall rise to that particular challenge. Desire, however, can spring from many sources, and you would do well to consider your reasons for building a cult before you attempt it, just as you would want a reliable map before starting out on a journey to an unknown land. Know your goals, then find the means of attaining them. What are the goals of a cult? They are manifold.

BLOOD

The simplest reasons to gather mortal, and even Cainite, followers to your side is our base hunger for prey. Loyal retainers and followers can assure a herd

that you can feed on safely, without having to hunt and risk discovery or mortal outcry. Carefully handled, a cult can provide blood for a coterie of Cainites for years, even mortal generations, as the most successful cults have in the past.

If you desire a cult to help slake your never-ending thirst, consider it when gathering the herd. You need mortals who are strong and preferably free from disease and contagion, enough of them that you need not drain any vessel too greatly, but not so many that they may easily rebel against you. Young families are particularly useful, since they will have children that can be brought into your service, to receive your blessings and to eventually serve you with their vitae as well. Plus, they are useful hostages against the behavior of their parents. Unless you intend to take an entire village as yours (an ambitious undertaking), your followers must conceal your feedings from their neighbors and particularly their parish priest.

Most importantly, you must have a means of assuring the obedience of your herd. As they feed your hunger, so must you feed theirs, or else, your prey will no longer be so willing. I will discuss the needs of cults and how to satisfy them anon, but be aware that no cult exists simply because you will it so.

ON ELDERS AND CULTS OF BLOOD

Some elders of our kind gather cults around them to ensure the blood that they need — not mortal blood, but the vitae of Cainites of higher generations. As we prey on mortals, so must our elders prey upon us. (Be assured, my childe, I have no such designs for you. You are destined for other things.) Like any blood cult, this need not be a matter of hunter and prey. A cult can provide satisfaction to its members as well as its leaders, and wise elders slake the desires of their followers in exchange for their fealty and their vitae, particularly since an elder desires a variety of vessels to drink from (also for reasons I will discuss in time).

TEMPORAL POWER

There is power to be had in this world, and many Cainites hunger for it nearly as much as they hunger for blood. Sects can be a source of influence for those who build and maintain them carefully, but do not overestimate the safety and position offered by a cult, even a great one, for it can be your undoing.

Certainly, a carefully made and controlled cult offers power at least over one's followers. Some cults also offer influence in other parts of the world, depending on who belongs to them and what they are capable of. A craft cult may grant some sway over members of that craft, even those who don't belong to the cult. A pagan cult or a knightly order may exercise influence

with like-minded folk, and any cult may exercise authority through the personal influence of its members. If a lord or bishop is your follower, then much of his power is yours, provided you exercise it with care and protect the interests of your pawn.

If you seek a cult for power, then choose its purpose and members accordingly. A heretical cult that draws lords of the Church to your side or a cult of pleasure that serves the appetites of noble lords is certain to garner more influence than a collection of peasants or pagan folk. Also, consider the influence your cult may give you in the future. The sons and daughters of nobility you ensnare now may rule households and manors of their own in a mere 10 or 20 years time, and ladies may snare themselves even more powerful husbands, especially with some helpful guidance. Patience is the key to building a cult's position — and your own.

WORSHIP

I know of cults where Cainites are worshiped and treated as gods by their followers, who see our immortality, our physical prowess and the power of our blood as signs that we are divine. I know of more than a few of our kind who truly consider themselves divine, rather than damned, either blessed by the hand of God Himself or gods in their own right, like the pagan deities of old. They claim the worship of their followers as their due, and I must confess, who would not be drawn to the heady draught of being worshiped? It is a potent libation.

It was certainly so in the days before the Christian Church, when many Cainites took the guises of gods for the Romans, Egyptians, Greeks, Celts and others. Today, the guises of pagan deities are not as useful, but some of us adopt the mantle of saints instead, either mortals blessed and chosen by God or His saints returned from Heaven on His work. You have no doubt heard that the blood of saints is holy, so how much easier is it to convince the devout to take and drink of such blessedness?

For some Cainites, the worship of mortals is merely a means to an end, giving them power and assuring the loyalty of their followers. Others, as I said, consider it their due and see themselves as gods among men. Certainly, the fervor that worship inspires allows a supposed Cainite god or saint to call for whatever sacrifices he wills, and his followers may well gladly place their children upon his altar like Abraham did Isaac. But the zeal of worshipers can also turn ugly if their god does not live up to their expectations. As God is both jealous and angry, so too is a congregation spurned or disappointed by their deity.

If you would be worshiped, seek out those with nothing to believe in and give it to them. Or else find

ASHEN CULTS

those who believe devoutly and play to their beliefs. Cultivate the Disciplines that will grant you godlike majesty and holiness to rival an angel descended to Earth. Most importantly, keep faith with your worshipers, as you would have them do with you. A jealous and angry god inspires awe and fear, but a fickle one sends followers to find another to worship.

COMPANIONSHIP

Ours is a solitary existence. Even among our own kind, we must always be on our guard because we know the kind of predators we truly are and how easily we turn on each other to satisfy our own desires. That is one of the first lessons I taught you. Although the lion may lie down with the lamb in the Kingdom of God, it is difficult for hunter to lie with prey in this world.

Still, there are those Cainites who seek relief from their lone existence — no matter how brief — in the company of others, both mortal and damned. Most find ease among loyal servants and retainers, or worshipers, as I have mentioned. A few, such as the Brujah, seek the company of equals and dream of a peaceful coexistence between mortals and our kind. I cannot say what may come of such dreams, only that I have never seen them bear fruit.

A cult founded on companionship is a folly, an effort to capture the mortal life and family that has been lost forever. Would you take yourself a wife, build a fine manor somewhere and raise a gaggle of adopted children nursed on blood? Would you be the head of a loving clan, sitting beside a cold hearth, watching them live in the dark? Friendship between mortals and Cainites has been known, but do not seek it among your followers. You are their better, and if you forget that, then you are courting rebellion and betrayal, not camaraderie.

DUTY

Some cults arise because the Cainites who found them feel it is their duty to gather followers to serve a cause. It may be one of the causes I have spoken of, in the name of a liege lord, such as a childe creating a cult in the name of his sire, to give him blood, power or worship. As a great lord has many vassals, so may a powerful Cainite have many childer and thralls, whose mortal followers ultimately owe fealty to their master's master. If you can, see to it that a vassal does not find his duty onerous, but pleasant. Vassals benefit from the responsibility of overseeing the cult in your name, but they must not get above themselves. Remind them always whom it is they serve and in whose name it is that they rule.

Other Cainites create cults out of a sense of duty to an ideal or cherished goal that does not fall among those I have named. Of late, the greatest duty for neonates is

chivalry, the call to knighthood that has led to the creation of knightly orders for Cainites to follow. Others create schools or gatherings of scholars to study ancient works and the riddles of nature. Some even form sects to protect the interests of a mortal nation they still feel ties to. I know of one Cainite who swore an oath to her beloved husband to care for their family before he took the cross in the First Crusade. Though he never returned home, and she caught the eye of a Toreador, she kept her oath even after the Embrace. She and her mortal retainers watch over her great-grandchildren and their children still, and I am sure that she will protect her line for as long as she walks the night.

FAITH

As I have said, faith is a great power, even among us, and many of the Damned seek comfort and solace in their faith, while others find in it a reason to continue beyond satisfying the needs of the Beast. Those of like faith tend to gather together, and they may preach to others and seek to convert them to their faith, gathering followers and disciples to their way.

This strong faith may come from a Cainite's mortal life before the Embrace, or it may be found in unlife.

CULTS AND FAITH

Many ashen cults are founded on the power of faith, from Christian heresies to surviving pagan beliefs. The followers of such cults are usually strong believers in the faith, since they are willing to risk being denounced and punished as heretics for their practices. The vampire leaders of religious cults don't always share their followers' faith, but some do, believing as strongly in their cult's dogma as others, if not more so. Such vampires may have the Higher Purpose Merit with relation to their cult (or the Driving Goal Flaw, depending on the nature and depth of the characters' beliefs).

A religious cult can inspire True Faith among its adherents, whether they are Christians, Muslims or pagans, although it remains rare even in the most fervent cults. A vampiric cult-leader cannot have True Faith in a cult that worships him (faith is belief in something outside of yourself). If the cult accords a special place to Cainites (as many ashen cults do), then the cult's True Faith does not repel vampires and may even overcome the True Faith of others opposed to the undead. In any event, a cult's True Faith never repels or harms the Cainites who lead the cult.

Some neonates come to the Viae with the zeal of the newly converted and seek to spread their newfound faith to others, both Cainite and mortal.

Those who cling to their mortal Christianity seek redemption from the God who cursed Caine and, therefore, all of us, or they make themselves God's instruments of vengeance against the unholy in the world. Other Cainites hold to Jewish, Muslim, or pagan beliefs with the same fervor. Then there are those who embrace their damnation with all their heart, walking the Road of the Devil and creating infernal cults, as I have described. Do not be so foolish as to assume that the Baali are the only infernalists in our midst, my childe, or that their wiles are easy to detect or resist.

I will leave you with that thought for now.

CRAFTING THE CULT

Greetings, my childe,

Your attention to detail over these past weeks has pleased me, my childe. We have considered the many reasons for forming a cult or coven. Now come the three stages of actually doing so. You must gather followers, ensure their loyalty and see to the cult's needs and growth over time.

GATHERING THE FIRST FOLLOWERS

A cult grows from a small retinue of devoted followers like a crop grows from seed. First, you must gather the seed — planting and carefully tending it — before you can reap any sort of harvest from your efforts. Your first followers must have certain qualities if they are to serve as the start of a worthy sect.

First, they must be loyal. Much of the work of creating and maintaining a cult must be done during the day, so you must be able to entrust this work to your followers. They are your lieutenants, overseers of the cult you will gather together. If you are the cult's god, then they are your high priests and priestesses. If you are lord, then they are your seneschals and ministers. Therefore, you must secure and hold their loyalty completely and utterly, but not through such crude means as domination. No, you need their free will and their wits intact if they are to be of any use to you. You must secure their loyalty through other means: the strength of your presence, whispered promises, worship, fealty and the power of the blood. There are many ways to secure loyalty, as you shall see.

Second, your first followers must have some measure of cleverness and the ability to sway others to your cause, but they must not be so great in either endeavor as to exceed you. These first converts will be your

emissaries in the mortal world, gathering others to follow you. Therefore, they must be able to recruit others and secure their loyalty to you and your order. That is why I teach you these lessons, not only so that you may understand, but so that you can pass on enough knowledge to your followers. Here, you walk a dangerous line. You must teach them enough of this lore to be useful but not so much that they believe they can do without you. Underlings throughout history have decided they could do without the rulers they served. Of such things are rebellions made. Take care to guard against them.

Third, consider the purpose and nature of the following you seek to build. Choose your first servants from those able to accomplish your goals. If your new following is to be made up of the sons and daughters of the noblest houses, it does little good to choose a penniless beggar as your catspaw, unless, of course, you clean and clothe the rogue and arrange a suitable introduction to court for him. Even then, you are better to choose someone familiar with the ways of the nobility and able to move easily among them. Likewise, if you will gather strength from beggars, thieves and outcasts, a nobleman is a poor choice as the first of your company. Your first servants must move easily through the social circles of your potential converts.

Finally, choose your first converts with care and an eye toward subtlety. You do not want fanatics preaching heresy in the streets for all to see, nor do you want sudden changes in manner or behavior likely to arouse suspicion. Seek out those with beliefs and manner matching your needs, so their later actions will seem to arise naturally from their character.

GAINING CONVERTS

Once you have gathered your first followers, it falls largely to them to gather the next, although with your guidance and assistance. For any following greater than a handful, it is important to understand that you cannot exercise direct control over all. You must rely on the abilities of your most loyal servants to keep the others obedient. This is perhaps the greatest benefit and the greatest risk of a large following. You gain the benefit of many servants and all that they bring you, but you surrender at least a small part of your security, unable to watch all of your followers at once, relying on the aid of others to maintain control.

Still, you can minimize these risks by careful planning and following my advice. Learn the means of swaying and gaining converts well, then teach your most loyal only what they need to know to carry out their work. Maintain the loyalty of those closest to you, and they will watch the rest for you, warning you of any danger to your rule.

ASHEN CULTS

Gaining converts is a matter of three discrete steps: seeking out those suited for conversion, initiating them into your circle and, finally, binding their loyalty in some lasting way.

FINDING NEW FOLLOWERS

Like the hunter you are, you must develop an eye and ear for prey. This is different from the hunt for vitae but similar enough that it comes to our kind with only a small amount of study. In the hunt for blood, we seek those that are filled with the life we need to sustain us, alone and vulnerable, unlikely to be missed for some time, that we can continue to feed from or dispose of easily. In the hunt for servants, we likewise look for the frayed edges of mortal society and those who linger at them. Ideally, a potential follower has few friends or relations or can be separated from them for long periods of time. The absence of such followers will not be noticed or can be explained away as part of their duties or regular habits.

Potential followers should either be weak in faith and will, apathetic toward worship and life, or ardent believers, burning with zeal. In the former case, they can be guided toward something they can believe in deeply, a new center for their life that gives it meaning and purpose. In the latter case, their faith can be used as a means of guiding them toward you, slowly transferring their fervor over to you. This can be dangerous when dealing with a fanatic whose views are already set, but others are like clay, waiting to be molded and then fired with religious zeal to set them in the form you dictate.

Consider all the reasons men and women enter the cloister, and you will find among them the reasons they will come to you. There is a desire to leave the world behind and find one more suited to their temperament. Some seek to know something greater than themselves, to feel awe and wonderment. Others, driven by shame and guilt, seek to wash away past sins or cut themselves off from their old lives and begin anew. There are those who seek order and discipline, the simple life of following the monastic rule, who are easily turned to follow your own way. There are seekers of companionship, compassion, love, power and peace. All of these desires are as bait for your hooks, to draw them in and make them yours.

THE INITIATION OF FOLLOWERS

Once you have hooked the fish, all that remains is to haul it in. The introduction of new members to your cult is important to secure your influence over it and assure its future loyalty. There are many techniques that help integrate a new recruit into a cult's ranks. Use them in combination to ensure the neophyte will have no opportunity to resist the cult's lure.

SEPARATION

Keep the neophyte from contact with anyone other than your loyal followers. A sense of separation from the world creates a need for what you have to offer: stability and purpose. Loyalty and faith are contagious, and being in the presence of those loyal to you can inculcate it in newcomers. Isolation from the familiar makes it more difficult for the neophyte to return to old ways and familiar faces. This isolation need not be long; a day or two at least, the duration of a hunting trip or a short journey (a pilgrimage, perhaps?) is better. If you have the opportunity to isolate neophytes for longer (in a castle, monastery or stronghold of your own), so much the better.

Encourage separation from the people and things of ordinary life within neophytes. They are special, different from the common herd, which doesn't understand their wants or needs as you do. If others knew how special they were, they would be jealous and would move against them. Instill in them a fear of the ordinary, making yours a place of refuge from a strange and hostile world. Create a sanctuary for your followers, whether an actual physical place or a sanctuary of thought and ideas, where they can seek shelter.

RITUAL

The induction of any newcomer into your flock should be accompanied by the appropriate rites, given as much importance as any sacrament of the Church or the crowning of a king. It matters little exactly what rites you use, so long as there is a ceremony that stresses the binding of the neophyte to the order, preferably with oaths of loyalty and dire consequences for violating them. If you are skilled enough in the arts of domination, an oath of fealty may bind your new vassals to you more tightly than they imagine. I have also heard of blood magic being used for the same purpose. An initiation ritual is also an ideal opportunity to begin a blood oath, particularly if it includes a Mass or some sort of communion, in which a small amount of vitae can be included. Do not underestimate the power of a sworn oath, bound by blood or not. After all, oaths to liege and Church are taken deeply to heart, even without the power of our blood behind them. If you choose well, your followers will take their oaths as seriously.

Teach newcomers the rituals of your order and stress their importance. See that rituals are carried out on a regular basis. Their secret knowledge of your rites elevates your followers above the masses in their hearts. They know things others do not, and they likely hunger for greater knowledge and the opportunity to rise in the ranks of your order. Carrying out rituals together creates bonds of fraternity and familiarity within your cult,

and accustoms them to obedience and following your instructions and those of your lieutenants.

MANIPULATION

Once neophytes are in your hands, their hearts are yours to play like fine instruments. One does not need the illusions of the Ravnos or the intoxicating aura of the Toreador to twist the mortal heart, particularly one made so vulnerable. Be as a parent (or a stern God) with small children, lavishing praise on those who obey and serve you well, harshly disciplining those who fail to show the proper respect. Your followers will quickly learn that to obey brings rewards and to disobey brings swift and sure punishment. Not only will they follow your orders, but they will also seek to find new ways to please you and earn your affection.

THE RULE

One of the most important aspects of monastic life is the rule, the laws that govern every aspect of monastic life. A successful cult must also operate by a rule, although not necessarily the same as that of a monastery. Consider the life of a cloistered monk: rising daily at matins, observing morning prayers and a meal eaten in silence, working throughout the day, with time for other devotions, and retiring at complin. A monk's vows are ever uppermost in his mind and in his daily life.

So it should be with your followers. Although most cannot follow the rigid rule of a monastery, you can create and enforce rules that keep their loyalty and duty uppermost in their minds. Daily rituals performed in secret, meetings with others in your service, tithes to your coffers, and sacrifices such as a monk's vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are all means to give a cult order and discipline. Mortals desire order and leadership, so provide it and they will not fail to follow you.

The creation of rules is also a means of testing your followers' loyalty, as God tested Abraham and Job. What will they give up for you? What will they do in your name? What torments will they endure if you command it? Test these limits cautiously, but test them nonetheless, and you will know precisely what your followers are capable of and how you can use them to your best advantage when the time comes.

WORK

A successful leader gives his followers work to perform. Even if it is not important work, the follower must consider it so. Work can serve a useful purpose (providing for you and yours, performing needed tasks and such), but its true purpose is to involve the heart and mind as well as the body of the follower in your service. It is said that work is good for the soul, and it is certainly true that work prepares the soul for service to

a higher power. Work calls for obedience and discipline, qualities you must inculcate in your followers.

Again, it is likely you cannot enforce the work of a master over slaves in your followers, particularly those still living in the world. But you can give them small tasks to perform in secret: gathering certain herbs, making useful goods, hunting for food, mending broken items and so forth. When their work is done, reward them. When it is not, punish them accordingly. Do this, and you will see their loyalty grow.

DISCIPLINES: ASSURANCES OF LOYALTY

Of course, even the most silver-tongued leader can encounter resistance to his will, although carefully choosing your first converts can help to overcome or prevent this. Still, our kind has advantages in swaying others that mortals can only imagine. The power in our blood lets us mold the human heart and mind like clay, but it is a power that must be wielded like a master sculptor to be truly useful.

Many neonates, especially young Magisters and Patricians, are taken with the power to dominate, to impose their will on others. It is useful to be sure, but it is hardly subtle. It binds the soul in chains of will, leaving the victim with no choice but to obey. It can ensure cooperation but not true loyalty. In fact, the dominated usually grow frightened and resentful of their treatment. Those often subjected to such treatment may lose their free will altogether, making them quite obedient but not as useful as vassals with their own minds, capable of doing not only what they're told, but also what they think their master would want. At greater levels of expertise, the art of domination can ensure loyalty through oaths of fealty similar, but inferior to the blood oath. Thus, it is a useful Discipline in the creation and maintenance of cults, but only when used with foresight and restraint.

The intoxicating power of Cainite presence, on the other hand, is a great boon to any leader. It cloaks the practitioner in majesty to rival or exceed that of kings and princes, bringing mortals to their knees and drawing them to us like moths to a flame. Even the simplest uses of the Discipline can overwhelm the mortal heart with longing and, unlike outright domination, can sway a small gathering or even a crowd as well as an individual. Your majestic presence can assure your followers that your will is not to be questioned and convince others that they cannot even hope to challenge you and win. Whether or not it is true, so long as your followers believe it, it may as well be.

The limit of Presence is that it requires a deft touch, since it affects the heart and not the mind. It leaves followers with their free will intact, although, after a time, they will find it difficult to defy or reproach you in any way. Still, powerful presence is no substitute for true leadership

and an understanding of how to handle followers directly. I have known some Cainites who thought to enchant others with their majesty but failed to understand the needs and wishes of their newfound worshipers and, so, were surprised when the enchantment soured and the adoration turned to distrust and, eventually, to fear and hate. More than one beloved ruler has been overthrown, and the Son of God Himself was betrayed by one of his own and crucified by his enemies. If you are so foolish as to consider yourself beyond such a fate, you are even more likely to meet it.

OF LIFE AND LIMB AND EARTHLY WORSHIP: THE BLOOD OATH

"I shall be your liege-man of life and limb and of earthly worship," says one oath of fealty I have often heard. Such words may be spoken falsely, even with a hand laid upon the Bible or a holy relic. More than one vassal has betrayed his lord and his oath, given the opportunity. But such vassals were not bound by the power of Cainite vitae.

The blood oath is one of the most powerful means at your command to ensure the loyalty of our servants and retainers. It is an oath of fealty binding them to you body and soul that none can easily ignore and fewer still can break. A vassal can swear an oath of fealty regardless of what he may feel in his heart. A blood oath reverses this; no words or rituals need to be exchanged, but the thrall knows that he is a vassal in his heart, regardless of what he might think or feel.

It is best, of course, if a blood oath is sworn honest and true. It only strengthens the vassal's loyalty and ensures that he will not easily be swayed to act against you, even against his will. Such a loyal servant is also more likely to take the blood oath willingly, requiring only three sips of vitae on three successive nights to seal the oath. Of course, the judicious use of Disciplines can help garner a thrall's loyalty and willingness to take the blood oath in advance. Few mortals can resist the full majesty of Cainite presence or the Lure of Subtle Whispers; it weakens their will and even their desire to resist.

In dealing with less willing vassals, some deceit or coercion may be necessary to ensure the oath. A small amount of blood, a few drops, mixed with a dark wine is the simplest means, particularly when it is taken in a meal with meat to help cover the taste. It requires more than three successive nights to pass on enough vitae for the oath, but the thrall grows more and more cooperative with each drop of blood consumed, perhaps to the point where the final sip comes to his lips willingly. His desire for the blood grows along with his loyalty and obedience toward you.

Desire for vitae can also be an effective means of ensuring the blood oath. A mortal need not know the

consequences of consuming our blood, only the benefits that it brings. New ghouls have strength and the fire of vitae burning in their veins. Most are more than willing to return for a second drink — and then a third. Their loyalty is assured before they even realize it, caught up as they are in the newfound power.

Of course, not all thralls can be ghouls, since ghouls require a considerable amount of blood to maintain and can be a drain on our precious vitae. But a few drops or a small sip given to a thrall every fortnight or so can assure their continued fealty with little risk or effort.

THE CHARACTER OF THE BLOOD OATH

Though the blood oath is a bond of fealty between regnant and thrall, my studies have show that its precise nature differs from one Cainite to the next, depending on the nature of the blood used to bind the oath. Though all Cainite blood is equally capable of forging an oath, not all oaths are the same. The blood of elders is more potent than that of the younger generations. There are also differences according to the regnant's clan, with each bloodline carrying its own unique "flavor" in the oaths it administers. I will discuss this matter further when we consider the particular ways of the clans in regard to cults.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE BLOOD OATH

I said that many vassals swear fealty falsely. The same can be said of many liege lords. I also said that the blood oath ensures fealty regardless of the thrall's true intent. So it must also be said that the oath requires a measure of duty from the regnant. You will discover that the bond of a blood oath creates in you a measure of protectiveness and responsibility for your thralls, as if they were your loyal servants, regardless of what you might feel for them. Do not mistake the blood oath for the chains of slavery and domination, and do not seek to forge the oath lightly. If you do not meet your responsibilities toward your thralls, then, like any mistreated followers, they may leave you.

ON THE POWER OF LIES

Finally, for ensuring the loyalty of your servants, consider carefully the power of lies and the limits of a retainer's knowledge. While it is known to me and other well-educated Cainites that only old ghouls (who have lived past their natural span) will die from lack of vitae in their bodies, most ghouls do not know this, particularly newly made ones. I have found that if ghouls (or even thralls under the blood oath) believe that they will die without a regular infusion of blood to sustain them, then they are far less likely to defy the one they believe holds their lives in his hands. Certainly the pain and misery of having no more vitae is enough to convince them that they truly are about to die. And not just any vitae, but only *your* vitae. Does a ghoul believe that the blood of other



HIEROPHANTS OF THE NIGHT

Cainites is a deadly poison to him once he has taken yours? He may, if you tell him it is so.

Exaggerating or obscuring your true powers can give you a cloak of awe and mystique among your followers, so long as you do not pretend to powers you do not possess, since there is a chance you will then be called upon to use them. But how many mortals know the limits of our strength and fortitude? How many know the secrets of our blood? Fewer still know of our powers; mortal legend accords us powers far beyond those of the elders, while often ignoring or misunderstanding our simplest Disciplines. Use this ignorance as means of assuring your followers that you are invincible, that you know their every secret and that their hearts and souls are yours to read and do with as you please. Such a fearsome reputation makes it less likely some upstart will move against you.

ON THE CONTINUANCE OF CULTS

My childe,

You have learned how to gather followers and secure their loyalty, but being able to create a cult is not enough. The cult is a creature that hungers like any other. Feed it well, and it will remain loyal, like a dog harkening to your voice. But starve it, and it may well turn and bite the hand that feeds it. Know how to satisfy the cult's hunger to keep it loyal.

A cult may hunger for many things, depending on its nature. To clarify my own thinking, I have arrayed these from gross appetites to the most sublime. Each bears careful attention.

NOURISHMENT

All creatures need nourishment and shelter. A cult that is literally starving will revolt in exchange for a crust of bread. Conversely, people who are starving can be drawn to a new faith by the promise of food and shelter, the most basic of needs. The Church gives alms and bread to the poor not only because it is mandated by the Word of God, but also because those tokens buy the loyalty of beggars and poor souls who see the Church as a source of worldly as well as spiritual salvation. The lord who is generous with his treasury and his granary is loved and lauded by the people. You would do well to take a lesson from this.

Nourishment is not limited to food, either. There is also the nourishment that our kind craves and is forever driven to seek. Blood can be difficult to come by, particularly for the weak, and a generous provider is a boon to the neonate, the Caitiff, even the Cainite who simply tires of

the hunt or has become foolhardy in choosing prey. The same can also be said of ghouls with no master, desperate for the vitae they need so very much. A promise of quenching their thirst can lure others across the threshold and into your domain.

SAFETY

Mortals huddle in fear of what lies in the darkness beyond their torches, lamps and hearth fires. They fear war and disease as well, the cruel whims of fate that come upon them, king and commoner alike. All mortals seek the safety and security of a stout house and a warm bed, and many are willing to do whatever they must to have it. Even the most adventurous souls must eventually return to the safety of a home. We Cainites, damned and feared, need the shelter of safety more than any living creature: safety from the sun and from the fires of angry mobs.

What will others give in exchange for safety? Nearly anything, if their need is great enough. Many can find safety within the ranks of a sect, not only physical shelter from threats but a fellowship ready to defend them. Few fight harder than those protecting hearth and home. Make a place of safety for them, and your followers will support you against anything that threatens it.

LOVE

Whether it is the love of a man and woman, a parent for a child or the pure love of God, mortals seek to love and be loved in return. Even we, who consider ourselves beyond mortal love and damned in the eyes of God, seek

IMPRESSING THE LOCALS

Storytellers and players alike should keep in mind that mortals in the Dark Medieval world know almost nothing about the true abilities of vampires. There are numerous legends, but they are nearly all greatly exaggerated. Cainites can use this to their advantage by concealing the limits of their abilities and through clever applications of their Disciplines to create "special effects" to impress their followers.

A vampire masquerading as a pagan nature god can use Protean to rise up out of the earth during a ritual or to assume the form of a beast (particularly effective if it is one associated with that god). Chimerstry and Obtenebration are useful for creating all kinds of different effects, including summoning "demons" or "spirits" out of thin air. A little information provided by Auspex can convince others of their leader's omniscience or power as an oracle

to create a shadow of that love in our existence, through the worship of followers, the respect of our peers, perhaps even the fealty of the blood oath. But although we cannot grasp the passion of those whose hearts still beat, we must understand the mortal need and hunger for love, since it is a powerful lure and temptation in our hands. Followers who feel loved and cared for are also more likely to return that love, tying them to you even more strongly. The Toreador and Brujah, whose blood gives them a unique insight into true passions, have always understood this.

FAITH

"Though our bodies be satisfied, let our souls ever hunger," says the Benedictine prayer at mealtime. Man does not live on bread alone, and many hunger for the satisfaction of their soul, they need to feel the presence of God (or of a god, at least). Although the Church satisfies this need for some, others leave the house of God wanting for more, and they can be drawn to your side, to worship you as their god or to follow you as their priest and guide. A cult based on faith must be fed through ritual, devotions and prayer. In flame your followers with the power of faith, strengthen their belief in all that they are taught, show them the power of their belief, and they will not waver.

Beware a crisis of faith among your followers, however, for faith is a precarious thing. It can be as strong as steel, but a powerful blow can still shatter it, leaving it broken and useless. Worse yet, there are few enemies more dangerous than apostates or more dedicated than the newly converted. If your followers find faith in something other than your order, they may well turn against you.

KNOWLEDGE

Some minds desire to know the truth (or at least believe that they do) and may come to you seeking answers to their questions. So long as they believe, the truth is yours to do with as you will. Certainly, few mortals know the truth of our existence as anything other than legends and stories, and fewer still know anything of our history or our nature as childer of Caine.

There are those in the clergy and in scholarly circles that would give much for this knowledge, and I know Cainites who have taken advantage of this opportunity to spread false and misleading information about us, which is passed on through books and manuscripts, from teacher to student. Others go a step further and, under a guise of repentance, teach mortals our "secrets," while actually leading them astray into sin and corruption, until they are left broken and defeated or willing swear fealty to their unliving mentors.

When using knowledge as your lure, beware of the sharp-witted student who spots the flaws in your tales. A small lie is often more useful than a great one, although a great lie is sometimes more easily swallowed than a small

one. Mix truth with falsehood, but do not forget which is which or what you have revealed, or else, you may hang in your own web of lies.

PEACE

The world is a place of torment for many. Some are victims of famine or plague, but others flee the ravages of war — either those fought by men or those fought within their own hearts. They seek peace and tranquility, safety from the world, as well as from the demons that torment them. You can find such souls looking out from behind the eyes of the old soldier, weary of battle and bloodshed; the heartbroken youth or maid, betrayed by love and lust; the priest who has lost his faith or the woman who has lost her virtue, now seeking some peace in the world.

We can offer them peace among the ranks of our followers, giving them comfort and purpose once again. While those who seek peace are unlikely to rise up against you, they are equally unlikely to leap to your defense unless they feel their peace is threatened and there is no other choice. They may be reluctant to serve if goaded or treated harshly, but they will sing your praises when treated well, willingly delivering others into your hands.

