

ROAD OF Heaven



A SOURCEBOOK FOR DARK AGES: VAMPIRE™

ROAD OF Leaven™



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Author's Dedication

This book is dedicated to Ari "What's the Book?" Marmell for his tireless commitment to the future of roleplaying, and to Matt "Where's the Book?" McFarland for similar dedication to the bird in hand. You are not only two great friends, but two of the finest accomplices a guy could ask for — the Athos and Aramis to my Porthos.



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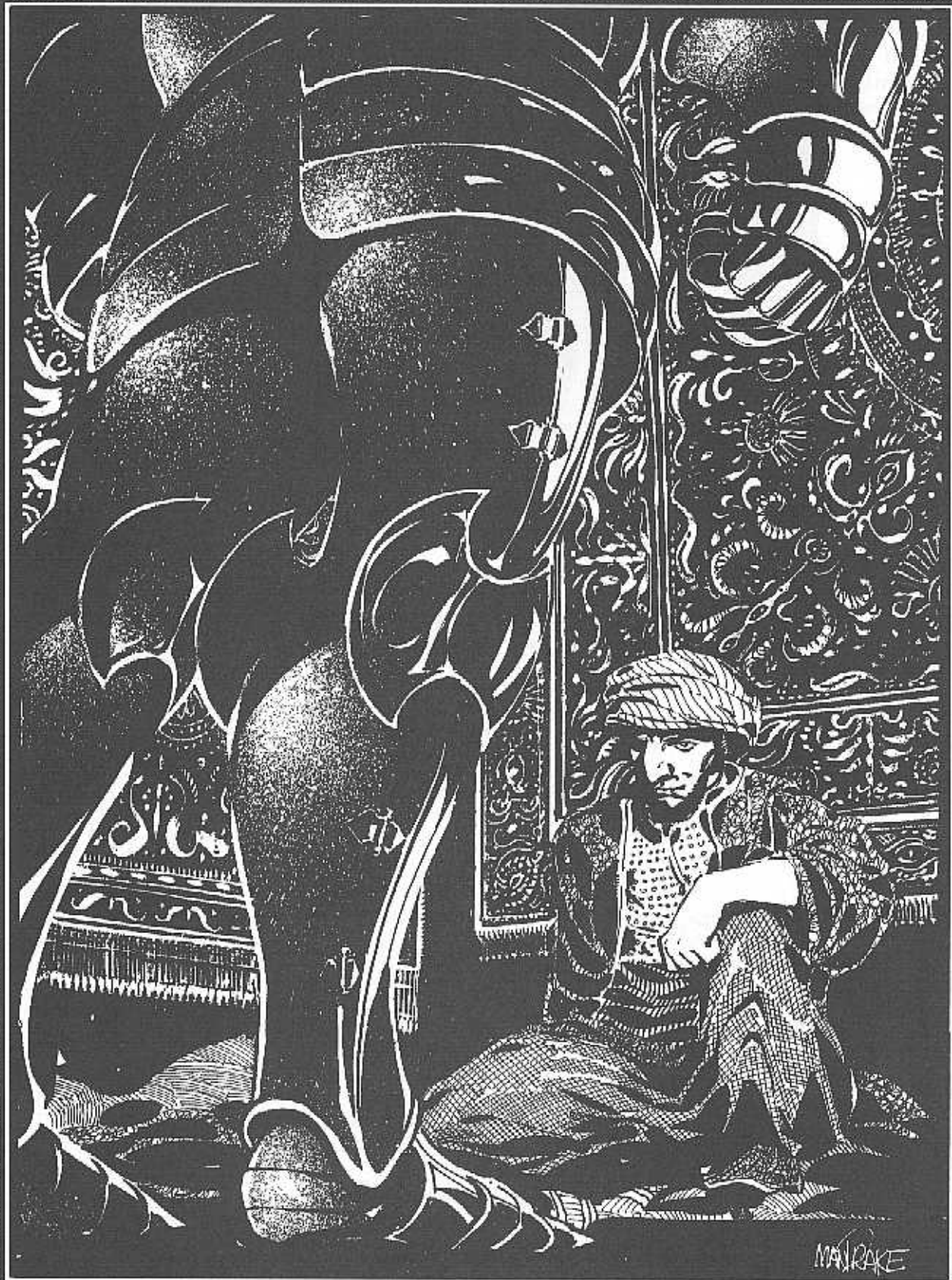
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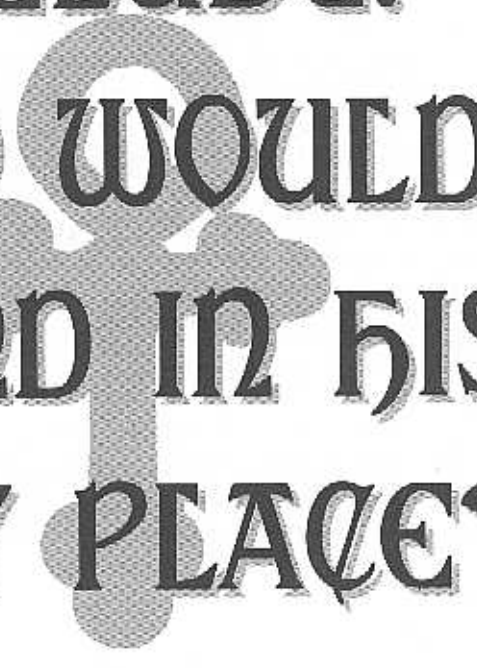
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prelude: Who Would Stand in His Holy Place?	5
Chapter One: Stages in Threefold Darkness	11
Chapter Two: The Fragile Path	31
Chapter Three: Angels of the Lord	57
Chapter Four: A Heavenly Host	79





PRELUDE: WHO WOULD STAND IN HIS HOLY PLACE?

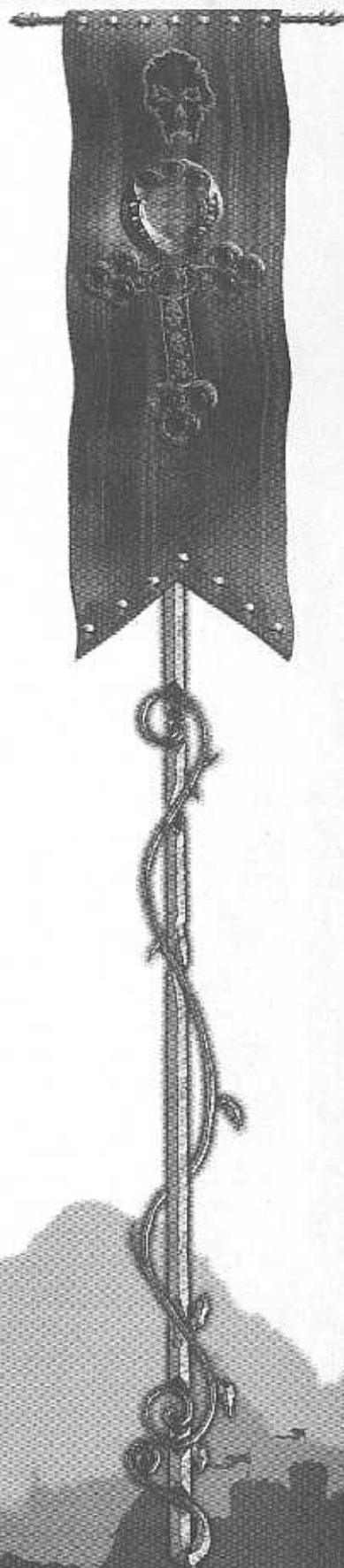


Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of mine enemies.

— Book of Psalms 23:5

The Crusader awoke before dawn, reaching for his boots before his eyes were even open. A brief surge of panic swept over him as he found them missing from their usual place — standing on end beside his feet (a position chosen for convenience as well as to provide an additional level of challenge for invading pests). As the blur of sleep faded from his eyes, however, his boots came into view, sitting atop the rest of his clothing on an oversized, decorative cushion lying several feet away. The simple sight of his own belongings, his boots in particular, allowed him to regain his sense of peace. It returned a feeling of both place and purpose to the Crusader. As it had always done.

Over the long nights since his estrangement from home, the Crusader had come to rely on his boots almost as trusted friends. Loneliness and hardship had made them seem allies in this unfortunate and bloody campaign; allies that had been there for him when nothing and no one else could say the same. Many times had he taken his rest without removing them lest a surprise attack catch him off guard, unprepared to stand and deliver the judgment his office required. Their presence was a comfort to him in an uncertain and dangerous world.



The Crusader stood, fighting past the last dullness of slumber to assense his immediate surroundings. He immediately discerned he was in a bedchamber of some sort, the dim light in the room provided by a handful of wax tapers. The walls of the room were little more than an array of draped linens, sparsely decorated (likely for fear of inward collapse) and held fast by a lengthy run of thick hemp. A glance back to his bed showed that he had been lying atop a quilted mattress, far finer than the simple straw to which he had grown accustomed over the years. He hurriedly reached for his clothes and dressed, his unfamiliar surroundings leaving him feeling especially vulnerable.

As the Crusader gazed about the unfamiliar room, he was astounded by the number and size of cushions around him. They were not merely on the bedding, but spread all around like decorative finery. Where a piece of furniture might otherwise have been, he found cushions in its place. The larger cushions doubled as chairs, tables and even as a place of prayer in one instance — a long flat cushion placed at an odd angle on the floor at one corner of the room. Most assuredly pointing south, he surmised. Towards Mecca.

He remembered where he was.

The Crusader had taken up with a regiment out of Palermo, departing for Palestine in September when Emperor Frederick II first commissioned the call for Crusade. Although illness delayed the official attack until June of the following year, these early forces went on ahead just the same. He was inspired at first, steeled to the idea of holy reclamation and proud to be part of the first wave. But then came the excommunication of the Emperor; then word of yet another delay, during which Frederick had the gall to threaten Rome herself. While his armies did indeed join them in the Holy Land eventually, the Crusader's regiment operated with full independence for almost eleven months and had fallen out of all but the most cursory contact with the Emperor's command.

Some weeks ago, the Emperor had ordered Count Stephen of Gotron and the other Italian Longobards (his troops from Southern Italy of which the Crusader was nominally a part) to attend him in Cyprus. There Frederick had seized all the Cypriot fortresses and revenues for his personal use, as was his "royal right." Among the military, this was seen as the final insult from an arrogant and impious soul. Many mainland knights refused their

emperor's call. Most hoped that the Lord of Beirut would lead the Cypriots in revolt against Frederick, taking the infant King of Cyprus under their own protection and demanding the Emperor abandon his claim to the Christian kingdoms. The commanding officer of the Crusader's regiment, a pious veteran named Alessandro, was one such unyielding knight. On the evening after receiving word of the Emperor's command, he gathered the men together and addressed them.

"Brave knights, your emperor has chosen to wage war not against the blaspheming Saracen, but against his own barons and their right good men. He has claimed the rightful domain of the Lord of Cyprus for his own, where your brothers Hospitaller and Templar face confinement, exile or worse at his hands. And still he demands our attendance.

"I say to you now: Any man who feels bound by duty to heed this call should embark at sunrise for Cyprus, there to attend the Emperor in his bid for authority over all the Crusader kingdoms. Let no man punish any other for doing his duty. If, however, any man feels bound by duty to God instead, let him remain here and fight the cause for which he was so rightfully conscripted. All men who do so now shall know they stand with me."

The next morning, the Crusader was not among those who departed Palestine for Cyprus. Although conflicted, he felt sure that his place was in the Holy Land doing his part for the glory of Christendom, not the Emperor. Here he remained, dug in alongside a regiment of "traitors" in a war of chance skirmishes with the Moslems in Oultrejourdain. Alessandro's leadership was stronger than ever, but without reinforcements it seemed like a losing battle — an impression that solidified into reality.

While moving through the area south of Sidon, the regiment happened upon a small Moslem encampment. Rather than try to move around it, Alessandro ordered a bold attack. The Saracen, however, proved more than ready for their attackers. The battle ended almost as soon as it had begun. Overwhelmed by the enemy, the last thing the Crusader remembered was the sight of his compatriots' bloodied banner and the whirring shush of wood through wind....

The Crusader suddenly broke from his reverie and opened his eyes, quickly scanning the wall hangings. He was suddenly struck by the fact that no light shone through; neither moon, nor sun, nor

stars, not even high above where the folds would leave some gaps. For the first time, he realized that the walls were thicker than they first appeared. He wondered just how long he had been asleep. Was it even the same day?

As best the Crusader could discern, the sun wasn't on the rise yet. It was possible that it could be later the same evening of that unfortunate battle, but it seemed unlikely. Those bloody events seemed somewhat distant now, however, and he felt as though he had enjoyed a long, undisturbed rest. How, then, did he come to this place?

He reached instinctively for his chest, but found no bending blade or protruding arrow shaft — nor even any wound, judging by how hearty he felt. Some sort of soft wrapping pressed against the skin of his left breast; it was little more than a linen bandage wrapped loosely around his chest with a bit of padding. There would be no danger of the wound reopening.

Under the circumstances, the Crusader felt thankful. Things could have been far worse. Though he now found himself a prisoner of war, he had clearly been treated with respect thus far. The knight's gaze fell to the pile of clothing that lay beneath his boots. His battle-worn armor (what remained of it, at any rate) lay on the floor next to his clothes, but both his sword and shield were conspicuously absent. They were the two symbols of his office, both fashioned with the symbol his office represented — the cross of his Savior, Jesus Christ. The fact that it made perfect sense for these items to be removed by his captors did not mitigate the sting of their absence. Of more concern, however, was the absence of his bag from the rest of his belongings.

Pulse racing, the Crusader reached for the small cross dangling from his neck and stepped to the center of the room. As he knelt to pray, he closed his eyes and whispered, "Oh, Heavenly Father..." In that brief pause, however, he became aware of another presence in the room. A deep, rich voice surprised him, speaking in the Crusader's own language with scarcely an accent.

"I apologize for the intrusion," said the man standing at the entrance to the tent. "Or, rather, for not announcing it properly. I merely wished to give you time to finish your prayers." The man was obviously a Saracen, olive-skinned with rounded features. His body was draped in simple, well-crafted robes that were the color of sand, and hung all the way down to his ankles. On his crown he bore the headdress common to all Moslems, and his

feet were bare as he stood at the edge of the chamber. He appeared unarmed, but the Crusader was sure that some thin blade hid beneath those tawny folds of cloth, ready at a moment's need.

The Crusader stared at the Saracen for a long moment, his uncertainty giving way to suspicion. "Of what concern is it to you that I finish an 'infidel' prayer to an 'infidel' god... and inside a Moslem temple, no less?"

"Prayer fends away indecency and evil. So says the Qur'an, Surah twenty-nine." The Saracen remained where he was, standing just inside the tent flap with the barest hint of a smile on his face. "It is pronounced Mus-lim, not Moslem. And *this...*" he swirled a hand through the air, indicating the tent and its trappings, "...is hardly a temple, my friend." The Saracen laughed as confusion flickered across the Crusader's face, a genuine laugh that brought the fullness of his lips to bear in the half-light. As the last of his mirth fled, he straightened and bowed to the Crusader, arms splayed to either side as if in supplication. "Your pardon, *saidi*." With a soft rustle of robes and draperies, the Saracen turned to leave.

"What have you done with my things?" the Crusader asked. He had meant to sound forceful but his voice betrayed him, sounding weak and raspy in his ears. He hoped it sounded less helpless to his captor.

The Saracen paused, one hand hovering above one flap of the tent. He spoke without turning around. "You had to be disarmed. Surely you understand."

"I do. But there was something else... besides my weapons." He paused. The admission of his missing items galled him, but there was nothing else to be done. "A leather satchel."

The Saracen slowly turned his head to one side, glancing back over his shoulder. "Oh, yes. The book." A wisp of dread coiled around the Crusader's heart, tightening with each breath. "Not to worry, my friend. Your book is safe." He smiled and half-turned toward the Crusader. "If you would be so kind, I should like to have you as my guest — here, in the adjoining chamber." The Saracen whipped open the tent flap. Beyond it, the Crusader could see bright lights and flashes of rich color. "Only after you have finished your evening vespers, of course." As the Saracen finished speaking, he stepped into the next room. The tent flap fell closed behind him, leaving the Crusader in silence.

The Crusader's hands moved up to his cross once more, seeking the comfort he so desperately wanted. That his host seemed courteous was more than he could have hoped, but mere civility could not ease the fear in his heart. His misgivings were amplified by the helplessness of his situation. Try as he might to regain his confidence, his mind remained haunted by the image of the Saracen as he had turned to leave; although shadows had obscured his host's face, he was sure that the Saracen had left smiling.

The adjoining tent was a miracle of Islamic architectural acumen. Not only was its design a thing of beauty and brilliance, but the simple fact of its existence — out here, surrounded by nothing but desert — was a testament to the diligence and ingenuity of its creators. As with most things the Crusader had seen in the land of his enemies, the structure was elegant in both its simplicity and strength. It brought long slender rods to bear as makeshift support beams while reinforcing the basic frame with copious amounts of both hemp and sand. In this way, they could drape heavier fabrics on the frame and decorate them as they pleased, with little to no fear of collapse. Looking at it with from a tactical standpoint, this simple structure was probably even sturdy enough to withstand a direct collision from a horse and rider.

The interior was decorated sparsely but to great effect. There were yet more cushions, as well as several lavish tapestries depicting either elegant passages of script (the Qur'an, most likely) or colorful Mediterranean seascapes. The Saracen sat in the center of the room on a large chair made from a single cushion. The Crusader could neither hear, see nor otherwise sense any other beings in the area. This fact, along with his host's lack of weapons, disquieted him even more than the alienation he felt from his surroundings.

After concluding his prayers, the Crusader had put on the rest of his knightly attire. Standing at the entrance now, he felt both awkward and exposed, despite being covered in over fifty pounds of armor and equipment. The Crusader stiffened both his resolve and spine, straightening to his full height and clanking across the chamber to where his host sat. "Might I ask how long I have been held prisoner here?"

The Saracen regarded him with no small measure of amusement. "Prisoner? Whoever said you were my prisoner?"

The Crusader started to speak, then decided to simply return to observing his host.

"You are free to leave, Crusader. You have always been so. Of course, I doubt you would get very far without the benefit of your horse — a stolen Arabian, was it not? You should know that it is days to the nearest town and we found no food amongst your belongings, as I recall." The man's gaze was unrelenting.

Loath as the Crusader was to admit it, the Saracen was right. While the desert was a harsh mistress to some, she was an merciless harridan to others such as he. While he was confident that daybreak remained hours away yet, he didn't really know where he was and couldn't with any confidence say that he could find shelter in time. While he weighed his choices, the Saracen gestured toward a large cushion directly across from him.

"Please... sit a while. There is much I wish to discuss. If you are courteous and will indulge me in this, you have my word that I will release you — and your horse — when we are through." A moment's time was enough to let the Crusader decide. He set his bundle down and crossed to the seat his host had indicated. Out of courtesy, the Crusader removed his boots before sitting down across from his host. He took an identical position to the one his host held — both knees forward with the hands on top of the thighs, ankles crossed.

The Saracen smiled patiently while waiting for him to settle onto his cushion. Only when he was confident the Crusader was comfortable did he finally speak. "Earlier this evening, you mentioned that yours was an 'infidel' god. Do you recall?" The Saracen was still smiling, his deep-set eyes focused on the Crusader's face.

"I do," said the Crusader. There was something about the Saracen's eyes.... His uneasiness grew.

"Would it surprise you to know that I believe that your god is not the god of any infidel, but rather the very same God to Whom I invest my own daily prayers?"

The Crusader's mouth dropped open slightly. "What trickery is this, Saracen?"

"None, I assure you," said the knight's host, shaking his head slowly. "Christians, Jews, Muslims... we are all people of the book, *saidi*. I believe in the same God as you. Is not the God that created me the same God that created you? I simply know Him by the name of Allah, the Merciful and the Compassionate, rather than Yahweh or God. The

Creator wears many names, but only one face. You must believe."

"Merciful and compassionate?" the Crusader huffed. "I've seen the evidence of your god's mercy and compassion on the field of battle. Tell me... if we are all truly one, then why do you so resist the Crusades? Isn't this land holy to us all?"