OBEDIENCE

The servant eagerly awaiting a command, the back aching for the kiss of the scourge; there are those whose nature it is to serve and to do so willingly. Many mortals feel a need for order and discipline in their existence, for the guidance of a strong hand. In truth, these folk do not wish to decide matters for themselves, they want things decided for them, to be told how things will be. Although we are not all gifted with such servants, we have a penchant for attracting them. They are drawn to our presence like moths to a flame, and they rarely leave it once they have arrived.

To these followers, give duties to perform and opportunities to serve, and they will be satisfied. Treat them as a wise lord does his serfs: as valuable cattle. Be free with your praise for their good work and stern with their failures. Remember that the true servant is, at heart, not a leader and needs your guidance. Do not expect too much of these followers, nor expect them to act with the cunning or force of one of us, or even a daring mortal, for that is not their way.

Also, beware of the Cainite who appears to be a born follower. Although that may be so for a time, all of us feel the Beast stir within our breast, and sooner or later, our hunger turns toward ambition as well as blood. A trusted Cainite servant may have the means to overthrow his master, and more than one master has fallen under a servant's fangs. You should be aware that I understand this danger well, my childe.

INDULGENCE

Pleasure and indulgence are powerful tools with which to control followers. Many are tempted into hidden cabals

and covens by the promises of pleasures beyond those of ordinary life and remain when those promises are fulfilled. There are three sorts of pleasure to give to your followers as a means of rewarding them and keeping their loyalty.

The first pleasure is praise and appreciation, which I have discussed. The second pleasure is power and its use, which I will discuss. The third are the pleasures of the flesh and the senses, things we are often denied, but which mortals still enjoy and are therefore vulnerable to. Procure concubines and comely boys for their enjoyment. Throw a lavish feast with revels and much wine and ale. Give gifts of fine goods that delight the eye. And when all is said and done, do not allow your followers to forget who has given them these gifts, nor how easily their indulgences could be taken away. Drawn by your rewards and fearing your displeasure, they will remain true to you... so long as the rewards continue.

POWER

There are always those who hunger for power, and their desires are not always easily satisfied. They will make themselves known to you sooner or later. Your first instinct may be to destroy them as a threat to you, and that may be wise, but there are uses for those who find power a lure. First, you must tie their power to yours, so you can reward them with what they crave but still snatch it away from them, should they abuse your gift. As you may suspect, many Cainites turn such mortals into ghouls, giving them a taste of our power but binding them to our cause as well.

Focus your followers' struggles for power within the confines of your order. Let them contest for power given by you to those who serve you. Play such power-mongers against each other rather than allowing them to band together to overthrow you. Reward the survivors with power over others beneath you, but remind them that they serve at your sufferance and can be replaced as easily as they have come to power. If they are concerned about their ambitious fellows beneath them, they will find little time to get above themselves.

I have other matters that beckon my attention, my childe, so I will leave you for now.

CONCERNING THE CULTS OF OTHERS

Greetings, my childe,

You know now all that I have to teach you about the creation of a cult of followers. Now, we shall consider the cults that others of our kind create and direct for their own purposes and how best to deal with them.

The struggle between those Cainites who use cults as surrogates is much like a game of chess (so hopefully you begin

to understand my insistence on teaching you to play). It is a game of move and countermove, and the ideal gambit results in your opponent's defeat before he is even aware that he has lost. But when dealing with others, there are also the risks of sudden reversals and of trouble from within the ranks. No chess player has faced a pawn that refused to move, but you may, so consider your moves carefully.

OBSERVATION, ALWAYS OBSERVATION

When dealing with a cult, your first task is to use the lore I have given you to study it and learn all you can about it. What is the cult's purpose? Who brought it into being — and why? How does the cult gather its followers? How does it sustain itself? How does it maintain loyalty within its ranks? You can learn much simply by observing.

But most covens are not easily observed. By necessity, they conceal their activities, so you must gather information about them covertly as well. In addition to the far-seeing abilities of our kind, there are more mundane methods. You can employ spies, both within the cult and without. Spies outside the cult can observe the comings and goings of its members, their routines and patterns, which may point toward the cult's nature.

Spies within the cult have the opportunity to learn much more, but you must beware the possibility of betrayal. I have already shown you the power a carefully constructed cult can have over the mortal (and even immortal) heart and mind. Spies sent into the cult may become caught up in its ways and turn against you. A mortal agent bound to you by the blood oath is perhaps the safest spy you can employ. The power of the oath protects him from many of the cult's wiles and helps to ensure he will not turn against you, as well as keeping him safe from any blood oath the cult might seek to exact upon him. Even then, the agent must be one whose loyalty is beyond reproach, one able to resist the cult's lures.

If you are aware of who some members of the cult are, you may be able to draw them away from the cult long enough to worm information out of them. This risks exposure of your interest, so it is best to employ a capable catspaw for this, one you can deny should things turn sour. An apostate cultist is perhaps the most valuable source of information, particularly since many cults ensure the silence of their former members however they can. An apostate is likely to feel threatened and in need of a safe haven, which you can provide in exchange for information.

Once you have begun learning about the cult, seek out its weaknesses. Consider what I have taught you about the nature of cults and compare it to the one you

face. Look and see how the cult sustains itself and particularly how it satisfies (or, more importantly, does not satisfy) the needs of its followers. Just like learning the habits of a beast you are hunting, discovering the strengths and weaknesses of a cult gives you the means to deal with it effectively.

Is the cult built on a clever lie? Then how will exposing the truth affect it? If the cult encourages infighting among the ranks to keep anyone from aspiring to overthrow the leadership, you can either seek to unite the disparate factions or fan the flames into an inferno that will consume the cult entirely. A cult may have many small weaknesses rather than one large one. Indeed, it is likely that any competent cult leader has taken steps to eliminate the most obvious weaknesses, but no group is invulnerable. Sects are made up of people, and people always have flaws that can be exploited.

TACTICS

Observation is very valuable, but unless you discover the cult does not threaten your activities, it must lead to action. When the time comes, there are many ways you can move against the offending sect.

First, you can confront the leaders of the cult with what you know. In exchange for their compliance or allegiance, you promise not use your knowledge to destroy their cult. This approach is dangerous, but it can be effective when dealing with a small cult or one where your information would surely allow you to destroy it, giving the cult no choice but to accede to your demands. It is also more elegant than simply crushing the cult outright. After all, why destroy something that might prove useful to you? You will have to keep a close eye on your new "followers" and guard against betrayal, however.

Second, you can use your knowledge to infiltrate the cult with your own followers and arrange a coup that places the cult under your control. Perhaps in exposing the deception of the cult's "gods" you show them that you are the true deity, come to punish the deceivers for their blasphemy. You are the cult's liberator and its members' savior, and they will turn to you after you have shattered their beliefs, looking for direction and hope. Tread carefully, and you can shift their loyalty to you.

Third, you can seek allies among the cult's enemies, giving them the information you have uncovered and setting them against the cult while distancing yourself from its destruction. Word passed on to a rival, a baron or king (or even the Church itself), can bring him down upon the cult like a thunderbolt, smashing it and scattering its members to the winds. But take care in doing so not to expose yourself to too much scrutiny, or you may find yourself suffering the same fate.

Your knowledge of your enemy will allow you to protect your own followers against his wiles and may allow you to conceal your cult's existence from him. This secrecy gives you the opportunity to plan and strike from the shadows, before your enemy has realized there is any danger. It also allows you to choke off the cult from what it needs most: new followers to add to its ranks. Once you know the cult's means of seeking out and recruiting new members, you can interfere with those efforts, denying the hunters their prey, thus making the cult more and more suspicious and desperate and, therefore, more likely to make mistakes.

Finally, knowledge of a cult may be a valuable commodity in a Cainite court. Princes are always interested in the doings of their subjects, especially if a cult is a potential threat or a violation of the prince's edicts. Other members of the court may be interested as well, including rivals of the cult leaders, and they may offer valuable information or other rewards in return for what information you have to offer. Just remember that as you may bargain knowledge in the court, so too will others, perhaps knowledge about you. This is one of many reasons I have kept you far from court, my childe. With that, I leave you.

ON THE CULTS OF THE CLANS

Felicitations again, my childe,

This is the last of my letters to you discussing the creation and use of cults by our kind. Consider it and the other letters I have sent you carefully, for soon you will have need of all that you have learned. The last matter we will examine is how the Cainite clans each create and use cults.

There is great diversity between and within the 13 clans. Each of us is an individual, and our blood is only part of our legacy. Nevertheless, the teachings passed from sire to childe and the proclivities inherent in our vitae both mean that some generalization is possible. Each clan has its own traditions when it comes to the acquisition of human worship, and you should be aware of these.

THE ASSAMITES

If tales from Castile and Outremer are to be believed, the Saracens are like unto a cult themselves, with a strict and secret hierarchy among their own kind. Their ranks extend from the pinnacle, where the mysterious Old Man of the Mountain rules over the clan, down to the very roots of their mountainous homeland and the mortals that live there. It is clear to anyone familiar with Assamite ways that some of the mortal paynim have received training from their hands and in their ways. The legendary

hashashiyyn known to the crusaders are only shadows compared to their secret teachers and masters, but they are nonetheless effective.

The teachings embraced by the *hashashiyyn* give us clues about Assamite mortal cults. Clearly, they indoctrinate mortals who have embraced the faith of Islam as they have. These mortals are taught unflinching obedience to their masters through the power of their faith and promise of paradise after death. I have heard tales that some *hashashiyyn* claim to have seen paradise with their own eyes, a glimpse given to them as proof that they are among the chosen. Could this be a stronghold of the Assamites, perhaps the legendary Alamut itself? I cannot say. Perhaps it is no more than a false vision or a legend put about by the Assamites.

THE ASSAMITES AND THE ASSASSINS

In fact, the Assamites do *not* control the *hashashiyyn*, or the Assassins, as westerners call them. They allow the other clans to believe that they do, while studying the Assassins' techniques and using them to help spread fear of their clan among the other bloodlines. The truth of the matter is that the leader and founder of the Assassins is a rogue Assamite ghoul and as much a danger to the clan as he is to anyone else, perhaps more. He and his inner circle prey on Assamite vampires for the vitae they need to sustain themselves.

The clan itself is also divided into three castes, each with its own way of dealing with mortals. The warrior caste deals most often with protecting the clan and its lands from invaders, and its members involve themselves heavily in mortal affairs such as the Crusades. They most often associate with other warriors and choose their neonates from among them. The sorcerer caste deals in ancient lore and blood magic, and its members are most likely to involve themselves in scholarly matters among mortals, finding followers and neonates in libraries and mosques. The viziers are a diverse lot and the most involved of their clan with mortal society. They weave webs of influence to control the places and people most important to the clan. Each vizier is also obsessive about a particular area of expertise, which often leads to them becoming the focus of a cult (even inadvertently).

For more information about the organization of the Assamites and the Assassins, see **Libellus Sanguinis 3: Wolves at the Door**.

It seems equally clear that the Assamites only rarely share the vitae they so jealously guard with their mortal followers. Assamite ghouls are few but nearly always experienced and carefully chosen by their masters. Likewise, the members of the clan often choose neonates from among the ranks of their mortal followers, already trained in obedience of their elders and in the skills useful to a member of the clan. The promise of power and eternal unlife is a strong lure, as we have already seen.

The Assamite blood oath seems to enhance the qualities they seek in their followers. Thralls are instilled with almost unthinking obedience, although how much of this is a matter of the blood oath and how much their training and initiation into the Assamite ways, I cannot say. Perhaps the blood oath is part of the making of a true *hashashiyyn*, perhaps not. Whatever the case, these thralls are remorseless and relentless agents of their masters' will.]

THE BRUJAH

Say what you will about their beliefs, the Brujah know the nature of mortals well, perhaps better than any other clan, and they have a strong interest in mortal society, above satisfying their own needs. These things make the Brujah masters of creating new mortal alliances, cults and societies to further their goals, whatever their particular vision of those goals might be. A Brujah can rally a peasant rebellion to burn a domineering lord from his castle, forge an alliance between former enemies or inspire kings to rule their lands with justice and fairness toward all. They have done all these things before and will do so again, tearing down and building up, seeking an ideal society for both Cainite and kine.

What the Brujah lack is a unity of vision regarding this ideal society of theirs. This disunity leads them to experiment, each following his own vision. So one Brujah or coterie may create a secret society of scholars devoted to translating, copying and maintaining various ancient works of philosophy, poetry and thought for the edification of future generations. Others might form a coven in support of a particular noble line they wish to encourage or in support of a rebellion to topple a line they find troublesome. Still others may form a small society apart from the rest of the world to experiment with their theories, although they are rarely left in peace for long.

Perhaps the most important distinction between the Brujah and other clans adept at creating cults is that the Brujah do so through their understanding of the heart and mind rather than the power of inherent in their blood (although they have been known to use that as well). This means that the societies they form are based on the bonds of honest loyalty, making their

followers more capable than those under bonds of blood and dominance. These same followers are vulnerable to such tools from another source, however.

Even the Brujah blood oath differs somewhat in character from the oaths of other Cainites. Mortals who drink of a Brujah's blood gain increasing feelings of loyalty, as with all blood oaths, but more the loyalty of a comrade-in-arms or a brother to his fellow rather than the loyalty of a vassal to his liege-lord. After the third threshold, the mortal regards the Brujah as a true and devoted companion and friend, and many Brujah return these feelings to their "blood brothers" (and sisters, since they are known to give the blood oath to women as well). The thrall (or "companion" as some Brujah say) is willing to go to great lengths for his blood brother. Some Brujah claim that this is the basis for their ideal society where Cainite and kine can live together as equals.

THE CAPPADOCIANS

The grim and solitary Graverobbers have only a passing interest in any sort of society, including their own. They prefer the company of musty books and moldering corpses to any living thing. Still, the Cappadocians have interests that sometimes lead them to form societies with their own kind as well as with certain mortals.

Their foremost interest is knowledge, particularly knowledge of death. This leads them to cooperate with others versed in death's ways, such as necromancers, morticians, embalmers and even graverobbers. They move among scholars, learning their lore and sometimes choosing one to Embrace and add to the clan's knowledge. There are tales of Cappadocian cults that take a more direct hand in studying death by inflicting it upon mortals, and perhaps even upon Cainites, taking careful note of the various forms death can take. Their Mortis arts seem centered on just such studies and are said to cover such dark topics as plagues and decay. Such murderous cults — if they exist at all — are carefully hidden from the outside world.

The other side of the coin of death is life, and the Cappadocians take an interest in the medical arts as well. More than once, the patron of a hospital has secretly been a Cappadocian interested in passing on medical lore of the ancient world and studying the work of physicians and healers. The hospital of Constantinople is one such institution, although it appears that its Cappadocian patrons moved on during an outbreak of plague, using its cover to add at least one priestly healer to their number.

I have also heard tales of the Graverobbers creating cults of mortals devoted to the study of necromancy, the magic of the dead, or seeking out such cults to bring them under their banner. They are interested in both the secrets of death known to these wizards and, perhaps, a means of using those secrets themselves, like the blood magic of the

Tremere. An Embraced necromancer may discover such necromantic blood magic some night, signaling a rise in Cappadocian power.

The Graverobbers are known to create ghouls to serve their needs (as well as animated corpses). The Cappadocians share their blood for the purpose of the blood oath alone rarely, only when they need to ensure loyalty of a mortal vassal. The Cappadocian oath seems to deaden the emotions of thralls over time. Their regnant becomes their only true source of happiness or contentment, while the rest of life becomes as ashen as death. The Graverobbers often select their thralls from among those who have recently lost loved ones. To outsiders, it seems only that the mourning period goes on and on as the thrall cares less and less about the world of the living.

THE FOLLOWERS OF SET

Few Cainites are more skilled in the manipulation of mortals and Cainites alike than the Followers of Set. Their clan is a great and powerful cult itself, so little wonder the Setites understand so much of the creation and control of such sects. Each Serpent is a priest (or priestess, since temptation often comes in a most comely form) and lures

INSIDE THE CULTS OF SET

While it is true that Followers of Set create cults to manipulate both mortals and Cainites into serving their own ends, that only scratches the surface of the Serpents' activities. The Setites view these covens (and their members) as useful tools to help them further their true goals and support their real cult, devoted to the worship of Set.

Each independent Setite is a priest of Set, and these Serpents seek to honor their god by overthrowing a world dominated by the oppressive and misguided ways of Set's brother, Osiris. Belief in the Lord of Resurrection — in one form or another — binds both the living and the dead in shackles of fealty and false piety. Set represents freedom from this existence of slavery. What others call "corruption," the Setites see as the release of the true primal nature of humanity.

Those who the Serpents find worthy are eventually inducted into the inner layer of their cults, initiated as acolytes of Set and taught his secret ways, free from the world Osiris and his followers have made. The process is painstakingly slow, since few are strong enough to bear the responsibility for their own freedom and accept the message of Set. But the Followers foresee the day when their ranks will swell and Set will lead all of his chosen people to freedom.

followers wherever he goes. With every convert, the Serpents further their goals, spreading corruption and tightening their hold on the world.

Although they view their work as a holy duty, Setite cults are not always religious in nature. In truth, most of them are not, since such heresies only serve to attract the attention of the Church. Those religious cults where the Setites involve mortals are carefully hidden from prying eyes, since they involve blasphemous rites in honor of the Serpents' god, Set.

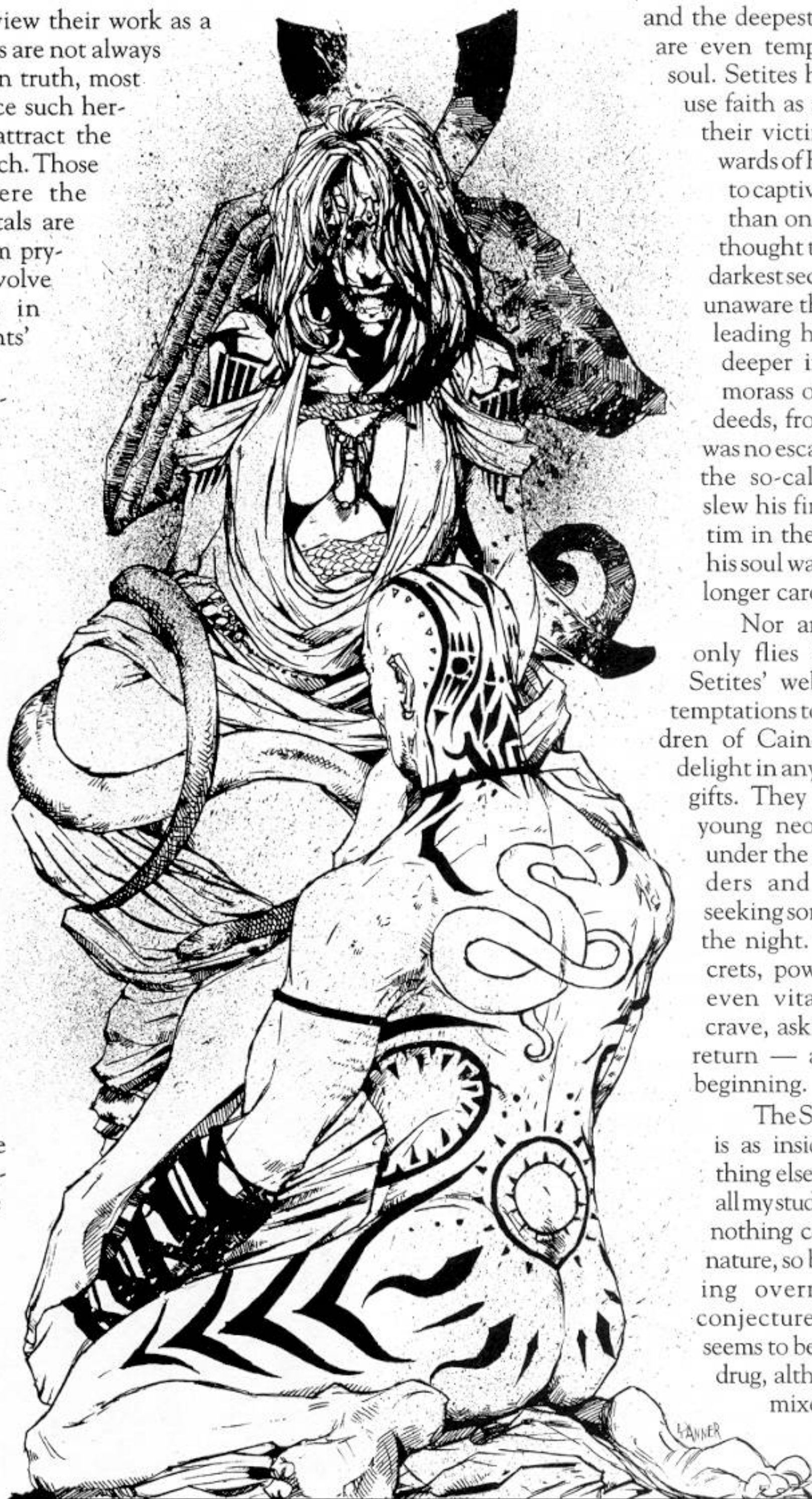
No, most cults created by the Followers of Set are far subtler, webs of temptation designed to lure in the unwary and entrap them before they are even aware of the danger. Setites are masters of vice. They seek out the most forbidden pleasures and offer them, like the serpent offering Eve the fruit of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Also, like the serpent, Setites are skilled at convincing their victims to act of their own free will, with perhaps only a turn of phrase or whispered suggestion to help guide them.

What pleasures are these? The manifold pleasures of the flesh, of course, from fine food and drink to exotic potions and elixirs to a warm

bed and equally warm company. There are the temptations of the mind: forbidden knowledge, secret lore, the choicest morsels of gossip and the deepest secrets. There are even temptations of the soul. Setites have learned to use faith as a goad to drive their victims and the rewards of Heaven as a lure to captivate them. More than one holy man has thought to penetrate the darkest secrets of our kind, unaware that a Setite was leading him deeper and deeper into an unholy morass of thoughts and deeds, from which there was no escape. By the time the so-called holy man slew his first virginal victim in the name of God, his soul was lost and he no longer cared.

Nor are mortals the only flies caught in the Setites' webs. They have temptations to offer the Children of Caine as well and delight in any that take their gifts. They seek out both young neonates chaffing under the rule of their elders and jaded elders seeking something new in the night. They offer secrets, power, favors and even vitae that others crave, asking for little in return — at least in the beginning.

The Setite blood oath is as insidious as everything else about them. In all my studies, I have found nothing certain about its nature, so be wary of relying overmuch on my conjecture. Their vitae seems to be like a powerful drug, although it is often mixed with wine or other exotic potions of



ASHEN CULTS

their own making, so these other ingredients may be responsible. Continued drinking of Setite blood seems to fire the senses and the carnal lusts, creating a desire for the regnant above all other things but also weakening the will toward temptation. Like their many other temptations, Setites make their blood into something followers lust after, so their thralls thank them for the opportunity to drink while placing themselves more in the Serpent's power. Thralls become slaves to their desires, with the serpent holding the chains that bind them.

THE GANGREL

The feral Gangrel have little use for civilization or society, even less than the Cappadocians, in truth. They prefer the solitude of their wanderings, but that does not mean that the Gangrel do no traffic in mortal affairs or that they do not form cults when it suits their needs.

In fact, Gangrel create cults quite easily because they draw upon mortals that other Cainites ignore or overlook. While the other clans gather their followers from castle, keep and village, the Gangrel take them from the edges of the wilderness they inhabit. Mortal folk living in wild lands are the natural allies of the Gangrel and respect the Animals' power and strength. Gangrel have been known to lead bands of mortal and ghouls in raids on civilized lands and to protect wild lands, claiming the tribute due a lord or steward from those living there.

The wildness of the Gangrel also calls to those who know the old ways of the land, which existed before the coming of Christ and His Church. Although forbidden, they are still practiced by some common folk, including the custom of paying respect to the beast-men of the wood. More than one Gangrel has claimed worship from a furtive group of mortals gathered in a moonlit grove in the depths of the forest, and tales of their midnight revels and supping upon the blood of a forest devil are not all just legends.

Gangrel blood brings out the beast within all men. Gangrel ghouls are often as feral and fierce as their masters, prone to flying into berserk rages in battle. The Gangrel blood oath engenders a feeling that one thrall described as the loyalty of a whelp to the leader of a pack of wolves, a sense of place in the natural order, with the regnant as leader and the thrall as follower. I've also heard tales of a strange potion concocted by Gangrel from the far north, consisting of vitae, honey and certain herbs known only to them. In addition to the other effects of the blood oath, this draught appears to inspire a kind of poetic madness in mortals, giving them visions and causing them to speak fantastic poetry or babble in tongues. How it would affect Cainites (or if we could stomach it at all), I know not.

THE LASOMBRA

I mentioned that few Cainites are more skilled puppetmasters than the Followers of Set. The Lasombra are among those few. They are truly worthy of the name Magister and have dabbled and interfered in mortal affairs since time immemorial, moving invisibly among the wealthy and powerful of Greece, Phoenicia, Persia, Rome, Italy, Iberia and elsewhere. Whatever society mortals create, the Lasombra take to it like true hunters seeking fresh prey. Most recently, the Church has provided the most fertile ground for their schemes, and the Lasombra model their own ranks on a mockery of the Church's offices and rites, with bishops, archbishops, cardinals and abbots of their own making.

Faith and power are like clay in Lasombra hands, to be shaped into something both useful and aesthetically pleasing. Thus it is that many Lasombra cults are based upon a foundation of supposed faith or nobility, a secret Christian heresy here, support of an ancient bloodline there — pawns arrayed on a chessboard everywhere. The Magisters take and twist mortal ideas to suit their needs as they have for centuries. Lasombra religious scholars reinterpret passages of the Bible (and, sometimes, other holy texts) to fit whatever meaning they wish. The Cainite Heresy is the most striking and best-known example of their work, and Lasombra throughout Iberia and France are involved with it. Heresies abound where the Lasombra are concerned, as they craft new twists on Church doctrine to attract followers.

Of course, many Lasombra are not content to amuse themselves with cults created by others centuries ago, and each of them is driven to at least leave some personal stamp on whatever cults they create. This is more than simple pride, it is also a matter of belief. For the Lasombra, like the Setites, are often true believers themselves. Many take their Christian or Muslim faith seriously and forge cults that reflect their own beliefs about their place under Heaven. I've heard it said that wise Lasombra (and even Cainites of other clans) can recognize the work of a particular Magister, but I suspect this is only true of those who have not yet learned subtlety or who want their work known for reasons of their own.

The Lasombra are masters of the blood oath and often use it to their benefit, gathering large numbers of mortal thralls, ranging from minor lords to crowned heads and powerful clergy. The "blood communion" of the Cainite Heresy is one of their tools; a few drops of vitae added to the sacramental wine can bind an entire congregation to a Lasombra's service in a short time. Their blood oath seems to affirm the Lasombra belief in their divine right to rule, since their thralls become convinced in their regnant's leadership abilities and

infinite wisdom. Unknowing thralls often feel the need to seek out their regnant and ask his advice or offer him a place in their household or court. Lasombra take great pleasure in refusing the first few such offers, waiting until their thralls beg their indulgence before "reluctantly" accepting the generous offer.

THE MALKAVIANS

A taste of the draught of madness and inspiration; how many have sought it in sacraments considered heresy by the Church? How many have received it from the hands of the Malkavians? It is easy to underestimate the mad Children of Malkav — too easy, in fact. Fools they might be, but fools often have insight others do not, and more importantly, a fool can speak words that might lead another man to loose his head, literally.

It seems sometimes that the madness of the Malkavians is contagious, and those who spend too much time in their company fall prey to it. Certainly, their ghouls' minds are twisted by their masters' vitae. Malkavian blood oaths also seem to carry their taint of madness, although not so strongly as the Embrace. Their thralls are often known to behave strangely or even go mad over time. They become fascinated with their master's madness, seeing in it some hidden truth or wisdom that they might decipher, if only they had

the means of understanding it. When understanding does come, such thralls often lose their own sanity.

Malkavians seem to delight in inflicting their madness upon others, so they create followings of mortals and other Cainites based on incomprehensible mysteries and arcane secrets. Often, their cults are elaborate hoaxes played on their victims, but sometimes, the Malkavians believe in them as much (or more) than anyone else, though their fanaticism can shift like the wind to another cause or ideal, leading them to abandon their former followers to their own devices.

The spread of interest in arcane and ancient philosophies among the landed and learned classes of Europe has been a boon to the Malkavians and all others that create cults based around them. There is a thirst for knowledge among them, the kind of knowledge that may sometimes bring madness with it.

THE NOSFERATU

If the growing thirst for knowledge in the world calls to the Malkavians, then it is even more welcome among the Nosferatu, whose stock in trade is secrets. More than the members of any other clan, the Nosferatu are forced to hide their faces from the world. They do

MALKAVIAN MYSTERY CULTS

Once the Malkavians controlled many different cults, with a mix of mortal and vampire members, throughout the ancient world. They were seers and oracles in ancient Greece and Rome, and they influenced mystery religions throughout the *Pax Romana*. With the decline of Rome came the decline of the Malkavian cults, since mortals and Cainites alike were concerned with matters other than philosophy and mystery. Only in isolated parts of the world did the Malkavian cults continue on, and there are only a few of any great import in the Dark Medieval age. They are described in *Libellus Sanguinis 4: Thieves in the Night*.

However, they are by no means the only cults involving the Malkavians. The Madmen are given to creating small followings among those who listen to their prophecies and insights or those interested in helping them carry out their elaborate pranks and deceptions. Some Malkavians proclaim themselves the heirs of lost traditions and mysteries, based on visions or fragmentary lore they have gathered (or that have truly been passed on to them).

THE NOSFERATU AND MASONRY

The growing Masonic movement in Europe is a boon and a useful tool for the Nosferatu. The order is made up largely of craftsmen and the growing middle class, a group the Nosferatu support. It is interested in building, and the Nosferatu support the growth of cities and revel in the opportunities to learn the secrets of their construction. But most importantly, it is a secret order that thinks nothing of its high-ranking members wearing masks to conceal their identities (and their terrible deformities). Some Nosferatu have risen high in the ranks of Masonry and use their position to further their own agendas, while passing on secrets of architecture and engineering lost to the world for centuries but preserved among members of their clan.

Most of the powerful lords of Europe (both mortal and Cainite) are unaware that many of the secret passages, hidden rooms and labyrinthine catacombs built by their dutiful servants are well known to the Nosferatu. The Lepers have also used their influence to create bolt holes and secret passages known only to them. They use them to come and go as they please — and can use them to strike at enemies in their own strongholds, when they must.

LEPER COLONIES

Leprosy is one of the most feared plagues in all of Europe. Although Christian charity demands that lepers be cared for — given alms and shelter at monasteries and churches — sensible people know to avoid them whenever possible. This means that leper houses and colonies are kept well away from cities and towns and that people give them a wide berth. This makes them perfect places for Nosferatu to hide, feed and gather followers that understand the disdain of others and have no further fear of disfigurement. More than one leper colony in Europe is the secret stronghold of an individual Nosferatu or a Nosferatu coterie. Lepers are useful spies, since others go out of their way to ignore them, although they're likely to be chased from places reserved for healthy folk.

not walk among the throngs of humanity. They slink among the shadows, in the catacombs and the dark underground places, away from the light and the eyes of men. But they watch, and they listen, and they learn much from so doing, things they are willing to share with those who can meet their price. They also learn things they can use to further their lot in this world.

The Nosferatu understand many things about secrecy and meeting in places abandoned by the rest of the world, valuable lessons for creating and sustaining a cult. There is a combination of fear and longing in Nosferatu cults; the thrill of the forbidden, of the dangerous and dark places, wedded to the power of being outside the realm of humanity, away from the watching eyes of Church and liege, even the eyes of God Himself. They understand the power of secrets and of dangling them like a fisherman's lures before the eyes of others.

Nosferatu cults are found most often in the cities and larger towns, places where they can gather without suspicion, particularly old Roman towns, which often feature cisterns, catacombs or ruins that the Lepers may claim as their own. Their members tend to be craftsmen and skilled laborers, those whom the Lepers admire and seek to support against the nobility, which so often is riddled with the so-called high clans. In fact, many of the mortal followers of the Nosferatu are themselves outcasts: beggars, cripples, thieves and lepers, and the leper's cloak is an effective guise for a Nosferatu to wander abroad at night.

The blood of the Nosferatu carries a measure of their curse. Their ghouls slowly become as twisted and hideous as their masters. Even beasts that drink Nosferatu blood

are twisted and unwholesome to behold. The Nosferatu blood oath changes the hearts of thralls more than their bodies, filling them with appreciation and loyalty for the Lepers and allowing the ghouls to ignore their deformities. Some of the only friends the Nosferatu have are created in this way, and how it must plague them to know that the loyalty of their thralls comes from the power of the blood and not freely from their hearts.

THE RAVNOS

Although the Charlatans have little truck with the schemes and power-games of the Cainites of Europe, they are not without influence of their own. And others do well to mistrust the Charlatans, for they have earned their name. The Ravnos are more than willing to lighten a man's purse or rob him blind if given the opportunity. They are not the first to hit upon the scheme of using cults to line their pockets, but they do it well.

No doubt, the Ravnos find it amusing to employ the techniques other Cainites use to built up allies and strongholds to trick unsuspecting mortals, and even us, out of things the Charlatans can use, namely wealth and other moveable goods. Such Ravnos "cults" are short-lived things at best. The Charlatans quickly tire of their game and move on before they are discovered and exposed, forced to face their angry victims. Mortals are left behind or sometimes taken along for sustenance, while Cainite victims are simply fled from as quickly as possible.

But theft is not the only purpose of Ravnos cults. They indulge in as many sins as the Charlatans themselves, from greed to lust, gluttony and vainglorious pride. I have heard of Ravnos cults whose debaucheries exceed those of the most jaded Toreador, existing to encourage sin and permit their Cainite leaders to indulge freely. I've also heard tales of Ravnos worshiped as saints or gods by their followers, having used their trickery to convince the mortals of the Charlatans' great power and benevolence. For every sin, there is a Ravnos devoted to it, and cults often serve these sinners' goals.

The true Ravnos cult wanders like the Charlatans do. A caravan, a group of bandits or a pirate ship can serve as a fine haven for a Ravnos cult. A wandering troupe of performers might harbor Ravnos among them. A merchant house may have a Charlatan whose wanderings serve them well, although few Ravnos are likely to be tied down to such a thing for long. Ravnos keep their followers moving, going from town to town, sometimes leaving with a new convert or two and a strange "sickness" in their wake. These roving bands allow Ravnos to exist in Europe even without the shelter of the Cainite courts.

Lastly, the Ravnos have been known to steal an unwary Cainite's cult out from under him. Build a cult on religion, and the Charlatan will offer its members a piece

RAVNOS BLOOD OATHS

At the discretion of the Storyteller, a Ravnos blood oath may lower the difficulties for using Chimerstry on a thrall rather than Dominate and increase the thrall's difficulty for resisting the illusions. Ravnos cult leaders naturally use their Chimerstry to great advantage in keeping their followers enthralled with their "mystical power."

of the True Cross or the finger-bone of a saint. Build it on pleasure, and the newcomer will tempt and tease with the promise of indulgences from far away lands. Build it on fear, and the Ravnos will strike terror into the hearts of your followers that might make them fear you a little less. Then, when they have what they want, the Charlatans are on their way, leaving you to deal with whatever they have done. When strange travelers show interest in what is yours, beware.

I know little of the Ravnos blood oath, since it is something they seem to use sparingly, if at all. What little I have heard suggests that it creates a bond of camaraderie much like that of the Brujah, so it may be reserved for close family and friends (or those the Ravnos want to have as close friends). It may also make its victims more susceptible to Ravnos trickery, although I cannot say for sure.

THE TOREADOR

The creation of a cult is an art, and the Toreador take to it like they do all arts, with great passion and fervor. Although some Artisans claim they want as little to do with the game of politics and authority in the land as possible, most still take steps to secure their own power and goals for the future. While Lasombra and Ventrue manipulate popes and princes, the Toreador play in the fields of the mind and draw like-minded mortals to their causes. The Artisans operate in monasteries and craft guilds, places of contemplation and learning, and act as patrons to artists and builders, shaping their vision to suit the Cainites' own, subtly coloring it without their mortal protégés being any the wiser.

The Toreador work well in their beautiful isolation. Some try to recreate part of the glory that was theirs before Rome fell. Cults of indulgence and pleasure are tempting to mortals, and the Artisans remember the bacchanalian orgies and wine cults of ages past. These sorts of cults draw in the most beautiful people to share in their pleasures and often to partake in the ecstasy of the Kiss of their Cainite patrons.

Other Artisans remain true to the name and create followings among mortal artists and craftsmen. The work of an artist can draw attention from others who appreciate

beauty, and Toreador use artists and their followings well. Craft-guilds also create a place where Artisans can work their will, particularly when they have insights into the making of ancient structures and crafts lost to mortal memory. No few of the cathedral builders of Europe feel the subtle guidance of Clan Toreador, creating monuments to God, touched by the Damned.

Finally, some Artisans have turned away from the fever of inspiration to find beauty in solemnity, perhaps the influence of the East upon them. More than one isolated monastery is home to Toreador who seek a quiet existence of contemplation, inspiring their mortal company to new heights of enlightenment. There are even those Toreador who join knightly orders of mortal or Cainite origin, take chivalry as their art and gather followers around them eager to learn from the Artisans.

Of all bonds of blood, the Toreador oath is the most passionate. The loyalty it engenders is touched with a true devotion for the regnant and, often, from the regnant toward the thrall. I've heard Toreador say that the blood

TOREADOR GUILDS

Only Toreador interested in religious or ecstatic rapture use the word "cult" to describe their gatherings of followers. Most prefer to use the term "guild" or "order" when discussing such things. Often preternaturally beautiful and charming, the Toreador are masters of personal relationships, and their gatherings reflect that. Their guilds are often true cults of personality, built up around a single vampire, who acts as muse and patron to a group of mortals (and, sometimes, other Cainites). They tend to be small and personal by comparison to the cults of clans such as the Lasombra or the Ventrue, but the Toreador command great personal loyalty from their followers and have control over nearly every aspect of their guild.

One area where the Toreador have touched upon the potential for greater influence is in the Masonic guilds. There, they have run across the interests of the Nosferatu, who are also involved with Masons. The Toreador are often loathe to share any domain with the hideous Nosferatu and want nothing to do with them, but they do want influence over the growing network of Masonic lodges in Europe. Such a network may allow the Artisans to pass on the importance of art and culture, since the Lasombra are already turning the Church away from such things. The beginning of a power struggle between the two clans is brewing in the meetings of the Masonic guilds.

oath helps to inspire mortal artists to new heights, to give knightly thralls courage and to give others peace. I suspect much of this is flowery exaggeration, but there may be some truth to it.

Toreador can be fickle creatures, and some regnants are known to banish or abandon thralls they've grown tired of. Other Toreador drink thralls dry when they tire of them. I have heard more than one cautionary tale of such fickle masters regretting their actions and Embracing their thralls in order to preserve them—often without the permission of the local prince or lord.

THE TREMERE

The Tremere are already much like a cult, tightly organized under the rule of their elders against the threat of the other clans. They also sprang from a cult of sorts, the secretive Order of Hermes, so the Tremere know a great deal about creating and using secret orders and cults to further their plans. Moreover, that is just what they have done as their power has grown—and their boldness with it.

The Tremere seek people drawn to power, particularly occult power and knowledge. Would-be wizards hear stories about the powerful magi and their arcane secrets. These aspirants come into contact with hidden lodges and orders, carefully arranged so neophytes know little about the inner circles but get enough of a taste of what they offer to entice the mortals back. It seems that the Usurpers have twisted many mortal scholars and occultists to their will and use these to set up lodges that mask their vampirism. Is this arcane society just what it seems or a pawn of the Usurpers? Few can say for sure before it is too late, and most clans do not wish to move against all wizards for fear of making them into enemies or, worse yet, allies of the Tremere. Many of the mortals seeking power find it in the ranks of the Tremere, Embraced and taught their ways. The rest serve as a useful screen for the clan, which still needs all the influence it can muster.

The Usurpers have also learned the importance of temporal as well as magical power. Although their Gargoyles serve as soldiers and guards in their struggle against other clans, the elders of the Tremere have realized the importance of military expertise. They began to Embrace some of the soldiers and mercenaries in service to their chantries, and they went on to Embrace others to swell the ranks of the Tremere's warriors, expected to defend the clan as they once defended the old Hermetic house. It remains to be seen if these soldiers, once they have tasted power and immortality, will remain as loyal to their masters as before.

The Tremere also understand the potency of the blood oath, and tales say they use it to bind child to sire, neonate to elder, in a feudalism like that of any great kingdom. Certainly, outsiders seeking to join their ranks must take

THE CULT OF TREMERE

The Tremere are at work on many fronts, consolidating their power and struggling to survive and prosper in the face of so many enemies. Influence in the mortal world is one of the keys to Tremere survival, and they play a complex and dangerous game of secrets with their mortal allies. Many members of House Tremere are still mortal, not entirely aware of what their elders and teachers have become.

The Tremere present their vampiric state as a form of magical "enlightenment" to others, and it cannot be denied that the elders of House Tremere have vitality and power unlike anything their apprentices and students have seen. The most powerful mages of the house have been Embraced, and the elders control those who remain mortal carefully. Even more than the rest of the Order of Hermes, the Tremere have always been secretive, and that serves them well now, since the truth of what they have become might force them to fight their mortal brethren as well as their fellow Cainites.

A potential danger to the Tremere lies in the increasing number of neonates unschooled in the magical arts. The Tremere Embraced these soldiers, many of their families having served the house for generations, to provide the Usurpers with additional warriors in their struggle against the Tzimisce. The Tremere have also created ghouls among the soldiers' number, to strengthen their ranks without the Embrace. While most are as willing to serve as ever (more so with the use of the blood oath to ensure their loyalty), some find they like the new power they've tasted and that their Tremere masters are not quite as fearsome as they once thought. Although they lack much ability for Thaumaturgy, these warrior-Tremere are studying their elders carefully and considering a future where they control their clan.

the oath to assure their loyalty, since the Tremere can take no chances with spies or traitors.

THE TZIMISCE

The night lords of the lands of the Danube and the Carpathians have long influenced mortals in

TZIMISCE BLOOD OATHS AND VICISSITUDE

At the Storyteller's option, a full blood oath (third threshold) between a Tzimisce and a thrall may reduce the difficulty of any use of Vicissitude on the thrall by one, in addition to the reduction in the difficulty of Dominate. This allows the Tzimisce to treat their thralls as flesh puppets and living clay for their sculpting.

their domain. To the Tzimisce, flesh is like clay, to be worked into things that are useful and pleasing to them, and mortals are no more than the raw materials that a sculptor takes to create a masterpiece. To the Fiends, the mind and heart are much like the body, to be molded and shaped to suit their own desires. Perhaps more is the pity that the Tzimisce allowed many of their arts to lapse over time, or else, they would not have been taken so by surprise by the Tremere Usurpers.

Unlike the members of the secret cults and orders of the rest of Europe, a goodly number of the followers of the Tzimisce are quite aware of the nature and power of their dread lords and ladies, since they have ruled their lands throughout living memory. Entire families and isolated villages pay homage to the Fiends, and generations of ghouls are born in their service, Cainite vitae in their veins even within their mothers' wombs. These mortal and revenant vassals are mistrustful of outsiders and keep their masters' secrets, and woe betide the lone traveler who stops at an isolated village for the night seeking shelter. Many such travelers are never seen again.

The bond of Tzimisce blood is said to be bitter, forcing thralls to recognize and obey the majesty of the Fiends with all the deference of commoner to nobility, and it creates an almost instinctual desire to obey the regnant's commands. I've also heard it said that Tzimisce vitae helps to "soften" the flesh and make it more pliable to their crafting arts; perhaps that is why they choose to practice them so often on their ghouls and revenants.

THE VENTRUE

The Ventrue move among the wealthiest and most powerful mortals of Europe and nearby lands, where they also draw their childer, their ghouls and their retainers. Therefore, the Ventrue are often born to leadership even before their Embrace and learn to appreciate its subtleties even more afterward. Ventrue are given to working alone to fulfill their ambitions—but not without servants and followers to carry out their commands. So, Ventrue often gather cults around them to serve their needs and further their



ASHEN CULTS

goals, in addition to providing them a certain cachet among others of their clan, a visible sign of their accomplishments.

For the Ventrue, cults serve another purpose as well. Each member of the clan feeds on only one sort of blood, and the Ventrue often base their followings on the sort of vitae they require (or vice versa, perhaps?). Thus, a Ventrue who drinks only the blood of the clergy is likely to establish a monastery or even a church where his followers can gather, ensuring a steady supply of blood. A Ventrue with a taste for the blood of virgins may build a cult that draws the young to their side. In fact, an astute observer may learn something about a Ventrue's feeding habits by studying the nature of his followers.

Ventrue also include other Cainites in their cults more often than other clans. A Ventrue lord may have knights sworn to serve him through the power of the blood oath, and these knights may belong to other clans. Ventrue use orders of knighthood as one of the models for their own retinues, and they are strongly associated with mortal orders as well as Cainite ones.

CAITIFF CULTS

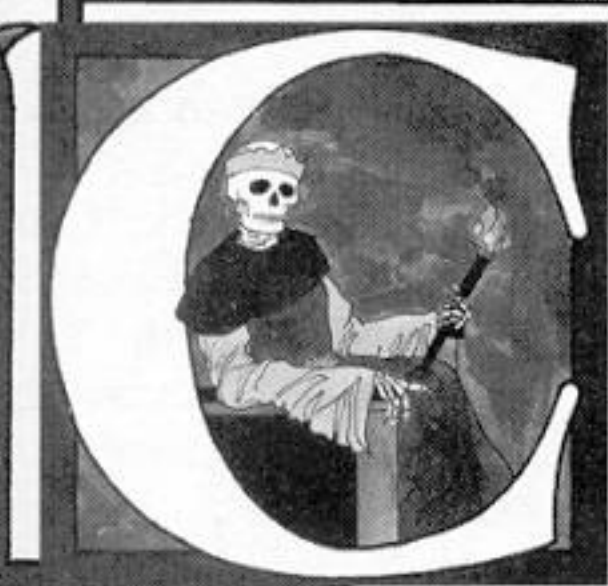
I've heard tales of some cults built up in out of the way places by Cainites who could not be attributed to any of the clans. Of course, this may be because they have covered their tracks well, but it may also be because the leaders of these cults do not truly belong to any clan, like us, my childe. Elders dismiss the possibility that Caitiffs can gather such followings among mortals, but for all our lack of clan ties, we are still Children of Caine. Our status forces us to learn the arts of self-reliance and leadership, as I am teaching you, and the willingness of the clans to underestimate us is to our advantage. Ponder all that I have told you, and you will see that it is so.

Care for your manor and your needs for now, and await me, my childe. Your true work begins soon.



HIEROPHANTS OF THE NIGHT





Chapter Two: Dying Covens

fear none of those things which
thou shalt suffer: [...] be thou faith-
ful unto death and I will give
thee a crown of life.

– Revelation 2:10

Some observers of the Cainite condition claim there are as many ashen cults as there are vampires with retainers or aids. Something of an exaggeration, perhaps, but it remains true that a wide variety of covens and sects dot Europe and the rest of the Dark Medieval world. The seven cults in this chapter vary from the truly expansive cult of the Methuselah Mithras to local covens serving individual Cainites. They are all intended both to further explore the Dark Ages setting and to provide you with immediately useful resources for your own chronicles.

EXPANSIVE CULTS

Most cults are local affairs, worshiping or guided by a few Cainites and used (at least in part) to spread influence through a region. When truly ancient Damned become involved, or when a cult is lucky enough to burgeon within a growing social movement, the faith can reach a wide variety of followers across who kingdoms and even beyond.

THE CULT OF MITHRAS

Centered in England (spreads into Wales, Scotland, Aquitaine and elsewhere)

The Cult of Mithras is a revival (or continuation, according to its followers) of an ancient pagan cult dating back to long before the time of Christ and His Church. It is a warrior's cult, appealing to soldiers and generals alike, led by a powerful conqueror who is the embodiment of the cult's god, a Ventrue Methuselah named Mithras.

The modern Cult of Mithras began in England not long after the Norman invasion of 1066, which awakened Mithras from his torpor near the Scottish border. The Methuselah discovered that matters had changed considerably in his absence from the world and began to take steps to reassert his influence. He reopened a temple devoted to him in London, but he underestimated his opposition, and the local clergy (backed by Ventrue lords) burned the pagan temple and everyone within in. Mithras and some of his followers escaped, and he began to plan his ascendancy more cautiously.

Rather than grand displays of power, Mithras reestablished his cult quietly in the British Isles, attracting new followers to his banner, particularly among mortal soldiers and nobles and the younger generations of Ventrue, eager for the power he had to offer them. With these strings in hand, Mithras began to tug at the feudal network of English Cainites, provoking conflict between them. He covered his activities, making it seem that a rival faction sought to gain power, and the Ventrue were quick to accuse each other of treachery.

As powerful lords fell before their enemies, they were replaced, often by younger Cainites loyal to Mithras. The influence of the cult spread, and Mithras's influence grew.

By the start of the 13th century, Mithras is firmly in control of southern England, with London as his center of power. A network of powerful vampiric barons and princes owe him fealty, and he is turning his eye toward the land north of Hadrian's Wall, a land even the Romans never truly conquered. But, given time, he knows that it will be his. Mithras's cult remains a useful network of influence for the Methuselah, especially as it allows him to reinforce feudal bonds. According to the agreements forged after Mithras's awakening, he is technically dependent on the most powerful barons to defend his domain. Yet, the extent of the cult within those barons' own territories makes any betrayal of the Methuselah difficult at best. Mithras is also using the cult to spread his influence into Scotland, parts of France and even further afield.

rites and Practices

The Cult of Mithras worships the ancient Greco-Persian god whose name Mithras assumed. He subverted the Cult of Mithras centuries ago and subtly modified its tenets to suit his needs. The modern cult is based on the practices of the ancient cult Mithras used to such good effect in the Roman Empire and the years leading up to its eventual decline during the rise of Christianity.

Ironically, Mithras is a solar god, associated with the ancient gods Apollo and Helios, but the Methuselah convinced his followers of his need to rest during the day because all of his energies were devoted to steering the course of the sun. Mithras is also a militant god, often associated with the Roman Mars. He's a god of soldiers and battle, qualities Mithras embodies himself, since he has been a soldier and a general for millennia. Mithras is particularly associated with the slaying of a sacred bull, which represents the qualities of power, strength and fertility, and eating the bull to take all of these qualities into himself.

The cult gathers in small underground chambers known as Mithraea. They may be natural caves but are more often mounds or chambers dug into hillsides. The typical Mithraeum is 75 feet long and 30 feet wide, with an altar at the far end and an aisle running down the middle of its length, with stone or wooden benches on either side. The Mithraea usually hold 20 or 30 worshipers, and many have additional chambers further past the altar holding stone sarcophagi, havens for Mithras' loyal followers to rest in during the day. There are Mithraea scattered across England and parts of Scotland — some of them built from burial mounds, Roman ruins and other forgotten or isolated places.



The primary ritual of the cult involves the sacrifice of a bull to Mithras, followed by the consumption of its flesh and blood by the worshipers, who take the strength and qualities of the bull into themselves. Cainite followers of Mithras usually conduct the rituals, sometimes seized by frenzied "divine madness" in the presence of so much blood. Most add a small quantity of their own vitae to the bull's blood, strengthening the congregation's loyalty. Those mortals who consume the sacrifice most eagerly are offered full blood communion from Mithras's vassals, making those followers ghouls to support him. The most promising are Embraced, but Mithras rarely gives permission to do so, careful to limit the number of Cainites he must contend with.

INFLUENCE AND ACTIVITIES

The Cult of Mithras counts numerous soldiers and nobles as followers, both living and unliving. Many are sincere in their devotion to the faith and its martial values, while others give only lip-service because they feel the cult can further their lot and it is best to profess loyalty to the most powerful faction. The existence of the cult is something of an open secret among the Cainites of Britain. They know that it exists and who some of its members are, but they don't know for certain

who is and is not a member. In particular, the Cainite priests and functionaries of the cult usually go masked, so it is difficult to be sure — even for the cult members — who is a loyal member of the cult and who is not.

The existence of the cult is kept secret from the Church, of course, which hears rumors of pagan rites but has little more to go on, typically attributing such things to folk rituals. Some Ventrue have considered stirring up the Church against the cult as a means of striking against Mithras, but they are too concerned about backlash, both from an inflamed Church and from Mithras, should he discover who is behind such a plot. The fact that some powerful lords are members of the cult makes things even more problematic.

MEMBERSHIP

The Cult of Mithras includes hundreds of members in Britain. No one (except perhaps Mithras himself) is entirely sure how large the cult is, but they have many individual gatherings at different Mithraea. Most of the cult members are common, mortal soldiers, but it also counts officers and nobles among its ranks, along with Cainites loyal to Mithras, who serve primarily as priests and functionaries.

The cult is divided into seven ranks based on an ancient system, each rank associated with one of the astrological planets. They are Raven (Mercury), Bride (Venus), Soldier (Mars), Lion (Jupiter), Persian (Moon), Courier of the Sun (Sun) and Father (Saturn). The ultimate goal is to rise through the ranks and transcend mortal existence altogether, a state the cult calls *æternitas* and associates with the Embrace. The greatest of Mithras's followers possess great power, and the higher-ranking followers are aware of Mithras's godlike powers and seek such a state for themselves.

Admission into the cult is only for men, primarily soldiers and the nobility. The initiation is difficult, involving trials of physical strength and endurance, whipping and flagellation, branding and bloodletting (always attended to by Mithras's Cainite priests). After successfully enduring the various trials, the candidate swears oaths of loyalty and secrecy to the cult. He is then baptized with the blood of a sacrificed bull and admitted into the first rank of the cult, followed by a celebration and feasting on the sacrifice's flesh.

By serving the cult as a faithful soldier (usually on the social battlefield rather than in actual war), cult members rise through the ranks. There are tests of bravery and worthiness and further initiation ceremonies into the upper ranks. Those who reach the rank of Lion often become ghouls in service to the cult's Cainite priests, who occupy the higher ranks. Those few reaching the Father rank are often Embraced and initiated into some of the truth about the cult and its master. Mithras and his followers also give special dispensation to Cainites who join the cult, usually initiating them as Soldiers and guiding them quickly into the upper ranks, if they prove worthy. Those who prove unworthy through cowardice or treachery face destruction.

Not surprisingly, the martial tenets of the Road of Chivalry appeal to the followers of Mithras, and many members of the cult follow that Road. The romance of a martial brotherhood and the ancient roots of the cult also drawn in many of Mithras's mortal followers.

MITHRAS, LORD OF LONDON

4th generation Ventrue, childe of Veddartha

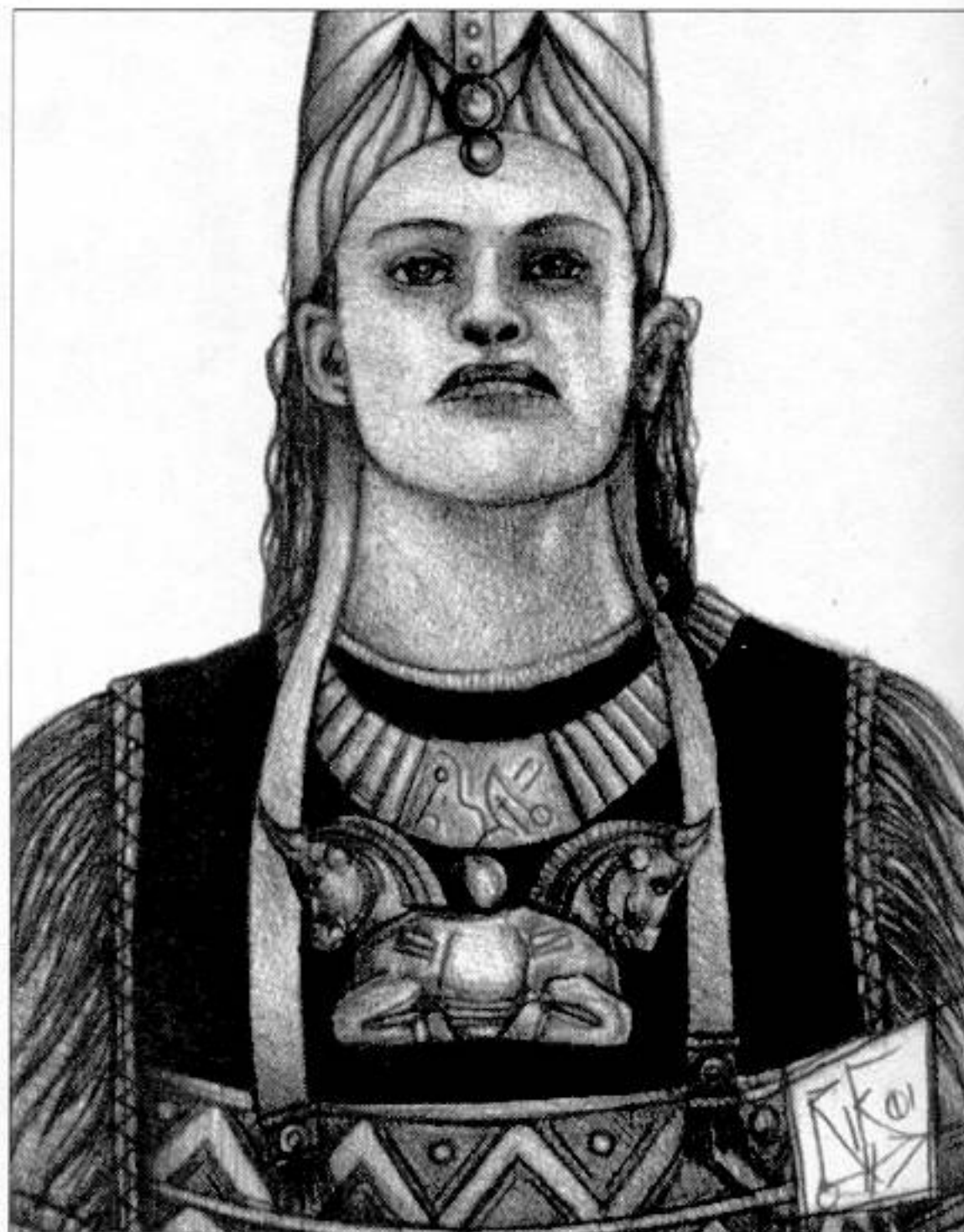
Nature: Innovator

Demeanor: Autocrat

Embrace: 1258 BC

Apparent Age: mid- to late 20s

Mithras has always been a soldier. In his mortal life, he served in the army of a king whose name has long since been forgotten and whose kingdom has been dust for a thousand years. He was sent to root out some rebels and was Embraced by their leader. In the ancient world, Mithras was worshiped as a god, and he advised generals and kings, shadowing the rise of the Roman Empire. His



curiosity and his desire to be at the forefront of the empire's conquests brought him to Britannia, where he eventually entered torpor.

Now that he has returned, Mithras has found new challenges and opportunities awaiting him. He is patient, he has seen empires rise and fall, and he is willing to take his time playing out this latest conquest. In truth, Mithras is enjoying himself, and he's wistful about the possibility of his latest game coming to an end. Of course, he'll simply have to look for another conquest to occupy him, and for the moment, Scotland is of interest.

Mithras is quite cynical and manipulative toward his cult and his followers. He's co-opted an ancient deity to serve his needs, and he doesn't believe in anything greater than himself. Even the Christian Church is a relative newcomer by Mithras's standards. He's seen cults and religions come and go, and this one is much like all the rest to him. So long as the cult is useful to him, it will continue. When it no longer is, Mithras will dispatch it with the ease of slaughtering a bull.

JAMES MANNERLY, PRIEST OF MITHRAS

9th generation Ventrue, childe of Thomas

Nature: Gallant

Demeanor: Judge

Embrace: 1178

Apparent Age: early 20s

ASHEN CULTS

STORY SEEDS

- Cainite agents of Mithras are sent to establish a new branch of the cult in Scotland (or elsewhere) but face opposition from the local Gangrel as well as the Church and some of the Scottish lords. The agents must move cautiously and avoid becoming entangled in local conflicts if they are to be successful. The characters may be the chosen agents or may be charged with rooting out the cult.

- Mithras cultists are surprised when a rival cult that also claims to follow the god appears in eastern England. These upstarts claim they are the true followers of Mithras, and they appear to have at least some measure of wizardry to back up their claim. However, they are strongly influenced by other Ventrue lords, hoping to use them as a weapon against Mithras and his followers.

- A mortal member of the Cult of Mithras turns traitor and intends to go to the Church with what he knows about the cult. Mithras and his followers want the man eliminated, while other Ventrue lords want to see him succeed in order to distract Mithras and weaken his power (although they risk a backlash against all Cainites in the British Isles in so doing).

James is one of the younger Ventrue who have thrown their lot in with Mithras. After his Embrace, James quickly realized that the power structure of the Norman Cainite lords was settling into place and would ossify and remain the same for decades, if not centuries, leaving few places for an ambitious younger vampire to advance. But Mithras has promised the young Cainite a place in his new order, and James is in awe of the power and wisdom of his liege lord.

Never a particularly religious man in life, James has thrown himself wholeheartedly into his role in the Cult of Mithras, finding his faith in unlife. In addition to providing him with the opportunity to feed, the cult also speaks to James's belief that soldiery is the highest calling of man and openly celebrates what he considers its virtues. He helps conduct rites for the cult near Dover and has attracted some converts to the faith.