"Allah loves those who fight for His cause in ranks as firm as a mighty edifice. Surah sixty-one." The Saracen leaned forward, his eyes two pools of dark cream. "We fight because their cause is not God's cause, *saidi*. It is the cause of tyranny, and of wicked men. Your pilgrims are now and have always been welcome here. All pilgrims are. But it is those who would strip me — or you — of the right to worship freely in this place that are God's enemies, and thus yours... and mine."

The Saracen stood and walked across the room to where the room's sole piece of furniture lay. It was an oaken chest, hidden from casual view by the placement of several large pillows in one of the tent's far corners. Bending down he opened the

chest, its hinges creaking with age. The Saracen deliberately stood to the side as he lifted the lid so that the Crusader could see what lay within. There, resting atop a pillow of its own, was the book. The Crusader felt his heart drop at the sight of it. "Come. I have prepared a table for us outside. We shall sit and discuss this tome."

"Outside?" murmured the Crusader. The corner of his eye twitched. The notion that a mortal (and a Muslim, no less) was going to be privy to what revelations lay within the Gospel of Laodice was bad enough — truly the thing that should have concerned him most — but his mind could not get past the threat of whiling away the remainder of the morn outside. Beneath the open sky.

"Yes, outside." laughed the Saracen. "I find it much more pleasant to sit under the stars at night, especially when discoursing on Heavenly things. Is this a problem for you, *saidi*?"

"No," the Crusader whispered, rubbing the tip of one finger beneath his eye as though wiping away an errant tear. "There will be no problems. Lead on, Saracen."







CHAPTER ONE: STAGES IN THREEFOLD DARKNESS

And in the lowest deep a lower deep,
Still threatening to devour me, opens wide,
To which the hell I suffer seems a heaven.

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

From the Gospel of Laodice, as translated by Sir Parsifal of the Right Knights of His Most Holy Order of Vengeance and Sir Leonitus of the Knights of Penance, appearing almost identically in the *Book of Threefold Darkness*:

On the First Darkness

"In the beginning, there was darkness.
From that darkness was born the Earth,
Beneath the sky and all the things of Heaven.
The Creator saw what had been wrought,
And brought forth from this earth Man,
The first of His creations with a soul.

Man, whom He loved best of all,
Above even His own Heavenly Host.
Man, best-loved for his pure, pure soul —
A soul born of an earth born of darkness."

From the footnotes of Leonitus:

To be certain, this passage has caused no small amount of perturbation, even among the most staunch supporters of the Gospel. What is important to draw from this verse, however, is what it tells us about God's power. Even those of a traditional, non-Catharist conviction can respect the differences between the kingdom of Earth and the kingdom of Heaven. The latter, being the consummation most devoutly to be wished, is indeed inherently superior to the former.

Anyone who has lived on this earth for long enough — and further, anyone with even a crumb of sense — can tell you that the full measure of existence on Earth can be summed up in the phrase "toil and pain." Despite the contentions of some, however, this fact alone neither proves nor establishes Satan's hegemony over the physical world. Remember, God is all-powerful as well as all-knowing. His domain is everywhere and everything, even the darkness from which all has sprung. Every life on this plane is a test, a chance to show God that one is worthy of entering the kingdom of Heaven. Of course there is toil and pain. Without it, there can be no test. And those who fail this test — or those who fail to see its purpose — are ultimately rewarded with precisely the thing they have earned in their time on Earth.

Nothing.

From the commentaries of the Divinist:

You see, friends? Even in the earliest chapters and verses of the Book of Threefold Darkness, the text reveals the hidden truth of Man. Although none will dispute that Man's beginnings originate with God, the book suggests that those beginnings were humbler than most are led to believe. Note how the text specifically states that the Earth came from the darkness, and how it specifically avoids saying that God brought it forth.

One does not have to be entirely committed to Gnostic dogma to see the sense in these words. Even reason suggests the same. If the Earth was born of darkness, and Man was born of the Earth, then surely Man is therefore born of darkness — at least in part. This remains the essential conflict of all those on the road. If Man was truly spiritual in both essence and origin, he would not be consigned

to live out his days on the dark, harsh landscape that is this world. Creatures entirely of spirit (or *premana* to use the term of favor among my brethren) know only an environment of spirit, wanting for nothing and being restricted not in the slightest by earthly means or by the shackles of physicality.

This passage of text confirms Man's duality, that he is, indeed, more humble than some among the faithful would care to admit. Was Man brought forth by God? That much would seem indisputable. But what is also indisputable is that Man was brought forth from and upon the earth, thus revealing his flawed nature — his heart of darkness.

On the Second Darkness

"The first darkness is behind,
In the fog of history and of Man.
The first darkness is inherited.
The second, the darkness of the womb,
The blackest pitch of the null world,
Is the test of a new soul's worth —
When faced with its task,
The place and manner of its execution,
What sees the infant soul beneath its caul?
The second darkness, a dark twofold,
Is the dark of life itself."

From the commentaries of Anatole:

Much is made of the Gospel's teachings of the Threefold Darkness. To me, the words expressed in the text only confirm what each and every Noddist knows, or most surely should know, deep within his soul. Although each of us is taken at a different time in our lives, each one spends at least a number of years living as ordinary man. If one listens to the text rather than just reading it, one understands its timeless wisdom.

Take this passage, for instance. What simpler wisdom could there be than the wisdom of the darkness of the womb? Every one of God's children spends nine moons in darkness before he is brought forth into the world of men. The text merely gives voice to the knowledge that each of us keeps buried deep within — the experience of an eternal soul wrapped in darkness before it must engage the flesh and experience the physical world. The Gospel simply encourages all Noddists, as faithful servants of God, to reach back — and remember.

The Saracen paused mid-recitation and looked up. He wore a quizzical expression, leaning back in the rattan chair that sat on the other side of the table from the Crusader.

"Noddists?" he said. He pointed at the page to which the tome was opened.

"Yes," replied the Crusader. He was still unsure as to just how much to say. If his host was indeed a Saracen warlord, then he was playing a dangerous game by allowing this man to even see the pages that sat before him. But, as had been pointed out already, he was a prisoner — regardless of what the Saracen said. If he wanted to escape this camp with both his book and his mount, he would need to permit this violation, at least for the nonce. And besides, the Saracen had been good to his word thus far.

"Apparently," he said, "the author believes that there is a tribe that descends from the Biblical slayer of Abel, he who was cast east into the land of Nod as punishment for sacrificing the first part of his joy unto God. Well, as part of such punishment."

The Saracen nodded. "Yes, I'm familiar with the story, said. I was just curious about its usage here."

"Well, the author refers to all those that descend from the First Murderer as Noddists... presumably as some sort of reference to their progenitor's home-in-exile."

"Interesting," the Saracen murmured. "Do you think that he refers to all murderers when he says Noddists, or does he mean those of the First Murderer's familial line?"

"Actually," the Crusader said, his voice rising with excitement, "there is some considerable debate over that very issue — it's one of many highly interpretable passages in the book. As you'll see, the author often speaks in parable. It is difficult to guess precisely what message was intended with any given verse. From the author's tone, however, it seems that he's using it to indicate familial lineage. Its use likens all such descendants to 'children-in-exile.'"

"You'll also note that the author never names the First Murderer at any point in the book. More devout followers of the book's teachings likewise refrain from ever giving that name utterance or pen. You'll see the term 'the First' mentioned quite often; this is the author's only name for him."

"Fascinating," the Saracen repeated. "And this... author? I see no name inscribed, neither on the book's spine nor inset upon the frontispiece..." He flipped back to the inside cover page as he spoke.

The Crusader regarded the tome for a moment. "I think that was intentional," he said, his gaze shifting away from his host's face. "The book's author is unknown. Only the footnotes' authors are known, and even then, one prefers to remain anonymous."

"Oh!" the Saracen leaned forward again. "Why so?"

The Crusader cleared his throat. "His views are... heretical. He knows this, and chooses to keep his identity a secret," he said, returning his gaze to meet the Saracen's. "Because he fears God's wrath, and he knows that his blasphemy will bring it down upon him."

The Saracen smiled again. "Interesting."

On the Threefold Darkness

"From twofold night, a journey beyond
Into the darkest pitch of night most still.
His welcome is the undiscovered country,
The Creator's will made manifest.
And thrust upon the earthly spirit,
Making a monster of the Man
And a Man of the monster.
A Noddist he is now,
Inheriting the mantle of the First.
And for him, the darkness is bright,
And, lo, does it become him.
The Threefold Darkness now is his."

From the footnotes of Leonitus:

Here we come to what is perhaps the most pivotal passage in the text — the one that establishes both the existence and the origins of our kind. Incidentally, it is also the turning point in the narrative flow of the Gospel itself. After this point, the text loses any semblance of structure, becoming largely a collection of parables, admonitions and insights rather than a narrowly focused treatise. The discussion on the Threefold Darkness remains the most sequential and coherent section in the book, and there is much to be learned from this alone.

The passage itself is the first reference in the text to the Noddist condition. Here, the author likens it to "undiscovered country." This seems a strange reference, considering that it is a curse from God we are discussing, until we see the next line. It points out that the Noddist condition is God's will made manifest. In this light, we see how even something this terrible can be viewed with hopeful eyes. After all, if it is God's will that His own children be so afflicted, then perhaps there is a purpose to it all. Notice how the curse, in addition to making a monster of a man, also transforms the monster into a man. This shows the power of choice, that each Noddist is now in control of his own soul and, with the Lord's help, may find salvation yet. The notion that Noddists may still serve not only God but a genuine purpose on Earth is central to the Gospel and those who value its teachings. Most Faithful credit this line of the passage as the beginning of wisdom for our kind... and of hope.

From the commentaries of the Divinist:

It is indisputable that this is the first specific reference to our kind in the *Book of Threefold Darkness*, sequentially speaking (agreed upon even in the most suspect of translations). But to the astute reader – indeed, to any reader who actually reads the text with objective eyes, rather than seeing what his dead heart hopes to see – this passage reveals the truth of the Noddist condition: God's so-called "curse" is nothing of the kind. Rather, it is a blessing most divine.

Note the language used in this section. The author shows just what a wondrous opportunity the curse represents, the chance to pioneer country undiscovered, to witness wonders and accomplish feats of which few mortals would dare to even dream. Again, one need only look to the wording to see the message hidden therein: Noddists "inherit the mantle of the First," rather than being "smitten by the curse of the First" or some such. This has the feel of the passing down of a legacy of untold majesty, rather than the contraction of some hideous affliction. And what of the lines about men and monsters? It seems to me that they indicate a harmonious merging of two states, leading to a singularly powerful whole – an exalted state sanctified by the One most high.

Neither man nor beast, neither dead nor alive. The chosen of the Lord.

On the Noddist Legacy

"Hear, now, the tale of the First.
In the dawn of the first age of Man,
The first son was brought forth on Earth,
First child of sin and seed of the tree,
First inheritor of the First Darkness,
And first of Man to know the Second Darkness.
He grew strong and proud in his principality,
And he loved his Creator for all the world.
Then was a second brought forth, a brother,
And the Lord demanded from each a sacrifice:
'A gift of the first part of your joy,
To burn on the altar of the One Above.'
And the First, in his love, gifted the Lord
With a sacrifice of the first part of his joy —
His brother.
And the Creator showed great displeasure,

Cursing he who killed his brother, saying
'What hast thou done? Thy brother's blood,
It crieth unto me from the ground!
As your father was cast out, so shall you be.'
And the Creator exiled him to wander in Darkness,
The land of Nod.
And, lo, did that dark become his home,
And, lo, did he become the First Noddist."

From the commentaries of Anatole:

One of two "creation parables" found in the text, this passage fills many of the Faithful with a sense of guilt or despair. Here, they find ancient and grisly confirmation of the terrible act that resulted in the Noddist curse. For them, reading the story of how the First was cursed for his crime is a self-effacing experience, a reminder of their own accursed origins. Personally, I find such individuals to be more self-indulgent than anything, as the passage itself should provide comfort to those who truly believe.

After all, it lays to rest the question of our origins once and for all. By reading the text, there can be little doubt as to the identity of the First. And the fact that the tale appears as it does in the Gospel is an even surer sign of the story's veracity, as the same tale would go on to be dictated to untainted mortal scribes some millennia hence. The Bible, of course, makes no mention of the true nature of the Curse...

This is yet another sign of God's willingness to accept all those who accept Him into their souls.

On the First City

"The First was drawn to the children of day;
And in his grief, he built for them a city,
Where they could build for him in return.
And in his grief, he took three of them for his own,
Naming the city after the first of his blood —
The second Noddist.
Here, the children of day toiled in darkness,
Under the rule of the Lord of Night.
And because they bowed down to him
Of their own free will,
The Lord of Heaven did not intervene."

From the commentaries of the Divinist:

It is partially from this section of the text that we find substantiation for our claims. In his rule of the First City, the First became a great lawgiver, proclaiming his commands to all those in his domain. Clearly, the Lord does not look down upon Noddists who govern, guide and command the children of day, so long as they are just and good and right



to so govern. Indeed, the very nature of the Curse requires that we remain in close concert with humanity. Would the Lord have made this a part of our state of being if we were not to do our best to use it for the good of ourselves and our flock? The message of the text is clear: When mortals come willingly and in good faith, the dominion of the Noddist is both a precious and righteous thing.

From the footnotes of Parsifal:

Although many Heretics use this passage as justification for their ludicrous blasphemies, few are honest enough to cite the sister passage found some two pages hence (in most translations I have seen). In this later passage, it remarks upon the words of the First to his childer in the First City:

"Thou shalt not become as a God to the Children of Seth. For the One Above, growing jealous in the shy, Will strike down the line forever..."

Know thou that the Children of Seth will rise up With weapons from the One Above And conquer us, should we be as Gods to them."

This passage, a direct quote from the First himself, reveals in no uncertain terms that it is *not* the Noddist's place to hold open dominion over the Children of Seth. No matter how much power our

state may seem to afford us, it is all a mighty illusion of the spirit; one that requires only the wanton hubris of the impure to vanish like so much smoke. We Faithful are only as divine as our Lord and Savior will allow, and no more.

There is only one God, and none shall have any other God before Him.

"Interesting," the Saracen intoned, tracing his finger along this last line of text.

Either that is his favorite word, the Crusader thought, or it is the only one he knows.

"There is only one God, and none shall have any other God before Him.' This is almost identical to what all Muslims profess with some regularity. 'There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His prophet.' I should like to meet this... Parsifal. I am sure that he and I would have much to discuss. He seems to be one of you, a Crusader. Do you know him?"

"May I ask you a question?" the Crusader said quietly. His brow furrowed as he gazed steadily at his host.

"But of course," said the Saracen, folding his arms across his broad chest.

"It is evident that you understand who... and what... I am," the Crusader began, then paused as though waiting for permission to continue. The Saracen only stared in reply, then smiled.

"So, then... why?" the Crusader continued. "Why have you brought me here to discuss this book with you when you could have easily just kept it and read it for yourself? And why did you not let me die out here? And why the ruse?"

"That is three questions, *saidi*," objected the Saracen, wagging his finger above the table.

The Crusader began to fidget with agitation, shifting uneasily in his chair and chewing at his lower lip. The Saracen watched only a moment of this suffering before giving in with a laugh.

"Well, let me see. I brought you out here because I wished for us to discuss this book *together*... and because I do so enjoy the night sky," he said, motioning heavenward. "And I did not allow you to die out here because it is not my way. I wonder... is it yours?"

The Crusader was taken aback by both the reply and the ensuing question. Now that the issue was put to him, he had to admit that he probably would have done the same. No... not probably. He would indeed have done the same. The very same.

"And to answer your last question," the Saracen finished, "I was never aware of any ruse, *saidi*. I spoke as I did and feel that I did so in good faith. All the same, I apologize if I misrepresented myself in any way."

The Crusader reflected for a moment. "Well... no. I don't suppose you did, but..." He was beginning to feel as though something was wrong with him, though he could not pinpoint what it was.

"But...?" the Saracen said quizzically.

"But nothing, I suppose." He knew he spoke the truth, but the words made him feel vulnerable somehow. He had to physically shake the thought away in order to find composure.

"Well, then," the Saracen said, still smiling. "Shall we continue?"

On the Deluge

"I hear, now, the tale of the Fall.
The First City grew decadent,
Swallowed by darkness and sin
With no love for the One Above.
Where once there were four of the blood,
The ranks swelled fat and bloated
As the Three took childer of their own.
The First did not stay their dread Embrace,
And thus did he sin once again.
In His wrath, the Lord smote the city,
Sending a great flood to wash it clean.
When the last of the waters had receded,
The First, in his disgrace, had fled his childer,

Abandoning the ruins of his hubris."

On the Second City

"Without their Dark Father,
The Noddists fell to great conflict.
Without wisdom to stay their hands,
The childer rose up against the Three,
Destroying them with wood, fire and claw.
The second brood then engaged in their own sin,
Passing the curse along to a new, third brood
Who would join their sires in a new city of vice.
In his rage at their deceit and lack of faith,
The First cursed each of the second brood from afar,
And the Lord, hearing his plea, made it so.
And again did the sinful Noddists fall to conflict,
And again did the childer rise up against the sires,
And again did a great city of sin fall to ruin."

From the footnotes of Leonitus:

One of the most telling things about this passage is the clarity it provides on the topic of God's judgment. Some assume that simply because they do not see lightning cracking the sky asunder and smiting the sinful where they stand, it must mean that the Lord does not punish the wicked. Indeed, He does, and in ways more frightful than lightning could ever be. Notice how every endeavor born of sin — even those brought forth by the most powerful and mighty the Earth has ever known — seems to end in ruin. The Lord knows, sees, and punishes all. One way or another, all souls pay for their sins eventually, so it is best to own up to them — while the option to do so yet remains.

From the footnotes of Parsifal:

While I concur that these passages provide keen insight into the truth of God's judgment, I must differ with my esteemed collaborator on the nature of His justice. It is true that a great flood laid low the iniquity of the First City, but remember the times: These were the very first Noddists in existence and they were all in error. When there are none to do the Lord's bidding on Earth, He can and will step in to do it Himself.

Notice how no such great calamity befell the Second City. It is my belief, and that of most within the Crusader Congregation, that the Second City fell because of the pety of a few select Noddists, perhaps even only one — one with the courage to heed the will of God and deal retribution to his wicked brethren. In that sinful environment, all it would take is one Noddist who understood his purpose and attempted to

fulfill that purpose, and in so doing laid waste to the evil around him. While all were surely guilty of some trespass, the very war that laid their evil city low is evidence of God's hand in the affair.

On Being Faithful

"From the moment of his Embrace,
Until the Last Days, when all will be done,
The soul of the Noddist must make a choice:
Dwell static within its dark inheritance,
Or take heed God's word and walk proudly
Down the Road of Light.
The Lord's voice calls to all Noddists in the dark,
beckoning them to join Him in the Light.
Each step taken towards this Heavenly sound
Is a step further forward along the road.
Some steps cover more of the path than others,
And the wise Noddist soon discovers his own pace.
But, lo, the path is narrow and often winding,
And those who stray too far may never again
Find their way back to the path of righteousness.
Thus, the road of the Light requires things divine:
Discipline and faith in the rightness of the way."

From the footnotes of Leonitus:

One of the most central teachings of the Road of Heaven, or the Road of Light (as it was known in pre-Christian nights), is the notion that while Noddists lead unlives of Threefold Darkness, they do so with the knowledge that God is the Light and that, in time and with faith, the Noddist may push through to Him and His eternal reward. Many rejoiced when Christ later went on to say, "I am the way and the light, none shall come to God the Father but through me," as these words echoed the words of the Father heard in the soul of every faithful Noddist before that time.

The primary importance of this particular passage is twofold: First, it clearly mentions that God has ordained the Curse as a means of testing each soul with which it comes in contact. Once a Noddist is brought into Threefold Darkness, he has a choice (for without choice, his undying state is merely a punishment, rather than a test). He may choose to exist in sin, indulging in the very carnality that would lead his soul to complete and total damnation, or he may choose to walk the fragile path — to lead his unlives in pursuit of redemption, in the hopes that one day he will once again know God's grace. That, dear

friends, is the premise of the Via Caesi: Walk the road aright and ye shall know paradise, the taint of sin and temptation forever purged from your precious soul.

This leads to the secondary importance of this passage. Note the final sentence, where the Gospel mentions discipline and faith. This is key because it is the first time that the text mentions specific qualities that are required of all Faithful. Although these are somewhat obvious notions after the fact, this was a key passage for those in elden nights attempting to find the root of the Gospel's message. Here, they were told specifically what qualities would be required of them, should they desire to return to God's grace. Incidentally, this passage is part of what makes some believe that the author was none other than one of the Heavenly Host, sent to Earth with a gift from God — a few concrete hints about what Noddists can and must do in order to find redemption. And there lies the real gift of the Gospel's message; the revelation that we are cursed, but not forsaken.

The Road of Heaven is the embodiment of the idea that so long as God is with us, there is always hope — even in Endless Death.

From the commentaries of the Divinist:

What a rousing orator is he who sings praises to the Lord and delights in His divine presence. From the words of those who most deeply adore the Gospel, one might think that God's grace is enough to carry a soul through an eternity on this plane. It is not. What carries a Noddist through his undying existence is not the Lord's presence, but His singular power, and the knowledge that a piece of that awesome power, however small, has been divinely invested in the Noddist's formerly fragile and pitifully mortal coil. That is the true revelation of the Noddist condition: Not the mere assurance that God is with and above us, but rather that we have been chosen to stand with and beside God.

What truly amazes is how few of the so-called Faithful are bold enough to even dare to admit the undeniable truth to themselves. We need not eat nor draw breath, we suffer not the plagues and illnesses of our mortal herds, nor even the ravages of time, itself. For God's sake, we are even gifted with powers beyond reason, the ability to sway the minds and hearts of men, or to take on whatever form our glorified minds can conjure.

"Endless Death," you say? Nay, fine fellow, that is the very definition of "Eternal Life."

The Saracen placed a finger at this spot in the text, and with his free hand, flipped through the pages that followed. He frowned, scanning each page quickly, as though hoping a specific word would catch his eye.

"If you tell me what it is you seek, perhaps I could assist you in finding it?" the Crusader said helpfully. He hoped his tone did not betray his growing impatience. The night was already short enough this time of year — this night more so than most. The last thing he needed was additional dalliance. While he awaited the Saracen's response, the Crusader allowed his gaze to flit along the far horizon for a brief moment. The sky above it remained a nebulous grey... for the time being.

"Well," the Saracen said at last, "I am curious about those faithful Noddists who do not follow our God."

Our God. The Crusader still did not care for the sound of it.

"Surely there must be followers of this book who do not hold with any of the Abrahamic teachings. Are the pagan Noddists of, say, Lithuania forever damned in the eyes of God simply because they have not yet glimpsed the truth of the Qur'an... or the Bible?" Although he couldn't be sure, it seemed to the Crusader that his guest added this last as an afterthought. A courteous one to be sure, but an afterthought nonetheless.

"An interesting question," the Crusader said, and it was. He reached across the table, half expecting the book to be pulled away from his reach. It was not.

"There is actually quite an intriguing, as well as controversial, chapter in the book that addresses this very question. Let me see if I can remember where it was...." With a nod from the Saracen, he pulled the book over and began flipping through it himself, a sudden smile now coming over his face as well.

"Something amuses you, *saidi*?" the Saracen prodded. "Do share it with me."

"It is just curious that you mentioned Lithuania," the Crusader began. "I have a... friend who journeyed extensively in the region. From what he says, it is a unique place for Noddists." He did not look up as he continued flipping.

"Oh?" the Saracen said. "Do tell. I have never had the pleasure of traveling in that land myself."

"Well, apparently the pagan denizens of Lithuania have long shared a greater degree of comfort and cooperation among one another than do their Western counterparts. The woods and glens of their land are home to the Fair Folk, who are more powerful there than perhaps anywhere else in Europe. All others who would dwell there are wise to show deference in and around their sylvan courts. You are aware of the fae, yes?" His

host nodded, his crooked smile returning at last. Satisfied, the Crusader continued.

"That's not to say that they rule, mind. As I said, the entire system works on shared faith, so the mortals, too, are an inherent part of the natural order there. Thus the existence of the supernatural is not quite so shadowy — nor even seen as 'supernatural,' if truth be told — among them as it is among other Europeans.

"This applies even to pagan Noddists. After all, the fae have little reason not to accept them. Since Lithuania's early days, when magic ruled both day and night, the fae have insisted upon the concerted respect and cooperation of all those they have allowed to share their sacred groves and glades. They know of great evil that sleeps beneath the land's rich soil, and have always strived to guide the hands of the others toward staving off the worst of its depredations. As a result, all who dwell there are expected to contribute to the betterment and sanctity of the land and all its inhabitants."

"So... the Noddists are given 'duties' to perform?" inquired the Saracen.

"Everyone is, really. The Noddists are devoted to the sacred groves and hills they call home, and since time immemorial, the fae have instructed them on methods of keeping their bawns safe and pure. So the Noddists of this land have learned to dwell in relative harmony with their neighbors, and such accord has grown into a powerful tradition of its own over the centuries. Those who violate the age-old understanding between the groups are judged most harshly — if not by their own, then by the will of the fae."

"Interesting," the Saracen said again, rubbing his thumb along the underside of his thick, black beard. "Does this communal worship have a leader? A ruling body?"

"Yes, actually. Like the Catholic Noddists of the kingdoms to the East, the authority for the spiritual leadership and guidance of the Faithful of Lithuania stops at a single soul. But unlike the pontiff of their Church-minded compatriots, that single soul belongs to a fellow Noddist. This man — the "pagan pope" of Lithuania — is known all throughout the land, and to all the creatures that call it home, as the Krivė."

The Crusader's eyes lit up as he turned the next page.

"Ah... here it is! Shall I read it for you?" he asked excitedly.

"By all means," replied the Saracen.

"To the Creator, each Noddist is equal.

Gifted with the same trials and means,

Each has the potential to grasp his own purpose,

To take the fate offered by his Creator

And make it his own.

All those who accept Him and their role,
Listen to these words and heed their call,
Shall be accepted into the Host of Heaven.
Let not any Noddist command another
By name, by idol, nor by any deed
Not flowing directly from his Creator.
Heed one another as equals before the Lord;
Authority is found only in wisdom and in faith.
The beginning of redemption for all is found
Only in the unanimity of Noddist piety.
One Creator, one faith."

On Mastery of the Accursed Self

"Hear, now, the perils of the Adversary.
The Noddist's attunement to the Darkness
Makes him a fine catch for the hoary host of Hell,
And for those already damned beyond damnation.
It is the curse of the Noddist to abide
The proximity of this evil, but not to succumb.
The Light may be dim, at first,
But it grows brighter with each victory over sin.
Behold, the tools of the Adversary:
It will seduce, beguile and corrupt;
It will tug at the Noddist's heartstrings;
It will provoke him to rage at every slight;
It will tickle the bone of his humor,
Especially in times when humor is ill-suited;
It will erode the Noddist's very sense of self,
And in the easiest way to the Noddist's soul,
It will fuel the fire of his burning hunger,
And attempt to use his own curse against him.
If heeded, its voice will grow louder, louder,
Until it drowns out the voice of the Father.
This, the Noddist must prevent,
On peril of his very soul.
Both within and without,
The voice of the Adversary *must* be beaten down.
At all costs."

From the footnotes of Leonitus:

The lines of this passage have been recited at gatherings of the Knights of Penance since the order's inception. Indeed, most every soul on the Path of Penitence knows them by heart (or, at least, some version thereof), and most intone these words while performing their nightly ablutions. The notion that sin must be actively "beaten down" is one to which

we Penitents take strongly as well as literally. Keeping sin and temptation away from one's soul when one's soul is already "partially damned" is a potentially daunting prospect. Doing it properly requires not only the discipline of which the text speaks, but a healthy respect for the idea that sin is most effectively beaten back when it is actually, actively beaten back.

What disturbs (and often terrifies) many Faithful about this passage is the fact that it mentions nothing overt or stereotypically devilish on the part of the Adversary. No demonic herds overrunning hillside monasteries, no seven-headed horrors erupting from fissures within the earth; nothing visually nor obviously Hellish. Rather, the message of the Gospel here is that the weapons of the Adversary are those of sublety and of guile when it comes to pulling the strings of the Faithful. Perhaps the author (or the Adversary) knows that direct methods fail to sway the convicted Noddist, and thus, he teaches us the things that might not be obvious, but that we absolutely need to know; that which we must be wary of in ourselves and behind the eyes of our fellow Noddists.

From the commentaries of the Divinist:

How easily we ignore the things that make us who and what we are. Does Leonitus honestly believe that our drive for blood makes us somehow base or unworthy? As a Noddist, even he cannot dispute the fact that our hunger is a wonder to us, a Godsend, if I may be so bold. It is what fuels our passions, and its sariation is what enables us to accomplish things that no mere mortal ever could. Could not the "curse" have simply reduced us to a steady diet of ash, and ash only? Our drive for blood, and the ensuing culmination of that drive, all but ensures our place at God's right hand. I fail to see how any reasonable or even self-respecting Noddist can argue the simple fact that the blood is the life!

No, I'm afraid that Leonitus and his ilk have got it entirely backwards: The voice we hear inside that propels us to feed is not the voice of the Adversary. It is the very voice of the Lord, urging us toward our destinies as sanctified creatures of both life and death. Even an objective look at the text does not disprove this. What the text says is that the voice of the Adversary will try to corrupt the voice of our Creator to Its own ends. There is an enormous difference between the voice that drives us belonging to Satan and the

voice that drives us to sin belonging to Satan. The fact remains that the truths of our existence—our power, our hunger, our immortality, our superiority—were ordained by God Himself and not by Satan. Our esteemed Knight does not realize how right he is when he says the things we must be wary of are “behind the eyes of our fellow Noddists.” For it is there that he will find the thing that he and his fellow Penitents fear most of all—the truth.

On Visions of Light

“Hear, now, the lesson of pure moments.

The journey within Threefold Darkness is long,
Fraught with peril, indecision and temptation.

At times, even the purest Noddist will know doubt,
Fearing that the Lord has abandoned him in this,
His never-ending hour of need.

But, lo, shall He come to you in those times,
Cutting through the darkness with his radiance,
And bestowing unto you His holy wisdom.
It is the sacred gift and duty of each Noddist
To seek these moments of light with all his soul,
To open his mind and spirit to the Word,
To let it flow through him, touching him,
Changing him, and revealing unto him
The Light of God.

It is in these precious moments of brilliance
That the Noddist may truly glimpse God's grace,
And know that which awaits him in Heaven.
Here endeth the lesson.”

From the footnotes of Leonitus:

One of the most important things a Faithful Noddist can do is to keep an open heart. Although penitence is and should be a large part of his nightly existence, penitence without understanding is nothing more than self-abuse for its own sake. It is the growth of the soul that drives us. We seek to gain a greater understanding of ourselves and our place within God's plan by purging ourselves of sin. It is true that ablutions must be a large part of this process (we are, after all, damned creatures), but these ablutions must go hand in hand with conscious spiritual awareness if we are ever to achieve our goal.

The Light can be so very elusive to those who have just stepped onto the road. At the beginning, doubt swirls free. If left unchecked, it can grow into the sin of despair as the young neovitiante seeks to find any hope at all in the seemingly endless void that is the

Threefold Darkness. The key to unlocking his own hope rests in opening his mind and soul to God's visions of light. It is those fleeting moments of grace that allow us to take each successive step along the road. I am pleased to say that after some time the visions become more familiar, although that should not be mistaken for ease. The amount of discipline required remains the same; it is simply the fact that, once one has a bit of light in his world, the rest of his environment becomes much clearer to him.

From the commentaries of Anatole:

What many fail to realize is that these visions of light are one of the reasons why the “community” of the road, such as it is, is so very important. Having another soul to which one can relay the experience of being on the receiving end of a vision from God is critical to achieving any objective understanding of that vision. In this regard, the role of ashen priests among the Faithful cannot be stressed enough. It is these counselors and confessors that help the stumbling acolyte find his way in the dark. They share in his moments of revelation and provide a context in which he may interpret his own dreams and visions. Often times, a struggling Noddist will be smitten so forcefully that he cannot tell dream from reality. Without someone there to reinforce them both, he may fall victim to his own religious doubt, insecurity, depression, or worse.

This uncertainty leads to some among the Faithful growing terrified of their own visions of light. When one is alone and one receives a sign from God, how does he know that what he sees is truly divine inspiration sent from Heaven to sanctify his soul, and not the tortured hallucinations of a mind fractured by guilt? When left unchecked, this “divine madness” is more often than not a downward spiral from which few ever return. Unfortunately, such individuals are mistakenly associated with the road at large, though I can attest that they are certainly the exception, rather than the rule.

To prevent this phenomenon, it is utterly essential that growing souls on the road have a wise priest (or at least fellow Faithful) to whom they can confide. I, myself, never had such a confidant when I started along the path. Although I seem to have come through my moments of light with my mind yet intact, I often wish I had.

But then, not every Noddist, even among the Faithful, has my fortitude.

On Heresy and Sin

“Hear, now, the lesson on heresy and sin.

The Road of Light is not an easy one to walk.



Diligence in the Noddist's faith must be maintained,
 And he must be ever wary of his own soul's taint.
 As with the Children of Seth, the Noddist may know sin.
 So long as he repents, confesses his sins, and atones,
 His soul and its position in the afterlife may be preserved.
 Heresy must not be counseled among the faithful.
 The Lord's word is law, and those under his Curse
 Have even less room to stray than do all others.
 Thus is apostasy the sin most dire to a Noddist.
 Those who abandon their former humanity
 Do not: devils and unrepentant sinners make —
 Not if they turn their newfound souls unto the Lord,
 But those who willfully renounce the path of Light,
 And turn away from the face of the Lord Himself
 Are sinners of the lowest order;
 A danger to both themselves and their brethren.
 The Noddist who deems himself truly loyal to God
 Suffers not the Heavenly apostate in his midst.
 Drive them out, drive them all out,
 Lest they despoil all good souls with their taint!

Here endeth the lesson."

From the footnotes of Parsifal:

When young novitiates seek my counsel on walking the path, on knowing truth from lie or heresy from piety, I often refer them to this passage of the Gospel. It is important for newly confirmed Faithful to recognize that they are free to let go of their humanity; to understand and accept that such ideas as active codes of morality and behavior were good to them only as mortals. The lessons of breathing men are vital to understanding the condition of Threecfold Darkness, but they are nonetheless left behind when a former man is changed by the Curse. Humanity and its lessons serve the Noddist best as object lessons in the line, in examples of how the Faithful have been touched by the Lord and how that affects their relationship with the Children of Seth.

I also recommend this passage to those who would give their Confirmation of Blood (either upcoming or long since past) less weight than it deserves. Stepping upon the Road of Heaven is not a decision to be made lightly. Doing so involves a direct and

conscious choice on the initiate's part, wherein he chooses to accept God into his existence and to devote the remainder of his unlife (which may, indeed, be some time) to understanding and fulfilling his role in God's plan. I do believe that most Faithful are very open about the requirements of the Road. Very few have ever been truly "forced" onto the *Via Caeli*, and this is precisely the reason. Only those who believe are wanted here, and that also applies to those who would forsake God and leave the faith. Such individuals are, to put it lightly, unwanted souls. In addition to their excommunication, most apostates are also reviled wherever they may go and, if the rumors are correct, further cursed beyond their Noddist nature. I've heard tales of apostates being hounded by all manner of spirits and demons following their cowardly flights from the faith.

From the commentaries of the Divinist:

Again we see how much the text supports the so-called "heretical" movement within the *Via Caeli*. It says specifically, "The Noddist may know sin." And as well we should for if we could not, how would we be able to tell the difference? Wrong and right are not relative terms nor ideas, they are determined by the One Above. When He ordains that a thing is right or wrong or when a thing should be done, who are we to dispute it? The text also tells us that heresy must not be counseled among the Faithful because God's word is law. I very much doubt that you would find a single Heretic who would dispute that Heresy, as defined as "that which goes against God's will," is most certainly unacceptable. This is precisely why those who deny God's will by failing to embrace who and what they are, such as the very so-called "Faithful" who appended this translation of the great *Book of Threefold Darkness*, are the true heretics - not I and my confederates.

Then there is the issue of apostasy. Look at how strongly the Gospel makes its point about those who profess to embrace and then deny God. We see how important it is for the Faithful to remain faithful, the Lord tolerates no evasion in this regard. And why do we suppose this is? Could it be because the Faithful, especially among all those under the Curse, must hold true to God's will? That once one has stepped onto the Road of Heaven - the Road of God - that he is bound to staying true to the path until the End of Days? This could only be the case if our condition and existence is indeed a part of God's plan for Judgment Day. Yet again, we see how your "unending interpretation" of our Creator is more dangerous than my so-called heresy could or ever will be.

On Walking the Road Aright

"The path into the Light is laid
With the stones of faith, diligence, and loyalty.
Those who have demonstrated these qualities
Shall be counted among the Lord's favored.
It is part of the faithful Noddist's duty
To recognize his own progress along the path.
The journey through the Threefold Darkness
Is a personal voyage of spiritual discovery,
But it is one made easier through community.
Let the teachings and the sins of the First
Be a personal guide through the darkness,
But heed the wisdom of those farther along the path
And the warnings of the messengers of the Lord,
Lest ye stumble off the path and into sin."

From the commentaries of Anatole:

Sadly, a great part of the overly complicated bureaucracy in our faith today stems from passages such as this. Those who would use their own progress along the path as a political foil cite this passage as holy writ - which it is - calling it proof of the fact that path elders are meant to have sweeping dominion over the rest of the faith - which it is not. While it certainly shows a strong argument for those of the faith banding together, and even for those newly initiated in the ways of the road to heed their elders' wisdom, the passage hardly calls for the rigid hierarchy we see some elders trying to enforce tonight.

Anyone who reads the text can tell that it was never the Gospel's intent that all Faithful be forced to dwell in fear beneath the suffocating net of their elders' spiritual authority. At this stage of our evolution, few would disagree that the Congregations, the synods and the pontiffs certainly have their place, but should their decretums and *motu proprio* be anything more than simple religious treatises? Is there a legitimate precedent, or need, for these groups to have any true power over their fellow Noddists?

On Priests of Ash

"Progress is needful for every soul
Who travels along the road to Heaven,
But there are and must always be
Those who light the way
And those who heed their wisdom.

The most pure of light and dark
 Shall be the keepers of His house on earth,
 And all shall abide the wisdom of these pious few.
 The few, who shall guide others to the path;
 The few, who shall listen with just ear and heart,
 Heed the sins poured out in voice
 From their accursed brothers and sisters;
 The few, who shall observe the confirmation
 When a new soul shall enter the house of worship.
 The few shall do all in the presence of their Creator
 And in the full faith of their office,
 Lest they be stripped of their divine vestment.
 Those who violate His sanctified trust
 Shall be poured out like water,
 Their strength dried up like a potsherd,
 And their tongues shall cleave to their jaws.
 He shall bring them into the dusk of death."

From the footnotes of Leonitus:

The tradition of the ashén priests began with those of our faith. To be sure, those on the Via Humanitatis have found counsel in their kin since time immemorial, much as the Ferals have always found guidance (or had it find them) in the form of those more feral than they. But the first true, codified system of ashén priests belongs to the Via Taali. This text, extant for millennia now, calls for the establishment in the Via of a body of spiritual leaders, and this passage is one of the key components of that decree.

Notice how the text speaks of the wrath of the Creator. As I said before, the physical realm is a harsh habitation and those who dwell here do so at God's sufferance. Enduring physicality means enduring pain, and the text clearly describes what fate will befall one who flaunts God in such a blatant manner as to defile the oath and spirit of His most holy office. The duties of priests of are most sacred, indeed, and if they are not to be taken seriously on principle alone, the text provides ample alternate incentive.

From the commentaries of the Divinist:

Watch closely, friends, as the theory once again fails to live up to the reality! While the punishments certainly do sound severe for those ashén priests who fall short in their duties—or, at least, their duties as seen by the book—I have yet to actually meet a single priest who failed his duties in such a way as to merit the divine retribution of which the text speaks. After all, the punishment is rather specific, no? Could it be that the priests who fail in what the Church sees

as duties are still performing the duties of which the Gospel speaks? Could it be that even priests of our "heretical" faith are likewise doing their Creator's bidding?