THE MASONS OF MARSEILLES

Marseilles, Provence (influence with other Masonic guilds in France and Italy)

A rising power in the Dark Medieval age is the crafting and mercantile class, particularly the artisans who design and build the castles and cathedrals of kings and bishops. Over the years, these artisans have come

to understand their value and band together in guilds to protect their own interests and preserve the secrets of their trade. These guilds are secretive by necessity, and their secrecy is useful to Cainites with their own secrets to protect — and their own interests to advance.

In the Provençal port city of Marseilles, many crusaders boarded ships for the journey to the Holy Land, and some returned from their travels with tales of what they had seen and done. In particular, some men returned with knowledge of the great sites of Jerusalem, of temples and churches, castles and fortifications, and a sense of the sacred nature of architecture. They passed this information on in secret to their fellows, along with other lore they gathered.

Not all the lore that found its way into the hands of the Masons of Marseilles came from holy sources, however. Some of it came from the hands and the lips of those who knew and studied ancient building methods from Rome, Carthage, Greece, Egypt and other lands, knowledge lost for hundreds of years but preserved by Cainites. The Toreador showed an interest in the marriage of art and craft, creating beauty as well as durability. The Nosferatu were intrigued by the arcane relationship between means and measures as well as the clever creation of catacombs and hidden passages.

It is quite clear to these Cainites that the Masonic guild is a force to be reckoned with. More importantly, they see such craftsmen as the future of civilization. While the Venture and Lasombra cling to their nobles, soldiers and churchmen, the Toreador and Nosferatu have taken interest in this new power, still in its infancy. The two clans increased their influence over the Masons' ranks, but slowly and carefully, engaged in a complex game of chess with each other and with the mortals they seek to control.

UTES AND PRACTICES

The Masonic guild of Marseilles is a mystical group but not nearly so much as many cults. The lodge recognizes a system of degrees for ranking its members and observes a code of behavior, but it does not consider itself a heresy or seek to usurp the power of the Church; the members of the lodge are God-fearing men. The lodge acknowledges God as the Supreme Creator in the form of the Divine Architect, a craftsman who made all of Creation. The Masons have a particular fascination with the ancient Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, an example of the sort of perfection they seek in their own work.

The Masons as a whole are interested in knowledge, and they look on their work as something of a holy calling. They have already collected lore from crusaders returning to Europe, and more comes to the Masons from emissaries of the Toreador and Nosferatu clans. Members of the lodge swear oaths of secrecy, and they

UNDYING COVENS

often wear cowls and masks at gatherings to provide anonymity. This practice allows Cainites to appear sometimes at Masonic gatherings, with the knowledge and permission of the master of the lodge.

INFLUENCE AND ACTIVITIES

The influence of the Marseilles lodge, and of the Masons in general, is growing, as more and more craftsmen join and both Church and crown have greater need for their services. Already, the lodge strongly influences all aspects of the Mason's trade in Marseilles and influences other craftsmen as well, since many of them are employed by master Masons as part of their building projects. Adherence to the lodge's requirements is strongly encouraged among the artisans of the city, and those who are not members of the guild find it difficult to obtain legitimate work.

The Masons' primary goal is to ensure a profitable future for the lodge's members, both by expanding their

influence in the trade and by acquiring a greater understanding of their craft. The guild is considered innocuous by most, although some craftsmen grumble about its growing monopoly of the trade. The Cainites of the city have also begun to take an interest in the guild. Ventrue, Lasombra and Cappadocians in the region all compete for mercantile control of Marseilles. The Toreador and Nosferatu hope to influence the burgeoning new guild and snatch power away from the ruling clans.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the Masons is open only to craftsmen, which is to say freemen who are recognized as masters in their craft, rather than humble journeymen or apprentices. The lodge (like the craft in general) does not admit women. Current members must sponsor new members, and the current members of the guild vote on the admission of new members. If they are accepted, there is an initiation ceremony where the new members swear an oath of loyalty to the lodge and agree to keep its secrets and to render aid and assistance to their brothers in times of need.

In Marseilles, several dozen craftsmen belong to the lodge, led by Maître (Master) Jacques Remillard, an experienced artisan and a skilled leader and scholar. No vampire is a full member of the lodge, but a few members have been made ghouls by local Toreador and Nosferatu.

MAÎTRE JACQUES REMILLARD

Mortal

Nature: Caretaker

Demeanor: Innovator

Apparent Age: late 40s

The current Revered Master of the Masons of Marseilles is Jacques Remillard, a master craftsman and builder for nearly 25 years. Although he is not a man of great learning, Jacques has educated himself over the years to become a true scholar of his crafts, its history and its secrets. His work is a calling to him, as important as that of any monk or priest, and he has devoted himself to the concept of a powerful guild with much to offer members of his trade.

To achieve his goals, Jacques has accepted some risks. His position has drawn the attention of certain other scholars with access to information of great interest to the craft. Jacques has become aware that these emissaries are not mere mortals and that their interests do not always coincide. For the time being, he meets with them and allows them access to the lodge in exchange for what they have to offer. Efforts to draw him into an alliance with one or the other have been met with polite evasion, which Jacques knows can't last forever. He's caught between his fear of dealing with these devils and of losing what they can offer.

THE GUILD AND THE CRAFTMASON

Cainites tread on dangerous ground where the Masons are concerned because the Masonic lodges of Europe are increasingly involved in an alliance known as the Craftmasons. The leaders of this alliance are dedicated to using their secret lore and engineering skills to protect the common folk against the dangers of wizardry and magic, launching attacks on known wizards and forging alliances with like-minded individuals, including some within the Church.

Players of **Mage** will recognize the early stirrings of the Craftmason Convention of the Order of Reason (which later becomes the Technocracy). In the spring of 1210, the Craftmasons recruit key members of many guilds in Provence, such as the one in Marseilles. That winter, the most skilled (and most zealous) of them launch an assault on Mistrudge, a stronghold of Hermetic sorcerers, and destroy it. **Dark Ages** Storytellers can choose to involve Cainites on the periphery of the rise of the Craftmasons, keep it as a background element or ignore it altogether and assume it's something the characters are unaware of (which may very well be the case). It's altogether likely that the Craftmasons only recruit some influential and gifted members of the lodge, leaving the others to continue their own intrigues.



Recently, the matter's been made more complex by a third party who claims to possess wisdom even the other two lack, secrets of building dating back to the pyramids and great monuments of Egypt, wonders of the ancient world.

JULES DE TOULOUSE

8th generation Toreador, childe of Elena

Nature: Gallant

Demeanor: Celebrant

Embrace: 1109

Apparent Age: 30

Jules de Toulouse finds much of interest in the lodge of the Masons; he was one himself more than a lifetime ago. While building a tomb for a nobleman, he chanced to meet a beautiful lady and fell in love with her. She granted him the Embrace so they could be together, although Jules' love cooled like his blood over time, and they eventually went their own ways. Jules continued to hold a great interest in building and studied with some of the greatest Cainite masters and scholars in Europe.

At the bidding of the Grand Court in Paris, Jules has become an emissary to the growing guilds of Masons and builders in and around France, and he visits Marseilles often, to extend the court's influence over the guild. He knows full well that the Leper Nicodemus also has dealings with Maître Jacques, and the two of

them play a subtle and civil tug of war for control of the guild.

NICODEMUS

9th generation Nosferatu, childe of Henri

Nature: Loner

Demeanor: Innovator

Embrace: 1122

Apparent Age: 40 or more

The Nosferatu known as Nicodemus speaks little about his life before his Embrace, only that he was a "humble man" made even more so by his unliving existence. Nicodemus looks aged and shrunken; his age when he was Embraced is unknown. But it is clear he was a learned man and that he has continued his studies

STORY SEEDS

- Crusaders returning from the Holy Land are often contacted by a representative of the Masons interested in any useful lore they might have collected while there. Any attempt to sell such information, ancient texts or the like is almost sure to reach the lodge's ears and attract their attention. Moreover, the Toreador and Nosferatu are likely to try and acquire the information themselves so they can be the ones to deliver it into the grateful hands of the lodge.

- The building of a new cathedral is hampered by accidents and poor timing. The Toreador and Nosferatu suspect each other, of course, and accusations begin to fly. But the true culprits are Tremere. The Usurpers have cursed the construction, partly to set the Toreador and Nosferatu at each other's throats, partly to goad the Craftmasons and stir them up against wizards, in hopes of directing the Crafters against the mortal Order of Hermes.

- A secret chamber containing a lost artifact (perhaps even the body of a torpid elder) is hidden in a palace, cathedral or the like, and its location is lost. However, the Masons may have record of it in their collection of lore. The question remains whether they can be convinced to part with the knowledge or if it can be stealthily taken from them.

- Unknown to either the Toreador or Nosferatu factions, the Followers of Set are also interested in the Masons and the power they represent. A Setite agent works to set the other clans against each other while insinuating himself into the lodge and gaining control over it.

with the time allowed him. Architecture is a particular interest of his, and he shares his insights and knowledge with certain mortals he favors. In particular, he's interested in aiding the craftsmen of Marseilles against what he sees as the encroachment of the Grand Court and the other "noble" Cainites that squabble over the city.

CULTS OF THE CLANS

For the most part, Cainite clans are not philosophically unified. They are fractious blood-families who share certain proclivities and legendry but nothing approaching a coherent and organized agenda. There are some instances, however, where members of a clan come together based both on blood and belief, in which they feel their lineage opens up the doors of worship in ways unavailable to outsiders. The Followers of Set are the prime example of this, an instance where cult and clan almost fully overlap, but several other clans have religious subcultures within them.

THE FOLLOWERS OF LAZARUS

No fixed center of power.

A scattered cult at best, the Lazarites believe in the wisdom and divinity of the Cappadocian Lazarus and study the secrets of life and death as a means of emulating and serving him. Constancia, the Cappadocian high priestess at Erciyes, considers them heretics for Lazarus' failure to heed the will of his sire, Cappadocius, and for their belief in resurrection.

Lazarus was a Jew Embraced into the Cappadocian clan sometime in the early first century AD. Some believe he is the Biblical Lazarus, raised from the dead by Christ. Cult dogma claims that Lazarus was Embraced before Christ laid his blessing upon him, which raised Lazarus to a new state of being and gave him untold insights into the nature of death and resurrection.

Lazarus later settled in Egypt, where he studied the nature of death, including the funerary rites of the Egyptians and other cultures. He visited the Great Library of Alexandria, and it is said that he or his followers carried away books and scrolls from it before the library burned. By the fourth century, Lazarus was acknowledged as one of the greatest scholars among the Cappadocians (then or since).

When Cappadocius called together his childer for what became known as the Feast of Folly, Lazarus did not respond to the summons. Cappadocius took the opportunity to thin the ranks of his clan, entombing thousands of his childer in the underground depths of Kaymakli. Lazarus' brothers Caias and Japheth noted

his absence, and Caias decided to seek out Lazarus and question him about his failure to appear.

When he found Lazarus, Caias discovered that his erstwhile brother defied Cappadocius' will and attacked him for his insolence. Lazarus was sorely wounded, but he escaped. He began to withdraw from the world, settling in a Coptic monastery hidden somewhere in the Holy Land. His agents continued to wander the land, speaking in their master's name and (rarely) bringing blindfolded guests to speak with him.

As the centuries passed, Lazarus was seen less and less, and he became more and more of a legend, even to his followers. Word among the Cappadocians is that Lazarus fell to the temptations of Set and became corrupt before Caias slew (not wounded) him in battle. Some believe Lazarus has gone into a long torpor, while a few claim he has achieved Golconda through his studies and his knowledge. Many of his followers believe Lazarus was chosen by God to show others the way to this lofty state, but whatever the truth, the Cappadocian Methuselah remains silent.

rites and practices

The major rites of the Lazarite cult are focused around the obsessive study of death and, particularly, the means of restoring the dead to life (or a semblance of it, at least), including the Embrace. Followers of Lazarus seek out ancient texts on medicine, necromancy, funerary rites, embalming, preservation and so forth. They are also known to traffic with the restless dead as a means of learning more about death and the afterlife. The Lazarites deal often with mortal necromancers, and some have even joined the ranks of the cult.

Unlike most other Cappadocians, who seek to unravel the secret mystery of death, the Lazarites are obsessed with discovering the secret of the resurrection, as embodied by Christ rising from the dead. They believe there is a means by which Cainites can transcend their undead state and become reborn into life again, purified and forgiven by God, perfect in body and soul. Some of them believe Lazarus has already achieved this state — or is very close to it.

The Followers of Lazarus are at least nominally Christian, and most accept that their patron is the Lazarus of the Bible and that Christ favored him. Most are fervent about their faith and believe their clan is chosen for a special destiny, signified by God's favor of Cappadocius and, later, Lazarus. But the Lazarites now believe that Cappadocius lost God's favor and that his other childer have fallen from the true way embodied by Lazarus.

influence and activities

The Lazarites are a small faction within the clan — and one grown smaller since the Feast of Folly. It has little

if any influence on the thinking of the clan elders and the other factions. Most Cappadocians see the Lazarites as heretics and religious martyrs, followers of a possibly corrupt patron (if Lazarus still exists at all). Certainly no Cappadocian who entertains hopes of influence within the clan would consider joining their ranks.

The only other Cainites the Followers associate with to any significant degree is the Lamia bloodline. These vampires sometimes become companions of wandering Lazarites, aiding in their search for new lore and secrets, becoming their “muses of death,” with their skill in ending life and seeing death from new perspectives.

Despite accusations that their patron has been corrupted by the wiles of Set, the Lazarites remain steadfastly opposed to the Setites, although, in practice, they prefer to avoid the Serpents’ notice as much as possible, particularly when traveling through the Holy Land or anywhere in Egypt. The Setites, for their part, typically have only passing interest in the Lazarites, although their outcast status does make them somewhat more susceptible to Setite wiles. A Follower of Set might take the opportunity to acquire information from a Lazarite, if the opportunity presented itself.

The Lazarites spend most of their time searching out new information on how to reverse death or, at least, to advance the Embrace on to what they see as the next step of Cainite development, a perfect, living form raised from undeath. The cultists tend to lead solitary existences, occasionally gathering to share their knowledge and write it down for safekeeping. Some members hold out hope that their Cappadocian brothers and sisters will come to see the error of their ways in time, but it does not look likely.

Most recently, there has been debate within the cult regarding contacting the Tremere and offering to exchange information with them. Although the Lazarites care little for the opinion of the Cainite lords of Europe, they also know that openly supporting or aiding the Tremere could bring the wrath of many princes down upon their order. Still, the lure of the Tremere’s lore has proven too great, so a limited exchange has begun, with the Lazarites carefully hiding their activities.

MEMBERSHIP

The Lazarite cult is almost entirely made up of Cappadocian vampires and their mortal followers and associates. Membership in the cult is mostly a matter of declaring oneself a member, although many Lazarites study with a mentor before declaring their allegiance. The cult is a haven for some of the *Infiores*, those Cappadocians who, like Lazarus, ignored their founder’s call to the Feast of Folly and, therefore, escaped possible entombment in Kaymakli. The cult also sometimes recruits among exist-

ing Cainites, and there are those who find hope of new life within the ranks of the Lazarites.

Membership is also sometimes passed from sire to childe, as the sire indoctrinates the childe into the cult, telling him the “truth” of Lazarus. Not all neonates so inducted remain with the Followers, but many do. The Lazarites Embrace rarely, only when they encounter someone they believe is a worthy student who can add to their holy search for truth.

The Followers deal with some mortals and even count them among their number. These mortals mainly include ghoulservants and companions of the Lazarites and mortal necromancers who study the same secrets as the Followers. The Lazarites shun the Giovanni family and have done so since the two first encountered each other. The Followers consider the Giovanni untrustworthy dabblers who got lucky while the Giovanni want to know what secrets the Lazarites have uncovered — but for power, not enlightenment.

The cult’s membership is scattered across the known world, but it is most often found in places of learning, particularly in the Holy Land and Egypt but also in parts of Eastern Europe, Iberia and the Italy. Few Followers are found in Central or Northern Europe, unless some promising lead brings them there.

JULIANNA TREVANI, FOLLOWER OF LAZARUS

10th generation Cappadocian, childe of Andel



UNDYING COVENS

Nature: Loner

Demeanor: Fanatic

Embrace: 1141

Apparent Age: late teens

Julianna comes from Genoa, where she was Embraced by a Follower of Lazarus who recognized in her the sharp mind and discerning eye of a true scholar. Julianna took to the opportunity to study and seized upon her divine mission to discover the true nature of death with great zeal. She slipped away from her family with the aid of a friend and traveled with her sire for a time before they parted ways and she continued on her own, with only her trusted friend Ricardo.

Julianna is far more clever and learned than most others give her credit for, and her sharp wit (and equally sharp tongue) can get her in trouble, but she manages to curb it with Ricardo's help and stay on the good side of those Cainites she happens to meet. Recently, she has been charged with the task of bearing messages between the Lazarites and the Tremere, traveling into their lands, acquiring scrolls and books from them and delivering these writings to ships setting sail for the Holy Land and Egypt.

RICARDO RINALDI

Ghoul of Julianna Trevani

Nature: Caretaker

Demeanor: Defender

First Thrall: 1152

Apparent Age: mid-30s

Ricardo Rinaldi's family was close to that of Julianna Trevani. The two of them grew up almost as cousins, although Ricardo's feelings for Julianna were not always those of a brother. As she blossomed into a beautiful young woman, Ricardo wanted to court her, but he was intimidated by Julianna's wit and cleverness, and she was obsessed with books and morbid ideas better suited to an old man than a young girl. Julianna's parents actually hoped Ricardo would lure her away from such things, but before he could, Julianna was Embraced.

News of her death shattered Ricardo's world, and her appearance at his window filled him with joy and gratitude. But Julianna was forever changed, not at all the same girl he knew. Still, Ricardo proclaimed his love for her and insisted on helping her leave home, rather than denouncing her or allowing her to be lost to him again. As the truth dawned on him, he considered turning back, but he could not leave Julianna's side. By the time he first shared her blood, Ricardo was completely devoted to her. Now, only death can make him

leave her side. He will remain with her forever, if that is what she wishes.

Ricardo's adoration for his mistress knows no bounds, although a part of him still mourns for the life he'd dreamed of, imagining he and Julianna as grandparents or even great-grandparents of a huge family, rather than homeless wanderers digging up moldering bones and ancient scrolls. But at least he and Julianna are together, forever. Her least kind word or touch still fills him with longing and gratitude, and Ricardo will protect her from all harm with his life, if need be. If the truth of her mission is discovered, that may well be necessary.

STORY SEEDS

- Other clans (particularly the Tzimisce) want to cut off any aid coming to the Tremere, although some Cainite lords are more interested in discovering *who* is aiding the Tremere, in order to use that information to their advantage. The characters could be sent to learn more about the comings and goings in the domain of the Usurpers, allowing them to learn about the Lazarites and their mission. Lazarites such as Julianna eloquently plead their case. They have no interest in the politics of Europe, they serve a higher cause that may benefit all Cainites. Do the characters allow the Lazarites to continue dealing with the Tremere, expose them or offer them another option? What of the other factions involved?

- A wandering Lazarite who uncovers an ancient fragment of the *Lilith Cycle* is attacked not long thereafter, the fragment stolen. Characters may be prevailed upon to find it, particularly if others fear what the thieves might do with the knowledge contained on the fragment.

- The dying ghoul of a Lazarite carries a carefully drawn map showing a hidden ruin in the depths of Egypt that may contain untold necromantic secrets, perhaps even the power of life and death itself! The Lazarite was set to meet with others of his order to deliver the map when he was slain, and his servant barely managed to escape with the map. Many factions are interested in it, including the Cappadocians and the Setites. Will the characters barter the map to one or the other or try and follow it themselves?

HOUSE GORATRIX

Centered in Paris, France, with members at Ceoris, Transylvania and scattered across Europe and the Levant.

With the recent (as far as Cainite history is concerned) transition of House Tremere from a cabal of magi to a fully founded clan of vampires, the taste of forbidden power has gone to the heads of certain members of that meretricious clan. Strange blood rites, pacts with demons and allegations of internal treachery plague the Usurpers from within. Even after the clan joined the ranks of the undead, its members' penchant for politicking among themselves remained vital.

Riddled with rivalries, factions, secret societies and circles of mystery, the Tremere rot from within. One of the most potent members of the clan, Goratrix, plots his own coup. Politically exiled to France "to monitor matters occult," Goratrix seethes with anger. Nightly, he brews his own magical formulae, turning the art of Thaumaturgy from a working of miracles into a black art fueled by innocent blood. In the nights to come, Goratrix's coven shall secede from the fledgling Tremere bloodline to make its own fate. The course of Cainite history will never be the same.

House Goratrix, like its parent House Tremere, is devoted to the study of the arcane art of blood magic. And also like its parent, the house is convinced of the supremacy of its founder and leader. Just as many Usurpers look to Tremere as the source of all their power and success, the members of House Goratrix give that mantle to their founder. Was it not Goratrix who created the masterful alchemy that transformed the first Usurpers into vampires? Was it not he who created the great chantry of Ceoris? Was it not he who forged the Rego Magica path and, through it, all Thaumaturgy? Tremere may have been a grand magus once, but he long ago became nothing more than a politicking leech. Accompanied by his sycophant Etrius, Tremere murdered the three-eyed devil Saulot, and that — and only that — is the reason Tremere calls himself clan progenitor and master of House Tremere. And even in this, Tremere has proven himself incapable. Etrius tries to hide the truth, but the clan father is reduced to a torpid, tortured mess, buried deep in Ceoris. It is Goratrix who is the font of understanding and thaumaturgic power, and his house recognizes it.

(Additional information on Goratrix and Clan Tremere is available in **House of Tremere, Transylvania by Night** and **Libellus Sanguinis II: Keepers of the Word**. The fate of House Goratrix is played out in the **Transylvania Chronicles**.)

rites and Practices

While the conservative Tremere take baby steps in their research, the members of House Goratrix ascribe to

the bold methods of their master, methods that have accomplished much. While House Tremere eschews traffic with demons, human sacrifice and the like — at least in the open — House Goratrix has no desire to accept limitations placed on its power by the moralities of others. As such, members of House Goratrix are quite likely to be among the most powerful Tremere any other Cainites may encounter. Their road to power has had its costs, however, as most of Goratrix's coven seek magical potency expeditiously. Many of them keep poor notes, fail to test their rituals thoroughly, contaminate their experiments with outside conditions and generally take the quick-and-dirty route to magic instead of learning the basics first and building from them.

A small but growing house, few rites and practices are universal among the Goratrix Tremere, but those that are have regular, almost reverent, observation. The most characteristic is the *vincula*, a series of rites that involve the sharing of ritually prepared blood between members. The details of the *vincula* change as a member of the house is initiated into different levels of the cult, each time getting metaphorically (and sometimes literally) closer to Goratrix himself.

A related branch of research, conducted in secret at Ceoris and in lesser chantries in the vicinity, studies the eldritch Tzimisce magic known as Koldunic Sorcery. The followers of Goratrix have assimilated a few of the mystic practices of this forbidden art, and the results would likely horrify any traditional Tremere. Whispers of rituals that simulate or break blood oaths, distort the natural spirits of the land and plague victims with the "demons" endemic to the Tzimisce's blighted domains occasionally leak forth from nervous apprentices. Whether or not these tales are true, or how efficacious the rituals are outside of the Fiends' ancestral lands, is as yet unknown, but they certainly portend ill for any who stand against House Goratrix.

House Goratrix is a mystery cult in the most traditional sense, a group of searchers seeking enlightenment from the most learned of all, but it also a true blood cult. Vitae is not just a means to bind the house together, but an end in and of itself. Naturally, the blood its members take can provide House Goratrix with simple sustenance, but vitae also holds tremendous power for these Tremere, arguably more so than for other Usurpers. Surely, all Tremere use vitae to power their thaumaturgies, but so do other Cainites use blood to enable their Disciplines. For House Goratrix, blood has become an icon — it is its salvation, its weapon against the vengeful fangs of enemies and the faith that sustains its members when they rise each night. While the main body of the clan is secular in its approach, House Goratrix studies its blood magic with fervor. In the words of Goratrix's protégé Malgorzata, "Vitae sustains other Cainites. For us, vitae promises transcendence."



To this end, Goratrix's small cabal of sorcerers has attempted to dissect the Tzimisce sorceries and reproduce their effects by way of their own Hermetic formulae. This has yielded a number of effects, the aforementioned rumors of demonic bindings and the shattering of the blood oath notwithstanding. The cult has established a way to foment multiple blood oaths in a single subject, which it sometimes tests on Gargoyles and even a few unsuspecting Tremere who are not a part of the fledgling faction. Ties that bind the Tzimisce to their ancestral lands have also been the subject of much study, and the Goratrix Tremere have created numerous (if flawed) rituals by which they can draw on the inherent natural magics of the lands in which they make their haven.

Other experiments have proven to be successes, at least on the surface. Recently Goratrix developed an artificial vitae that, while not exceptionally satisfying, could sustain a Cainite in times when blood runs scarce. As with many of the house's efforts, though, the formula is imprecise and unreliable. While it serves the need in most cases, it has a debilitating effect on the mind of the user when contaminated by exposure. Some of Virstania's Gargoyles, test subjects for the

concoction, have changed radically from their docile selves to ravaging beasts, only to revert to their subservient personalities hours later with no memory of their enraged state. Goratrix, originally a user of the false vitae, has since abandoned its use, though he has made no mention of this curious side effect to anyone other than Virstania, leaving even Malgorzata uninformed.

Despite the seemingly slow progress of their "*ignotus ritualia*," House Goratrix continues to study and gather members in earnest. With the vitae they take contributing not only to the physical well-being of its members, but also to the rites the house studies, this cult has its foundations in the physical as well as the spiritual, making its members all the more fervent due to the double commitment.

INFLUENCE AND ACTIVITIES

House Goratrix forms the hard, rotten core of the conspirator faction within Clan Tremere. These Usurpers believe in rapid and radical action and were once the most vocal advocates of Embracing all mortals within House Tremere. In the last several years, House Tremere has come under scrutiny from mortal members of the Order of Hermes, and the point has become moot. Even

the conservatives of the clan have accepted that that time to Embrace many mortal Tremere and abandon many others has arrived. Still, Goratrix and his acolytes retain significant sway within the clan through the auspices of the radical faction. This influence gives the house a powerful presence even beyond the Paris chantry (Goratrix's home), Ceoris and the other chantries with scattered members. Despite Goratrix pretense, however, not all of the conspirators with Clan Tremere are bound to become members of the Goratrix heresy. Many simply disagree with Etrius's terrible conservatism and wish to enter fully into the vampiric world. Jervais, the *vis* master of Ceoris, is one such conspirator who has no desire to join the heresy against the founder of the line.

Etrius and his closest allies see this conspiracy — or heresy — everywhere. Followers of Goratrix supposedly advise in the courts of counts and dukes, *jarls* and viziers. They may number among the Curia. In superstitious lands that accept the undead as figures of importance, some village elders purportedly belong to House Goratrix. A few isolated Fiends, lords of their lands, have accepted the presence of the Tremere (though they don't hate them any less) and might take on Goratrix-aligned mentors, chamberlains or ministers of the occult. It is whispered that even the oblique Telyavelic Tremere pagans of Lithuania have sympathizers to Goratrix's policies of empowerment among their number.

These are only the most credible rumors. Outrageous tales of House Goratrix establishing a chantry in far-off Taugast have circulated, as have overblown accounts of allied cardinals, witch-hunters, kings and generals. The hysteria knows no bounds, as the festering body of Clan Tremere grows ever more paranoid about the poison it knows gathers within yet cannot excise. The Golden Horde — tool of Goratrix! The Great Khans — comrades in arms! Clan Assamite subverted! Clan Ventrue defanged! The hoary Tzimisce held in thrall! The Inconnu! Caine himself! No claim is too outlandish to pass from dead lips to fearful ears. The trembling Tremere seem prepared to believe anything.

Few members of House Goratrix have any but the most hostile relations with other clans because they see the Tremere as besieged by Cainite enemies. While their brethren are content to exist in nights that may well be numbered, the goal of House Goratrix's acquisition of magical power is to bulwark the clan against the depredations of the other undead. In this sense, House Goratrix is a cult of personality in addition to a blood cult. The house is enticing because it offers power for the sole price of loyalty. Although the house is small at present, it has a very conspiratorial outlook, regarding the main body of Clan Tremere as ill-informed

dupes and the rest of Cainite society as tools to be used for the house's own ascension. A few silver-tongued diplomats number among the house's members, and these are the only ones who show their faces to the mortal or Cainite world with any but the most fiendish results. This isn't to say that the sorcerous Goratrix Tremere don't deal with the outside world. Quite the contrary. The results and intents of these dealings, however, rarely have any pleasant motives behind them. If one of Goratrix's coven steps outside his sanctum, it is always with selfish intent. Even more than the single-minded thaumaturges of the main Tremere line, Goratrix Tremere view the final result of their work as justification for the methods by which they achieve it. Indeed, this hauteur leads those few Tremere who know anything about House Goratrix to underestimate it: They see hubris-maddened rogues rather than the true cunning sorcerers who have rallied under Goratrix's banner.

MEMBERSHIP

Where Tremere lurk, followers of Goratrix may be among them. More than a few of Goratrix's acolytes may be found in the clan's home chantry of Ceoris, such as Malgorzata (whose own name contains part of Goratrix's, in tribute). The Mistress of Gargoyles, Virstania, is also a initiate of the house, but her loyalty is primarily to her own twisted creations.

In truth, House Goratrix numbers somewhere between a dozen and a score members. Most are in Paris, with several in Ceoris and a few part of chantries far from these locations. Its members largely work in secret, and if it has allies (outside of those who may be convinced to perform occasional favors, such as with all Cainites), they are well hidden. While a given member may be powerful, his power is on a local scale. While another member may have a broad range of influence, that influence is almost surely checked by other Cainites (such as with the apocryphal cardinal) or limited by his own desire to avoid attention (as with Goratrix himself).

GORATRIX, THE JUDAS

4th generation Tremere, artificial Embrace

Nature: Monster

Demeanor: Rogue

Embrace: Early 11th century

Apparent Age: mid-30s

Head of the heresy, discoverer of an elixir that could transform men into "immortals" and inveterate agitator, Goratrix advocates complete dominance of the lesser Tremere. His goal is not so much subjugation as it is an opportunity to make right the error that came as a side effect of his potion. Too many of tonight's Tremere — cowards! — don't wish to tempt fate again.



Their ignorance blinds them. Why would anyone settle for an eternity of skulking in shadows, furtively sipping blood with a wary eye out for those who don't fear them? True power is not casting paltry blood magics. True power is causing the world to reflect one's desires, simply by wishing it so. Cower, then, you weak "vampires"; shudder, while great Goratrix pulls you to the great destiny you mewl to avoid.