On Heeding the Call

"The priesthood is for those
 Of purest thought and deed,
 As well as those farthest along the path.
 The Lord chooses those who would serve;
 The beginning of wisdom is to know the call
 Of the Lord when one hears it —
 To obey, and to know what a gift it is to serve.
 Let no Noddist enter His service
 Who has not himself known confession
 From both sides of that most sacred sacrament.
 Let no Noddist preach the Word
 Who has not himself seen and known sin.
 And let no Noddist presume to know Heaven's will
 Until such time as he has spent a life in exile.
 One must know the darkness himself
 Before he may guide another through it safely."

From the footnotes of Parsifal:

Quite an extensive body of customs have flowed from the passages in this section of the Gospel. The process and circumstances by which we have come to select our ashén priests stem from the guidelines presented herein. Although the parable of the ass and the angel is a more colorful (and popular) discussion of this topic, it is not as clear in its message and is rarely found in most versions of the Book of Threecfold Darkness, anyway. Aside from that amusing fable, this is the sole place of text that reveals the most critical of things: the requirements of office for our faith's would-be ashén priests.

From the text, we see that the author believes that each would-be priest is actually called to service, literally. I have spoken with several of the older, more respected priests of the local synod and each one confirms this to some extent or another. For some, it is merely a dream they feel compelled to act upon; for others, the calling is a thunderous, undeniable command from God. (In one case, the poor priest was knocked flat by the sound of a voice in his ears.) This is a wonderful sign for the road at large, because it shows that only those who feel a powerful compulsion to serve should actually do so. Precisely the way it should be.

As to other requirements, the text speaks of confession playing a major role. Only those who have both given and received confession are truly worthy of

being priests and counselors for the rest of the Faithful. Another Godsend. Then comes an interesting interdiction: "Let no Noddist preach the Word/Who has not himself seen and known sin." From a logical standpoint, this makes perfect sense: Let not the blind lead the blind, as the saying goes. But it has become something of a row among those in the faith, given that it distinctly implies that a Noddist must have sinned in order to be a priest. Note, however, that it doesn't specifically give this as a pre-requisite for being a priest, but only for preaching the Word (yes, it is found in the passage about herding the call, but the Gospel itself is hardly a model of narrative flow and structure). To me, this means that one should not proselytize about sinning and abandoning sin unless he himself has both sinned and abandoned sin.

Last comes the passage that causes the most grave friction among neonate Faithful whose eagerness to join the priesthood meets with stony defiance from the Congregations. "Let no Noddist presume to know Heaven's will/Until such time as he has spent a life in exile." As most Faithful can attest, the elders have taken this to mean that a Noddist cannot be considered for priesthood until he has spent at least as many years under the Curse as he lived before receiving it. For those Faithful who are brought across in old age, especially those who were already men of the cloth in life, this can be a long time to wait before picking up their duties to man and God. Thankfully, not everyone follows the traditional interpretation, and some of the more forward-thinking synods have accepted alternatives such as a period of post-Curse monastic existence to be a faithful fulfillment of the requirement of having spent "a life in exile."

On Confession

"Hear, now, the lesson of confession.

There can be no redemption without revelation,
And it is the duty of every Noddist to reveal
All impure thoughts and deeds to a confessor.

Doing so is essential to the soul's ability
To negotiate the Threefold Darkness itself.
After accepting the dominion of the Lord,
It is the first step on the path to redemption.
A confessor need only be another Noddist
Who is at least as far along the path as he.

Once accepting this sacred duty,
A confessor must keep soul's confidence;
Confession is between two souls and the Lord.
In times when one's confessor is absent,
It is permitted for a Noddist to find another,

One who shall hear confession in his stead.
This surrogate must meet the same demands,
And shall be bound by the same sacred oath
That binds a confessor to his office.
Once a surrogate accepts this sacred duty,
He must fulfill all its terms in good faith.
Those who violate the sanctity of confession
Shall know the judgment of the Lord.
Here endeth the lesson."

From the footnotes of Leminus:

Perhaps the most sacred teaching given to us through the Gospel is the importance it places on confession. As the text states, we are truly pitiful creatures, having been damned by our own Lord and Savior. We are cursed to wear the humility of our own sins like a permanent scarlet mask. But we have been given a glimpse of the Lord by way of our own damnation, and have eternity to not only atone for our sins, but to hopefully gain more than a glimpse of the understanding that so shamefully eluded us in life.

As any priest along the road will happily (and often loudly) confirm, the first step on the road to salvation is the unburdening of the soul. For the truly penitent, this process must always begin with the time-honored tradition of taking confession. The Lord sees and hears all, and by giving voice to one's admission of sin, one is crying out for the Lord to hear his plea. And when one strikes his own flesh in repentance, does not the Lord also hear his cries of piety?

The most telling thing about this passage is that it is one of the few in the book that carries no ambiguity — surely this is no coincidence! Nay, for any true believer, for any faithful that expects his progress along the path to bear any true significance to the Lord above, the confessional is the key practice of our faith, the very symbol of hope for our damned souls. As the good book says, it truly is the first step on the path to redemption.

On the Role of Keepers

"Hear, now, the lesson of the Keepers.
All Noddists are accursed beings.
Even those who follow the Word
And endeavor to find redemption
Are fraught with every temptation,
Their very natures leading them to sin.
While it remains the duty of each soul
To negotiate the weight of its own purity,

It also falls upon the pure Noddist
To become his brother's keeper;
To watch for signs of the Corruptor
Inside and around his fellow believers,
And finding evidence of such,
To bring it out into the light —
For the sake of the Noddist's own soul.
Here endeth the lesson."

From the footnotes of Parsifal:

Now we come to one of the most intractable bones of contention inside the corpus of our faith. Very few dispute the notion that God's law should be upheld, but some (including myself) disagree with the notion that it is for each and every servant of God to question his fellows and superiors. Each believer must question his *own* urges and behaviors, first and foremost. In addition, one who has barely begun his spiritual journey into God's grace has little wisdom in dogmatic matters of the *Via*, and is thus less likely to even be correct in his perceptions of another's wrongdoing or trespass.

The message of the book is clear: We are indeed the Damned, and we must look out for one another if our souls are to prosper. After all, a fellow in faith who has succumbed to Satan is infinitely more deadly to the rest of the faith than the average external threat. From a purely logical standpoint, this is a sensible course of action to suggest. However, it is plain to me that the book is suggesting that the onus be placed upon a select few, rather than the individual. I've seen ignorant neophytes run to the local luminary with "news" of their confessors' impiety. Simply put, such men bear false witness. As I've said before, the Congregations should finally and formally acknowledge the right knights of the Order as the heirs of this sacred duty. Crusaders have always borne the brunt of the faith's security duties, and these internal matters should be no exception.

The Saracen sniggered, causing the Crusader to start in his seat. When he looked up from the tome, his host had clasped both of his strong brown hands together in front of his mouth in a vain attempt at quieting his own mirth.

"Something amuses you?" the Crusader asked.

"My apologies, *saidi*," the Saracen said, still trying to regain his composure. "I just find it amusing that your own holy book not only espouses that you spy on one another, but further advocates running to your 'moral superiors' when you believe a fellow Christian is found wanting."

"Am I to believe that your faith has no such monitors?" the Crusader asked skeptically.

The Saracen's mirth subsided. "We do, yes. But for the Ashirra, these grim souls serve another, far greater purpose."

"Why not, then, a group of our own? Surely those of my faith require such a thing even more than those of yours, since we are such... 'infidels.'" The Crusader sat up in his chair, his own features growing equally austere.

"Agreed. You *should* have this. But the form is the thing. Your superiors reward their 'keepers' with material wealth, power and political advancement. Simply put, they are little more than mercenaries. The Ashirra have no such rewards system. Moreover, not just anyone can become one of our 'keepers.' Ours are a select and humble few."

The Crusader stiffened. "Perhaps you are right... at least about the result. I, myself, have long disliked the way the Congregations implement the Gospel's teachings on this issue. But in the interests of not having a tightly organized and controlled order, one that could be manipulated to evil ends, we opted for the opposite extreme. It may not be the best system, and yes, it occasionally fosters sin and ambition in the worst of us, but it seems to work as well as can be expected. Better that than the alternative, I say. In fact, I find it hard to believe that your own 'select and humble few' are faultless in their piety."

After a palpably tense moment, the Saracen began nodding. "Perhaps you are right."

On the Covenant of the Lord

"Hear, now, the tale of the First in exile.

After being cursed, the First knew only despair,
For he had wronged his Lord and knew not why.
He cried, 'How can I know which thing is right?'
And the Lord, perhaps for the first and last time,
Took pity upon the First in his despair
And sent the archangel Uriel to counsel him.
The all-knowing Lord knew the mind of the First,
And knew that he would take childer to ease his pain.
His angel found the First in the Darkness,
And said unto him, 'You have been cursed,
But know that there is hope in doing right;
You have been cursed, but those of your line
May be redeemed if they heed the laws of God —
The laws I give unto you now.'"

From the footnotes of Parsifal:

This is one of the most significant passages in the entire Gospel, as it provides a clear origin for the traditions that all Noddists have come to hold dear.

While many assume that the Traditions have their origin in the words of the First to his childer during the time of the First City, they are only half right: The First had already been given these laws by the Lord's messenger long before the First City was ever built. Later on, when the First is said to have handed these rules down to his own childer, he was doing so at God's behest, not his own. Thus, these so-called traditions are not simply time-honored customs followed by Noddists since their humemorial, but laws of being, decreed by God Himself. When a Faithful willingly violates one of the Traditions, he must know that he is going against the wishes of his Creator, and is thus putting his own soul (as well as his standing along the road) in serious jeopardy. Accidents are, of course, bound to happen, and the tenets of the road itself are certainly important, too, but it is best not to tempt fate where one's eternal soul is concerned.

It is worth noting that this particular parable does not appear in every translation of the Gospel that I have seen. While this leads some Faithful to question the veracity of the text's origin, the fact remains that we do have a documented source for the rules we all willingly follow. That suits a great many of us well enough.

On the Right of Domain

"As you are master of Nod,
Thy domain is thy own concern.
Thou art its master,
And all will respect this or suffer thy wrath.
All will present themselves when entering,
And thou shalt protect them in turn.
By right the master is allowed to hunt
Within the bounds of his domain,
Its blood his own.
Accept its responsibilities, minister thy domain,
And pay others the same respect thou expect."
Thus spoke the angel of the Lord."

From the commentaries of the Divinist:

I find it ironic (not to say highly amusing) that those who would decry a Noddist for ruling over those in his domain are the same ones standing by the divine origin of Traditions such as this one. Notice how the text refers to a Noddist's domain as his "own concern" and that any who do not respect a Noddist within his domain should - by divine right, remember - suffer his righteous wrath. If I am a Noddist with a domain, and my domain is my own concern, who are you to tell me what I can and cannot do within its

boundaries? Am I not master of my own domain, as the messenger of the Lord has decreed?

It would seem that God Himself understands and acknowledges the very thing his so-called Faithful servants refuse to accept.

On the Right of Progeny

"A childe shall only sire another
With the permission and blessing of his elder.
To create is the providence of those closest to you,
For they shall be accountable.
All those who break this rule shall be slain."
Thus spoke the messenger of the Lord."

From the footnotes of Parsifal:

In these dark times of carelessness and thin blood, I must firmly uphold the notion that the right of the Becoming should rest in the hands of an elder, one who will say who shall and who shall not sire progeny. The issue that I take, however (and that many of my fellow Crusaders take), is what the text intended by the term "elder." It seems to me that, since the laws were given unto the First by God, Himself, then the term "elder" applies to the eldest of the Faithful in a given area (or group, as the case often is). The wisest among the Faithful are more than capable of discerning who and how many are brought into the Threesfold Darkness, and in case it needs pointing out, none of this would be an issue if only everyone followed the *Via Eccl*.

As it stands, most of us concur that the prince alone deserves the right to administrate this tradition, especially in the event that said prince is also one of the Faithful. Otherwise, some of us refuse to see how the political laws of our kind should bind the Faithful in any way. After all, we do the work of God on Earth, and it is not the place of some heathen Feral or self-proclaimed Scion to give us by or leave. All the same, a Scion prince who acknowledges the divine origin of the Traditions and follows his iniquitous road in the name of God, is more often than not viewed as the lesser of evils.

From the commentaries of the Divinist:

Listening to the Crusaders rant about this issue is almost as much fun as watching them squirm when the local Scion prince has denied them the right to bring another young sapling into their not-so-milky white fold. What's even more interesting is the fact that the text reads, "To create is the providence of those closest" to the First. This would indicate that lineage is more important than age,

would it not? Thus, if my sire's sire was a direct child of one of the Thirteen, then I should be able to create progeny as I wish, should I not? What if my sire permits it? You see how, after a time, the notion that a prince has the final say begins to lose its luster. After all, few are closer to the First than I, especially in "these dark times of carelessness and thin blood."

On the Right of Accounting

"Those thou createst are thine own blood
Until released from thy charge.
Until that moment, their sins,
Their blood and their punishments are thine."
Thus spoke the messenger of the Lord."

From the footnotes of Parsifal:

One of the most unfortunate casualties of the rampant spread of our kind in recent decades is responsibility. There was a time when this tradition actually bore some real significance. These nights, most neonates pay it mere lip service when they heed its existence at all. Or at least they would, were it not for one thing:

We among the Faithful encourage the most Draconian and literal interpretation of this tradition's wording. When the text says "punishments," we listen. And we punish. In this regard, we must give credit to our brothers among the followers of the *Via Regalis*. If not for our combined efforts, this tradition would have all but disappeared in practice. Due to our vigilant enforcement of its terms, however, the Second Tradition remains a vital and active part of Noddist existence. While the community of the Faithful might lose some truly worthy sires through this practice, it is a small price to pay to ensure that our kind continue to take their responsibilities seriously.

I am quite sure that God would have it no other way.

On the Silence of Nod

"Never shall a Noddist reveal his true nature
To those not of the blood.
Doing so shall renounce his claims to the Covenant."
Thus spoke the messenger of the Lord."

From the commentaries of the Divinist:

Not even the so-called Heretics among the Faithful dispute the wisdom of this most important of Noddist traditions. In addition to the fact that the Lord has repeat-

edly demonstrated His desire that we remain in the shadows of the Children of Seth, it is rarely a wise thing to reveal one's self (and thus one's weaknesses) to those who would likely destroy him for his honest revelation. After all, why relinquish a great advantage unnecessarily? While there are a few extremist Heretics that feel they should not be forced to hide amongst the masses, and look to the night when they may doff their masks and take their rightful places on the thrones of Man, even they understand that night is not yet come.

On the Right of Destruction

"Forbidden is the Noddist to spill the blood
Of another of his kind who is elder.
This right belongs only to those closest to you
And none other.
It is forbidden for those of weaker blood
To rise against their elders
In this, the final covenant."
Thus spoke the messenger of the Lord."

From the footnotes of Parsifal:

This is perhaps the most important tradition where the Faithful are concerned — especially those of us affiliated with the Crusader Congregation — as it involves the rather delicate issue of Noddist versus Noddist conflict. In our duties, we are often called upon to strike down those who would corrupt humanity or other Noddists, and we needs must be both aware and careful of from whence our authority derives, lest we put our own spiritual advancement at risk.

Accordingly, we have a very rigid structure in place when dealing with the final destruction of other Noddists. Thanks to the words of the Sixth Tradition, we are only forbidden from slaying the unrighteous who are elder than we. Thus, individual Crusader houses are each led by one of fairly elder stature, with the hope that all authority in local matters descends from his most noble personage. Further, we attempt to receive the authority directly from Congregation elders when the need arises for us to destroy someone of even elder stature than the local order head. By our charter, we must lay waste to the evil and wicked, whether mortal or Noddist, but by the laws of God's messenger, we must be very careful in our duties with regards to the latter.

It's all very involved, of course, but we can assure it is done with the utmost propriety in order to comply with both the will and the word of God.

From the commentaries of Anatole:

Although I would not be so brazen as to suggest that there is some hidden fault buried in the history of this great text, I cannot reconcile the wording of this passage with what I know to be God's truth. In the nights of the First City, the angel of the Lord came down and told the First of how it was an innate aspect of the Curse that the young would rise against their elders. If the Lord truly wished to prevent Uriel's dread prophecy from fulfilling itself time and again until the End of Days, I cannot believe that He would decree any commandment that would authorize the old to slay the young with impunity. This would all but guarantee that the young would revolt, thus fulfilling Uriel's prophecy and defying God's will.

The only explanation (or, indeed, alternative) is that it is God's will that Uriel's prophecy be fulfilled, perhaps as punishment for the original sin of passing along the Curse in the first place - the very thing Uriel counseled the First against so very long ago. If such is the case, then the young are simply fulfilling their role in God's plan by revolting against the harsh provisions of this most puzzling of traditions. In either event, it remains the duty of each Noddist to weed out the sin of those around him and, if and where possible, to save their tainted souls in the hope that they may one day be redeemed. Where the Faithful are concerned, this law supercedes all others.

Erege-sis

"From darkness comes the Noddist,
Born of fog and ordained by damnation.
Through darkness journeys the Noddist,
Into whose home he cannot know nor see.
In darkness eternal dwells the Noddist,
His spirit hemmed by shadow and shade.
The darkness is within, where it must breathe,
The darkness is without, where it must seethe;
The darkness is above, beneath, behind and beyond.
To the Noddist,
The darkness is and must be everywhere —
But it does not claim him.
Let there be light."

The Saracen carefully replaced the last of the brittle papyri inside the back cover of the hide-bound tome and slowly closed it. He gazed down at the book in his hands, holding it up as though gauging its weight, and then inhaled, a deep and prolonged affair.

"Many thanks for sharing this with me, *saidi*. Now, with your permission, I would share something with you in return," he said, that crooked smile returning to his tanned face.

"Oh?" replied the Crusader, his tone laced just slightly with anxiety.

What more could there be, he wondered, casting a quick glance to the east.



"A bit of good news, which I am always happy to give. 'Give good news to the righteous,' says the Qur'an. Surah twenty-two." The Saracen once again smiled broadly, this time only for a moment.

He said at last, "The news I wish to share with you is that your battle here is done."

The Crusader cocked his head. "My battle, as you call it, is never done," he corrected.

"Of course it isn't," agreed the Saracen. "But your struggle in this land — Red Beard's Crusade — ended two days ago. The Emperor himself signed a treaty to the effect." Even in the dimness of the light, the Crusader's face betrayed his confusion and disbelief.

"What I am telling you is that you are free to return home, Crusader." The Saracen said this last as though it was ironic, somehow. The Crusader now wondered if that just might be so, then shook the thought away as he stared at nothing, his gaze fixed just over his host's shoulder. Irony or no, the Saracen *was* telling the truth — or at least believed he was.

"Where? How?" the Crusader muttered. His voice seemed far away to him now.

"At Jaffa, by way of a rather simple treaty with Sultan al-Kamil. By its terms, there shall be peace between Muslims and Christians in the Holy Land for no fewer than ten years. In addition, your Emperor has finally won for the Franj old Al-Quds... your 'Jerusalem.' Moreover, the borderland you have fought so hard to preserve these last few months has finally been ceded to Christian hands. The *outrejourdain* is yours, Crusader.

"So, you see... as of two days ago, you and I no longer have a quarrel. It seems that you were uninformed when you made your assault on our camp. And while some viewed it as a breach of the newly inked treaty, I suspected the truth — that you simply had not yet heard — and I stayed their vengeful hands. It was a decision I will not regret."

The Saracen placed the tome down upon the edge of the circular brass table between them.

"You have kept your word, Crusader, and now I shall keep mine. You are free to go."

Pressing a single finger down upon its saucer-shaped top, the Saracen swiveled the table in a slow, clockwise motion until the book swung round to sit in front of the

Crusader. For a moment, they stared at it together. Then the Crusader gingerly lifted the book off the table and clutched against his chest with both of his thick, mailed arms.

"Thank you," he said, a faint shudder in his voice. Again he found his gaze drifting past the proud silhouette of his host. The brown fog of sky had melted into a velveteen purple, beneath which the Crusader could just make out the cerulean haze of dawn.

The Saracen stood, turning to look back over his shoulder at the brightening horizon. When he turned back to face the Crusader, he was smiling again, this time with a hint of something else... sympathy, perhaps.

"You look... sickly. Still weary from your injuries. Perhaps too weary to travel just yet?"

The Crusader's head lowered in reply, his pallid hands still gripping the corners of the book held tight against his breast.

"Not to worry, *saidi*," the Saracen said briskly, circling around the table. He crossed to where his guest stood silent, laying his hand on the Christian knight's shoulder. "Since we are no longer enemies, I took the liberty of making some... arrangements."

The Crusader looked up into the Saracen's lively face, his reddened eyes worn and haggard. He suddenly found himself intensely tired, and he yearned once again for deep and dreamless sleep. Or perhaps something more.

The smile quickly drained from the Saracen's face, his features growing solemn in the half-light. Putting his other hand on the Crusader's free shoulder, he leaned forward. In a whisper he recited, "*I would have lost all heart, had I not believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.*"

A single crimson tear ran down the Crusader's pallid face. "Psalms," he croaked. "Chapter twenty-seven... verse thirteen."

At this the Saracen's smile returned, more crooked now than ever. Nodding decidedly, he gently turned the Crusader around and headed back towards the caravan-serai. As the two men walked, leaving the rising dawn behind, the Saracen turned to the Crusader.

"Come," he said, putting a robed arm around his guest. "There is a place for you."



CHAPTER TWO: THE FRAGILE PATH

And as to the unbelievers,
Their works are as a mirage in a spacious plain,
Which the man athirst supposes to be water,
Until, when he comes to find it, he finds that it is
nothing —
Indeed, there he finds God.
— Surah 24:39

One God, One Faith

At heart, the Road of Heaven embodies one core universal truth — that the Creator of All, be It called God, Allah, Yahweh, Jehovah, or any of the host of names that pagans might use — has a purpose and place for Cainites in His (or Hers, or Its) grand design. The notion is really the only one that remains consistent between the myriad factions of the road; everything else is details. Unfortunately, the Devil does indeed tend to reside in those details, for two Faithful who disagree on what would seem a niggling point to other Cainites can easily wind up throwing heated words — or worse — at each other in short order.

This section, however, focuses on what the Faithful have in common — the calling that brings them to God, the practices and customs practiced thereafter, and the moments of truth that lead further down the Road of Heaven.

Coming to God

Most residents of the Dark Medieval are raised from an early age to respect, pay homage, and fear God. In the moment of horror and blood that is the Embrace, a great many souls lose track of that faith. Many never truly regain it; some put on the semblance of devotion, mimicking the human traditions of worship as Prodigals. Others put it behind them entirely, seeking more base ways to supplicate the Beast. But for those strong enough, and of course faithful enough, the Road of Heaven beckons.

Many paths lead to the road. Some Cainites find it soon after their Embrace, with the help of mentors. Some follow other roads for years or centuries. It matters little; God is patient.

Supplicants

The Road of Heaven, unlike the *Via Bestiae* and the *Via Humanitatis*, is not a road onto which a newly Embraced Cainite can easily stumble. Especially devout (or even sinful) mortals might be selected for Embrace onto the road (see *Salvation*, below), but many of the most important Faithful in Europe were converts from other roads.

Changing roads is dangerous; a vampire who would attempt it must allow the Beast to come perilously close to taking control before the first steps on the new road may be taken. For a vampire to even consider adopting the Road of Heaven, however, some very powerful event must already have taken place to convince the Cainite to do so. A pilgrimage to the Holy Land, witnessing a miracle or viewing the scene of a great slaughter, an encounter with one of the Blessed (see *Dark Ages: Vampire* pp. 287–291), or simply an omen that the Cainite sees as the work of God; any of these can be enough to rekindle the spark of faith for one of the undead. Of course, maintaining that spark over the long nights of wrestling the Beast onto a new (and probably much stricter) road requires more will than many Cainites have. Some Faithful, particularly on the Paths of Divinity and Retribution, make a point of hunting down Cainites who have become lost to the Beast while trying to find the Road of Heaven.

When a Cainite does decide to change roads, the next step is largely dependent on his surroundings. If the would-be supplicant knows of a nearby Faithful, especially one equipped to act as a confessor, he might petition that Cainite for help. Many Faithful consider it sinful not to aid a willing convert; some, however, feel that any vampire who underwent the Embrace and did not immediately begin seeking forgiveness (or perhaps glory) is beyond hope. If the Cainite can find a sponsor, the sponsor immediately begins grooming the supplicant for induction into a Congregation. Conversely, the sponsor may teach him as a mentor, separating him from the greater body of Cainite politics (see *Sponsorship* for more details).

Missioners

Once a Cainite finds God, she often finds it difficult to keep the revelation to herself. Some Faithful vampires make

it their business to spread the Word of God to any who will listen. These Missioners are not always itinerant; many remain within one prince's domain, encouraging any visitors to convert and extolling the virtues of their road. Others become camp followers, trailing along behind armies ministering to crusaders. Still others haunt pilgrimage sites, either protecting the travelers from the depredations of unscrupulous vampires or preying upon those pilgrims themselves (as is often the case with pagan Faithful who find that their ancient land has suddenly been deemed a "holy site").

In general, Missioners of differing faiths tend not to agree on the finer points of worship (putting it lightly). Pagan and Jewish Faithful spread their faith quietly, if at all. Most Cainites of these faiths wait to be sought out by petitioners rather than actually proselytizing. Like their mortal compatriots, however, Christians and Muslim Cainites actively spread the Word and occasionally come into conflict when their territories overlap. Most Missioners are Christian or Muslim.

Regardless of an individual Faithful's attitude towards Missioners and the agenda they pursue, few such Cainites will pass up an opportunity to bring another vampire into the fold. Indeed, allowing another vampire's soul to go unsaved could well be considered a sin. If even a small chance to nudge a fellow towards the Road of Heaven exists, a truly Faithful Cainite would be well-advised to take that chance.

Salvation

Faithful vampires are nominally very careful about whom they Embrace. If asked, the average walker on the Road of Heaven might well wax poetic about the torments of the Damned, but how God in His wisdom has a place for all beings, even (or perhaps, especially) the Noddists. The Faithful might then go on to explain how only a mortal who evinces spectacular piety (or conversely, the most depraved sin) can be considered for Embrace onto the road. Some Faithful simply won't Embrace without a direct order from God Himself.

Of course, notions such as these do not always stand up to the rigors of the Dark Medieval. All of the roads have their standards, and all of them boast adherents who were Embraced on whim or by mistake. The Road of Heaven is no different; more than one Faithful has lost herself to the throes of the Beast and then tried to atone for the mistake by making the unfortunate mortal her child. Likewise, that which constitutes "great piety" (or even "depraved sin") depends largely on that particular vampire's experiences to date. A Noddist who participated in — or even witnessed — the slaughter at Béziers is unlikely to view a simple cutthroat mercenary as sinful enough to deserve the Embrace. A simple country lad, however, who in his breathing days had trouble beheading a chicken for an evening meal, might decide that a well-spoken but otherwise unremarkable priest is a truly holy man and worthy of immortality. When this sort of short-sightedness occurs,

the Faithful elders nod sagely and intone something about God working in mysterious ways (if the error is grievous enough, though, they might well "correct" it later).

Being Embraced specifically for the purpose of walking the Road of Heaven is known as "salvation" among many Faithful. At death, all prior sins are washed away, giving the new supplicant a potentially clean slate (with the new moral requirements and problems of being a vampire). For the pious, the sire often regretfully informs the childe that although she must now feed on the blood of the living, God demands no less of His true believers. Sometimes this is done before the Embrace, sometimes afterwards. If the sire does inform the childe of her intentions, it is most often to give the potential Faithful a choice; remain among the mortal herd, or become one of the Damned (or blessed, depending on the Faithful's point of view). Mortals who choose to remain mortals are usually Dominated to forget the experience. Cainites on the Path of Divinity, however, usually kill mortals who spurn the chance to walk among God's Chosen, occasionally choosing to instead claim the mortal's body and soul for use in their own twisted rites.

While occasionally done on the spur of the moment (such as on a battlefield or a mortal's deathbed), the Embrace is usually planned in detail with a great deal of ritual. In many ways, the Embrace is a baptism — the mortal leaves behind her spiritual infancy (mortality) and is "saved," her eyes opened to the true nature of God's Earth. Different sects of Cainites celebrate this occasion in different ways; Christian Faithful hold a second christening, where the childe takes on a new name which she uses among the Congregation. Those few Faithful found among pagan religions usually hold such rites outdoors, often just after sunset so that the childe can see what she is leaving behind. The Ashirra never Embrace non-Muslim mortals into the road, although they do practice a sacred ritual known as the Rite of Second Embrace on all would-be converts (Cainite or otherwise), which effectively cleanses the soul of sins past while "baptizing" him into Islam.

When the Embrace is complete, the rite may conclude with any number of celebratory ceremonies, depending on the bent of the sire. A Cainite Embraced by a Penitent likely spends the rest of the night, and some time after, learning how to beat the Beast into submission. The initiation rites of the Cainite Heresy, on the other hand, culminate in orgies of blood and satiation. Newly Embraced Crusaders might be forbidden to feed except on a deserving sinner (kind sires have one on hand for their ravenous childer).

Many Cainites thus "saved" take to the road quickly; few are taught of any alternatives until the Road of Heaven is firm underfoot. Some such vampires, however, rebel, taking other routes to containing the Beast (see Apostasy, p. 42).

Walking the Road

Once a vampire arrives on the Road of Heaven, whether by conversion or salvation, she must observe the tenets of the road. More so than most other roads, the *Via Caeli* is a social one; while a Faithful vampire can certainly worship



in private, the road has many rites and practices that require the involvement of others. Especially during the early nights of training on the road, a Cainite stays close to her mentor, lest a wrong step bring the Beast to the fore. After she gains the spiritual fortitude to resist the Beast's wiles, however, she spends her nights following her own agendas (and God's, hopefully).

Sponsorship

During the early nights of a Faithful's existence, her sire typically acts as a sponsor. This is not always the case, however; a Cainite converting to the Road of Heaven from another faith often finds a Faithful vampire willing to speak for her to a Congregation. This sponsor assumes responsibility for leading the convert (or *childe*) onto the Road of Heaven; for this reason, no Faithful takes on the role of sponsor lightly. Few accept sponsorship of a Cainite older and/or more influential than they.

A sponsor may renounce her charge at any time; if this happens, the supplicant (and sometimes the sponsor, depending on the circumstances) may be excommunicated or assigned penance. Among the harsher adherents of the *Via Caeli*, the charge might be slain rather than allowed to slip back onto her former, unworthy road (this is most often the case among the Crusaders, although the Divinists are similarly stringent).

While a sponsor need not be a member of the charge's own clan, it is customary among Christian Faithful for High Clan vampires to sponsor others among the first-cursed, while the Low Clans likewise sponsor their own. If a High Clan Cainite does deign to sponsor a Low Clan, it is seen as a superlative act of kindness and even martyrdom, similar to Jesus associating with lepers (needless to say, this attitude provokes resentment among the Low Clan). A Low Clan vampire who sponsors a High Clan supplicant, however, is often seen as overstepping his bounds. As the Low Clans grow more powerful across Europe, this attitude is changing. It bears noting also that an obviously advanced adherent of the road is afforded respect regardless of his clan, at least outwardly. Like the mortal Church, gossip and innuendo take the place of outright slander.

Among the Ashirra, of course, the High Clan/Low Clan distinction breaks down, as the *Banu Haqim*, ostensibly a Low Clan, are the most powerful and influential Cainites in the Middle East. Sponsorship works in much the same way, however.

Initiation

As mentioned above, mortals who are "saved" by Embrace onto the Road of Heaven have already experienced an initiation of sorts. Other Cainites, however, must be baptized onto the road. While the particulars of the ritual vary from sect to sect, it usually involves being brought before a synod (or at least an elder of the road) and reciting a series of vows. This most often includes a series of prayers (which are then recited on a nightly basis for the rest of the Cainite's existence), a vow to battle the forces of Satan, and a promise to

obey the Will of God as written in the Bible (or the Qur'an, or even the Book of Shining Blood). It culminates in the Confirmation of Blood; this again varies greatly between sects and is described in greater detail on p. 36.

The initiation rite is an important one because it cements a Cainite's place in her Congregation. It establishes what among mortals would be a feeling of belonging, but for Cainites is also a dependency on others of her kind. This is deliberate, though few of the Road of Heaven's hierarchy would admit it.

By forcing a new convert to feel that her spiritual safety is tied at least in part to a greater body of Cainites, the more advanced on the road tie the Congregation together. On one level, this allows them to call upon aid from their brethren, should they require it. On another, this practice falls back on the old adage of keeping one's friends close and one's enemies closer.

By knowing every initiate's name, clan, and lineage, the Congregation is able to track from whence their power might be threatened. After all, religious trappings (and even noble intentions) aside, temporal power among Cainites is a strong lure for both the younger and the more powerful. The elders know that a new initiate might well take the notion, "God helps those who help themselves," to heart.

That said, not all sects of Faithful practice initiation in this grandiose manner. A vampire brought onto the road by a lone ashen priest or a "hermit" of sorts might never see another Cainite until her initiation is complete, and might be "confirmed" on the road by a simple set of vows on a lonely road or in a deserted church. Pagan Faithful, while they certainly practice initiation rites, do not usually put emphasis on vows and words. The initiate might instead be required to hunt down and slay a threat to the surrounding mortals (which, ironically, might well be a Christian Cainite or a group of mortal crusaders).

Prayer and Penance

During a Faithful's training, she usually learns a series of rites, prayers, and rituals for use during the long nights ahead. Rare is the Cainite who does not spend at least some time each night in prayer. Muslim Cainites, of course, honor the *salat* Pillar of daily (or nightly) prayer — some even possess the fortitude to wake during the day to pray at the appointed times. Christian Cainites also pray at given times during night, saying aves, nones, and vespers like mortal monks. Many times, these prayers are variants on the mortal versions, rewritten to fit the unique condition of the Children of Caine. Sometimes these prayers simply involve recitation or quiet meditation, but for the Cainites on the Path of Penitence, self-flagellation is usually involved. The vast majority of Faithful Cainites refuse to feed until after prayer has been completed — some even "say Grace" after or just before subduing their prey.

Observing nightly prayers in whatever form they may take is crucial to keeping the Beast under control. A given Cainite might look at flagellation as whipping the Beast into

GRACE

Lord Futrelle fingered his coin purse, fat and supple. The road to Paris stretched before him, and although the shadows grew long as night approached, he found himself too eager to reach the city to turn back. According to his messengers, the roads had been curiously clear of highwaymen of late. The lure of wine, whores and finery was too much to resist.

He rode by a small farm and thought for a moment that the door opened and shut. He saw no movement on the grass, however, and no lights indicated that anyone was about. Futrelle idly wondered if these people had paid the proper taxes to him; many of his vassals had not.

Not far from the farm, his horse stopped short. He nudged its side and swatted at it, but it stood stock-still, quivering. Futrelle looked into the distance, but could not see more than a few feet in front of him.

Then he heard the voice.

Heavenly Father, I hear and obey Your wishes, and gladly accept the bounty You have given me. I take into myself the blood of the sinner before me, and through me he is cleansed and redeemed, and brought to Your Light once more.

A man appeared from the darkness, and stood before Futrelle shaking his head. "And what sin shall I redeem tonight?"

Futrelle could only gape as the man locked eyes with him. Numbly, he dismounted. His horse turned and galloped back the way they'd come. Powerless, Futrelle approached the man.

"Avarice," the stranger said after a moment. He smiled sadly. "It will do, I suppose. I rather prefer wrath, but I go where the Lord directs. Surely you understand."

submission while an Ashirra might see his prayers as lulling the Beast to sleep, but the effect is much the same. Most vampires fall into routines with their prayers (much like most mortals) and after a time, become dependant on that routine to retain control. This means that any circumstance that forces them to miss an evening's prayer or observance can open the door for the Beast to seize control (at the Storyteller's option, this might manifest as an increased difficulty to Self-Control rolls until the character can slip back into her routine). A Cainite can avoid this kind of malaise by varying her prayers and observances. As vampires are stagnant creatures, few of them have this kind of foresight.

Most sects of Faithful Cainites recognize the need for penance in some form or other. The notion of redemption, whether by performing acts of kindness or by reciting prayers, can be found in almost every faith. The exact nature of the penance requires three things, however, regardless of the Cainite's faith.

First, the Cainite must realize that she has sinned. If the sin stems from violating one of the tenet's on the road's Hierarchy of Sins, the Cainite usually knows that she has done wrong and is prepared to absolve herself. If, how-



ever, the vampire has sinned but rationalized the act or ignored the transgression (in game terms, the player has failed the Conscience or Conviction roll and the character has lost a dot of Road), she usually doesn't recognize the failing unless someone points it out to her. This is one of the reasons that community is important among the Faithful; those of similar mindset can watch each other for signs that the Beast is lurking close to the surface.

Once a sin has been recognized, the Cainite must confront it. For Christian Cainites, this is done by means of confession (while other faiths they don't hold confession in the same reverence as Christians, might adopt the practice as well). Other Faithful might return to the scene of their transgression to pray or simply bear witness to what their weakness has wrought.

Finally, the Cainite must take action. Absolution is a difficult and often painful step in redressing sin, but it is the most important step. Unless the wrong is corrected, even symbolically, the vampire slides ever closer to the Beast and ultimate damnation. Correcting the wrong might entail providing for a victim's family if the vampire killed an innocent, or tracking down a wrongdoer that the vampire allowed to escape. For more ephemeral sins or those that cannot be corrected in such a direct manner, the Cainite might spend entire nights (or days) in prayer, fast, undertake pilgrimages or any number of other methods used to absolve sin. Only when this step is complete is the character whole again (and only then may the player spend experience to buy back a lost dot of Road).

Evangelism

Missioners, discussed above, spread the Word of God to any who will listen. Evangelists do much the same, except that they are prepared to force others to listen if necessary. Vampires have died and seen what lies beyond. For many Faithful, this is a vision of Hell (or perhaps worse, Heaven unattainable). This means that any vampire or mortal who has not been shown the true way is in danger of risking his immortal soul. How can a Cainite claim to be "Faithful" and not act, in light of this fact?

Evangelists act as the road's inquisitors when necessary, searching out particularly vile sinners and forcing conversions. Failing that, they are usually content to simply slay the transgressor. This is especially true where other Cainites are concerned, as converting vampires is a long, slow process that is not at all certain of succeeding.

Although the word "Evangelist" often refers to one of the authors of the Gospels, not all Cainite Evangelists are Christian. Despite the Muslim teachings that there shall be no compulsion of religion, the Ashirra are quite willing to kill or convert to protect their homelands. Likewise, any vampire entering a pagan Faithful's domain had best be prepared to respect her beliefs, her lands and her people.

Evangelists may or may not act with the support of a Congregation, but those that don't are usually the most dangerous and fanatical of all. Congregational

Evangelists, while certainly driven, have political concerns as well as spiritual, whereas independent Evangelists answer only to God.

Moments of Truth

A Faithful Cainite might experience a moment of truth in a number of ways. Most often, these come as flashes of inspiration from God. This inspiration can either come directly, as a vision of the divine, or indirectly through experiencing a breakthrough in faith. This latter occurs most often when the vampire either accomplishes something of great significance by the Grace of God only, or else when he fails to do so and subsequently recognizes that the failure was due to his personal lack of faith. A Cainite who takes a solemn vow before God, including the Confirmation of Blood, might also well experience a moment of truth — it is one thing to promise to oneself that one will walk the road, but another entirely to proclaim it before one's fellows. Simple things might spark the Faithful on towards grace — an act of mercy by a mortal, a victory against a demon, the discovery of a forgotten holy site or text, or being burned by an object or mortal with True Faith.

When a Faithful Cainite experiences a moment of truth, she may immediately change her behavior to match her newfound piety. Conversely, she may instead require some time to digest what she has learned. Confessors are always eager to hear of such instances, largely because they find it refreshing to hear some good news rather than listening to unending tales of sin and blood. Many Cainites find, though, that voicing their experiences somehow cheapens them — a moment of truth is very often a private affair, realized only by the Cainite in question and noticeable only in the change in behavior that follows.

Sacred Rites

The Road of Heaven distinguishes itself in large part by way of its adherence to ordered discipline and ritual. No other road claims quite as rigorous an adherence to ceremony or quite the volume of religious practices in which it regularly engages. What follows is merely a handful of the more prevalent rites to be found among the Faithful.