JOHANNES OF WORRINGEN, THE SCHOLAR OF COLOGNE

9th generation Tremere, childe of Matthias

Nature: Autocrat

Demeanor: Defender

Embrace: 1113

Apparent Age: late 40s

Unlife often makes one embarrassed for one's breathing days. Johannes was a petty researcher into the occult, a spoiled brat made wealthy by his father's money from the Hanse. He wasted this money, buying forbidden texts, taking trips to consult with wise men, paying charlatans to host seances and then purchasing indulgences from the Church after he was tried in a canonical court for heresy. A lifetime spent pursuing cheap thrills left him penniless and unmarried.

Then Johannes's sire found him. Matthias, a deranged Tremere conjurer, Embraced Johannes as the man considered suicide. That was all it took to invigo-

rate Johannes's sense of purpose — his wasted life had been a test. The fruitless quest for real magic had only been a trial of faith. After Matthias introduced him to his fellows in the coven, the madman left Cologne, never to be heard from again. Even this last act compounded Johannes's sense of rightness: He was the heir to Matthias's power.

But power came slowly. His apprenticeship wasn't spent learning magic, it was spent sweeping this and transcribing that and scrubbing whatnot and boiling all of the brine from something or another. How degrading, not only to be an old man saddled with a boy's chores, but to have been given forever only to spend it as manservant to his so-called mistress, a stupid, pretentious and ugly slut.

The squeaky wheel gets the grease, and Johannes soon found himself courted by a secret society of Tremere who felt as he did. Now was the time for action, they taught. Power best is power used, and power used must be power learned soon. In exchange for his keeping an eye on the Cologne chantry — Johannes had been made librarian; oh, such a grandiose honor for one of his age and... wisdom — his patrons sent him scrolls and books with which he could augment his knowledge. Every year they came, and Johannes devoured them with a singular mind.

Tonight, House Goratrix knows something of the happenings at the Cologne chantry. Granted, it's all been filtered through the jealous pen of a peevish old simpleton, but information is information, nonetheless.

JEAN FURNEAUX, THE PRODIGY

11th generation Tremere, childe of Tania Caboche

Nature: Tyrant

Demeanor: Caretaker

Embrace: 1194

Apparent Age: early 20s

Jean is a rarity among the members of House Goratrix: He was Embraced into the faction, not converted from without. Brought into the clan as an aide to his sire, Jean believes that his Embrace was an experiment itself. After being instructed in the history of his coven, he put two and two together and came up with the idea that his Embrace was intended to be an improvement upon the common practice. It all went wrong, of course, and he's no different than any other Cainite now, but that's only because the experiment didn't work.

Jean is right in his suspicions, but not entirely. After she drained his blood into a cauldron, Jean's sire Tania used her blood magic to transfer it back into his body. It shouldn't have worked — she didn't imbibe the blood and pass it on to him by the normal method, nor did she imbibe

it and transfer it from herself into him thaumaturgically. Tania suspects that by using magic to move the blood from the cauldron back into Jean's veins, the magic that traveled through her also took the essence of the blood — but not its physical component — through her, thereby making it "vampiric" vitae, having used her as the magical medium. It was a bold new discovery, but it has yet to be repeated with any success.

In any event, Jean is a member of House Goratrix only by dint of Embrace. He doesn't really care for the precarious faction, but it's better than anything else that has come his way since the Embrace, which is to say nothing. If he found something better, he might take it, but it would have to offer him something other than respite from his chores. After all, he is learning to work miracles, for what that's worth.

SMALL CULTS

Despite the power and profile of expansive and clan-based cults, they are far outnumbered by the small and local covens. These clutches of believers and followers are each centered on key Cainites and have regular contact with them. Some of these sects have absolute mastery of a small area, whereas others snake their way through Europe like plague-bearing nomads.

CALOMENA'S FORSAKEN

Moves throughout the Balkans

In the dark years prior to the sack of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade of 1202 to 1204, the New Rome was plagued by a vampiric cult known as the Chosen of Calomena. Scourges of the Cainite race, the

STORY SEEDS

- The characters' local influences have slowly been eroding. Aldermen who relaxed the curfew no longer grant the vampires audiences, merchants who could be convinced to do business after dark now shutter their windows at the moment of nightfall, and the town guard hasn't been so quick to turn away from calls for help. As it turns out, one of the House Goratrix Tremere has taken up residence in the characters' city and has quietly been cultivating their old influences for her own — as well as those of all the other Cainites in the city. How will the characters respond to this? Will they align with her against the untrustworthy "mainstream" Usurpers? Will they enlist that untrustworthy Tremere aid to oust her? How will they bring her down when they realize she has a continent-wide conspiracy of sorcerers lending her their aid? Or is her stab at their personal resources simply a blind for some other House Goratrix ruse?

- A mysterious visitor offers a powerful Cainite artifact to the characters in exchange for a few weeks of quiet, no-questions-asked hospitality and silence. He provides them with the artifact and then disappears into the night after his stay. A week later, the characters are visited by a coterie of Tremere who have discerned that he spent several nights at their haven. Do the characters keep their word, possibly incurring the wrath of the Tremere? Or do they give up their

quest? If they give him up, even if he doesn't return, perhaps one of his associates will....

- This one takes a bit of revision on the part of the Storyteller, but its epic scale may prove rewarding to certain troupes of players. The time is the mid- to late 11th century, not long after the change of the Tremere from mortals into Cainites. Goratrix uses his elixir on himself and his fellow leaders of House Tremere. Thereafter, the Tremere embark on a pogrom of Clan Salubri, culminating in the diablerie of Saulot himself, which allows Tremere to become a member of the Third Generation. Thereafter, the rest of the Council of Seven hunt down other Salubri (or, indeed, other elders of any clan, so long as they're of lower generation than themselves). The characters can interpose themselves between the Tremere as a whole or, in closer keeping with the spirit of **Vampire: The Dark Ages**, as agents of one councilor who sees trouble in the form of Goratrix and enlists their aid against him. Set Goratrix's generation at whatever you'd like, pre-diablerie (perhaps even allowing him minor "victories" here and there over the characters). As the chronicle goes on, it seems that Goratrix has amassed more and more followers under his banner, proving ever more difficult for the characters to oppose him as he grows in support, generation and magical power. This story can be an excellent, centuries-spanning chronicle or an introduction or parallel plot to the **Transylvania Chronicles**.

Chosen believed themselves to be avatars of Caine's sister who must bring about the destruction of the race of Caine and were responsible for subverting many mortals and Cainites (and destroying more than a few of the latter). The Chosen were led by a Caitiff known as Stanislav who derived his drive from a belief in the Bogomil heresy. Stanislav and many of his chosen met their end in the fires that ravaged Constantinople in 1204, but some escaped. Among those were Basil and Bayezid Gantenbein, Bosnian brothers, devout Bogomils and ghouls of Stanislav.

Freed of the blood oath to their master by his destruction, the brothers realized that their faith had been corrupted by their domitor. He was a Cainite — a being of physical evil — like all the others. But they had survived and recovered their will and were convinced to do good again. The siblings have headed back to the Balkans to preach the Bogomil dualist philosophy and root out Cainites where they slumber by day. Instead of destroying the slumbering vampires they find, however, the ghouls drain their victims of blood — they are veritably the vampires of vampires.

rites and Practices

Calomena's Forsaken observe the harsh poverty upheld by most Bogomils. Basil and Bayezid position themselves as models of purity, preaching the popular Bogomil heresy to believers they meet in their tours of Serbia and the rest of the Balkans. Calomena's Forsaken are among the more radical factions of Bogomils; they believe that the Old Testament is only so much myth and that Christ himself was not the Son of God but an angel sent to earth as a manifestation of supreme good. Calomena's Forsaken resent the Catholic Church and despise it for the wealth it has gathered, a bitterness they foster in those who fall in among their ranks. They harbor similar resentment for the local Orthodox Church, which they believe does not protect its flock, as evidenced by the collapse of Constantinople and the hardships of the Balkan peoples.

Following the brothers is a variably sized contingent of the faithful, who listen to the brothers preach. For their part, the brothers consider their followers little more than bait. This theological point has been brought against them many times by Cainites tricked into the brothers' captivity — a point which Bayezid refutes as a matter of dualistic philosophy. As creatures of good, their methods are above reproach, for what they do is destroy the undead, who are obviously creatures of evil.

The argument grows murky if Cainites ever learn of the brothers' nature as ghouls. At this, Basil posits that by extending their own lives — which they do at the expense of evil beings — the brothers can continue

destroying those evil beings for longer than they could were they not to partake of the Cainites' tainted vitae. That this only prolongs their time in the physical (hence evil) world only speaks to the power of their commitment to good.

Basil and Bayezid are strong in their faith. They are almost impossible to tempt, though Cainites have tried in the past and occasionally succeeded with the aid of their Disciplines. Such treatment is always temporary at best, though, and when the other brother catches on to the situation, he scourges his sibling, and the pair exact their righteous justice. Indeed, the pair still harbors a deep hatred for numerous Bulgarian Tzimisce witch-Fiends and the Byzantine Ventrue Anna Comnena (whom they recently ran into in exile in Nicea) because of the "temptations of the flesh" these Cainites mystically worked upon the siblings. As the Bogomil heresy preaches, the brothers believe that the carnal lusts engendered by lascivious contact are sinful and evil. Digging deeply into Bayezid's psyche would no doubt

Story Seeds

- Calomena's Forsaken find themselves between a rock and a hard place. On one of their journeys, the brothers attracted the attention of an churchman en route to Constantinople, who they have discovered is pursuing them after attending to his business in the city. The problem is, the brothers know that where they currently are is the domain of a coterie of Cainites — the players' characters. The siblings ask to be hidden. The characters now find themselves faced with fanatics who would destroy the vampires if they had the chance, but can they not redeem themselves through doing this good deed? Or are the characters of a conflicting faith, just waiting to turn the heretics over to the proper canonical authorities? But if the characters do this, wouldn't they themselves risk attracting the Church's attention?

- The characters wake to find a ragged pilgrims' camp on the horizon. The next night, the prince goes missing. Over the course of their investigation, the characters find that the prince has been staked and taken prisoner by the cult, ostensibly to be used by the brothers to feed their need for vitae. Do the characters help the prince? Or do they take every advantage of the opportunity?

reveal more than a small streak of misogyny, though Basil's is more truly founded in his faith and fear of contamination by evil.

INFLUENCE AND ACTIVITIES

By the early 13th century, the Bogomil heresy has caught on tremendously in the Balkans and much of Eastern Europe, extending as far as Bulgaria, Walachia, Dalmatia and Bosnia. While nowhere near as widely spread as the Orthodox faith practiced by the bulk of these countries' populations, Bogomilism has taken root. Naturally, this fact doesn't mean the brothers Gantenbein wield religious influence over the entirety of Eastern Europe, but it does mean that, with a little perseverance, they can find succor for their small flock. Almost every city worthy of the name harbors a clutch of Bogomils, who can put the itinerant pilgrims in touch with someone who can aid them if they can't provide it themselves.

The fact that their faith has been proclaimed heretical significantly limits the brothers in some ways. They fear persecution and its aftermath, both for themselves and for their flock. While they aren't above tempting the Damned with the promise of a quick, anonymous vessel, they *are* faithful and would hate to see so many of the

devout meet their ends due to poor planning on their part. While Cainites would have no love for them if they learned of the brothers' ways, the undying are hardly the prime concern when the cult finds itself forced to move. Religious enemies, as well as governmental enemies motivated by Orthodox (or even Catholic) allies, stand against them. Even troubling a lone subsistence farmer on the path between towns is a risk, for some folk hate the heretics as fervently as does the Church.

Still, it's worth all the risk for Bayezid and Basil. Their great cause demands that they consume the prolonging blood of the childer of Caine, and what better way to procure it than to bring the Damned to their doom, consumed by their own greed and unholy thirst?

By no means are the brothers expert vampire hunters. Tending to their flock is their primary concern, and they try to keep their dealings with the unliving from ever coming to the attention of their followers. The most common method for dealing with a vampire is for the brothers to ask him to discuss a theological issue, whether in their own rude tent or at the Cainite's residence. Once there, the brothers attempt to overwhelm the vampire, staking him so that they may steal his vitae and then destroying him, leaving only ash in their wake.



UNDYING COVENS

Of late, the pair have had an increasingly difficult time locating and handling their Cainite prey. It seems that word has passed through the region about vampire hunters traveling in the company of pilgrims. The cagey Damned, when they bother to think about it, might even use the mendicant Bogomils as cover for themselves, were they ever forced to take to the road. The brothers have considered staking a Cainite and taking the pinned corpse with them when they travel, but the logistics of the travel and of keeping the whole affair secret has proven too difficult for them to entertain the idea for any length of time.

MEMBERSHIP

While the number of the Gantenbein brothers' followers changes with the seasons, the people's fear of persecution and any number of other conditions, Basil and Bayezid are the only two actually in on the cult's secrets. The nature of their relationship is one that has kept the two at a low degree of tension for some time now, with Basil wanting to bring another in on the cult's true nature as an extra person to get things done but Bayezid not trusting anyone to do the job.

BASIL GANTENBEIN, THE GOOD SON

Independent ghoul

Nature: Caretaker

Demeanor: Innovator

First Thrall: 1150

Apparent Age: early 20s

Of the two brothers, Basil is the more compassionate, harboring a genuine love for his flock. After all, so many of them are flawed, but one cannot help but admire their courage and desire to better themselves, even if it means their own end. He is pragmatic and calm and would not hesitate to think a problem through if the immediate solution left him with any reservations. Increasingly, Basil has found himself forced to rein in his brother. Bayezid flies into fits of rage at times that scare Basil to watch. Still, despite this, Bayezid is the more charismatic of the two, and the flock reacts better to his sermons than they do to Basil's. For now, Basil is fine with this, preferring to handle matters behind the scenes and allow Bayezid to rally the faithful. He knows that the true issue is the destruction of evil elements and that worrying about his acceptance among the flock is the path of vanity.

BAYEZID GANTENBEIN, THE FLAWED CHAMPION

Independent ghoul

Nature: Judge

Demeanor: Fanatic

First Thrall: 1150

Apparent Age: early 20s

Satan is active on this Earth, and he sends his minions wearing the faces of the children of Seth. This belief is the core of Bayezid's philosophy, and he sees it as his calling to exact a terrible vengeance — no, *justice* — upon the souls of the Damned. He is the more likeable of the brothers, with a way for words, a ruggedly handsome mien and an aura of determination. Unbeknownst to his brother, however, Bayezid has become addicted to the Cainite vitae they steal, which is behind many of his radical mood swings. This reaction isn't the body's physical need for the blood (though both brothers would likely die were they not to imbibe their monthly draught); Bayezid psychologically needs the blood. He longs for it. That's why he grows so impatient — time spent hiding from the Church or the town guard is time that could be spent seeking that luscious crimson fluid.

CARNAVAL MORIENDI

Moves throughout France

In the short days of winter, the peasants' toil begins before the first ray of sun brightens the horizon and ends long after the cold dark has once again returned. Amid long hours of brutal work, turning frozen ground and harvesting bleak bounties of winter crops, those who toil sometimes have a respite: a holiday, a festival or the odd tournament hosted by the local count. Once in a great, long while, the Carnival Moriendi passes through a town or village, promising a circus show and a respite from backbreaking labor.

What it delivers, however, is something entirely different. The Carnival Moriendi is nothing so much as a traveling cult of Cainites. Each member having been expelled from one prince's domain or another's — and some driven from multiple cities — the carnival roams from village to thorp, offering festivity and taking its compensation in the form of blood.

Some two dozen members strong, the carnival is led by a trio of enterprising Cainites. Perhaps as many as five others of the Damned come and go as they will, with the rest of the troupe made up of communal ghouls and those sworn to their own undead masters. In the Carnival Moriendi's presence, the villages come to life. In its wake, they are left with tears, sickness and sorrow.

rites and Practices

The Carnival Moriendi promises a circus and, indeed, it delivers. With its members' undead strength or, in the case of the ghouls, with the Cainite blood coursing through their veins, the performers are some of the hardest on the continent. The circus takes full advantage of this, with the macabre festival featuring such attractions as bear-brawling, feats of strength and tests of mettle. These tests take many forms themselves — sometimes, the Cainites endure impaling upon metal skewers, while at other times, the ghouls withstand the strongest village

volunteer breaking wooden planks over their backs. The carnival also features animal acts, led by Ori, Master of Flies, and Hrothulf, Lord of Wolves. Even rare and "mythical" lions have made appearances at the carnival, terrifying and thrilling the audiences.

Additionally, the circus boasts clowns and mountebanks, oddities and faith healers, diabolical barbers and cunning fortunetellers. As the acts change over the course of the circus's travels, each member of the troupe may find herself taking on new roles. She may be the afflicted shill who lies upon the table as the healer removes tumor after tumor — actually the livers of chickens — from her pain-racked body in Vez, while a month later, in Crépy, she plays the part of the amulet-seller, hawking bone trinkets and potions that purport to strike their victims barren. The Carnaval is a strong supporter of *ars moriendi*, the portrayal of death in their art. Dancers have been known to cavort with troupe members made up as corpses. Clowns may affect skeletal masks and costumes. Short plays featuring lepers and plague-bearers are also common, as are puppet shows in which the marionettes meet grisly ends, complete with sprayed animal blood and flung bits of gore. The carnival tours in winter largely because its themes of death and fatality are more poignant in that cold season.

When all the acts are over, though, and the tents and rings have been stowed for travel, all of the morbid joy of the festival comes to an end. The carnival usually stays for a week or two, putting on a few shows and then, in the nights that follow, indulge their aberrant passions. In this time, the troupe slowly reveals its nature as a blood cult: The Carnaval Moriendi venerates mortal blood, upholding a dogma that from the life of mortals springs the unlife eternal of the Damned.

The carnival's blood-rites are as broad and varied as their circus acts themselves. Ghouls lure unwitting villagers into secret trysts with the performers, bludgeoning them to soften the vitae for their masters' tastes. Others bind their victims in their wagons, cutting them and smearing themselves with the oozing blood in hopes of feeling the experiences and spiritual weight of the peasants. The Cainites themselves have been known to bathe in blood, to drink their prey dry while fornicating with them and to collect trophies of their vessels' blood and store them in small vials. For these vampires, the act of feeding is not so important as the symbol of the blood itself — a vampire sated by only the tiniest draught of vitae may exsanguinate her vessel anyway, cavorting in the crimson fluid to satisfy her perverse quest for spirituality.

According to the heretical beliefs of members of the Carnaval Moriendi, vitae comprises two distinct parts. The material, physical portion of blood is what fills man's veins and what sates the thirst of Cainites. From brightest vermilion to a dusky claret, each mortal's

blood takes on the characteristics of her mortal life. Wealthy, corpulent nobles have a heady blood redolent with high-infinite distinct flavors, while hardy peasants possess a smoky, thick blood earned from a life of toil. Many members of the carnival consider themselves accomplished vitae-philos, identifying and savoring the tastes of each vessel's precious blood.

Beyond the physical aspect of vitae, members of the carnival acknowledge a spiritual portion. This component is the part of the blood that carries the essence of a mortal, the vehicle by which the soul sustains the body. Members of the cult swear that they can taste their vessels' individual memories and experiences. Cainite scholars of the circus bear this out with numerous small proofs, citing such examples as the consumption of a fellow vampire's soul during diablerie or the mystic properties of the blood identifiable by the new Tremere blood magic as proof of their faith.

Neither of these components is inherently good or evil in the dogma of the cult, which is based not on Christian belief but on the inscrutable nature of the Cainite condition. Indeed, members of the carnival have been known to grow quite hostile at the suggestion that their interpretation of the properties of blood is something so base as a simple dualist Christianity. Vitae knows no faith, they insist, and the blood of the paynim is as complex as that of the holiest of Popes. In fact, over the course of the cult's history, it has included members of non-Christian faiths and marginalized denominations, such as the Coptic Setite Ral-Beni and the Muslim philosopher Cainite Yusuf al-Ghazali, who claimed to have exchanged ideas with the Aristotelian commentator Averroës.

In its current incarnation, the Carnaval Moriendi doesn't harbor anyone of such (proclaimed) grandeur or import. Despite this fact, the cult persists in celebrating the properties of blood, and a few of the cult's more knowledgeable members take great pains to lend "scientific" legitimacy, or at least occult certainty, to the carnival's faith. A Cappadocian skilled in the fledgling art of *nigrimancy* has added a minor bit of understanding to the group's understanding of vitae, though he is by no means a master. Additionally, carnival member Searcy Watteau, a Tremere, has made the separation of the two distinct aspects of vitae part of her ongoing thaumaturgic research, pursuing "the distinction of sanguinary portions" as a zealous, solitary work in progress.

Once per year, on the winter solstice, the blood cultists of Carnaval Moriendi take a hiatus from their performances and spend the night in contemplation of a fragment of the *Book of Nod* that one of the troupe's members managed to acquire. According to the circus's oral legend, the original founder of the carnival was a Cappadocian driven out from that clan's temple haven.

This Graverobber managed to steal a copy of the esteemed book, and the few tattered pages are all that remain of his legacy. The current leader of the carnival, Margot d'Estrées, maintains that the carnival was originally a legitimate circus, adopted as a traveling haven by this Cappadocian. He followed the carnival and enticed members of its audiences into private "conversations" about their beliefs on the nature of transitory mortal souls. From these inquiries, the Cappadocian formed the early dogma of the cult, which has grown into its current form. Carnaval Moriendi reveres the *Nod* fragment in deference to that founding Cainite, as well as the First Vampire.

INFLUENCE AND ACTIVITIES

The carnival itself has little temporal influence — it is largely self-sufficient, gathering what it needs from oblivious peasant communities and then moving on through the night. It is very careful not to visit any given community too often, lest the horrific wake of its last performance linger too freshly in anyone's mind. Carnaval Moriendi stops at a given village only once every 40 years or so. By that time, the only people who remember the previous visit are too old, infirm or senile to attend, and any protestations they may have go unheeded.

Members of the troupe have been known to steal infants and children, sometimes for their sweet blood, sometimes to add to the carnival's ranks. One season saw Margot abduct an infant from one village, feed upon it until it died and then leave the cold corpse in a bassinet in exchange for a fresh child in the next village. Such adopted children usually grow up as ghouls and travel with the circus, lending their able bodies and doting on their domitors. At other times, the circus entices adults into the troupe, seducing, befriending or just plain absconding with them. Those who join the circus less than voluntarily often do so with short remainders of their lives. Others may follow the carnival forever, as is the case with the venerable ghoul Pagnacci, who claims to have tasted the vitae of the Cappadocian founder of the cult. Only rarely does anyone who wishes to part ways with the cult do so on any terms other than death. Over the years, a few have left, such as Blind Harriet and the imbecile Turnaud. Still others have taken their lives rather than face another night with the carnival.

On the road, the carnival feeds as it can, occasionally using its ghouls for sustenance but more often preying on cotters, charcoal-burners, would-be brigands and other marauders and renegades. These vessels rarely receive the same treatment as members of village audiences — Carnaval Moriendi prefers to consecrate only the blood of those who have voluntarily brought

themselves into contact with it. In the words of Ori, "anything else would be theft, and we're not bandits."

Obviously, more sedentary Cainites tend to take an immediate dislike toward Carnaval Moriendi. Whether or not they hold any lofty regard for mortal life, most Cainites find that the carnival not only taxes their precious resources of blood, but it excites the kine and make them unpleasantly wary. Few vampiric princes or minor lords are willing to believe such a concentration of Damned is not a threat to their domain. Carnaval Moriendi expects this sort of unwelcome reception, however, and usually confines itself to small villages. In the past, members of the troupe have offended powerful Cainites and met their Final Death, while others have slain aggrieved Cainites while defending themselves. The carnival has also earned the ire of a French Gangrel who caught them feeding on a subsistence farmer in her domain. To this night, she pursues the cult, watching and waiting for her opportunity to exact revenge.

Among religious and scholarly Cainites alike, word of the Carnaval Moriendi has spread to some degree, and these cognoscenti rarely have anything pleasant to say about the cult. Religious vampires consider the cult nothing less than a full-blown heresy, claiming that it asserts distinctions men and Cainites could not possibly know — while the Church promotes the concept of the soul, it is a hotly debated topic (among vampires) whether or not Cainites remain in possession of theirs. To claim that such is true is to claim penultimate spiritual knowledge and, in the words of a Ventrue in the domain of Rome, "A circus of blood-lusting vagabonds is where we will find our next apostate, not our next apostle." Secular and studious Cainites likewise spite the carnival, finding it laughable that a pack of troubadours has somehow discerned the true nature of the immortal soul and propagates its philosophy by busking and enacting morbid plays. Only Searcy Watteau's Usurper acolytes acknowledge that the cult's teachings have a certain merit and are worth pursuing, if only to extract greater mastery of the blood from their findings.

MEMBERSHIP

The troupe that makes up Carnaval Moriendi is largely informal, with its Cainite members nonetheless enjoying greater consideration than the motley crew of ghouls that follows them. The undead members also defer to Margot d'Estrées, the eldest among them, who decides when the group will leave a certain settlement and where they go next.

This informal structure allows the Damned members of the carnival to come and go as they please. Margot sees no risk in this — they are all vampires, after all, and giving up the rest of the group isn't likely to do a dissident any good, as it has acquired few really powerful and persistent enemies. She requires no displays of devotion, either,

assuming that if someone merely wants easy blood, he can find it with less difficulty than by traveling with a carnival on its own terms. Thus, the cult is not a collection of fanatical heretics, but rather, a quiet coterie of the elective devout.

The ghouls, though, are another matter. A ragtag group of charlatans, outlaws, Basques, pagans and, well, anyone who can adjust to the duty and the travel, they acknowledge Margot as their leader, and most have enough of a sense of self-preservation to acquiesce to the unliving members of the troupe. They are expected to either perform as jongleurs, actors, clowns or whatever other roles the circus needs or to deal with logistics, such as erecting tents and maintaining props.

MARGOT D'ESTREES, RINGMISTRESS

10th generation Brujah, childe of Sycorax

Nature: Innovator

Demeanor: Gallant

Embrace: 1113

Apparent Age: early 30s

The life of a peasant had always left Margot wanting more, which was not a common characteristic among common folk, let alone women, and ultimately proved her undoing. After a turbulent childhood and loveless marriage, Margot found herself condemned to death as a sorceress... or was it a heretic? In any event, the accusation was false, contrived by Margot's hus-



band and validated by the vicar, who, along with the rest of her village, had grown tired of her cynicism. As she stood weeping, tied down to the pyre that would be her end, she felt a rustle in the darkness and heard a voice in her ear. The witch Sycorax had stumbled upon the evening's events in her wanderings and planned to sneak up to the pyre and cut Margot loose, in hopes of terrifying the crowd as the "sorceress" infernally managed to escape their justice.

Instead, though, Sycorax looked into Margot's eyes and saw a look of longing tempered with resignation. Stirred by her bravery, the witch cut Margot free and fled with her into the darkness. Thereafter, the two traveled through the French territories, feeding in shadows and lording over the kine who had once held their fates in their hands. In Orléans, the pair met with a Ravnos named Euryale, then leading the Carnaval Moriendi. Euryale stirred a passion in Margot she had never known in life: love. She bid farewell to Sycorax, joining the troupe.

Margot learned of the Cappadocian blood-veneration with Euryale as her mentor. She listened raptly as he told her his own philosophies, and the lovers found spiritual strength in each other.

It came as quite a shock, then, that one night Margot rose to find the Ravnos gone. He had left her a short note, claiming he was sorry but that his faith in the dogma had been failing. She appeared at a time when he was at his weakest and briefly rekindled his devotion, but that, too, had grown cold. He claimed he would return one night and apologized succinctly but never even signed the note.

With a heavy sigh, Margot shrugged. Again, she had been abandoned. This time, however, she had been left with something — the faith. As she met with the other Cainites of the carnival that night, she announced that Euryale had fled and that she would lead the group until he returned. Thus it has been ever since.

HROTHULF, LORD OF WOLVES

11th generation Nosferatu, childe of Karl Reglav

Nature: Penitent

Demeanor: Monster

Embrace: 1154

Apparent Age: a haggard mid-30s

Embraced out of spite by a berserker in the northern territories, Hrothulf had never been gregarious but had always been a showman. In his undead state, he continues in that idiom, performing in his beastmaster's role with gusto and passion. As the ringmaster of animal acts, Hrothulf takes great delight in shocking his audiences. His favorite ploy, from which he takes his name, is to summon wolves to the circus tent, calling them to



attend him by venturing down the aisles and through the seats, walking right past the assembled villagers. He also enjoys conjuring a horde of rats, thus turning the carnival floor into a thick carpet of chittering vermin.

Beneath all his theatrics, however, Hrothulf understands what he has become. He knows that he is truly Damned as a childe of Caine. In his own way, he sees himself as warning the kine about his kind — those whom he terrifies or kills are the precious few who pay the price of knowledge for the many. The more people who see the Carnival Moriendi, the more people can warn others about it and the vampires the world is host to. With any hope, Hrothulf maintains, these people will look over their shoulders when night falls and not succumb to the wiles of other Cainites.

ORI, MASTER OF FLIES

10th generation Ravnos, childe of Egrotatio the Wanderer

Nature: Child

Demeanor: Gallant

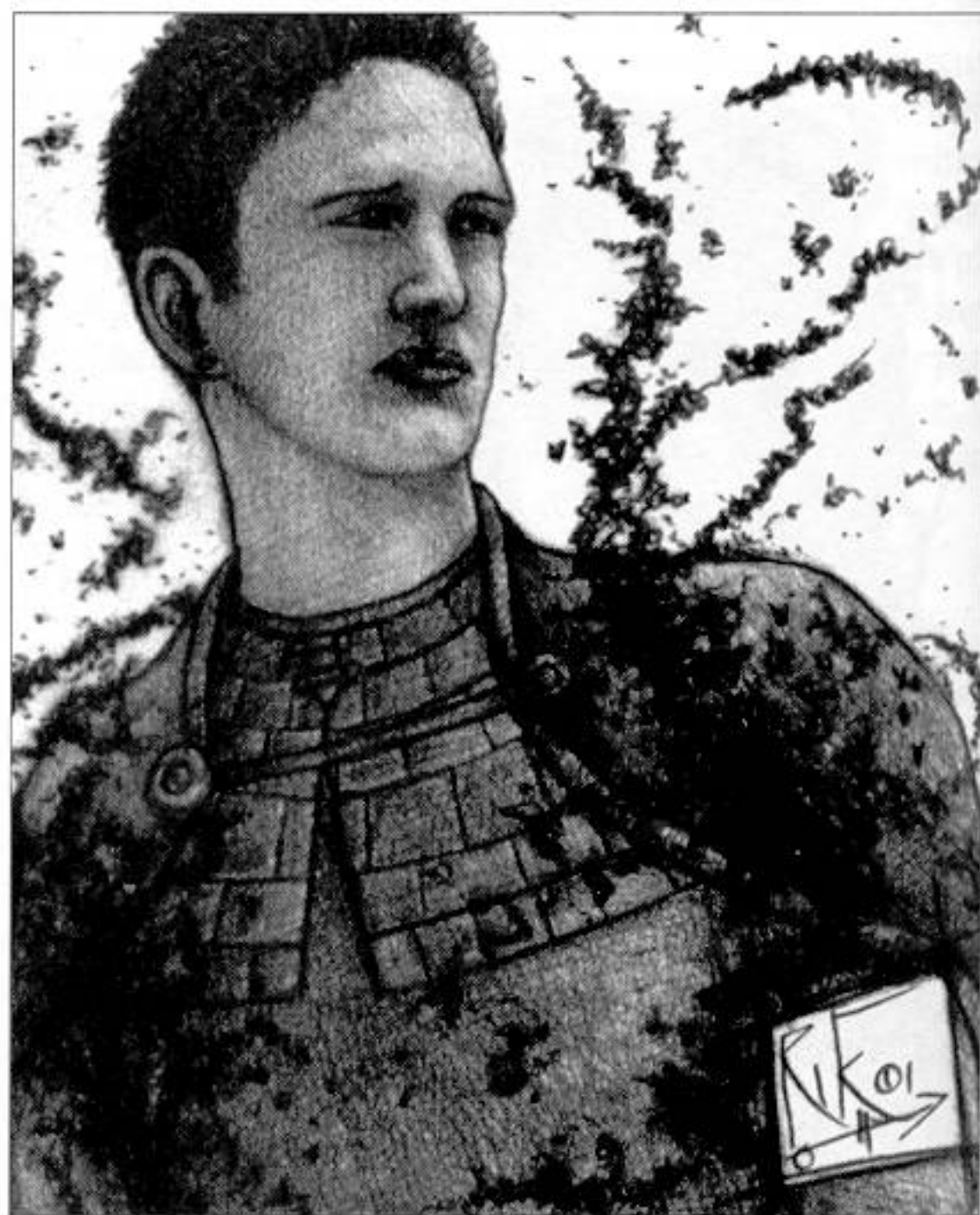
Embrace: 1182

Apparent Age: mid-teens

Had the Embrace never come to him, Ori would have become a rural farmer in northern Italy. In that sense, he believes that he has been liberated from a meaningless life of constant labor. His sire took the boy under the dominion of the night for his own reasons, suggesting that, after following him for a while and learning the ways of the Damned, he strike out on his own. Ori took this to heart, bidding his sire farewell as the Carnival Moriendi happened to pass through a town where they had briefly been making their havens.

Ori is as showy as Hrothulf and provides an excellent counterpart to his fellow with regard to animal acts. Ori's "beasts," however, are not the animals festival audiences are used to seeing. He favors calling upon flies, bees, wasps and even common ants, beckoning thousands upon thousands of them to attend him and turn the air into a cloud of stinging life. He and Hrothulf sometimes even play off each other, with Ori summoning flies and Hrothulf invoking scores of hungry bats to eat them out of the very air.

Of late, Ori has grown bored of playing to the Canaille. He is very vocal about wanting to "entertain" a higher class of people, in his words, "to feel how much grander their blood." Childish and bitter at times, Ori is probably the most likely to leave the carnival behind but not before he convinces the troupe, if only once, to take their act to the count's courtyard.



SEARCY WATTEAU, ALCHEMIST OF THE SOUL

11th generation Tremere, childe of Berdrand Ostek

Nature: Loner

Demeanor: Innovator

Embrace: 1152

Apparent Age: early 40s

Searcy had been her village's resident herbalist and supposed witch for over a decade before coming to the attention of a traveling Tremere who Embraced her. She had a knack for ingredients, knowing just which pulped roots to blend to soothe an aching back, which leaves to apply to a burn poultice and, some say, which herbs to brew into a tea that would strike the drinker barren. The Cainite who would be Searcy's sire made her acquaintance while passing through the village and asking her for hospitality for the next day. A few of Searcy's erstwhile neighbors say she knew what she was getting into when she invited the lone stranger in. In truth, though, she had no idea. She let her guest sleep the day away, however, only to be repaid with damnation when he rose the next night. To this night, Bertrand maintains that he did it because he had a dream that instructed him to Embrace her.

Searcy had no interest in her sire's dream-prophecies, though, and the two quickly grew estranged. She eschewed traditional Tremere learning, finding the practice weird and occult in the wake of her more naturalistic and herbal skills. Only reluctantly did she learn the Rego Vitae. When she finally did, it intrigued her, much to her surprise. It seemed that blood was no different from any of the other humors found in nature — while she once brewed soothing drinks from certain herbs, Searcy learned that she could make similar concoctions with her sole sustenance of blood.

When the Carnaval Moriendi passed through her town, she spoke with its Cainites and learned of their own perceptions of vitae. Intrigued by the groups philosophical take on her own physical studies, she joined the troupe, hoping that they could help one another come to greater comprehension of their common mystery.

Searcy acts as a herbalist and fortuneteller for the troupe, creating semi-functional potions and conducting utterly false readings for circus-goers. When not involved with the act, she tends to isolate herself, focusing on her blood-alchemy or speaking with the resident witch or wise-woman in whatever town the circus has visited. She occasionally compares notes with the Cappadocian Simon, but she feels the two of them are working in different directions.

SIMON RIGAUD, THE SPIRITICIAN

10th generation Cappadocian, childe of Raymonde Roussel

Nature: Child

Demeanor: Autocrat

Embrace: 1116

Apparent Age: early 30s

Prior to his Embrace, Simon pulled a cart upon which Parisians would place the corpses of those who had succumbed to plague. He was a curious sight, a hale and hearty man, wrapped tightly in dirty rags to keep away the stench of the bloating, pustulated riders on his cart. His sire Embraced him after the two had enjoyed a long commercial relationship. Simon would supply his sire-to-be with the freshly dead, and Raymonde would ply the carter with coin. After Raymonde noticed that Simon seemed to be taking ill — no doubt the result of his occupation — he Embraced the carter in order to keep himself in fresh material.

In exchange for bodies once he had become a Cainite, Simon learned the fledgling art of whispering to the shades of the dead from Raymonde and his sire's own mentor, a mysterious Italian. While Raymonde and his mentor discussed the finer points of their spirit-magic, Simon listened to what bits he could and gathered the night's bounty.

Simon is simple enough that he never required any more than this; he would have been content to study at the master's feet so long as his needs were met. When Raymonde began exchanging letters with the leader of a traveling band of performers that the nameless Italian vampire had mentioned, he found himself intrigued. Of course, Raymonde had no desire to leave his own haven, but his childe was of the perfect temperament to listen to what these performers had to say and, if it was worth anything, record it and send it back to him.

Thus, Simon found himself attached to the Carnaval Moriendi. He travels with the circus, dutifully compiling necromantic research and sending it to his sire. Simon maintains a crude library of these letters for his own sake and that of the carnival as well — a leather-bound journal filled with page after page of coarse illustration and barely literate observations can be found among his belongings. By no means insightful, Simon is a workmanlike necromancer, rarely able to sense the greater significance of discoveries he makes. Of course, this doesn't matter to him; it's his sire's job to make heads or tails of it. As always, he's just doing his own small duty.

THE DROWNED MONASTERY

The Rhineland, Germany

In the lowlands of the Rhine Valley, there lies a lake called Tötten. Rising up from the midst of the small lake is the Drowned Monastery, a place cursed by God and now a stronghold of the Adversary and his servants.

Once the monastery was a holy place, tended by Benedictine monks. The prior of the house was Brother Heinrich, a most pious and holy man. But Heinrich suffered from a single sin, and that was the sin of pride. He was aware of his own holiness and proud of his service to God and His house. Heinrich chanced to

STORY SEEDS

- The ghoul Pagnacci, older than any of the carnival's other members, Cainite or otherwise, has grown tired of the road and wishes to retire. This happens in the coterie's domain, and he offers to swear fealty to one of the characters (if they are nobles) or otherwise become their thrall. The Carnaval Moriendi takes issue; Pagnacci knows too much about the carnival to just leave behind. The performers may choose to kill him in the night (in his new master's haven...) or forcibly return him to the fold, depending on how his new master reacts to their demands.

- Margot's lover Euryale returns but not to assume his erstwhile role of leader. In his absence from the carnival, Euryale has found a place for himself in the Church, using his own knowledge of the Cainite condition to hunt vampires. His current guise is that of a mendicant priest, a wandering witch-hunter walking a solitary path of reckoning. For years, the Ravnos has kept an eye on the cult, assisted by his childe Ori (whom he Embraced under an alias, obviously), and Euryale wishes now to right what he sees as old wrongs for the purposes of penance. If he exposes himself openly to the carnival, what follows is ugly indeed, as Margot feels spurned and reluctant to acquiesce to her former paramour's destructive new desires. This story seed can work as a one-shot, with players taking

the roles of the various Cainites who are part of the carnival or assuming the roles of ghouls and acting as go-betweens in addition to their performance duties. The story seed can also work with the players' characters not being associated with the carnival at all but, rather, residents of a city to which the troupe arrives and proceeds to tear itself apart in a torrent of (others') blood.

- With a close coterie of only a few Cainites, it's difficult to support the vitae needs of almost two dozen ghouls. While Carnaval Moriendi visits the characters' haven town, Margot asks the characters for a deal — in exchange for leaving the citizens be, would the characters provide for a few ghouls? The characters obviously have the leverage of commodity, but the carnival could literally turn the town upside down in a blood orgy. If the characters do agree to help, who's to say Margot keeps her word? Or Ori for that matter (especially if he's feeling truculent)?

- Of course, unscrupulous, heretical or just opportunistic Cainites could join Carnaval Moriendi, whose nomadic travels would provide no end of story hooks. But can the carnival sustain so many vampires without attracting prohibitive attention? The cult already has enemies among the religious and intellectual societies of France — could it survive the open enmity of the Cainite community as well?

become the confessor to Lukas, a young novice of the house. One day, Lukas confessed to Brother Heinrich the most incredible tale. He begged the prior to help him, since Brother Heinrich was a most holy man and Lukas's soul was in grave need of salvation. Heinrich listened as Lukas told a tale of being seduced by a dark-clad stranger. This man taught Lukas that sin, not piety, was the road to salvation and inducted him into a cult that practiced debaucheries such as the young man had never known. He described them all in lurid detail, and Brother Heinrich found his breath quickening in his dark confessional, his heart pounding from Lukas's tale. Again, the novice begged for Brother Heinrich's aid, and his request appealed to the monk's pride. Surely God had brought Lukas to the prior so he could save the young man's soul and cast out this terrible evil!

But instead, Heinrich was seduced by Lukas's wiles, for the young man was not penitent at all, nor was he a mere initiate of this cult, but its master. Lukas seduced Heinrich with his tales of sin and debauchery, with his angelic face and his seeming repentance, until the prior

was his willing slave. When the abbot of the monastery fell ill and died, Brother Heinrich was chosen to replace the man, although there were whispers about the unseemly amount of attention the monk lavished on a novice of the house. Heinrich spread Lukas's corruption to his brothers, bringing to them the heresy that sin was the true path to God. The new abbot confused their faith with his sermons and tests, tainted their communion with Lukas' vitae and then tempted them with all the pleasures and sins of the flesh until even the most faithful among them succumbed.

Almost 40 years ago, a party of nuns traveling through the valley had the poor fortune to come to the abbey seeking shelter. What they found instead was a bastion of Hell on Earth, where they suffered unimaginable torments at the hands of Lukas and his followers. Though they cried for mercy and prayed for deliverance, there was no hope for them, and they each welcomed death when it came.

But perhaps God heard their prayers, for that spring, the river flooded as never before, and a deluge poured into

the valley where the monastery lay. It scrubbed the stones clean and killed most of the monks, washing their corpses up on the shore and creating Lake Tötten, the lake of death. The flooded monastery sitting in the midst of the new lake was abandoned and, although there were tales, few wondered about the fate of its abbot.

rites and Practices

Unknown to the folk in the surrounding area, the Drowned Monastery is still inhabited, though by increasingly fewer of the living and more of the dead. Lukas escaped the ravages of the flood with the aid of his loyal Heinrich and some other followers. They allowed the world to believe they were drowned, rather than risk having their sins exposed. The few folk who reach the monastery by boat never leave, adding to tales that the place is haunted and better left alone.

This belief suits Lukas well, since it creates a haven where he can lead his diabolical followers in their worship and rites. A follower of the Road of the Devil, Lukas truly believes that debauchery and indulgence are a means to enlightenment and teaches this philosophy to his followers. The cult has become increasingly depraved over the years, cut off from the outside world and forced to become bandits to acquire the goods they

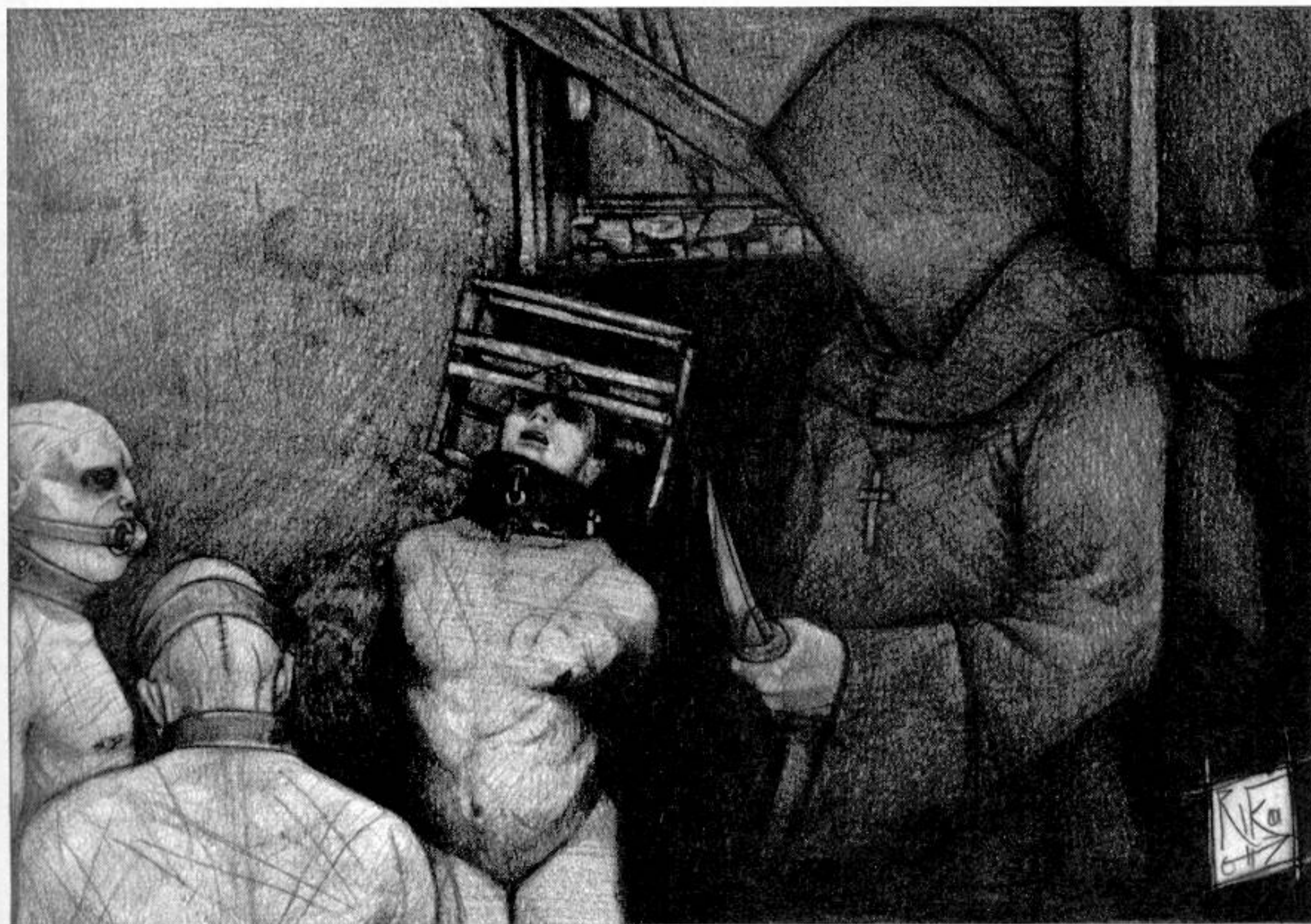
need to survive. They abduct people into the cult or tempt them with the pleasures the cult has to offer.

The cult continues much like a monastery, with Lukas as the abbot and Heinrich as his prior and right hand. But the devotions of the monks and nuns consist of discovering new depths of depravity and sin under the watchful eye of their master. Communion is laced with Lukas's blood, and most members of the cult are under blood oath to him. The cult keeps prisoners in the partly flooded lower areas of the monastery for torture and amusement until they are no longer of any use and Lukas drinks them dry.

Every few months, a raiding party (often led by Heinrich or even Lukas himself) leaves the monastery to rob and kidnap travelers. When successful, these raids end in a debauched Mass and a terrible orgy, with the surviving victims kept prisoner until they envy the dead. Thus far, no one has escaped from the monastery alive, although the activities of the bandits increasingly concern the authorities.

Influence and Activities

The Drowned Monastery is the cult's stronghold and Lukas' haven from the outside world. It originally consisted of four levels (including its cellars), but only the uppermost two are of any real use now. The cellars



UNDYING COVENS

are completely underwater, while the courtyard, cloisters and first level are under about three feet of water (the monastery having been located on a low hill when the area around it flooded). The first level is mostly used as a dungeon, where prisoners are kept chained to the walls, waist-deep in the cold and fetid water. The skeletons of a few unfortunates who died still hang in places. The flooded courtyard holds a few boats the monks have acquired over the years.

The second floor of the building holds the quarters of the members of the cult and the chamber they have converted into a blasphemous chapel where they conduct their rites. They store what goods they have here and are always eager to acquire more. The treasury of the monastery has helped to buy things, along with the goods stolen from victims of their raids. The uppermost floor holds the chambers of Prior Heinrich and Master Lukas, including a stone sarcophagus moved there by his followers for him to rest in during the day.

Though Lukas' power is supreme within the abbey walls, it is considerably less so outside of them. Heinrich has chosen some outsiders to visit the Drowned Monastery and join the cult in its worship, and these souls are beholden to the cult and willing to do whatever is necessary to keep their secret. But Lukas moves cautiously to avoid being discovered, particularly by the Church, which has grown more vigilant of late.

Most recently, Lukas has set his sights on expanding his influence and corrupting other monasteries and clergy. Toward that end, he wants to indoctrinate novices into his cult, then send them to other houses when he can be assured of their loyalty and ability to choose likely victims for conversion. The potential converts can either be brought back willingly or led to investigate Lukas's sins as Heinrich was, drawn into learning the cult's rites as a means of destroying them but, ultimately, being corrupted by them.

This game is a dangerous one, since each step risks exposure of the secrets of the Drowned Monastery, but Lukas has little choice. Almost 90 years ago, Lukas pledged to corrupt 100 innocent souls within 100 years in the service of a demon of the Pit. Lukas has corrupted many over the years since, but he's still more than a score short of his goal, with only a few years left to him before his patron calls his debt due. So Lukas' corrupt seeds will soon be scattered, searching for virgin soil in which they can root and grow.

MEMBERSHIP

In addition to Master Lukas and Prior Heinrich, the cult of the Drowned Monastery includes some 20 devoted followers, roughly a third of them Lukas's ghouls (including Heinrich). Some favored women are members of the cult, since Lukas is interested in his followers being able to tempt men with their wiles and

not all men are as interested in a handsome boy as Heinrich was. New members are added slowly, to avoid suspicion, but the cult has had over a dozen guests at its rites in recent years, who have enjoyed the cult's hospitality and can be depended on to keep their mouths shut and perform the occasional favor when asked.

During the daytime, Heinrich is in charge of the monastery and sees to it that everything is under control. He takes great pleasure in disciplining those who step out of line, so much so that few ever do. The daily work of the house involves maintaining the crumbling monastery, preparing food, handling the spoils from the cult's raids and undertaking whatever occasional dark diversions Heinrich allows the faithful. The cultists also spend time in worship to their infernal masters. Heinrich has become an eager student of the occult, seeking out and acquiring rare manuscripts and the like when he can.

At night, the cultists receive communion from their abbot in the form of wine laced with blood and perform other rites to honor the powers of Hell. They sometimes leave the monastery under the cover of darkness to rob and raid or to travel on the cult's business elsewhere, although Lukas doesn't like for his followers to leave the monastery for too long.

LUKAS, ABBOT OF TOTTEN

9th generation Nosferatu, childe of Sigmund the Leper

Nature: Monster

Demeanor: Child (sometimes Penitent)

Embrace: 1121

Apparent Age: mid-teens

To most, Lukas could be mistaken for a choirboy or young novice of a holy order. His innocent appearance belies the cunning monster that dwells beneath, the monster who systematically corrupted a house of God in the name of Hell. Even now, he keeps mortals in thrall, teaching them the ways of pain and sin, partly as a way of proving to himself that there are no truly virtuous men in the world, only those who have not yet been corrupted.

As a mortal lad, Lukas was proud of his fine beauty and unblemished skin — rare indeed for a peasant boy — and reveled in casual seductions and coquettish behavior. Reveled, that is, until he teased a leper shuffling across the road at night, only to find the wretch to be a monster of nightmare. Sigmund the Leper drained the child dry, fed him a clot of his vitae and left him to suffer. That first terrible night tore at Lukas's soul and flesh — pustules burst on his beautiful face, mold and raw patches claimed his glistening hair, black rot took his teeth.

For a full year, the childe scampered through the woods like the vermin he had become. Fear and disgust were poor replacements for lust, and Lukas despaired.



He would do anything for a restoration of his beauty, anything at all.

Far below, something heard his plea.

Lukas gladly struck a fool's bargain and thrilled to see his beauty restored. Soon, he was seducing better than he ever had before. The next 90 odd years were a pleasure indeed, but now, the deadline is fast approaching, and Lukas is terrified his terrible mien will be restored and made worse still. He is not even sure how that could be possible, but he has seen enough not to doubt the powers of his infernal master.

BROTHER HEINRICH, PRIOR OF TOTTEN

Ghoul of Lukas

Nature: Fanatic

Demeanor: Tyrant

First Thrall: 1162

Apparent Age: mid-40s

Heinrich was a godly man once. He loved Christ with all his heart and felt the call to His service as a young man. Heinrich excelled in the cloister, with a sharp mind and a willingness to obey his teachers. He was a model novice and took his vows with the blessings of his mentors, who expected great things from him. And Heinrich did rise through the ranks of the Benedictine order, eventually becoming the prior of his house. But he climbed no further, partly because he was so good as his job of maintaining the order of the house and partly because he lacked humility and sympathy. His righteousness was a bit too pure, too brittle.

Heinrich wasn't even consciously aware of his attraction to Lukas — or how such fancies had driven him to take the cowl. He'd long since buried all such feelings, or so he thought. But he was drawn to the boy's innocence and, more importantly, to the lad's need. Lukas was a soul in want of salvation, so Heinrich would bring it to him, and Lukas would be so very grateful. But in entering Lukas's world, Heinrich fell into a pit from which he would never emerge. Now Lukas is his lord and master and Heinrich the loyal servant, as efficient in running his house as ever and ready to carry out his master's bidding.

To Heinrich, Lukas is a kind of angel who has opened the prior's eyes and shown him the truth of the world, shown him his true self. He believes the path of sin is the only true way and that all others are deluded. He has been a ghoul for decades and is thoroughly addicted to Lukas's blood and his presence. A small part of Heinrich cringes in self-loathing at his existence, but he vents such feelings in the tortures he carries out in his master's name.

STORY SEEDS

- The depredations of the bandits in the river valley have increased, making travelers nervous and interfering with trade. The mortal authorities are under increasing pressure to deal with the problem, even the local Cainite lords are becoming concerned.

- A holy relic is stolen from a nearby abbey, raising a furor as authorities search for the thieves and an even worse tumult when the reliquary is found, open and desecrated. It turns out the thief is one of the abbey's own brothers, who may reveal his involvement with the Drowned Monastery under torture (or interrogation using Disciplines such as Presence). The diabolists decide to eliminate him to cover their tracks, making his death look like a remorseful suicide.

- A retainer of one of the characters is captured by bandits and vanishes into the Drowned Monastery. If the Nosferatu finds out the retainer's loyalties, Lukas may use the servant to lure the character (and possibly his coterie) to the monastery, tempting them to join him and trying to destroy them if they refuse. Alternately, he might condition the retainer as a catspaw and release him so he can lure his former master into a trap.





Chapter Three: Pulling the Strings

*I will have this done, so I
order it done: let my will re-
place reasoned judgement
-Juvenal, Satires*

The subtle manipulations and schemes of the Damned can easily form the basis for a **Dark Ages** chronicle. This chapter provides players and Storytellers with dramatic systems for handling such interaction, from the seduction of a single mortal to the creation of cults that span nations and generations. As with all such systems in **Vampire: The Dark Ages**, the ones in these pages are only guidelines and suggestions; use them or not, as you see fit.

CULT CREATION

Players and Storytellers creating new cults for their **Dark Ages** chronicles should read through the rest of this book to get a feel for how and why Cainites create cults and what they use them for, then read through the questions and answers below for additional guidelines.

Some Storytellers may prefer to handle the creation and maintenance of a cult simply through roleplaying and a few appropriate Trait rolls. This section also presents an optional system for quantifying cults in game terms, for those interested in a more defined way of creating cults within the game. It is particularly aimed at players interested in having their characters control a cult from the start of a chronicle, rather than creating one in play.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

In creating a cult (either as a player or Storyteller) there are a number of different things to consider. A look through Chapter One shows the many different elements of vampiric cults. The following is a checklist of some major things to consider when creating a cult for inclusion in a **Vampire: The Dark Ages** chronicle.

- **What is the cult's purpose?**

The most basic thing to consider when creating a cult is why it exists in the first place. Building and maintaining a cult is an involved process, so Cainites rarely do it on a whim. What is the agenda of the founder(s) of the cult and how does the cult aid in fulfilling that agenda? For example, a cult might exist to provide a vampire with a ready source of blood, while concealing her feeding habits from the local community, or it might exist for a purpose as sublime as offering salvation to mortal and Cainite souls through esoteric religious rites. Note that the cult's apparent purpose (or the one its followers know of) and its true purpose may not be one and the same. Ashen cults are often not what they appear to be on the surface.

- **What are the cult's precepts?**

What beliefs does the cult espouse? Belonging to a heretical sect of any sort is a dangerous thing in the Dark Medieval world, so a cult must have beliefs that its followers feel are important enough to risk their well-being. A cult's

precepts are often (but not always) strongly related to its purpose. They can be quite simple, such as "Dionysus is a true god and rewards those who worship him faithfully" or as complex as you care to make them.

Try and come up with some simple statements of what the cult believes, and consider why it believes those things. For example, a cult might believe in a pagan god because its Cainite leader claims to be the god's priest (or the god himself) and uses his vampiric abilities as proof of divine power. Of course, not all beliefs have a rational basis, and religious fervor might simply be a part of the cult, but determining what the cult believes helps you to know how the cult will act (and react) as a whole to events in the chronicle.

- **Does your vampire believe in the cult's precepts?**

As mentioned above, Cainites often create a cult for one apparent purpose while having another in mind. Some vampire cult-leaders believe wholeheartedly in their cult's precepts and gather followers in order to spread their truth and insight. Others cynically adopt whatever beliefs and trappings are most likely to impress and convince the herd, allowing them to direct the cult toward their own ends.

Some even fall in the middle, believing in what the cult stands for but aware that not everything the cult claims is true, simply necessary because the lower ranks or the uninitiated cannot truly understand the inner mysteries. They need simple explanations "for their own good." For example, a vampire may believe that she carries the gift of God in her vitae, but she conceals her need to feed on blood because she knows that her pious followers would not fully understand that aspect of her divine nature.

- **What does the cult offer its members?**

In addition to what the cult's leader wants from it, consider what the cult's followers expect to gain. What does the cult offer them that the Church, a craft guild or conventional orders of knighthood do not? Why do the cult's members choose to join it, and why do they stay? As Chapter One shows, there are many needs a sect can fill, although few cults manage to fulfill all of them. What needs does the cult aim at fulfilling, and what sort of people does this attract to it?

- **How large is the cult?**

How many members does the cult have? It may be as few as a handful to thousands of people scattered across Europe. Generally speaking, the larger the cult, the more likely it is to begin taking on a life of its own, becoming an entity distinct from its leadership and, therefore, more likely to survive a change in leadership. Large cults tend to carry greater influence, but they're also more difficult to control and more subject to things such as schisms and rebellion from within. Small cults

ASHEN CULTS

are easier to conceal and easier for a single leader or small group to control directly. A large cult also implies one that offers something a great many people want (and are willing to risk to obtain), while a small cult can be more specialized and may lack such broad appeal (or may simply not have been around long enough to garner it).

- **What sort of influence does the cult have?**

Every cult has influence, at least over its members, but how much influence does the cult have over its members and in society as a whole? Are the cult's followers fanatically loyal and willing to give even their lives in the name of the cult's cause, or are they more pragmatic about their involvement? If the cult does engender fierce loyalty, then how? It may be a matter of excellent leadership, personal charisma, the blood oath, the use of Disciplines such as Dominate and Presence, religious fervor, patriotism or some combination of all of the above. If the cultists aren't fanatically loyal (and most probably aren't), how far are they willing to go for the cult's cause?

A cult's members may also exert influence outside of its ranks. For example, a heretical cult that counts certain high-ranking clergymen among its number has some measure of influence within the Church, while a cult of tradesmen may influence others of their trade and a cult of courtly ladies may influence their fathers, sons, brothers and husbands at court. In what areas does the cult exert influence, and how much influence does it have? Oftentimes a cult's outside influence is limited by its need for secrecy; pressing too hard may raise suspicions leading back to the cult.

- **What are the cult's material resources?**

Closely related to influence in the Dark Medieval world is the matter of the cult's material resources. What lands and goods does the cult own (or at least control)? Are members expected to turn over some or all of their wealth and property to the cult, or do they keep ownership of it (perhaps with the cult occasionally borrowing from its members when needed)? Does the cult have any means of income, such as farmland, game lands (for hunting) or even quarries or mines? A cult may mix and match resources: owning land in various places, exacting a tithe from its members and maintaining a treasury of its own (much like the Church does).

Also consider how much of the cult's resources are "tied up" in serving the needs of its members. For example, a cult might own an abbey in an isolated area and much of the surrounding land, with its members expected to farm the land to support the cult and their own needs. Although the cult's daily needs are met, it may not have a great deal of wealth for other matters.