The Confirmation of Blood

Along with taking confession, the Confirmation of Blood is the most common practice shared in by all Faithful, regardless of sectarian allegiance or belief. The process of the actual ritual used differs slightly between the various sects and paths, but the fundamental elements remain the same. The purpose of the Confirmation is, as might be expected, to confirm the subject of the ritual; in this case, to confirm a Cainite as an accepted member of the road at large. This purpose — acceptance — is the rite's key intention for a novitiate Cainite. Without a highly ceremonial (and officially recorded) ritual to establish the effect, no Cainite convert is ever really considered a true member

of the Congregation. The Faithful are very insular in their mindset, and this ritual can make all the difference in the world if and when a Cainite is trying to convince them that he is truly a fellow supplicant.

The ritual itself typically follows the basic structure of the Catholic sacrament, in which the priest anoints a subject with divine chrism (both on his forehead and in his mouth) and prays for the Holy Spirit to forever after dwell within the heart of the one confirmed. It is important to note that one must already have committed himself to God and to the road for this ritual to be effective (and, thus, permitted by road elders). The subject must truly believe himself Faithful before he is considered for Confirmation, as the Holy Spirit is not given to Cainites in order to wash away sin, but rather to confer and cement the state of grace. For Christian Faithful, the blood used in the ritual must come from a mortal Christian and the small amount the subject consumes acts as his first communion, taking the place of the wine.

For pagan Faithful, a similar parallel is often the case, with the blood used in the Confirmation coming from a member of the character's faith. Pagan ashen priests also typically add in an extra step in the ritual to allow the subject to take time to recognize each aspect of his pantheon and its effect on his beliefs. Once a subject has been officially confirmed, his blood is considered "sanctified" (by Cainite standards) and is to be kept sacrosanct and protected at all costs. Indeed, there are even rumors that the rite's effects are so potent as to leave a permanent spiritual mark, allowing select gifted individuals to later determine whether or not a given subject has actually been Confirmed.

For the Ashirra, the induction of a would-be believer is an occasion of great and somber ritual. For those who come to Islam after being drawn into undeath, their conversion (or confirmation) is referred to as the Second Embrace. Since embracing Islam means joining the Ashirra *de facto* for most Cainites, the sect is understandably concerned with which undead choose to come to Islam and how they do so.

Unknown to most, the Second Embrace is actually a sacred ritual performed by all would-be Ashirra Cainites and their mentor along the road. The ritual itself, called simply the Rite of Second Embrace, is a metaphorical reenactment of the Ashirra founder's own experiences alongside the Prophet. Over the course of an evening, the rite attempts to symbolize the spiritual coming of age experienced by Suleiman ibn Abdullah and his own circle of early vampiric converts to Islam. From his humble beginnings in the fog of *jahiliyya* ("ignorance") to his first true glimpse of God, the neophyte Ashirra experiences first-hand the majesty that is awakening to *Rushd* ("the Right Way") and having one's weary soul galvanized by newfound faith. After each stage of the rite, the subject must burn a portion of his own "ill-gotten" blood as a testament to his desire to purify himself before beginning his new unlife as a believer and faithful servant of God. By the time the rite ends, the subject will have purified himself

of all the (presumably human) blood in his system, ready to embark on his new existence as one of the Ashirra.

The Rite of Second Embrace is thus a very intimate and personalized ritual, conducted between the neophyte Noddist convert and the one responsible for bringing him into the fold (whether mortal or Cainite). Although it is typical for one of the Ashirra to be the mentor in this scenario (and thus in the rite), it is considered good luck for a vampire to be brought to Islam by the faith of a simple mortal. In these cases, the mortal needs not know the truth of the vampire's existence; to him, the neophyte is simply another fellow Muslim. In all such cases, however, another more experienced Ashirra must counsel the would-be Ashirra beforehand, instructing him on the proper methodology for the rite prior to sending him back to complete the actual ritual with the subject's mortal "savior." Such mortal saviors often go on to become their Ashirra converts' first and often most loyal true *ansari* (ghouls).

Taking Confession

Perhaps the most important — and certainly the most universal — ritual practiced by the Faithful is the tradition of taking confession. During confession, which has no set duration and can last anywhere from five minutes to several hours, a subject pours out his soul to his Confessor, releasing the truth and the weight of his past sins and urges into the world — and off of his own dead heart. The ritual itself takes place in what is known as the "tribunal of penance." For all intents and purposes, it is a judicial process in which the penitent is at once the accuser, the one accused, and the witness, while the priest pronounces both judgment and sentence. In exchange for fulfilling the terms of his sentence, the subject is granted absolution for whatever sins he has confessed. This grace is a deliverance from the guilt of sin and, in the case of mortal sins, from its eternal punishment. Thus, the Confessor himself is a mighty individual, blessed by God with the jurisprudence and authority to act as God's advocate on Earth — a vessel through which His Faithful can keep regular maintenance on their own souls.

Although Cainites typically prefer to confine their secret-spilling to a single pair of ears, there are times when an ad-hoc confessor is both necessary and permitted. Anyone who has sworn the Oath of Confession may act as temporary confessor, although he is not considered a true Confessor (in the road's hierarchal sense); he is merely taking over the duties of the subject's regular Confessor for a short time. The Gospel of Laodice speaks of dire punishments that would befall all those who break the sanctity of confession, whether they be veteran ashen priests or simply impromptu confidants. Due to the importance of this text among the Faithful, the sanctity of confession is thus held in even higher solemn regard than it would have been otherwise.

During the War of Princes, the custom of taking confession has grown ever more important, as Noddists all over Europe struggle to reconcile their beliefs with their often grisly duties to their vampiric overlords. Indeed, many

Cainite generals in the war strongly encourage the practice among their Faithful soldiers, as they feel it frees them from the burdens of conscience, thereby allowing them to fulfill their roles on the battlefield that much more efficiently.

Communion

Along with the Confirmation of Blood, this rite is most often practiced in an actual place of worship (confession, for example, may take place anywhere, and is regularly held in a Confessor's private chambers). Even though mortal communion proper is a Christian sacrament, the Communion of the Faithful is practiced regularly — at least in some form — by nearly all Faithful; the Congregations insist upon it. Even the Ashirra, Jewish and pagan Faithful tend to practice their own versions of this most crucial of rites.

During Communion, an ashen priest of the road (and of the subject's own particular faith) blesses the subject, who kneels humbly before him, and then gives the sacrament of blood, similar to that used at the conclusion of the Confirmation of Blood ritual. Christian Faithful view this blood as a transubstantiation into the body of Christ, while other Faithful typically see it as an "infusion" of the Divine. The blood symbolizes God's grace and bounty — a source of spiritual nourishment that comes not from the urges of the Beast but from God Himself. This infusion, while not usually enough nourishment to actually stave off real hunger for any length of time, gives new life to the Faithful's drive to remain sin-free and bolsters his reserves of spiritual strength. Coupled with regular confession, the act of taking Communion gives the Faithful a moral advantage over his Beast. The two rites together are enough to push a Noddist toward mastering his own accursed nature, assuming the Damned does his part.

Acts of Contrition

In the course of the average Faithful Cainite's unlife, occasions arise when even the most dedicated of supplicants slips from the path. Situations inevitably arise where the routine moral maintenance of confession and Communion aren't enough to prevent a cursed soul from leading itself astray. In these cases, even the most fervent rendition of the Lord's Prayer isn't enough to clean the soul of its taint, and something more (and usually different) must be done. When such an occasion arises, the only recourse available to the soul in jeopardy is to attempt to atone for its sins through the completion of some action or set of deeds (above and beyond confessing said sins to an ashen priest, of course).

There are potentially as many Acts of Contrition as sins for which to be contrite, so the rites themselves differ from occasion to occasion. Nonetheless, any Act of Contrition must always involve three things: A recognition of a wrong done to God, a genuine remorse over the evil wrought, and a desire to turn from sin and do good. Only when these things have been satisfied may the Faithful's soul return to its previous spotless luster.

Due to the broad nature of these acts, no single mechanical system could possibly cover all the narrative possibilities. Nonetheless, it is recommended that the Storyteller take into account two things when adjudicating Acts of Contrition.

First is the context in which the contrition is performed. What are the circumstances? Why is the act necessary? Is it a punishment, perhaps ordered by the head of the local synod? Or is it a self-imposed act, brought upon one's self by a guilt-ridden soul? The circumstances always help in determining the lengths to which the subject should go in order to obtain his absolution. In no event, however, should the circumstances warrant an impossible task on the part of the character in order to achieve absolution. If the act is to succeed at all, the character should be able to fulfill its terms, even if he must work for it.

The second thing that must be considered is the player. Does he truly believe that his character is contrite, or is he simply going through the motions in order to get around a game or story-oriented obstacle? Although player should never be confused with character, faith and belief are essential to the roleplaying of any character on this road. A player who treats their character's road as some sort of dodge (or, worse yet, a punch line) should not be rewarded for their attitude. Conversely, a player who truly understands where his character went astray and honestly believes that his character is contrite deserves some credit. As always, let the quality and sincerity of the roleplaying be the guide.

The Hierarchy of Faith

Of all the major roads, the *Via Caeli* is the most organized and driven to both rigid structure and complex bureaucracy. For centuries, great pains have been taken in order to provide all Faithful — regardless of sect or creed — with a community of leaders, counselors and peers to whom they can turn in times of need. Although a pagan Faithful can still question the counsel of a Muslim luminary, he must respect the latter's status within the road as an organization. Thus does the road maintain some semblance of cohesion (and control) across sectarian and dogmatic lines.

The manner of this cohesion is based upon a system not unlike that established within the Catholic Church, with a counsel of elders along the path making decisions and being responsible for the spiritual guidance and progress of the bulk of the Faithful. In the *Via Caeli*, this structural breakdown is as follows.

The Congregations

When a neophyte is confirmed onto the road, he typically joins one of several larger groups of Faithful who share in his beliefs. Together, the elders of all the Congregations combine to form the road's equivalent of the Holy See. They are responsible for studying canonical issues, sifting through legal questions arising from road members'

MANY GODS, ONE ROAD

Among mortals, differences in worship are grounds for execution. It might seem odd, then, that Cainites do not respond with equal viciousness among the "Faithful" of their number. Indeed, the Congregations' acceptance of differing faiths surprises and shocks many neonate vampires when first they hear of it. Over time, Cainites come to respect and accept this fact, but few come to understand it.

The reason for the existence of the Congregations harkens back to the nights when the Road of Heaven was known as the Road of Light. This rather pure form of the *Via Caeli* posited only that Cainites fit into the spiritual hierarchy of the world; since the road predates Judaism and in fact most organized mortal religions, many of the details have been lost to time.

Elders of the Road of Light still exist, however, or did until relatively recently. The Congregations are perhaps their gifts to the Dark Medieval, providing a structure for Cainites who would continue to be reverent even in the face of damnation. Some current walkers of the Road of Heaven have delved deeply enough into the road's history to guess at this truth, but most don't bother — it's a terrible challenge to their faith, after all.

practices and policies, and administering all cases arising out of the road and its adherents' acts and concerns. Each Congregation has the power to issue what is known as a *decretum*, an order from the elders that acts as the Faithful equivalent of a papal bull. An official decretum from one's Congregation is the equivalent of holy writ, and must be followed in both spirit and letter if the subject wishes to remain an active and accepted member of the Faithful community. It is worth noting that no individual who has actively disobeyed a congregational decretum has ever risen to prominence within that Congregation. The system only supports those who support the system.

The five prominent collectives are the Roman Congregation, the Orthodox Congregation, the Crusader Congregation, the Penitent Congregation and the Martyr Congregation. The former is based in and around Rome and is the home for all Faithful who acknowledge the hegemony of the Church. It is also the "default" Congregation for most Faithful who choose no path along the road, preferring instead to remain true to the most general of the road's teachings and beliefs. The Roman Congregation is the largest in the year 1230, although its power over the road at large is specifically held in check by the other Congregations.

It is worth noting that a significant number of Muslim, pagan and Jewish Faithful are prominent members of the Roman Congregation. These important emissaries travel far to act as the spiritual agents for their own Faithful, many of whom reside far from the activities of their congrega-

tional elders in Rome. Their presence is essential in ensuring that the Roman Congregation remains as universal as possible in its administration of road doctrine and practice. They enjoy a certain "diplomatic immunity" from other Faithful, although this immunity often extends only as far as a given Cainite's (or prince's) ability to enforce it. A Muslim Cainite in Christian territory might be a "respected emissary" at court, but in the provincial surroundings she's just another Moor, and had best watch her back.

The remainder of those who follow no particular path, as well as those whose unives and interests lie further west than Rome, claim membership in the Orthodox Congregation. As an official branch of the road, this group had its origins in the Byzantine era, when the great empire split into east and west. When the Orthodox movement grew, so too did the Orthodox Congregation. Right up until the downfall of the Byzantine empire, it acted more or less in concert with Rome's wishes insofar as Noddist doctrine was concerned.

Out of the empire's ashes rose a newly rejuvenated collective, however, and the Orthodox Congregation has lately become a veritable thorn in the pride of Rome. This is due in large part to the fact that its elders hail from those whom the Church (and its Noddist supporters) have wronged over time, most notably those Muslim, pagan, Cathar and Greek Orthodox luminaries. For similarly inclined Noddists, this Congregation is the only true home of the road. They see it as a bastion of hope against the oppressive (and often corrupt) hegemony of Rome.

The other three major Congregations are spiritual homes for the major branches of Noddist ideology. Interestingly, these more "Noddist-specific" collectives are more fully integrated than their dogmatic parents, claiming members from almost every clan and creed or cultural background. The Crusader Congregation is the official home of all those on the Path of Retribution, and its elders — the most right of the Right Knights — never meet in the same place twice in a row (they gathered most recently on the Isle of Glass in Glastonbury, England, to discuss the future of the Order). All those who would be accepted into its ranks must meet certain minimum qualifications as worthy candidates of right knighthood, although all are welcome to share in their beliefs.

The Penitent Congregation accepts all those who follow the Path of Penitence, and it is the least active in the affairs of the other Congregations. Rather, it has a surprisingly solid foundation of its own. This reflects the general feeling of most Penitents, who prefer to bolster and support those who share in their beliefs rather than engage in senseless conflict with other Faithful over what often amounts to trifling matters. The Penitents are strongest in France, especially in Paris, though path luminaries regularly travel to other Penitent synods in Europe.

The tortured souls who follow the Path of Tears may at least find some comfort in their own collective, the Martyr

Congregation. The group itself is fairly young, having only come into its own as a structured organization in the years following the Baali Wars and the death of Samiel. The majority of its luminaries hail from the Salubri, Assamite and Toreador clans, and the entire path is known to base its operations out of the Holy Land. The path actively encourages pilgrimage, and congregational elders regularly hold court in Jerusalem for visiting Martyrs.

There is also, of course, a Divinist Congregation (more commonly known as the Cainite Heresy), but its practices and decretums carry no weight among other Faithful, and its organization has no place in the rest of the road's hierarchy. While its elders may be revered and powerful in other aspects of Cainite existence, their heretical views hold no sway over their Faithful brethren — at least not directly.

Luminaries

In every organization, the trail of power leads to one or more highly influential individuals. The Road of Heaven is no exception. Each Congregation has its own inner council of respected elders, called luminaries, who pull the most strings (and theoretically carry the most weight) in their collective. Sometimes, a particular luminary will be given an additional title for more official use. For example, the single most powerful luminary in the Roman Congregation at any one time is granted the added honorific of being known as the pontiff. Likewise, the head of the Crusader Congregation is deferentially referred to as the Grandmaster of the Order.

For one to achieve the rank of luminary in his Congregation, he must indeed be pious, but no more so than any other Faithful. Rather, the common quality shared by all luminaries is their zealous ambition — no Cainite ascends to a position of power and authority over other Cainites without a demonstrated knack for superlative cunning, wit and guile. With that drive comes rewards: A luminary in any given Congregation has the power to decide cases among Faithful, to direct road resources, and to issue a decretum more or less at will. In the case of those Congregations with a single luminary above all others, these powers are essentially unchecked in all but the most grievous of instances.

Synods

At the local level, the road's structure breaks down into communities of Faithful called synods. The synod is both the general assembly of those involved in the road in a given locality (usually a single principality or township), as well as the term for its collected leadership.

The primary purpose of this council is the night-to-night administration of the road's affairs in the given area. As ordained by the Congregation elders, no major canonical matters are to be decided (or even discussed) by the synods; only issues of local import. When a road-wide

change is in the offing, the synod heads are the first to hear of it and official decretums are often sent directly to them, for subsequent dissemination into the congregation at large. The high priest of the synod dispatches both priests and temple resources to people and places in need, and is often the first to hear the grievances of the local congregation. It is considered a great honor to have a high priest as one's Confessor, given both his great wisdom and limited time. It has become a custom for a high priest to reserve his powers as a direct Confessor for those in local power. No few princes and vassals during the War of Princes regularly unburden their heavy souls to the local synod head.

LINGUA FRANCA

Taking into account all the various sects, Congregations, and schisms spread across all the various nations and cultures of the Dark Medieval, the issue of communication between Faithful would seem to be one that would remain perpetually unresolved. During the Long Night, however, elders of all the Congregations strove to agree upon a single language that could serve as the "official language" of the Road of Heaven.

Naturally, even an issue as simple as this was immediately complicated by the whims, egos and desires of the bickering Nixdixs involved, so the discourse accomplished little at first. Some held that Aramaic, the language of Christ, was the only logical choice, while others were concerned that its lack of current speakers (it is all but dead by 1230) would force the majority to learn a language of the minority. And then, of course, came those who stressed the importance of having a neutral tongue for all Faithful, and the language of Christ was certainly nothing of the kind. Others contended that French, the language of diplomacy, was the obvious choice to serve as the road's neutral tongue.

In the end, the result was a compromise that accomplished what all good compromises should accomplish: Its terms were not pleasing to any party involved, but nothing to which anyone could really object. Since before the end of the Long Night, the official language of the *Via Caeli* has been Latin, the language used in all of the road's major rites. Latin was already known to most scholars, regardless of cultural origin, and most of the elders within each Congregation (including the Ashirra and the Jewish luminaries) were at least familiar with its structure. Even with this compromise, of course, there were those who refuted the validity of the decision for various reasons. Still, even these fringe dwellers recognize the intent behind the decree; most will honor any Faithful who uses the language as a means of communication between adherents.

Every year on the Feast of the Epiphany, the high priest receives news from the road's elders about the current status and direction of the road at large. Often times, this missive carries with it a summons or an announcement of visitation. In the former case, that synod is expected to send an emissary (usually the high priest, although other pivotal priests are called on occasion) to a special convocation, its date and location revealed only to the recipient of the summons. In the case of an announcement of visitation, the missive contains a notice that the synod can expect a visit from an important dignitary from the road, most typically a representative from Rome. Such visits are occasions of great pomp and circumstance, and are often accompanied by either great revelry or somber ritual.

Paragons and the Motu Proprio

According to the Gospel, the only thing Noddists are obliged to respect in others is wisdom and piety. Among the Faithful, only accumulated steps along the road are cause for admiration and esteem. While this often plays out with more complications on the political field, the ideal of this notion remains for many who strive to hew as close to the word of Laodice as they can, despite the road's modern structure. In keeping with this ideal, the Noddist with the most wisdom and progression along the road is customarily regarded as the highest "ranking" member of a given local synod, even if he chooses not to occupy any temple roles or fulfill any canonical duties. To the congregated Faithful of that area, such a Cainite is viewed as the "wise old man" upon the hill; his advice is heeded and his counsel often sought, even by those active in the synod itself.

By custom, the leading paragon of any region (the area around the local synod, or perhaps even multiple synods, if he is respected enough) has the right to issue what is known as a *motu proprio*. This writ is essentially a glorified personal opinion on a matter of religious or canonical importance to the members of the road. While it doesn't carry the political weight of an official decretum from a Congregation, it is often better received and respected by the Faithful, especially by those who reside in the area from which the paragon hails. The practical effect of a well-timed *motu proprio* is that it can go a long way toward establishing a precedent on a given subject. It usually takes a long time for the Congregations to convene to discuss an issue, and in that time, a lone but admired paragon can release the "unofficial word" on a subject before an official word has even been decided. Indeed, the luminaries often use well-respected paragons to their political advantage, allowing them to issue opinions as a way of gauging the popular response to a subject matter before they themselves must rule on it.