- **How is the cult's secrecy maintained?**

Cults must hide from nearly everyone, from the Church and the nobility (both of whom see heresies as threats to their authority) to other covens and Cainites that might exist at cross-purposes to the cult. How does the cult maintain its secrecy? Certainly, the risk of excommunication and execution are great motivators, but what techniques do cult members use? Are there secret signs, ciphers, handshakes and symbols used to recognize other cult members? Are messages passed on using a sort of code or through a cell network, where each member knows only one or two others (and thus cannot betray the entire organization)? Perhaps the members wear masks or hoods to conceal their identities at gatherings and meet only in isolated, out of the way places where they're unlikely to be happened upon.

Some cults isolate themselves as much as possible from the outside world, while others try to hide in plain sight, relying on the security and influence provided by their members to keep the cults' activities hidden. Certainly, having a cultist able to offer a chapel rectory or rarely used chamber of a castle for the cult's meeting place can be quite useful.

- **How is the cult organized?**

Does the cult have a hierarchy and, if so, how many levels are there to it? Are the leaders of the cult considered "the first among equals," or are they (more likely) set above the other members? A cult may have as few as two ranks (its leaders and their followers) or many, with a supreme leader or leader, many offices, sub-leaders, lieutenants and so forth. Cult hierarchies are often organized along the feudal model of the Dark Medieval age, with lower-ranked members owing fealty to their superiors, who owe fealty to their superiors and so forth. A structure similar to the Church is also common, with laypersons, deacons, priests, bishops, cardinals and, perhaps, even a pope.

- **Are the cult's members mortals, vampires or both?**

Some ashen cults are made up of mortals, led by one or more Cainites, while other cults are entirely made up of vampires or a mix of mortals and the undead. If a cult excludes one or the other, then why? Perhaps the cult's leaders do want the competition, or perhaps, the cult's percepts only include particular followers. The cult may be aimed toward goals only vampires seek (such as Golconda), or it may have different ranks, with the "inner circle" made up of Cainites and the outer ranks made up of mortals awaiting to be Embraced when they are judged worthy (and, perhaps, death if they are not).

There's also the matter of ghouls to be considered. Do the Cainite leaders of the cult create ghouls among their mortal followers? Are there any restrictions on

making ghouls, such as only so many to each vampire (to ensure that no one controls too many followers) or are the limits up to each individual? Are ghouls accorded any special status within the cult? Are they considered an "intermediate" step between mortality and the Embrace? Or are they actually considered *lower* ranked than the cult's merely human members, treated as the vampires' slaves or "hounds"?

- **How are members recruited and initiated?**

Chapter One discusses many ideas on cults seeking out and initiating members. Consider which of these methods best suit the cult, which ones it uses and which ones it does not and why. Do the cultists recruit new members, or is that work done by the cult's leaders or lieutenants? Who decides if a potential recruit can join the cult, and what tests or trials must a recruit pass in order to do so? Does initiation involve particular rituals, the swearing of oaths (perhaps even a blood oath) or the use of vampiric Disciplines?

- **What are the cult's most important rituals?**

Rituals are part of the glue that holds a cult together. What sort of rituals does the cult engage in, and how do they support the cult's percepts and goals? "Rituals" can include everything from regular gatherings of the cult's members to individual devotions. Rituals may include prayers or other religious elements, solemn social or philosophical discussion or hedonistic revels, depending on the nature of the cult. Do the cult's leaders take part in its rituals in some way, or do they remain aloof? Who leads rituals, and what roles do the different ranks of the cult play in them? Do rituals serve a purpose other than what the cultists believe? For example, many monasteries engage in the practice of bloodletting as a means of cooling the sanguine humors

CULT (NEW BACKGROUND)

You have control of a cult. You may have founded it yourself or usurped it from another. A cult offers different advantages, depending on its makeup, its structure and what resources it can call upon. This Background gives you cult points that allow you to design your own cult, with the Storyteller's approval. Storytellers not using the optional point system for cult creation can simply base the cult's overall usefulness and loyalty on the character's rating in this Background, using the point system as a guideline.

- You have 1 cult point to spend.
- You have 2 cult points to spend.
- You have 3 cult points to spend.
- You have 4 cult points to spend.
- You have 5 cult points to spend.

and promoting health, but certainly, Cainites working behind the scenes would have other uses for those bowls of fresh blood.

CULT TRAITS

Those who wish a concrete way to quantify a cult along the lines of other social elements (such as Allies and Influence) can use the Cult Background (see sidebar). The Background translates into "cult points" that serve to buy various Traits, much like those of an individual character. Some Traits have negative values, giving the player more points to spend on other areas of the cult by giving it a weakness or deficient Trait. The Traits of a cult are: Size, Influence, Loyalty, Resources, Secrecy and Arcana.

SIZE

The first thing to determine about a cult is its size: How many people belong to it? A cult can be as small as a handful of followers or vast enough to have members scattered all across Europe (and possibly elsewhere). A small cult offers the advantage of more direct control; a vampire can oversee all the activities of the cult members. A large cult is more difficult to control directly. The cult leader must rely on the loyalty and abilities of underlings (see "Loyalty," below).

Points	Size
0	10 members.
1	20 members.
2	50 members.
3	100 members.
4	250 members.
5	500 members.
6	1,000 members.
7	Greater than 1,000 members. Such cults are extremely rare, and the Storyteller may not want to allow player characters to control them.

INFLUENCE

How much influence does the cult have in mortal society? By necessity, most cults are secretive, but they can still exercise influence via their members. For example, the Cainite Heresy has considerable influence within the Church, while another cult may have influence in a particular land or culture or among a class of people such as craftsmen, artists or scholars. In general, a cult's influence should be limited to one area, be it a nation, religion, culture or any other area the Storyteller approves, but players can purchase multiple Influence ratings for cults that have power in more than one area of society.

Points Influence

- 0 None. The cult has no influence over anyone outside of its own members. Its members may be outcasts, escaped slaves, cut off from the outside world, presumed dead or otherwise without influence of their own.
- 1 Modest influence. The cult has some small influence in a particular area: a town, a monastery, a religious sect or so forth.
- 2 Well entrenched. The cult is a factor in the politics of a city or an equivalent arena. It might strongly influence a particular faction of that city, such as crafters, masons, beggars, monks or soldiers.
- 3 Influential. The cult can exert influence over an area the size of a barony, drawing the attention of lesser nobles (and influencing their decisions to some degree).
- 4 Strongly influential. The cult is a power to be reckoned with in an entire county or diocese, influencing the nobility and the most powerful people in the area.
- 5 Vastly influential. The cult's influence can be felt over an entire nation or within the whole of the Church.

LOYALTY

A key factor in any cult is the loyalty of its members. Loyalty determines not only how far cult members are willing to go to fulfill the commands of their leaders, but also determines how much danger there is of rebellion or treachery from within the cult's ranks.

Note that the cult's loyalty level represents the *overall* loyalty of the majority of the cult's members, not every individual member. At the Storyteller's discretion, the exact proportions of loyalty within the cult may vary slightly. For example, a Zealous cult might have a small cadre of truly fanatical members, a large number of zealous members, some devoted members and a few moderately loyal folk on the fringes. The Storyteller can always decide the exact loyalty and agenda of any important cult members; a high loyalty rating is not an absolute guarantee against betrayal from within, it only makes it less likely.

Loyalty — more than any other aspect of a cult — must also be maintained. This maintenance involves leaders reinforcing their authority over the cult on a regular basis, by performing rituals, interacting with subordinates, using Disciplines such as Dominate and Presence,

Points Loyalty

- 2 Divided: The cult is deeply divided into factions and beset by internal strife. Coups, betrayal and rebellion are all likely possibilities, and even the cult leaders aren't entirely sure whom they can trust.
- 1 Opportunistic: Most of the members of the cult have a cynical, self-serving attitude toward it and its leadership. If an opportunity to better their own lot at the expense of the cult, its members or its leaders comes along, they're likely to take it.
- 0 Fairly Loyal: The members of the cult are reasonably loyal to its cause and its leaders. Although they won't do anything that would seriously endanger them, they obey the cult's dictates to the best of their ability.
- 1 Moderately Loyal: The cult's followers keep its secrets under most conditions and do as they are commanded by the cult's leadership, performing any task short of risking physical or social harm.
- 2 Devoted: The cultists are willing to take dire risks in the name of the cult and will fight to defend it when necessary.
- 3 Zealous: The cult members keep its secrets under any conditions except torture or supernatural coercion. They always fight to defend the cult, its members and, particularly, its leaders from any outside force. Members are willing to take any risk for the cult.
- 4 Fanatical: Members of the cult are true fanatics, possibly conditioned using vampiric Disciplines. They will die before betraying the cult or its ideals in any way and gladly give their lives in service to the cult.

strengthening blood oaths, handing out rewards (and punishments) and so forth. This should take a fair amount of the leaders' time, and those who neglect such upkeep should find the cult's loyalty slipping.

RESOURCES

What material resources, both wealth and goods, does the cult control? Some cults count nothing but their members as resources. Others have considerable treasuries and own areas of land, perhaps even a castle. A cult's resources are not always equivalent to those of its members. Some cults require members to give a tithe, a portion of their income (perhaps all of it) to the cult. Others make little or no financial demands of their members (often

because they have nothing to give). A cult's resources also determine what it can offer its members by way of material things. A poor cult isn't likely to have a secret meeting place other than an isolated ruin, forest grove or dirt basement. Likewise, a poor cult can't afford to arm its members with swords or mail; they have to rely on whatever implements are at hand. Wealthy cults can afford all of these things and more.

Cult resources are separate from personal resources (determined by the character's Resources Background). A cult leader can draw upon the cult's resources, but generally, they must be managed by a mortal member of the cult, able to move about during the day. A cult's resources must also support the cult's needs first, although the more loyal the cult, the more likely it will tolerate personal use of resources by its leaders. See "Cults and Other Backgrounds," below, for more information.

Points Resources

- 1 None: The cult has no resources of its own, and its members likely have none to offer it. It must meet in an out of the way place abandoned by the rest of the world.
- 0 Scant: The cult gathers enough to support itself and its members, with a little left over each month. Most likely, the members of the cult are peasant folk or beggars who make their living in humble ways or rely on the charity of others. The cult meets where it can, sometimes in the humble home of one of its members.
- 1 Modest: The cult has regular access to a structure such as a cottage or a clean and reasonably safe cave or similar place. It has a small income above and beyond the upkeep and needs of its members.
- 2 Comfortable: The cult has a permanent house or similar structure and has a small income above and beyond the upkeep and needs of its members.
- 3 Great Wealth: The cult controls a manor or an entire village, or it may control a merchant house or similar business. In addition, the cult has a small treasury for necessary expenses.
- 4 Vast Wealth: The cult owns considerably property, equal to a castle or 10-20 entire villages, or runs a huge trading empire.

SECRECY

How well is the cult hidden from outsiders? In the Dark Medieval world, the Church burns those guilty of heresy, and nobles take a poor view indeed of anything that smacks of treason. Ashen cults often smack of both

and must hide their existences. Cults also run the risk of being discovered by rival Cainites, by mortals or by other supernatural beings that may not care for the cult's activities.

Secrecy is a measure of how well the cult covers up its activities, not necessarily whether or not individual cultists are likely to reveal its existence. That's covered by the Loyalty Trait (above). Still, a cult with great secrecy offers enemies few opportunities to even find a member of the cult to question. Someone looking for a

Points Secrecy

- 2 The cult's existence is known to certain potentially dangerous mortals, such as clergy or members of the nobility. It's also known to most Cainites and to possibly other supernatural beings as well (such as a wizard). The cult must constantly be on its guard against infiltrators and attacks.
- 1 The cult's existence is known to most of the Cainites in its area, who may seek to undermine or manipulate the cult for reasons of their own.
- 0 The cult's existence is not generally known, but it is not difficult to discover. An extended Perception + Investigation roll (difficulty 6, five successes) reveals the cult's existence and basic information about it. Additional successes provide more detailed information.
- 1 The cult manages to hide from routine investigation. An extended Perception + Investigation roll (difficulty 7, six successes) reveals the cult's existence and basic information about it.
- 2 The cult makes excellent use of passwords, secret signs and so forth to conceal itself. The Perception + Investigation roll is difficulty 8 and requires seven successes.
- 3 Most people doubt the cult exists. Secrecy is ingrained in its members. The Perception + Investigation roll is difficulty 9 and requires eight successes.
- 4 No one except the cultists themselves is aware that the cult actually exists as anything other than a vague legend. The secrets of the cult are well protected even from its lower-ranking members. The Perception + Investigation roll is difficulty 10 and requires nine successes. Investigators may search a lifetime for evidence of the cult, and most of them trip up long before they find anything, allowing the cult to deal with them.

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cult can make an extended Perception + Investigation roll to find evidence of its existence and information about it and its practices. The difficulty and number of successes required are based on the cult's Secrecy Trait. A failure turns up no information and only wastes time. A botch on the Investigation roll, or posing the wrong questions to the wrong people, alerts the cult of the investigation.

ARCANA

While most cults are made up entirely of mortals (and often ghouls), some count Cainites among their ranks, and other cults have access to supernatural resources, such as sorcery or the like. How much access the cult's leaders have to these resources depends on the cult's loyalty and how the resources are used. As a general rule, any arcane resources the cult has will be less powerful than the cult leadership, and cult leaders should be wary of permitting more powerful supernatural forces within a cult, lest they become a threat. Note that this Trait applies only to vampires and sorcerers who are otherwise ordinary members of the cult; personal retainers of the characters are covered by the Retainers Background.

For more information on hedge magic and its possible uses in the chronicle, see **Liege, Lord and Lackey** and the **Sorcerer, Revised Edition** sourcebook for **Mage: The Ascension**.

Points Arcana

- | | |
|---|---|
| 0 | The cult is made up entirely of mortals with no supernatural abilities or resources. The only arcana the cult can call upon are those of the leader(s). |
| 1 | Some cult members may have a dot or two in sorcery, knowledge of the occult and, possibly, access to some occult texts. |
| 2 | The cult includes a small number of vampires (a tenth of the cult's number at most, in addition to the cult's leadership) or sorcerers with as many as three dots in paths. |
| 3 | Up to a quarter of the cult's members are vampires, or the cult has sorcerers with up to four dots in magical paths. |
| 4 | Up to half of the cult's members are vampires, or the cult includes sorcerers with abilities up to five dots. This level of arcana or higher combined with a low loyalty rating is a recipe for intrigue and overthrow. |
| 5 | The cult is entirely made up of vampires and/or sorcerers. |

CULTS AND OTHER BACKGROUNDS

Astute readers may note that cults offer their leaders access to many of the same benefits as existing Backgrounds from **Vampire: The Dark Ages**, often at a somewhat reduced cost. For example, a Cainite with four dots in the Cult Background can have a cult with wealth equal to five dots in the Resources Background. On the face of it, this might seem like a cheap way for characters to acquire other Backgrounds and have a cult of followers to boot.

It's not quite that simple. Note that a vampire with Cult 4 who spends his four points on vast resources has none left to spend on the other cult Traits. That means he's most likely got a cult with a less than dozen members at best, no social influence, shaky loyalty and some risk of being discovered by others (who will probably see the cult as a wealthy and vulnerable target). More importantly, the wealth belongs to the cult, not necessarily its leader(s) — a fine, but important distinction.

In general, it's important to note that the various advantages a cult offers are balanced by the fact that the character needs to devote considerable time to maintaining the cult and dealing with its members, as well as protecting the cult from outside influences and potential enemies. Also, even the most fanatically loyal cult isn't made up of mindless automatons; cult members have their own needs and interests, which no doubt coincide with the Cainite's to some degree, but they are not simply extensions of the character's will.

Storytellers should make an effort to distinguish the cult's Traits from the character's. Players may want to take other Backgrounds for their characters, either to increase the usefulness of a cult by having some personal Allies or Retainers or to have some Backgrounds separate from the cult, such as personal Resources.

COOPERATIVE CULT BUILDING

Cult points go quickly, so a single character, even with five dots in the Cult Background, can't start with control of a vast, powerful cult (which is as it should be in most **Dark Ages** games). However, a group of Cainites can pool their cult points together at the start of a game to build a single cult controlled by all of them. A group of five vampires has the potential to pool up to 25 cult points, allowing them to create a *truly* powerful cult. Of course, the catch is that they have to share control over it, and that comes with challenges of its own.

Storytellers should be cautious when allowing players to pool cult points to build a shared cult. The maximum cost of a cult using the point system is 29 points. A group

of six characters could achieve that if each of them has five dots in the Cult Background, allowing the players to control a vast, continent-spanning cult of fanatical vampires and sorcerers that command tremendous wealth and influence. If that's not the sort of chronicle you want to run, you should feel free to ask the players to come up with something a little less dramatic, setting maximum levels they can assign to the various cult Traits. Also, keep in mind that characters who pour all their Background dots into Cult won't have as many left over for other useful Backgrounds such as Generation, Herd, Influence and Status.

On the other hand, if the players *really* want their characters to control a powerful cult, let them, since it will offer them more than their share of difficulties in

CULT VS. HERD

A player may look at a cult and say, "Hey, a group of loyal mortal followers! Free lunch!" While a cult does offer Cainites opportunities to slake their endless thirst in relative safety, it is not a replacement for the Herd Background, nor is it without risks of its own.

A player may choose to take the Herd Background for her character to represent access to some or all members of a cult for feeding purposes. This works just like the regular Herd Background from *Vampire: The Dark Ages*; the cult is just color explaining why the vampire's herd is so loyal to her. This arrangement allows the Cainite to feed on members of the cult in relative safety, although it doesn't necessarily mean *every* member of the cult is a willing vessel (or even aware of their leader's unusual feeding habits). The Storyteller may say that some particularly fanatical cult members make up the vampire's herd, while the rest are ignorant of the true purpose of the inner circle's rituals — or are willing to look the other way.

A vampire without the Herd Background who chooses to feed on members of her cult faces certain difficulties. Only the most loyal cultists will knowingly allow a Cainite to feed on them, and only the truly fanatical are willing to die to slake a vampire's thirst. The ecstasy of the Kiss helps to reinforce the desire to serve, but a vampire that treats cult members solely as cattle (particularly if she regularly kills vessels) is likely to face dissent sooner or later. Feeding on cultists may also expose the Cainite's true nature, which can be dangerous in cults that aren't aware that their leader is a vampire

the chronicle. If the characters are personally weak, they may face challenges from more powerful Cainites for control over the cult or even dissent from within when cult members realize that their leaders aren't infallible or all-powerful. They characters will have to devote considerable time to managing the cult and its resources, and they'll have to rely on mortal cult members to deal with things during the day. (Did the players remember to put Background dots into Allies or Retainers? If not, how much can their characters *really* trust those mortal lackeys?) The characters will potentially draw attention from other cults that may consider them rivals or outright enemies or from factions that want the players' cult as an ally... or else.

In general, it behooves players working together to start out with a modest cult, then work on improving it during the course of the chronicle.

CREATING AND IMPROVING CULTS IN PLAY

Like other Backgrounds, cults aren't purchased with experience, but created through roleplaying and proper use of the characters' various abilities. If a vampire wants a new retainer, he must seek out a suitable mortal, draw him into his service and, possibly, Dominate or bond him with the blood oath. This process takes time and effort and runs the risk of failure. The same is even truer of cults.

While the rewards of creating or expanding a cult are greater, so is the risk and the effort involved. Building or expanding a cult can easily become the focus of an entire chronicle — or at least a substantial subplot in one. How detailed the characters' efforts are depends on how much the players and the Storyteller want the cult to be the focus of the chronicle.

For a cult-based chronicle, most events revolve around the creation, maintenance, and expansion of the cult. The characters have to take into account the cult Traits described on pages 74-77, and the Storyteller can use them as a source of ideas; once the characters' have begun to gather followers, they must consider ways to improve the followers' loyalty and maintain the cabal's secrecy. The characters have to manage the cult's resources, build its influence and so forth. As a general rule, each increase in one of the cult's Traits should involve the effort of an entire story, so building a very powerful cult may take the better part of a chronicle.

In chronicles where the cult is secondary to other considerations, the Storyteller can assume that some cult matters are handled behind the scenes and focus only on the important things concerning the cult. Loyal underlings and cult members handle the night-to-night business so the leaders don't have to worry about it.

TOOLS OF CONTROL

Vampires have many tools at their disposal when it comes to influencing and controlling others. These abilities have allowed them to exercise a parasitic influence over mortal society throughout history and to maintain their power among the Damned. Any Cainite who intends to rise to power within his clan or court must learn to master at least one of these techniques, if not several.

SOCIAL INTERACTION AND RELEVANT ABILITIES

The simplest means of influence is one that mortals have used since time immemorial: social interaction. Honeyed words, a forceful presence and a meaningful glance can all help to work one's will on another. It's a complex game but one that Cainites learn to play very well. In addition to helping them move unnoticed through mortal society and aiding in the hunt, social skills provide a vampire with the means of gathering followers and building a personal power base.

Naturally, the various Social Attributes come into play here, but training in key Abilities can make up for almost any lack of natural talent, plus Cainites have a great deal of time in which to learn to seduce and manipulate. Spending some experience to raise Charisma or Manipulation is a wise investment for the player of a would-be demagogue. A number of Abilities are equally useful for establishing and maintaining influence over others, and vampire cult-leaders use all of them to varying degrees. If you want to play a cult leader, consider making Talents your primary Abilities, since that's where most of these key Abilities lie.

EMPATHY

In order to manipulate feelings it is useful to understand them. True, Empathy does imply a measure of sympathy as well as understanding, but cult-leaders easily reason away such things. After all, many cults provide their members with a sense of comfort and belonging, if not increased happiness. Those cults that instill terror and despair in their members rarely last long and usually have leaders that don't care about their followers' feelings (and, so, don't bother having much Empathy).

Generally, you roll Wits + Empathy for your character to get a feel for someone's emotions, with a difficulty equal to that character's Wits + Subterfuge. A subject that is aware your character is trying to read her (such as in a negotiation or a meeting) can make this harder by actively trying to hide her true feelings. Your character's effort becomes a resisted action, with the opposing player rolling Wits + Subterfuge against a

difficulty of your vampire's Wits + Empathy. One success is enough for your character to overcome any pretense and tell the subject's general emotional state; more successes give you additional insights into how she is feeling. If your character uses that information in a later attempt to manipulate her, the Storyteller may lower the difficulty of the attempt.

ETIQUETTE

Because it deals most of all with the rules governing polite society, Etiquette is not all that useful when it comes to maintaining cults. It does have its uses, however, when dealing with people *outside* your character's circle of followers or when introducing those in the circle to outsiders. Etiquette can also be a passport into high society, where one may seek out certain kinds of people and encourage them to join.

INTIMIDATION

Intimidation is a poor means of gathering followers; folk tend to flee from things that frighten and intimidate them. It can be very useful, on the other hand, for keeping control of the followers you have and quelling dissent and rebellion. Masters of Intimidation can end disagreements with a cold stare or a word, sending their opponents slinking off into a dark corner. However, frequent use of Intimidation tends to breed resentment and rebellion. Only Cainites assured of their ability to put down any such rebellion, or able to keep their followers in abject fear at all times, use Intimidation as their sole means of controlling a cult.

Intimidation also has more subtle uses. It covers situations where one person uses threats to get something from someone else. Such threats don't have to be overt physical displays; they can be subtle, even implied. A powerful bishop doesn't have to point out that his forces can be at someone's door with only a word from him; everyone knows it and, therefore, is intimidated by his mere presence. A brilliant man can intimidate others with the force of his intellect by using fancy speech and citing facts (the player rolls Intelligence + Intimidation). Such subtle forms of intimidation are often more effective than outright threats at keeping underlings in line.

LEADERSHIP

A key Ability for any would-be demagogue, Leadership is useful because it is a subtle and largely automatic Talent; powerful leaders tend to attract followers without even trying, whereas others have to work hard to maintain their power and position. Storytellers may lighten the burden of leadership somewhat for characters with high ratings in this Ability because so much of it comes naturally to them. They don't have any fewer responsibilities, they just find it easier to maintain the loyalty of their people.

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Most other Social Abilities focus on individual interaction, while Leadership deals with groups. Giving a rousing speech, convincing a crowd of something, whipping a mob into a frenzy (or calming one down) and getting a diverse group of people to work toward a common goal are all uses of Leadership. The appropriate Attribute depends on what the character is trying to do. Making a convincing argument is Manipulation + Leadership, while directing or inspiring others uses Charisma + Leadership. Perception or Intelligence + Leadership might allow you to learn something about someone else's style of leadership and technique (difficulty equal to that character's Wits + Subterfuge).

SUBTERFUGE

While some cult-leaders sincerely believe what they tell their followers, most Cainites don't tell their followers *everything* and usually leave out some very important details (such as the fact that they intend to drink their followers' blood, for example). Therefore, it's wise for vampires to be able to keep their own thoughts and feelings carefully hidden, while wooing their victims with the utmost charm and sincerity. Subterfuge is the defense against Empathy (above), the ability to maintain a façade

in any situation. Subterfuge is also the Ability you use to chip away at the emotional masks of others, looking for subtle weaknesses and signs of their true feelings and intent. Roll Perception + Subterfuge (difficulty equal to your subject's Manipulation + Subterfuge). Each success you get reduces the difficulty of making Empathy rolls on that individual by 1, representing a chink in their emotional armor you've discovered.

Subterfuge is also very useful in the maintenance of cults and covens. Indeed, anything that could easily be branded heresy needs to remain hidden unless it has the broad support of the local community. Intelligence + Subterfuge rolls allow characters to plan ahead, making sure their cults remain hidden. Manipulation + Subterfuge allows for quick and convincing lies to further obscure matters.

INFLUENCE

Just like breaking down a wall is simpler when you know the right place to strike, so is influencing someone when you know their strengths and (especially) their weaknesses. The judicious use of Abilities such as Alertness, Empathy, Investigation and Subterfuge, along with

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various Knowledges, can often provide the leverage necessary to make an otherwise difficult social interaction simple.

The sorts of influence one person can gain over another are many and varied. They generally fall into two categories: things people desire and things that they fear. In the first case, the vampire takes the role of tempter, ferreting out longings and desires and dangling them in front of the subject to draw him out and ensure his interest, if not his cooperation. This might be an outright seduction or as subtle as learning about a noble's passion for hawking or fine wine and using that interest as a means to gain his attention. Many Cainites are experts in mortal vices and in worming their way into mortal lives through them.

Influence is also gained through the power of fear. Vampires already have fearsome reputations as creatures of the night, and some use their supernatural abilities to inspire terror in mortals to ensure their cooperation. More subtle influence is obtained through the use of threats, particularly blackmail. Mortals (especially ones in positions of power) often have secrets, and Cainites have the ability to uncover those secrets through both mundane and supernatural means. A spying Nosferatu or a use of Steal Secrets (Auspex 4) can place a powerful weapon in a vampire's hands. If a mortal doesn't have any secret vices or shames, it's also easy enough for a clever manipulator to *create* one, then hold it over the victim's head.

USEFUL DISCIPLINES

Although their duplicitous natures and many years of experience in refining the arts of manipulation make Cainites dangerous enough, the power of their various Disciplines means that few mortals can stand against the Damned when they exert their will. Vampires have abilities that can twist heart and mind, turning even the strongest-willed enemy into an obedient and fawning slave, given enough time — and the undead have nothing if not time to work their plans.

AUSPEX

The Discipline of insight grants its user indirect power and influence over others, but if knowledge is power, then a master of Auspex is very powerful. At higher ratings, Auspex allows vampires to gather information — even directly from a subject's mind — that they can use to manipulate others into doing their bidding. A vampire with Auspex is also better prepared against treachery from within the ranks of her followers, since she can spy on them and sense deception and deceit before it is too late to act.

CHIMERSTRY

The Ravnos art of deceit is useful for Cainites who base their cults on falsehood. More than one vampire has pretended to be a holy man, sorceress or great power and

“AND THEN SOME COOL ROLEPLAYING STUFF HAPPENS...”

Storytellers need to exercise a measure of good judgment when it comes to roleplaying social interaction. Most of the time, Storytellers are advised to ignore the game systems for social actions and to rely on the players' portrayals of their characters. While it's good to encourage roleplaying, it's also important not to forget about the character's Social Traits, either. A player who's not comfortable with public speaking or on the spot oratory might have a character with a Charisma + Leadership pool of 9 or 10 dice, after all.

In some cases, it's permissible to allow players to gloss over some of their characters' exact words and simply give everyone the gist of what they're trying to say or accomplish. For example, the aforementioned player might say, “I start off the speech with something like, ‘Men of Florence! Heed the words of one of your own!’ Then, I go into how I'm not worthy to address them and so forth, really building up my humility before I point out the fact they've all so clearly overlooked regarding the proposal. That way, they're all too ashamed to admit they didn't already notice it. I'll end with something like, ‘I hope that my humble insights have been of use,’ and bow before I exit. I'll be sure to refuse the first offer to become an advisor at court out of humility before I accept.” Then the Storyteller asks the player to roll his character's Charisma + Leadership, adjusting the difficulty based on his description. This sort of “shorthand” can also speed up complex social interactions involving only one of the players (unless the rest of the group want to listen to her give a long and involved speech, in which case, go right ahead).

By the same token, Storytellers should be aware of players who are good at social interaction and improvisation playing characters who are not. While they should be rewarded for coming up with clever things to say with reduced difficulties on Social rolls, the character's Traits should be kept in mind as well. An oaf with one dot in Charisma is only going to be so likeable, no matter how pleasant his player may be.

used Chimerstry (and other Disciplines) to make it appear so. Visions of the glories of Heaven (or the tortures of Hell) can help ensure loyalty among followers.

DAIMOINON

The Baali use their dark powers — notably Sense the Sin, Fear of the Void Below and Psychomachia — to manipulate others and lure them into lives of sin and depravity. Sense the Sin in particular gives a diabolist

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the opportunity to use Presence and Subterfuge to tempt a victim, focusing on their greatest weakness.

DEMENTATION

Although the Malkavian art of madness certainly grants the ability to influence the mortal (and Cainite) mind, it is less a precise scalpel and more of a hammer striking glass. It unleashes madness in others, but the user has little control over how the victim's madness manifests itself. Cults built on madness (usually by Malkavians) are like wild beasts that can easily turn on their masters. For this reason, most Cainites consider it madness to use Dementation in the first place (but then, as the Malkavians say, one *must* be mad in order to use it at all). True masters of the Discipline still find uses for Dementation in creating cults. Used carefully, it can shape a cult to mirror the madness of its creator.

DOMINATE

One of the key Disciplines for gathering followers, Dominate allows the user to directly control others. But in the creation and leadership of a cult, Dominate is not always as useful as it might appear, since it imposes the vampire's will without necessarily changing the subject's true nature. Still, properly applied, domination can ensure a Cainite's control over nearly any mortal — and many vampires as well.