Priests

At the base of the road's hierarchy sits the most fundamental role in the organization: the ashen priest. Priests are the faith's most numerous and diversified ser-

vants. Whereas the differences between those on the path grow fewer and farther between the higher up one goes, the methods, means and practices of the world's Faithful priests are as multitudinous as the cultures and creeds from whence they may originate. Although they are always responsible (at least in theory) to the ones who ordained them, most ashen priests are given a great deal of leeway in which to guide both their own affairs and the spiritual progress of those in their care.

The only true commonalities among ashen priests are the requirements imposed upon them by their holy office. Road custom, which itself derives from the Gospel of Laodice, puts a number of demands upon those who would dedicate their unlives in both the pursuit of the light, and in guiding others toward it. According to the Gospel, would-be priests must receive some kind of "true calling" in order to serve. This may be a vision from God or simply a powerful feeling in the depth of one's soul, but no Noddist can or *should* enter an unlife of service unless he is certain that this is the existence God has chosen for him. Nor may a Noddist be endowed with the role (or rank) of priest unless he himself has known confession from each perspective, as both Confessor and sinner. A priest must also have both known and beaten back sin and temptation if he is to engage unlife as a missionary (a Faithful evangelist), although this is not a true requirement for those who don't wish to proselytize. (This is seen as a technicality, as most every ashen priest fulfills this requirement easily and by default in most cases.)

The last requirement for service as a priest of the *Via Caeli* is the one most often disputed. According to Laodice, a Noddist may not don the robe of service until such time as he has known a "life" in the Threefold Darkness. Tradition (as well as the elders of the Roman Congregation) interpret this to mean that a Cainite must have existed for as many years post-Embrace as he lived pre-Embrace. The important thing about this interpretation is that it leaves a back door for new converts who wish to jump directly into full-time, faithful service. So long as they have been *undead* for as long as they lived, they may become priests — even if they, themselves, only found God very recently. Since the wording in the Gospel is vague, however, alternate interpretations can and have sprung up. The most common of these alternates holds that "a life in exile" merely indicates a great change in the unlife of the Noddist once he finds God — one that calls for a period of isolated and usually monastic existence in contemplation of the Curse. Only after this new "life" may one become a priest.

Confessors

One of the most common and yet most invaluable positions within the road hierarchy is that of the Confessor. As ordained in the Gospel of Laodice, each Noddist must have a trusted confidant to whom he may release the burden of his own guilt and sin. These individuals are sworn by sacred oath to keep secret whatever is told them in

confidence, no matter the cost. The local lord usually instructs mortal priests who hear confession to break this confidence when it comes to matters of imminent crime or treason. The Faithful, however, are not beholden even to this law; such is the serious regard in which they hold the sanctified bond between a Noddist and his Confessor. Nonetheless, many Confessors do break confidence in times of dire need, such as when the Faithful admits he will forsake God or betray his brothers along the road. Confessors who keep all privileged communications secret — no matter what atrocities they contain — soon become the most popular among the Faithful, and there are Confessors whose reputations grow so mighty as to be “in demand” for hundreds of leagues around the area in which they serve.

The requirements for becoming a Confessor are few, but they are non-negotiable. First, a Confessor must have advanced far enough along the road to be of some service to those he would hear. Thus, unless a would-be Confessor intends on hearing only those confessions of those new to the path, he must have progressed fairly far himself (minimum Road rating of 7 is the norm). Confessors share a “squares and rectangles” relationship with other ashen priests: All ashen priests of the *Via Caeli* are also (or have been at one time) Confessors, but not every Confessor is an ashen priest. One can act as a Confessor (in something of a limited capacity) without being an actual ordained priest of the *Via*. This most often occurs when a Noddist finds himself without access to his regular Confessor, but in dire need of taking confession. In these cases, a substitute will do, so long as he is a fellow traveler on the road. For some Faithful, this sort of “temporary” solution is perfectly suitable as a permanent one. They trust their souls with whatever individual they have come to call Confessor, even if that individual is not an actual ashen priest. For most Faithful, however, it is an unnecessary risk to have a regular Confessor who is not also an established priest of the road.

Falling from Grace

The Road of Heaven is demanding, even for those Cainites who believe themselves to be the chosen of God. The Beast gnaws at every act of charity and godliness that a Faithful vampire attempts to perform. After all, the Beast represents the raw, bloodthirsty core of the vampire, the base self. Whether accursed or exalted, the Faithful pride themselves in being able to look beyond the self to see a greater world, made in the Creator's image.

The simple fact, however, is that Faithful Cainites are still vampires. They must consume the blood of living, and no matter how they might disguise that ugly fact, sometimes the mask falls and the Beast within breaks through. This can result in a momentary loss of reason and faith, for which the Faithful must atone (see *Prayer and Penance*, p. 34). When sins mount, however, the Faithful can fall. This happens for three main

reasons; the vampire willingly changes roads, is exiled from her Congregation, or falls to the Beast.

Degeneration

Any vampire can fall, becoming a mindless beast slaving for blood. For Cainites on the Road of Heaven, however, this slide into wassail is marked by an increasing willingness to act in accordance with the Adversary. Vampires who once followed the *Via Caeli* and have lost their road entirely seem strangely drawn toward being bound by Infernalists, demons, necromancers and other unsavory sorcerers. Why this phenomenon affects Faithful and not other Cainites (at least not to the same degree) is unknown, but a logical theory is that since Faithful vampires hold aiding the servants of the Devil as the greatest possible sin, the Beast struggling against that morality is all too willing to serve such beings. Of course, once the Beast is free, one would think it would resent being made to serve another master — unless, of course, the Faithful are correct in their assertions that voice of the Beast is the whispering of Satan Himself.

Aside from this strange quirk, Faithful Cainites who are reduced to zero Road rating behave exactly like other such unfortunate vampires.

Apostasy

Cainites who willingly choose to leave the Road of Heaven in favor of another *Via* have larger problems than the already tricky process of changing roads (see p. 267 of *Dark Ages: Vampire*). Faithful Cainites, especially those involved in a larger society of vampires (such as the Ashirra or any Congregation) do not relish the thought of their members leaving the road to join one of the deluded paths — in effect, choosing eternal damnation. Some Faithful seek to counsel those considering apostasy, especially if the potential convert is important to the road on a political level. Evangelists often seek to force someone attempting to leave the road to confess any sins she has committed and then dispatch her, so that she might have a chance at redemption, however slim.

Why would a Faithful Cainite leave her road? The reasons are as varied as the potential converts, but two of the more common reasons are:

- **Disillusionment:** God might well be in His heaven, but all is decidedly not right with the world. Jews, Muslims and Christians kill each other over slights both real and imagined, all the while claiming to worship the same God. Pagans hide at the fringes of civilization, waiting for the Crusaders to burn them or convert them at sword point. Meanwhile, Cainites and other, even worse fiends stalk the hapless mortals from the shadows. Virtue might be reward enough for the short-lived human masses, but what of the undying Cainites? Should God not show His favor or disfavor? Some Faithful lose their faith after a century, a decade or even a year of witnessing the bleak horror of

humanity and the Dark Medieval. Some of these souls fall to madness and the Beast, others seek to join the human herds (adopting the *Via Humanitatis*) or leave society behind entirely (thus walking the Road of the Beast).

• **Temptation:** The Church provides so many opportunities for Cainites, and not all of the undead walking the halls of Europe cathedrals are Faithful. The Scions recognize the immense power the Church wields and seek to use it for their own ends, while the Prodigals work invisibly beside mortal clergy, mimicking the motions of the Faithful with few of the responsibilities. But worst (or best?) of all, the Church provides a haven for the *Via Peccati*. The Sinners recognize that from money comes greed and from greed all manner of sin, and the Church is the richest organization in the world. More than one Faithful Cainite has discovered a Sinner in her Congregation and attempted to convert him, only to find herself being gently led astray.

Excommunication

The threat of excommunication holds nearly as much gravity among the undead as among the living. A Cainite who commits grievous sins against her road — usually involving aiding the forces of Satan, although other heinous crimes might also merit this sentence — can be expelled from her Congregation and forced away from her spiritual support. Obviously, excommunication is only a threat if the Cainite in question is a member of a Congregation and places any amount of faith in its decrements.

A higher-ranking Faithful than the accused must present all available evidence to the leaders of the Congregation as well as a formal request for excommunication. These elders then review evidence, send agents (sometimes Evangelists, sometimes Keepers, often both) to perform interviews and take confessions, and above all to make sure that the accused cannot flee the area before the trial commences. Once a Faithful Cainite knows that a trial is being prepared against her, she is well advised to flee to any allies she has; most excommunication trials end in a judgment of excommunication and — more often than not — Final Death. Only in exceedingly rare circumstances is an accused Faithful ever found innocent (largely because by the time all the “facts” are in, the individual making the accusation has had plenty of time to fix the evidence).

If the accused is excommunicated but not put to death, she may continue to walk the Road of Heaven (the Congregation, after all, has no way to stop her from praying or acting in a manner befitting a Faithful) but she is ever after considered an apostate among her former Congregation. She is not welcome at any rituals or sermons, cannot receive confession, and cannot act as a sponsor to new Faithful. All of these strictures evaporate, of course, if the Cainite travels beyond the lands where her Congregation holds sway. If she does not wish to leave, however, her unlife can become very uncomfortable. Former allies on the road often shun her, and she typically loses any status that she may have possessed in the courts of the undead.

The Road Diverged

Despite the stranglehold that Christianity holds over Europe, the Road of Heaven predates that rise; indeed, it even predates Jesus of Nazareth. Of all of the major roads, it has undoubtedly changed the most over the centuries, spawning heresies and offshoots even as older ones die out. In AD 1230, the greater body of Faithful Cainites is Christian, but other possibilities likewise exist.

The Ashirra

Once in the lands to the east known in Europe as Outremer, many things change; from language to styles of horsemanship to clothing — and of course, religion. While Muslims purport to worship the same God as the Christians, this hasn't stopped either side from butchering each other for hundreds of years. As much as the Cainites would like to pretend themselves above mortal concerns, they find themselves embroiled in this conflict as often as the mortals upon whom they feed.

Muslim Faithful are collectively called the Ashirra. Most follow a version of the Road of Heaven which they refer to as the *Tariq el-Sama'*. While the core precepts of the road are similar to the Christian Road of Heaven, the two paths vary on some key points. First and foremost is the notion that God is alone in His sovereignty, and that He neither has nor needs a begotten son. While the Ashirra respect Jesus as a prophet, they do not believe in his divinity.

Another difference is that whereas Christianity (and therefore the Christian *Via Caeli*) preaches strict denial of the Beast, Islam teaches that base instincts are human and cannot be avoided entirely. Therefore, followers of the *Tariq el-Sama'* allow their Beasts an occasional moment of control to allow it to vent its ire before they reign it in once again. This philosophical difference, while subtle, is crucial to understanding the horror in which Western Cainites hold the Ashirra. To the Faithful, the Beast is the voice of Satan. Allowing the Adversary even momentary control is abhorrent. Many Ashirra likewise look at the use of the blood oath in similar disgust (they consider it slavery).

Muslim Faithful differ from their Christian counterparts in night-to-night matters as well. Muslim Noddists are not permitted to feed from unbelievers. They may also not feed from believers if it brings the mortal either to the point of death or to the point at which they are too weak to perform their daily prayers. The Ashirra believe that they should not feed on people at all, taking sustenance instead from any source that is not *haram* (forbidden). This, of course, is merely an ideal and is rarely enforced.

Muslim vampires are also forbidden from Embracing non-believers. Exceptions are made in the case of those near death, as the Embrace offers the soul a chance to turn to Allah and find redemption. Unlike their Christian and Pagan counterparts, the Ashirra do not Embrace without

the consent of the would-be child. Naturally, "consent" is hardly an immutable constant, and the dedicated Ashirra will almost certainly find some way to justify nearly any Embrace. Still, the spirit of this interdiction is followed far more often than not. The sect has ways of punishing those who willingly transgress without thought or purpose.

The Ashirra follow a Hierarchy of Sins similar to the one listed in **Dark Ages: Vampire** for the Road of Heaven. In brief, violating the precepts of Islam — spreading faith, the prohibition against theft and slavery, the Five Pillars — are sins of varying degree, while the worst sin to an Ashirra is turning from the worship of Allah, especially to worship an idol. As with Christian excommunicates, Ashirra apostates are often hunted down and put to death.

For more information on the Ashirra, see **Veil of Night**.

Pagan Faithful

While uncommon, a few Faithful pagan Cainites still stalk the nights of the Dark Medieval. Most are elders, Embraced from native peoples before the rise of Christianity. Those that survive keep an extremely low profile; while the other factions of the Road of Heaven are fractious, the presence of a heathen pretending to walk the *Via Caeli* unifies them quickly. Pagan Faithful lead solitary existences, watching as their herds dwindle in the face of Christianity.

Such a Cainite probably would not identify herself as walking the Road of Heaven; the main similarity is that these Cainites define their beliefs in terms of a higher power and that higher power's design for Cainites. This varies from region to region, naturally; a Greek Cainite might see herself as touched by Artemis, the chaste, night-hunting moon goddess, while a Cainite from Ireland might worship Dagda.

The lines between the roads blur a bit where pagan Cainites are concerned; not every pagan vampire walks the Road of Heaven. In the harsh northlands, a few *einherjar* still survive — although they worship Odin, their own system of beliefs is an offshoot of the *Via Bestiae*. Likewise, the Followers of Set refined their worship of their serpentine progenitor into its own road, the *Via Serpentis*. Pagan Faithful, however, retain their focus on controlling the Beast through fulfilling the will of their chosen deity (or deities).

The Hierarchy of Sins naturally changes somewhat for pagan Faithful Cainites, and might well change even further depending on what beings a given vampire worships ("pagan," after all, is simply a blanket term for anyone who does not follow a Judeo-Christian religion). The aforementioned follower of Artemis, for example, might regard any contact with men (beyond feeding) as a sin, while the Irish Dagda worshipper might view abstaining from feeding for more than a night as reproachful. If a player wishes to create such a character, she should conduct some light research into the god(s) that her character follows and work with the Storyteller to modify the Faithful's Hierarchy of Sins accordingly.

Heretics

Heresy, as the Church defines it, is any Christian belief or practice that knowingly contradicts established religious dogma or doctrine. The word *knowingly* is paramount; an ignorant soul who has been taught a heretical belief and simply doesn't know any better is not a heretic. For the Road of Heaven, the definition is much the same. Any follower of the Path of Divinity is considered a heretic (since the Divinists assume that they are the favored of God, rather than accursed). Of course, zealous Faithful (and there are few other kinds) might attach the label "heretic" to any Cainite professing to follow the Road of Heaven who worships in an appreciably different manner than they do. (For the record, Jewish, Muslim, and pagan Faithful are not considered heretics, though that doesn't necessarily mitigate any ill will towards them.)

Heresy within the Road of Heaven can become common practice in a Congregation with surprising ease; all it takes is one "heretic" vampire to rise to power and begin preaching his own beliefs and practices. Thus far, a "holy war" between Congregations has not erupted. The most likely target for such a Crusade, however, is the Cainite Heresy.

The Cainite Heresy

Begin in the fifth century, the Cainite Heresy is a system of beliefs that states (in brief) that vampires are spiritual beings and therefore inherently good, above the base evil that is the material world. Like Catharism and Gnosticism, the Cainite Heresy is a dualist belief system, espousing the notion that a being other than God created the material world and that this world is therefore imperfect. The Cainite Heresy is the most persistent of all of the offshoots of the Road of Heaven, despite occasional attempts to destroy it.

The Heresy, however, is weakening. Between efforts by the larger body of Faithful vampires (even others on the Path of Divinity; while the Cainite Heresy is a Divinist movement, all Divinists are not part of the Heresy) and the mortal Inquisition, to say nothing of the inherent treachery of the Heresy itself, many of the key members have been isolated and exposed over the last few decades. Very soon, the Heresy will either need to take drastic steps to ensure its survival or die out completely.

Complete information on the Cainite Heresy can, of course, be found in the supplement of the same name.

Bringers of Light

Due to the emphases the Gospel of Laodice places on the veneration of wisdom and faith, it comes as no surprise that those who take the greatest strides in each invariably come to occupy positions of no small renown among their Faithful peers. These exalted few are held in the highest regard of perhaps all Faithful. Their opinions, whether

formally expressed through media such as the *motu proprio* or by simple word of mouth, are at once disseminated and discussed by those who would follow in their radiant footsteps.

Saints

The true exemplars of the *Via Caeli* are those who have helped shape the very course of the road over time, as well as those who have fallen before their time in the defense of all that is good and pure. Such fallen Faithful are known as saints (though all official canonization is left to the discretion of the Congregations), and they are idolized and even worshipped by many along the road. Although the road is now hereof the direct counsel of these paragons of old, their famous deeds and convictions serve as abject lessons to those who walk in search of light.

Saulot

Although Caine is given his due as being the father of all Noddists, it is the progenitor of the Salubri line who is credited with being the father of the Road of Light (and therefore the *Via Caeli*). Indeed, no few Faithful credit him with being the mysterious author of the Gospel of Laodice, and many who do not openly hold such a belief secretly hope for it to be true. Saulot's teachings have inspired an entire road, as well as those who admire those of his line. His deeds — particularly his relentlessness in laying waste to the Baali and their demonic overlords — are a shining example of a Noddist fulfilling the purpose for which he was intended.

To this night, Saulot's name is revered throughout the ranks of the Faithful — even among the guilty few Tremere who follow his teachings. And unlike the name of Caine, the reverence of Saulot's name is not only acceptable but encouraged. The Congregations hold his unlife up as an example to neophyte Faithful. His name is

even invoked in a few of the road's more esoteric rituals. While the Tremere may have found some grudging admirers among the Scions of the night, few leaders of the Faithful would encourage the behavior of those wicked mortals — those who would not only seek out the Curse of their own volition, but would blaspheme the entire faith by quenching the radiant flame of the road's First Paragon in their bid for unholy power. Of all the roads active in the War of Princes, the Faithful do the most to stem the tide of their campaign of genocide.

Genrle Saulot was martyred in the early 12th century by Tremere himself.

Samiel

Often whispered in conjunction with that of his sire, the name of Samiel carries almost as much weight among the Faithful as that of Saulot. One of Saulot's most distinguished childer, Samiel founded the Salubri bloodline known as the warriors. His is the voice behind the Code of Samiel — the collection of interdictions and beliefs by which all warrior Salubri must abide, and the foundation text for all Faithful on the Path of Retribution.

Central to this code was the proper process by which a Salubri warrior ordained; a sacred ritual called The Bleeding, which was rumored to bestow mystical power upon a subject who was worthy. After Samiel's death, however, few remained who were skilled in the exact specifications of the rite. With the death of Saulot, the true rite of Bleeding has all but faded from the world altogether. Some believe that this loss is central to the current failures of the Salubri at large, leading some Faithful into the cause of recovering the lost wisdom of the original rite.

Samiel was martyred at the battle of Chorazin during the Second Baali War.



Michael

Among the Noddists, the golden city of Constantinople began as the dream of a Toreador from the Mesopotamian city of Elba. Born Mi-ka-il in the 22nd century before Christ, he was a master of mortal thoughts and words who, despite his youth, rose to become the Elban king's scribe. This meteoric elevation earned him no small repute in the land; The lad soon drew the attention of the Toreador Antediluvian, who Embraced him into the clan and into Noddist history.

In the first 50 years of his unlife, he enjoyed adulation as a creature of godliness as well as the intimacies of a mortal lover, Ma-ri. When his great city at last fell to the Alkadians, Mi-ka-il was secreted to safety during the day. He awoke too late to save his lover, however, and she was left behind in the burning ruins of Elba. In the centuries that followed, Mi-ka-il became a wanderer, changing his name first to Beshter then adopting whatever timely identities suited him. He settled in Rome for a time, there finding companionship in the form of the Gaulic Ventrué Antonius and the Tzimisce Dracon. At this time, Beshter found Christianity. He adopted the name Michael, after the oppressed faith's premier archangel.