Techniques such as Reveler's Memory and Lure of Subtle Whispers (Dominate 3 and 4, respectively) can slowly wear away at a victim's mind and will, replacing them with unthinking obedience to the vampire. Reveler's Memory is useful for eliminating memories or ideas that conflict with the master's will, making the subject more agreeable and loyal even when not under the vampire's direct influence. Likewise, some Cainites use Lure of Subtle Whispers to weaken a subject's will without destroying it altogether. By stretching out the time it takes to completely dominate the victim (by at least twice as long, sometimes longer), a fraction of the retainer's personality is left intact, enough to fool others in casual social interaction. Other players must roll Perception + Empathy roll, difficulty 5, for their characters to notice the retainer's strange behavior. Vessels that have been dominated for very long periods of time have also been known to develop rudimentary personalities, allowing them to better serve their master.

PRESENCE

Presence is the most important Discipline for influencing large groups of people and building cults and followings. Presence gives a vampire supernatural charisma and influence over others. Unlike Dominate, Presence does not provide precise control; the user can inflame passions or create feelings of awe and servitude but not dictate what a person thinks or does. Still,

skillfully used, Presence allows a Cainite to create and maintain a substantial following of mortals and, perhaps, even other Cainites.

Subtlety and patience are the keys to using Presence successfully. While any vampire can use it to inspire awe or even obedience in others, such things are momentary, usually functioning only while the user is present. It takes a bit more effort to prolong the subject's fascination and build a true sense of loyalty and even worship.

Awe (Presence 1) is useful for gaining the attention and affection of large groups of people all at once, although it only makes the subjects more drawn to the Cainite; it doesn't overwhelm their sense of self-preservation or their deeply held beliefs. Awe may also draw unwanted attention to its user, since word of the vampire's fantastic mien will no doubt spread quickly. This scrutiny may not be desirable, so a cautious Cainite may prefer to limit the use of Awe to a very select audience.

THE ENTRANCED

Entrancement (Presence 3) ensures the subject's true devotion, although for how long depends on the vampire's skill and the subject's strength of will. However, once a person has been entranced, it is easier for the vampire to entrance them again. After the entrancement wears off, the difficulty for using Presence on that individual is lowered by 1 for a full day and night. The vampire can compound this effect so long as she successfully entrances the character again during this period of susceptibility. So, after the victim emerges from his second entrancement, difficulties for entrancing him are at -2 for two full nights. If the period of susceptibility ever passes or the vampire fails a Presence roll, the difficulty returns to normal. If the difficulty ever reaches 0, the vampire can entrance him *permanently* with a successful Appearance + Empathy roll (difficulty equal to the target's original Willpower). These bonuses only apply to the vampire who first entranced the victim, and vampires cannot entrance their thralls while they are still under their sway.

Regular use of Passion (Presence 6) works much the same as Entrancement, except that Passion doesn't last as long and affects multiple people. Vampires with this level of Presence can quickly convert large groups of people into utterly loyal and devoted followers.

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The most common tactic for using Presence to build a following is to move through the social circle where potential recruits can be found. This may range from a market square to a royal court, depending on the individual vampire's needs and tastes. It is important for the Cainite to do this personally in order to use some Presence abilities, although a loyal servant can be sent to recruit in other cases. If the vampire finds new servants personally, she can use Summon (Presence 4) to call them into her presence later and deal with them privately. The summons takes the form of an irresistible compulsion, but mortals don't necessarily know that it originates from the vampire (or that their summoner is a vampire at all). Some chalk it up to fate, feeling they somehow just knew the enigmatic stranger would be there.

THAUMATURGY

The arts of Thaumaturgy are not as useful as some other Disciplines in gathering and keeping followers, but they do provide wizards such as the Tremere with tools for finding potential servants and keeping them in line, not to mention enhancing their usefulness. For some mortals, the promise of learning the secrets of sorcery is enough to entice them into a Cainite's service, and cults of would-be wizards serve vampires and provide them with influence in the mortal world. There are Thaumaturgy rituals that can affect the mind and emotions but not as effectively as Dominate or Presence, and most wizards favor paths and rituals that give them power over the material world.

VICISSITUDE

The Tzimisce hardly need the power of their prime Discipline to gather followers, since they already have their own fiefdoms and ghoulish families at their beck and call. Still, the ability to shape the flesh to create (or take away) beauty can be a powerful one. The Tzimisce use Vicissitude to enhance servants (although what the Fiends consider "enhancement" is often widely different from the rest of the world). Thus, Tzimisce ghouls and even mortal servants may have unusual physical Traits, and the Fiends often engage in competitions of flesh crafting to see who can produce the most novel new forms.

BONDS OF BLOOD

One of the Cainites' most potent tools for influencing and controlling others is the power inherent in their blood. Cainite vitae is both addictive and capable of creating a powerful bond between regnant and thrall, the blood oath.

It takes very little actual blood to create a blood oath. A single sip — about half a blood point — is enough to begin the process. More potent blood (from

a Cainite of a lower generation than 12th) works in proportionally smaller amounts. More works just as well, of course, but the potential thrall must drink at least three different times on three different nights to create the bond of a true blood oath, and a large dose of vitae transforms a mortal into a ghoul (see below). Lesser amounts of blood taken over a longer period of time can also create a blood oath. The more a thrall takes blood afterward, the stronger the oath becomes and the longer it lasts.

The creation of a blood oath and turning a mortal into a ghoul are two separate, but related, processes. The blood oath requires only small amounts of blood to be consumed over a period of time. Becoming a ghoul requires a mortal to consume a larger amount of blood (at least a single full blood point, often more) all at once. It is possible to combine the two, of course. So a ghoul who drinks her domitor's blood three times also forges a blood oath with him. So long as the mortal consumes less than a full blood point of vitae each day, she does not become a ghoul, but the creation of the blood oath still takes place.

Some Cainites use brute force to create blood oaths. Dominate can force a potential thrall to drink, as can a careful use of Presence. There is no need for the thrall to drink of her own free will. Vampires can even force blood down a victim's throat using pure physical force, particularly a victim who is chained or otherwise helpless. But this is a poor way to create a blood oath and leaves lingering resentment and confusion in the thrall, possibly even leading to a weakening of the oath and eventual betrayal.

Therefore, Cainites prefer a measure of subtlety when it comes to creating a blood oath. Ideally, a new thrall takes the blood willingly (although often without understanding the full implications). This is usually the case when a Cainite creates a new ghoul, since the Potence granted by the vitae makes the ghoul hunger for more. The blood oath occurs as a matter of course.

If they can't convince potential thralls to take their vitae willingly, vampires have means of tricking them into consuming it. The most common method is to mix some vitae with wine or, sometimes, food. A full, red wine is preferable because it covers the taste and color of the blood. It must be added shortly before the subject will consume it, since the vitae loses its potency outside the vampire's body in a matter of minutes at best. Done carefully, this can grant a small taste of blood to many people, provided they all drink or sup from the same dish. In cults, Cainites often offer their followers communion, with a small amount of vitae added to the sacramental wine. This method can extend influence over many people at once. With a priestly servant, a Cainite can even offer this special communion to the

parishioners of a church, although there are risks when dealing with holy places.

Cainites offering blood to guests (in a goblet or glass, rather than directly from a victim) may mix some of their own blood into it, making most Cainites wary of accepting blood from anything other than a living source.

THE THREE THRESHOLDS OF THE BLOOD

Vampire scholars have carefully studied the effects of vitae on mortals and each other and have broken the effects of the blood oath down into three "thresholds" with identifiable effects. The precise amounts of vitae needed to reach each threshold vary slightly from one Cainite to another and lessen as the vampire's generation decreases. The effects are the same whether the drinker is mortal or Cainite. Regardless of how much blood the subject consumes, no one progresses through more than one threshold in a night; a victim must drink the same vitae on three different nights to pass over all three thresholds.

The First Threshold: Reaching the first noticeable effects of the blood oath requires drinking only a small amount of vitae, about half a blood point or a decent swallow. Lesser amounts of vitae taken over time can also build up to this threshold, so a few drops of blood taken in wine over the course of a week or more can bring a drinker to this point. All Cainite automatically reach this threshold with their sires when they take their sire's blood at their Embrace, but this isn't necessarily a permanent condition. It erodes over time like any other blood oath (see below), and many sires prefer to allow it to do so, in order to have strong childer instead of obedient (and incompetent) lackeys nipping at their heels.

A drinker at the first threshold begins to feel a strong admiration for the vampire. She is often in his thoughts, and he may find himself unconsciously seeking her out for advice or guidance. The vampire gains a slight measure of influence over the drinker; her player gains -1 difficulty bonus when using mind-affecting Disciplines such as Dominate and Presence on the potential thrall. The drinker also begins to develop a thirst for vitae, and his player must make a Willpower roll (difficulty 6) to refuse another opportunity to drink.

The Second Threshold: After taking the second drink of vitae (the same amount as the first), the drinker's feelings for the vampire grow and begin to influence him more directly. He feels great admiration for her, and his player must make a successful Willpower roll for the character to act against the vampire's interests or harm her in any way. He must also spend a Willpower point to refuse another opportunity to drink from the vampire. The Cainite's influence grows, and her player gains a -1

difficulty bonus for all Social rolls against the drinker (in addition to the -1 difficulty for Disciplines).

Like the first threshold, drinkers can reach the second by taking smaller doses of vitae over a longer period of time, but the time in between reaching the first and second threshold must be at least a full day (sunset to sunset). Larger amounts of blood do not speed up the process.

The Third Threshold: The third drink of blood moves the drinker across the third and final threshold. His feelings blossom into complete loyalty and fealty toward his regnant, and he becomes a thrall of the vampire. She is the most important person in his life, greater than spouse, family, Church or lord. Everything else is secondary compared to the thrall's regnant, his one, true liege.

It is possible for a thrall to cross over the first or second threshold with more than one regnant. In fact, it is common in some cults for members to take the blood oath to the first or second threshold from all of the cult's Cainite leaders (likewise in clans such as the Tremere). However, once a thrall has reached the third threshold with a regnant, all other bonds fall away. He is bound to that regnant and her alone, and he cannot be bound to another unless the oath is broken somehow (see "Overcoming the Blood Oath," below).

"FOR THIS IS MY BLOOD..."

Vampires are certainly not above corrupting the Eucharist to serve their needs; indeed, the Cainite Heresy and other cults have done so for centuries. But there are risks in using the holy rites for such devilry. An adulterated Eucharist does not affect anyone with at least one dot in Truth Faith; the vitae is miraculously transubstantiated. If the officiant (the priest performing the service) has a True Faith rating of 2 or more, no one who receives the sacrament from his hands is affected, regardless of their True Faith rating. Likewise, if the church or place where the sacrament is performed is holy ground of rating 2 or better, no one is affected, whether they have True Faith or not.

Of course, it's possible for the officiant to deliberately mispronounce a word or two to corrupt the perfection of the offering. With no sacrament, there is no transubstantiation to protect the faithful. Likewise, unsanctified Communion wine is just wine, and any vitae in it affects drinkers normally.



The regnant has great influence over a thrall. In addition to the bonuses for the previous thresholds, she can now use Dominate on the thrall without the need for eye contact; simply hearing the regnant's voice is enough. Should the thrall somehow find a way to resist, he suffers a + 2 difficulty on attempts to do so. The thrall feels deep and utter devotion toward his regnant, but he is not rendered mindless. The devotion created by a blood oath is like any other, and a thrall retains his free will, although his loyalty belongs to his regnant. He will do anything he reasonably can to please his regnant.

Greater Thresholds: Rumors and speculation abound among Cainites about greater thresholds of the blood oath. Certainly, thralls and regnants do develop a kind of mystical connection over time, to the point where the regnant is instinctively aware of the whereabouts and condition of his thrall and the thrall seems to know what her regnant's wishes are before she utters a word. This requires a strong and long-lasting oath. If the Storyteller feels that a blood oath has reached this threshold, the player of the regnant or thrall may be permitted a Perception + Empathy roll occasionally to sense how the other is feeling. This is generally appropriate after a year of servitude and frequent contact.

THE CHARACTER OF THE THRALL

A thrall's personality and Willpower have a great deal of influence over his behavior after taking the blood oath. Thralls retain their sense of identity and their wits under the oath; only their attitude toward their regnant changes. How it changes depends on the thrall's Willpower. Weaker willed thralls (Willpower 4 or less) tend to become fawning sycophants, doing everything in their power to please their regnant, constantly seeking her advice and generally getting underfoot. Those of stronger will tend to have greater independence and ability to make their own decisions and express their own opinions, even to disagree with their regnant, if not disobey her. The strongest-willed thralls (Willpower 7 or more) have the manner of stout, loyal vassals. Unfortunately, it is also these thralls who are most able to resist or even overcome the blood oath, so Cainites must often choose between sycophants who can't say no to them and independent vassals capable of eventually turning against them.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE REGNANT

Like a feudal oath, a blood oath is binding for both parties. While the thrall owes the regnant loyalty and service, the regnant, in turn, must care for the thrall or else risk losing his loyalty. This does not mean that a thrall will not risk life and limb for his regnant (most medieval vassals swear to do so for their liege-lords). It does mean that the regnant cannot harm or abuse the

thrall without good cause and expect the oath-bond to remain strong.

As a general rule, if a regnant's command is something that can be expected of a true and loyal servant, then there is no difficulty. But if the regnant orders a thrall to do something that violates the oath of loyalty between them, then the oath begins to erode. For example, a vampire could order a loyal knight into battle against an enemy without consequence, since that is what knight's do. But he could not order his thrall to mercilessly slaughter an unarmed fellow knight. That goes against all that the knight believes in and abuses the power of the oath. The same is true if the regnant abuses or mistreats the thrall. A whipping for a failure may be customary and excused, but torture for no reason violates the oath.

The Storyteller is the final judge of whether or not a request of a thrall is appropriate or not (based on roleplaying and how well the regnant's player handles it). The Storyteller should advise the player when a command is likely to weaken a thrall's blood oath; the thrall's hesitation and unwillingness are evident to the regnant.

If a thrall is ordered to take an action that is against his nature, his player may roll Willpower with a difficulty of 10. Each success permanently reduces the number of successes needed to temporarily overcome the blood oath in the future (see below). Failure has no effect, but a botch requires the thrall's player to make a Conscience or Conviction roll (difficulty 6) to avoid the thrall acquiring a permanent derangement.

THE CHARACTER OF THE OATH

As described in Chapter One (pp. 31-40), each clan's blood oath has a slightly different character to it. A Brujah blood oath engenders feelings of friendship and camaraderie, a Toreador oath is fired with passion, and a Setite oath has the edge of an uncontrollable addiction. These "flavors" have no direct mechanical effects, but players and Storytellers can and should use them as guides for the nature of the oath.

OVERCOMING THE BLOOD OATH

It is possible to resist a blood oath for a short time. The thrall's player must make an extended Willpower roll (difficulty 8) and accumulate a number of successes equal to the number of times the thrall has consumed his regnant's blood (roughly the total number of blood points he has drunk from his regnant). Then, the thrall's player can spend a Willpower point to ignore the effects of the blood oath. How long this lasts depends on the circumstances. Overcoming the oath out of the regnant's sight may last for a scene, while overcoming it to attack the regnant lasts only for a single turn; then, another Willpower point is required. Ironically, the more honorable the thrall, the more

ASHEN CULTS

difficulty it is for him to betray his oath without just cause. The Storyteller may wish to increase the number of successes required to overcome the blood oath if the thrall does not have a sufficiently compelling reason.

Breaking a blood oath is no easy matter. There are three known means of doing so, all difficult for the thrall.

The first is to completely avoid the regnant (and taking any vitae) for a long period of time. It requires regular Willpower rolls and expenditures of Willpower to resist the urge to return to the regnant's side, the regnant usually has little difficulty convincing a thrall to return. Some thralls isolate themselves in monasteries or the like, but even there, thoughts of their regnant plague them, and those who have taken blood from the Children of Caine are often not welcome in the House of God. Over time, the blood oath weakens, and the thrall may be able to overcome it. As a general rule, if a thrall avoids her regnant for (12 - Willpower) months, the blood oath retreats to the next lowest threshold. Once it drops past the first threshold, it is broken. If the drinker has never passed the third threshold, and so entered a full blood oath, the time is significantly shorter, on the order of (12 - Willpower) weeks.

The second means is the final death of the regnant. Most thralls find the very idea horrifying, and few can bring themselves to actually attempt to slay their regnants, although some do manage to plot against them (with great effort). The blood oath ends at the moment of final death, although some thralls never completely overcome their feelings for their regnant.

Finally, there are tales of supernatural forces breaking a blood oath, from the workings of powerful sorcerers to divine intervention offering hope to a lost soul. Unfortunately for hopeful thralls, there is no evidence that such legends are anything other than that, although that doesn't stop some from searching.

SERVANTS AND SLAVES

Many Cainites would say it is their right to hold sway over lesser creatures, and the lords of the night do lay claim demesnes of their own. Storytellers can use the information here for managing characters' servants and as quick templates for typical servitors of that type.

HERD

A vampire's herd is considered the lowest level of servants (above creatures such as paid mercenaries and the like). A herd is a group of mortals loyal enough to a Cainite to protect her and allow her to feed from them. In the Dark Medieval world, herds often make up cults following a particular vampire or vampires, since there aren't any nightclubs or other places where a herd can gather unno-

BACKGROUNDS AND SERVANTS

Technically, only the Retainer and Herd Backgrounds provide a vampire with servants. Other Backgrounds may provide people helpful to a character in different ways but not as helpful as a true servant. The new Cult Background is a special case and is discussed on page 74.

Allies offer help but have lives of their own and aren't likely to endanger themselves on a character's behalf. They're friends (and possibly family), not servants.

Contacts provide information and may include spies, but they don't perform any other services, and they generally won't risk their own necks. They may also ask for favors (or payment) in return for their help.

Influence gives vampires the ability to sway things in mortal society (often through servants and other proxies), but it doesn't give them access to servants or helpers.

ticed. In the case of a particularly large cult, a herd may only be part of the membership, with the rest either ignorant of the cult's true purpose, awaiting induction into the inner circle or part of another vampire's herd. See "Cult vs. Herd" (p. 78) for more information.

Several vampires may combine their herds to create an even larger cult, although this may result in some factionalism among the cultists.

RETAINERS

Retainers are true and (reasonably) loyal servants. They may be permanently enthralled mortals (see p. 82) or influenced with Dominate and Presence. They may be thralls, bound to the vampire by the blood oath, or they may be ghouls, fed vitae to give them supernatural strength (and possibly access to other Disciplines) and to keep them loyal.

The number of retainers given under the Retainers Background in **Vampire: The Dark Ages** is a suggested number. The Storyteller may feel free to vary it if a Cainite's retainers are particularly powerful or weak or if their loyalty is stronger or weaker than usual. For example, a character might have double the number of retainers if they're all mortals that aren't bound to him by anything other than regular pay and decent treatment. Or three dots in Retainer might give the character an especially powerful ghoul bodyguard (but one who's loyalty isn't entirely certain). It's up to the Storyteller

to decide whether or not a particular retainer should be worth more or less.

GHOULS

More information on ghouls can be found in **Liege, Lord and Lackey**. This section provides some basic information on revenants and typical statistics for ghouls. Most every ghoul is oath-bound to the vampire who created her (her domitor) and relies on that Cainite to gain vitae to power Disciplines, heal non-aggravated damage or boost Physical Attributes. Vitae also prevents aging — but makes the ghouls vulnerable to frenzy (at a -2 difficulty).

Ghouls will usually have 1 to 4 blood points of vitae within them at any given time.

TRUSTED SERVANT

This sort of ghoul is the type vampires rely upon to manage an estate (and possibly other servants), to deal with mortals during the day and to carry out important errands and other tasks while their master sleeps. Ghoul servants quickly become skilled at subterfuge (if they weren't already) to keep their master's secrets — and their own.

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 4, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics 2 (or Hearth Wisdom 2), Alertness 2, Crafts 2, Dodge 2, Empathy 3, Etiquette 3, Larceny 2, Linguistics 1, Medicine 2, Melee 2, Occult 1, Seneschal 3, Subterfuge 3

Disciplines: Potence 1, possibly one other Discipline at 1

Conscience: 3, **Self-Control:** 4, **Courage:** 3, **Willpower:** 4

GHOUL GUARDIAN

This sort of ghoul is the type who protects the haven of a vampire liege or accompanies his liege to act as a bodyguard. Such ghouls are usually a match for most mortals and can even give a young Cainite pause, particularly if they are trained in the ways of fighting vampires (and many ghouls are).

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 4, Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 3, Archery 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Dodge 3, Intimidation 3, Investigation 2, Medicine 1, Melee 3, Ride 2, Stealth 3

Disciplines: Fortitude 1, Potence 1, possibly one other Discipline at 1

Conscience: 2, **Self-Control:** 3, **Courage:** 5, **Willpower:** 5

REVENANTS

Revenants come from ghoul families, usually those associated with the Tzimisce. Unlike ordinary ghouls, revenants can learn more Disciplines and produce their own vitae at a rate of one blood point per day. This blood is weak by vampiric standards; it cannot create blood oaths or grant the Embrace, but it can otherwise fuel the revenant's powers and Disciplines. A revenant's blood pool also increases with age, 1 point for every century, but revenants also age, albeit slowly, about one year for every four. Tzimisce ghouls and revenants often have some or all of the modifications described under Vicissitude (particularly Transmogrify the Mortal Clay and Rend the Osseous Frame).

REVENANT FAMILIES

Here, briefly, are the revenant families in service to the Tzimisce and their family Disciplines. For more information, see *Libellus Sanguinis 1: Masters of the State*.

- The **Bratovitch** are bestial shock troops and hunters. They may learn Animalism, Potence and Vicissitude.

- The **Grimaldi** are merchants and spies. They may learn Celerity, Dominate and Fortitude.

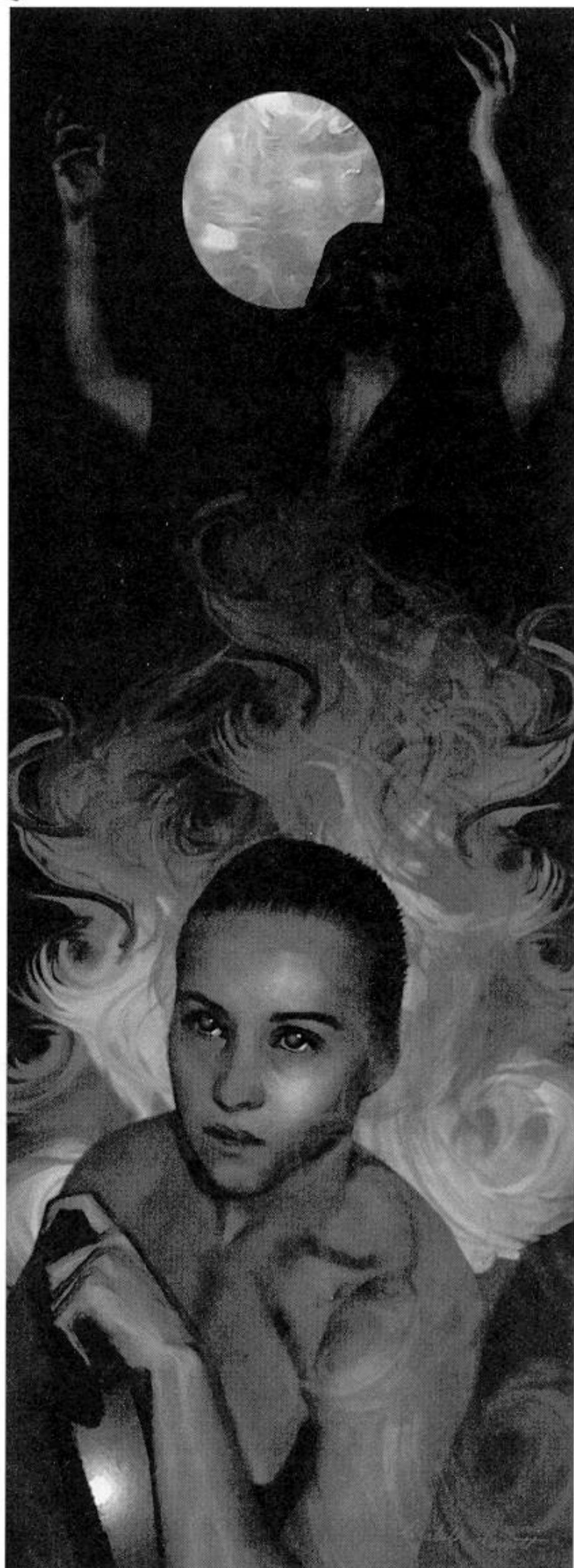
- The **Khavi** are the mysterious servants of the ancient Tzimisce Methuselah known as Byelobog the White God. They may learn Animalism, Obfuscate and Vicissitude.

- The **Krevacheski** are scholars, inventors and tinkerers. They may learn Auspex and Dominate.

- The **Obertus** are monastic scholars, clerics and librarians. They may learn Auspex, Obfuscate and Vicissitude.

- The **Szantovich** are spies and courtly infiltrators. They may learn Auspex, Presence and Vicissitude.

- The **Vlaszy** are knights and cavaliers. They may learn Animalism, Potence and Presence.



ASHEN CULTS

Most Holy Father and Eminence,

I'm sure this letter will come as no surprise to you, but please allow me to express the shock and fear that I have come to experience while doing the Church's will in the Godforsaken lands beyond its dominion. The mere fact that I suggest such a thing might sound like heresy, but Your Eminence surely suspects the dire nature of the Lord's flock if he has so wisely sent me to compile evidence of the Adversary's presence in the world.

And the Adversary is indeed present. I have listened to the unabashed testimonies of the Albigensians, condemning us for our wealth. I have witnessed the ignorant and misled lay preachers of the Vaudois, tempting their flocks to heresy. I transcribed part of the confessions of the unrepentant "Frater Vermis," and I adjudicated upon the witch-burnings in the Pyrenees. With my tired eyes, I have seen a thousand times the wickedness of the common man, and yet, all it takes for the Adversary to claim one common man is his momentary lapse of faith or the briefest of weaknesses in times of tumult. Man makes the world wicked with his original sin, and those who would exult that sin for their own comfort damn their fellows.

All of these, however, are sins and heresies already condemned by the Church. We have long known and opposed the various faces of the Cathari, the witches and the godless who indulge in sin. A new breed of heretics has arisen, though, which my research indicates might not be so new at all, and yet, our dogma has yet to record any sanction against them. Hear this plea with mercy, Your Holiness. Invoke the Word of God against the cults of blood that scar the land like a leper's sores.

These cults venerate the blood that fills our bodies and that of animals. The participants glut themselves on the sanguine humor.

Their rites involve murder and lust. Some covens of cultists cavort naked, streaked with blood, under the light of the full moon, while others fornicate and offer themselves for the pagan priests to sate themselves upon. And these pagan priests — these are not always barbarians or savages, as one would find in Spain, Ireland or the eastern reaches of the Germanic lands. They are men and women as any other, who have treated with the Devil himself and bought his favor with this blood. They consume no meat or fowl, subsisting only on the precious fluid — in open blasphemy against the holy Eucharist! The Adversary has also given them powers over the temporal sphere: Some can control beasts or sway a man's loyalties to themselves with an evil eye. Some can call down lightning; some can lift a poor priest's cart over their heads. They wield unholy miracles and call upon them at their whim.

At risk to my own immortal soul, I have spoken with several of these demons (for demons they are, as the slightest touch of sunlight burns their flesh and the purifying heat of flame drives them mad with fear) in hopes of learning their secrets and arming my brothers against them. Sometimes I escaped only by divine grace, but most of these fiends knew what the cloth meant and afforded my station at least grudging respect. It is because of these acknowledgments that I know such creatures were once men. They know the power of the Lord, and only in their conscious evil have they chosen to forsake him. In my travels among the Teutonic followers of these cults, I have learned that they call themselves vampyr, those who have returned from the dead and consume the blood of the living to survive. I have heard countless other appellations, as well, including "the shadows" in northern Italy and Spain, the nosfe "bearers of plagues" of the Eastern lands and even war-

locks. It would seem that these various names apply to different "ranks" of the creatures in this epidemic cult of blood.

I describe it as a single, fractious cult of blood because I have had chances to discuss the fiends' theologies with them. Pray, Your Holiness, pardon my humble quill for penning such atrocities, but the vampyr believe themselves to descend from Cain and not from Seth and Methuselah and Noah. As Cain slew his brother, so too do these vampyr murder the men among whom they dwell, taking their blood to sustain their own existences. They rise at night, thirsty and vengeful, bending the world to their cruel whims. Even united in their abandonment of God, they feud with each other, and on more than one occasion, I was delivered from the greedy fangs of one — and they do bear fangs, Your Holiness! — and spirited into the night by another who found amusement in your humble servant of God.

And "spirited" is a careful choice of words on my part, for they are indeed spirits that can temporarily give themselves flesh. I have seen them vanish completely before my very eyes, surely withdrawing back to the Hell that spawned them, or flutter away with less body than animated shadow.

In other cases, the inevitable slow rot of their temporary physical forms has taken its toll. Indeed, some have the look of corpses, while others are so advanced in age that what blighted flesh they can conjure drips from their bodies. I estimate that they observe a hierarchy of heresy, with these most monstrous of sinners occupying the highest ranks. Some may still even walk about by day — those new to the heresy and not yet fully suffering God's righteous wrath.

These vampyr always seem to have purpose, as well, though finding it is a difficult trick at times. I have seen whole villages in thrall

to the demons, due to the licentiousness of their women in the past. A fellow of mine sent me a letter reporting that, in the Bishopric of Krakow, the murdered Bishop Stanislaw has abandoned his body (for his bones are interred at the cathedral on the Wawel) and returned to tempt the good people of that city. Stories like these abound.

And the stories I have heard! Some would seem ridiculous, were the fact that they spilled forth from these demons bilious mouths any less truthful. I have heard of other "Cainites" among the clergy, in the courts of kings and counts, marauding through the countryside, taking refuge among traders, Saracens and other undesirables. Quite frankly, these vampyr make it seem as if they are everywhere.

It is not, then, uninformed that I make this recommendation to you. I have read the proposals of Ugolino di Segni, upholding the papal prerogatives. I have admired the work of Fabrizio Ulfila, suggesting the inquisito "seeking out" of heretics rather than waiting for complaints to surface against them. These are great men with great ideas, as I'm sure a fellow great man such as Your Holiness understands. I urge you, then, with great compassion, to make your mark against these children of evil. If even half of the tales are true, then these vampyr might even walk among us tonight and have our humors for their meal, and no man of God would have that for his flock.

In Nomine Patris,

Brother Bruno of Anweiler

Anno Domini 1215

Ashen Cults™

Drink of Me

We are the lords of this Dark Age, leading our flocks in the ways of the blood. They gather round our altars and in our churches. They form covens and cults in our honor. They are our worshipers, our slaves and our stock. And we are their gods.

And Enter the Night

Ashen Cults is a complete guide to the dark faiths promulgated by Cainites in the Dark Ages to promote their agendas, rule their domains and seek their own enlightenment. From ghoul and revenant blood cults and twisted Ventrue breeding stock to secret Malkavian orders and black churches, everything you need to add strange servitors and fanatical devotion to your chronicle is right here.

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