When Rome began to deteriorate, Michael departed with nothing but a dream of what could be and his two Cainite companions to make that dream a reality. Michael's vision of Heaven on Earth was noble. It was almost realized for a time, but after jealousy and feuding stripped him of both his eternal companions, the dream began to fade — and with it both Michael's sanity and Constantinople's fortunes. Finally, in 1204 the events of the Fourth Crusade conspired to provide the climax to an existence most radiant. As the golden city burned around him, Michael succumbed to the diablerie of Ma-ri the Black — the Baali queen who was once his mortal lover — and ascended at last to the divinity that was his. Even as the Baali is hunted for her crime, many Faithful now pay homage to the memory and the dreams of a soul who embodied what it means to *believe*.

Paragons

In addition to learning from the pious deeds and teachings of their fallen forebears, the Faithful also have a number of contemporaries whose wisdom and faith shines like a beacon of guidance and hope in the dark of the Dark Medieval. These active paragons are among the most involved of all Faithful in the road and its attendant affairs during the War of Princes.

Qawiyya el-Ghaduba

The Muslim warrior Salubri known as the Lioness of Jerusalem is one of the most recent additions to the ranks of the road's enlightened few. Qawiyya is certainly not a young Noddist by any stretch, but she managed to keep her presence unnoticed until two years ago. It was then that she raged through the Holy City like the wrath of God, laying

waste to the chantry of Tremere that had come bent on hunting down those of her kind. Before the year's end, she had roused them from the city and put a plan into action to keep them out of Palestine entirely.

Setting up shop in the old Tremere chantry, Qawiyya invited all the neighboring princes (most of whom were fellow Faithful) to a convocation there, upon the Mount of Olives. When this Diet of Olives had adjourned, a new era of peace and determination began in Palestine — one that Qawiyya intends to last a very, very long time. Since that time she has grown in both status and influence, earning herself the sobriquet of the "Lioness of Jerusalem." Although she is not the titular prince of Jerusalem, there can be no doubt among its residents as to who holds the reins of both power and righteousness in the Holy City.

The full truth about the Lioness of Jerusalem can be found in Chapter Four.

Fiore of Genoa

Embraced in 1203, Fiore d'Agostino adopted the Road of Heaven and immediately made a name for himself as a scholar among a family of merchants. The elders of Genoa — Lasombra who drew largely from the d'Agostino mortal family for childer — offered to reward his talents with domains in Outremer. Fiore refused; he felt that God could be best served if he remained in his native city. The elders obligingly offered him powers and retainers to wield as a Keeper in Genoa; again he refused, saying that service to God was reward enough. Finally, the Cainite elders of the city realized they would be unable to control him and cast him out, saying that he would find no support or succor in Genoa or its colonies elsewhere. In this, Fiore finally got what he wanted.

Tonight, this fiery Magister travels between Genoa and the islands of Corsica and Sardinia, acting as an Evangelist and occasional Confessor. His theories and scholarly commentaries on both the Gospel of Laodice and the Letters of Acindynus (see *Road of Kings*) have attracted attention from elders of several different factions. With minds of so many bent toward him, his talents might soon be called into use in the War of Princes, whether he wills it or no.

Yitzhak ben Avraham

Like the former Patriarch of Constantinople, Yitzhak of Krakow is a Noddist with a dream. As a mortal growing up in Prague, he saw the best and worst of society. He was fairly well-to-do but he was also a Jew, and with that distinction came tribulation. The city's so-called Jewish Quarter was little more than a forced isolation from the rest of Prague society. He soon found it to be a frustrating situation: If the Jews were never allowed to be as one with their fellow citizens, then they surely never would be. In response to this lifestyle, Yitzhak's parents moved the family to Krakow when he was 17, in search of a better life outside the stifling confines of Prague.

In Krakow, the young man found his people a bit more widely accepted. He soon began his life as a silversmith, believing that he did not inherit his father's devotion as a man of God. After his father's death, however, Yitzhak's eyes were opened to a truth of another sort. A former companion of his father's turned up, eventually revealing herself for the accursed creature she was and claiming Yitzhak as one of her own.

Following his Embrace, Yitzhak wandered Eastern Europe. In each place he visited, he saw with flat regularity how the Jews were treated — and how people treated one another in general. Now that he was a member of a different race, Yitzhak had the perspective to see just what effect this derision had, and how sadly it was mirrored in the world of the undead.

It was then that God revealed His purpose for the young Zealot. Yitzhak's aim would become a holy quest, and he will not stop until he sees that dream fulfilled. Yitzhak's work begins in the land of his former life, in Poland, where he strives to unite all the children of God: One mortal government by day, one Cainite law by night. He hopes for Poland to one day become a refuge for all downtrodden peoples, whether Noddist or kine, especially for persecuted Jews. His is not an easy task, however, as in addition to the uphill battle he wages politically, he must also struggle to reconcile the fire in his Brujah blood with the peaceful dreams of his Faithful spirit.

Roads and Clans

The Road of Heaven doesn't assume an adversarial relationship with the other major roads, but considers them misguided for the most part. In each of the other *vias*, however, is the potential for new converts. Therefore, few Faithful are willing to shun the other roads on general principle.

Likewise, the 13 clans produce Faithful vampires of differing caliber and intent. The sections below discuss the Faithful's dealings with the roads and the clans.

Road of the Beast

The *Via Bestiae* is not by nature a godless belief system. It is, however, an extremely pragmatic one — the Ferals disdain any practice that seems pointless to them. That means that most forms of worship are discarded along with tools, clothing, and civilization. In the Ferals, the Faithful see the untamed savages of the land, just as Christian missionaries must have once seen the pagan native peoples of Europe. Their attitude towards the Ferals can range from pity to resignation to anger. Some Faithful wish to convert and educate the Ferals — and it is possible, as one of their most powerful and influential paragons, Shabaqo the Nubian, converted to Islam after viewing the Great Mosque at Córdoba. A Faithful who attempts this should be careful, however; the Ferals respond bitterly to this sort of betrayal, and have been known to hunt down both the

newly converted Faithful and the Cainite who instigated the conversion.

Conversely, it is not unheard of for a Faithful to adopt Road of the Beast. Some Faithful, as mentioned previously, grow jaded and disillusioned waiting for God to reveal Himself. Feeling the Beast rise within them, they search for a way to contain it. The Road of the Beast fulfills that need while at the same time leaving them largely free to worship as they please. The Ferals hold special respect for those who abandon the Road of Heaven to walk their road; anyone can be misguided and cling to the tenets that sustained him in life, but it takes strength to give them up and walk the true road. (Ironically, Faithful hold similar attitudes towards Ferals who convert to the *Via Caeli*.)

Road of Humanity

Little differentiates the Prodigals from the Faithful at first blush, given that the Road of Humanity advocates dwelling among and impersonating mortals, and so much of the mortals' time and energy is bound up in matters spiritual. The difference, however, comes in that a Faithful Cainite's first responsibility is to God, whereas a Prodigal is beholden to humanity. For practitioners of the "main" roads, this is not usually a sticking point, and the Cainites can discuss religion and secular practices without anything other than intellectual vanity to impede them. Divinists, however, reserve a strong loathing for these soft Cainites who would make servants of themselves to humanity — and this after the Creator has clearly shown His favor to the undead!

Some walkers of the *Via Humanitatis* do not bother with religious pursuits at all; this is especially true of those who predate (or whose mentors predate) Christianity and espouse the secular philosophies of the ancient masters; Socrates, Plato, and so on. The Faithful do not begrudge the Prodigals this wisdom, but argue that God's wisdom must be far greater, if He deigned to give such intelligence to mortal men.

Road of Kings

The Scions and the Faithful often have an uneasy relationship. The Scions can appear pious when necessary and some even patronize the Church, but always as a means to an end. To the Faithful, God and His Church *are* the ends, and some Faithful Cainites take offense to the Scions using the Church as tools towards their feeble attempts at conquest. On the other hand, many of the Scions, especially those embraced in recent years, are still Christian (at least nominally). The Faithful work diligently to keep the faith of these Cainites alive in the face of their self-serving road.

In a time when kings rule through divine right, though, many Faithful consider it somewhat sinful not to support a Scion who comes to power without using sinful means. Many powerful walkers on the *Via Regalis* make a great show of maintaining their piety and promise to undertake pilgrimages or crusades as necessary; this simply goes to show what power the Road of Heaven *could* wield against them if it so chose.

Road of Sin

When Faithful and Feral meet, they are often hostile. When Faithful and Prodigal meet, the result is discussion. A Faithful Cainite and a Scion often fall into a leader/advisor relationship. But a Sinner and a follower of the *Via Caeli* have perhaps the most intriguing interaction of all. The two roads are antithetical, but not directly — that is, nothing in the *Via Peccati*'s basic philosophy says that God does not exist or does not have any place for the Children of Caine. Therefore, many Sinners are quite willing to talk with the Faithful, to exchange ideas, and to attempt to convert the other. Both Faithful and Sinners find it extremely satisfying to win the other over to the "true" road, but it is a dangerous endeavor — even speaking to a Sinner for too long can rouse the Beast of a Faithful Cainite.

A walker on the Road of Heaven would do to remember that the road to Hell is indeed paved in good intentions, and trod in small steps. A Sinner need not exact a promise to renounce God, at least not initially. For example, a sufficiently advanced Faithful risks degeneration if he acts out of gluttony. All a Sinner need do to set the wheels in motion is coax the Faithful to feed when not particularly hungry — which is often easier than any Faithful would like to admit.

For all this, however, the Faithful are unwilling to leave the Sinners alone. Perhaps they see the *Via Peccati* as a test of their spiritual strength. Perhaps they wish to walk among sinners as Jesus did, or perhaps their Beast just subtly drives them towards those Cainites it finds least objectionable.

The High Clans

Just as the richest bishop and the poorest peasant worship the same God, the first-cursed and fallen on the Road of Heaven do so as well. Still, differences exist between the two divisions of Cainites in their worship. The High Clans observe much more pomp and circumstance of their faith, perverting the sacraments of last rites, confirmation, and even marriage to their undead state. High Clan Cainites are the most commonly found among the Congregations' leadership; the Low Clans, they argue, do not possess the inclination or the ability to lead.

Brujah

No, child, not all of us are Prodigals. Some of us learn to give up our anger, our past, our history, even our vaunted knowledge to God. In return, He grants us respite from the Beast, secure in the knowledge that though human trappings might crumble to dust, the Lord is truly eternal. What more could we ask?

The Brujah are known as Zealots among the clans of Caine; when a Brujah follows the *Via Caeli*, the name often fits. The bloody crusaders of the shadow *Reconquista* come from Clan Brujah, as do some of the most persistent Missioners of the road. Many Brujah are idealists, and they therefore do not lead idle unives when they give them-

selves to God. They protect pilgrimage sites, scour the cities for sinners, and join the War of Princes with a vengeance (always on the side, of course, of the Cainite acting in accordance with God's wishes). While some Zealots look upon their frequent descent into frenzy as a curse that must be borne and atoned for, some feel that God allows them this "divine fury" in order to smite His enemies.

Cappadocians

Our Savior raised a man from the dead. Have you any concept of that? He did not raise a man in this mockery of life that we suffer, He reattached the man's soul to his body and allowed Lazarus another chance at life. Is this power beyond the purview of the children of Caine? Possibly, even probably, it is. But I shall never give up hope. I cannot believe that I have been granted eternity to study unless something awaits me at the end of it.

The Graverobbers who follow the Road of Heaven are sometimes the most optimistic of the clan; they see the miracles that Jesus performed — and even that saints have performed since — and see potential for their own souls. Others, however, grow frightened as they research the evolution of Christianity from its darker roots in Judaism, convinced that nothing but Hell awaits the children of Caine. The more powerful members of Clan Cappadocian often follow the Path of Divinity (those that do not follow the clan's own Road of Bones, that is) and indeed, many of the higher-ranking members of the Cainite Heresy hail from this clan. The clan founder himself is rumored to adhere to a belief similar to the Cainite Heresy, though this might be nothing more than speculation.

Lasombra

The role is a trying one, the mantle of leadership difficult. Spiritual leadership is doubly challenging. But we owe it our clan, to ourselves, and most importantly, to our fellows to provide that kind of leadership. The mortal Church is fed with the corruption of its mortal priests; perhaps a night is coming where Cainites might simply take over such duties. After all, we are above such petty pursuits as lust and greed, yes?

The Lasombra have an uncomfortable relationship with darkness, both literal and figurative. In their attempts to reconcile this relationship, they have become one of the driving powers behind the Road of Heaven and, indeed, influence the Church at nearly all levels. The only things that keep them from seizing control of the institution entirely are the deep rifts in the clan that Islam has caused (the progenitor of the Ashura faith was, in fact, a Lasombra) and the fact that doing so would require them exposing the existence of Cainites to the human masses. The other clans are hardly likely to permit this, of course, and so the Magisters are content for the moment to guide the Church from the shadows.

In actuality, their vaunted influence within the Church is grossly overstated. Recent years have seen the destruction of many of the most influential Lasombra within the Church, and not at the hands of other Cainites. It would

seem that humanity is attempting to light the darkness, and while many Lasombra are horrified by the prospect of losing their greatest source of power, the truly pious ones are secretly pleased that the mortals are still capable of raising arms against the Damned.

Toreador

I was with him when he was christened. I watched him when he was confirmed. I saw him wrestle with his conscience over the years, and wept bloody tears of joy when he devoted his life to God. I saw him enter the priesthood, and although it pained me, I followed him on pilgrimage to Compostela. I watched as he returned home to his village to become the priest. I saw him seduced by a girl nearly a decade his junior. I wept bloody tears as his life slipped away beneath my kiss, but many are called and few chosen. Perhaps his son, conceived in sin, will possess the necessary humility to become truly Blessed?

The Toreador, beyond doubt the clan most in tune with the ebb and flow of humanity, follow the *Via Humanitatis* more often than the Road of Heaven. Some Artisans, however, see beauty in faith and devote their unlives to God. Even these, though, stay close to the human flock, watching as they raise greater monuments to God across the land and fight wars in His name. Toreador Faithful are among the most likely clans to follow the Path of Retribution, hunting down monsters who feed on humanity. They are extremely unlikely, however to be Martyrs or Penitents — both of these paths require the Cainite to recognize that he is now less than human, and this view is painful and antithetical to the Toreador.

Tzimisce

Godless? Never. My gods were old and fat on the blood of the land while yours was in swaddling. I have ruled here for more centuries than Christ has been dead, and I will not rescind my right to do so simply because you brought an army with you. Your "soldiers of God" will water my forests with blood, but you I shall save to offer up to my own, true gods. Then we shall see if your Nailed God deigns to answer your cries of pain.

While some Christian Tzimisce exist (the Church exists in Eastern Europe, after all, albeit in a slightly different form), most Fiends on the Road of Heaven are pagan. The *koldun* (those that do not follow the clan's Road of Metamorphosis) almost exclusively follow this form of the road, binding spirits to their whim and repaying the land with offerings of blood.

As one draws closer to the fringes of Tzimisce power, however, one might find Faithful that do follow Christ among the clan. Most are Divinists — few Tzimisce are taught anything other than their own superiority to mortals, therefore the notion that God has damned or forsaken them is completely unpalatable. Even these Fiends, however, do not hew to the notion of God as a merciful, forgiving being. Mercy is simply a mask worn by those too weak to enforce their will. God has no need of mercy — witness the destruction wrought in His name across Eastern

Europe. The pagan Balts do not find Christ or His Father merciful — why should the Faithful Tzimisce espouse such a quality, regardless of what side of the war they choose?

Ventrue

Our clan has much for which to atone. We could have avoided much of the bloodshed of the last few centuries had we simply kept control of Rome, but we let the greatest civilization slip from our grasp. Constantinople is evidence of what happens when undeserving clans ride a city's rights. Now, as the War of Princes rages, we know that God has given us another chance to unite — or subjugate — the clans. We will not fail Him again.

The Ventrue call themselves Warlords, even — or rather, especially — the Faithful Ventrue. God demands war: War on the Saracens, war on the pagans of Eastern Europe and the Tzimisce that harbor them, war on the heretics of the Languedoc; the list goes on and on. But the Ventrue are well-equipped to fight these wars, armed as they are with steel, skill, and faith.

The clan suffers a great rift on the subject, however, between Scion and Faithful. The Faithful cannot deny that the Scions have made great headway in the War of Princes, but they also cannot help but point out that the war in Hungary failed and posit that if a Faithful Ventrue had been in command, rather than the Scion Jürgen of Magdeburg, the battle might have ended differently. Ventrue Faithful are often found on crusade, but while the Brujah take on this duty with zeal, the Ventrue haughtily declare that if they do not take the Cross, no other vampire should even bother.

The Low Clans

Jesus supped with lepers and tax collectors, and this isn't lost on the Low Clans. Likewise, three of the clans cast with the "fallen" are rarely, if ever, Christian and follow variants of the *Via Caeli* that most High Clan Cainites would consider heretical and offensive. As is so often the case in matters of faith, however, the truly devout know themselves to be correct and look to God to judge their worthiness.

Assamite

I have no intention of restricting your right to worship, Christian. You must simply pay the tax, like every other dhimmi. If this is distasteful to you, I suggest that you leave our lands and return to a place where you can call yourself "first-cursed" above a whisper.

The Bani Haqim do not often follow the Christian Road of Heaven (although noted exceptions exist, such as Ahmed ibn Zayyar, the Prince of Tripoli — see p. 94), instead following the *Tariq el-Sama'*. Assamites from all three castes follow this road, and indeed even those that follow other roads very often continue observing the Islamic customs of their breathing days. Even those Children of Haqim who follow the clan's Road of Blood usually at least attempt to follow the Five Pillars.

It bears noting, however, that Islam is a relatively young religion, especially where the Cainites are con-

cerned. The Assamites have doubtless been active longer than Islam has dominated the Middle East. If any Faithful Saracens exist that predate the faith — and have not converted, as many have — they might well be angered at the direction their clan has taken. Indeed, lore passed among certain Assamite viziers suggests that powerful elders of the clan even now remain in torpor, elders that before sleeping warned of a time when the clan would follow a “false prophet....”

Followers of Set

My clan follows the Road of Heaven, in our way. When our Dark Father rises, we shall all be rewarded. Yes, it does sound similar to what the Saracens preach about Paradise, does it not? Fanny, that. Almost as though one set of beliefs influenced the other. Why is that so offensive? Because it's blasphemy... or because it rings true?

While many Serites look to spiritual truth as their guiding principle, very few actually follow the Road of Heaven. Those who consider themselves to be divinely guided follow the Road of the Serpent, looking to Set directly. While the notion that a god — even a god of evil — takes an interest in the Cainites might seem similar to the basic precepts of the *Via Caeli*, the desire to prepare the world for Set's coming is much more focused than the aimless wanderings of the various Paths of Heaven (or so the Setites assert).

A Christian (or Jewish, or Muslim) Setite who follows the Road of Heaven is an extreme rarity, and probably not in contact with others of his clan.

Gangrel

Not all of us are animals, howling at the gates of society and wondering why, though we disdain it, it draws us back. Some of us are saved, for some of us have recognized the mercy of Christ. Jesus wandered in the desert to find truth; so do we all, apart from humanity and yet so close to it. The desert, however, is our own undead heart, and only by Our Savior may we find our way out again. Most of my clan never tries.

While the majority of Gangrel are Ferals, a few follow the Road of Heaven. Since Gangrel are wont to embrace their childer and leave them to fend for themselves, it's a rare Animal that remains sane long enough to find a sponsor for the *Via Caeli*. Those that do were typically extremely devout in life, but rarely actually members of the clergy — hermits and simple peasants who spend time in intense, but quiet worship are normally better suited to the solitary unlife that many Gangrel lead.

Of course, some Faithful Gangrel follow other faiths than Christianity. The Wah'Sheer (Arabic Gangrel) have Faithful among their ranks, although many more of them follow the *Tariq el-Bedouin*, an offshoot of the Road of the Beast. Pagan Gangrel, however, dwell in every wilderness of Europe, worshipping gods who were old when the world was young.

Malkavian

God, oh God, why have You forsaken us? The Blood of Lamb seals the new and everlasting covenant, and we are cursed simply to lap at the spilled blood, never knowing Your peace, never knowing Your mercy. We see things that no one should see, and yet others think us possessed for it, when truly we are blessed! Blessed!

Malkavian Faithful run the gamut from seers touched with holy sight and glossolalia to fanatical madmen relentlessly pursuing anything they perceive as “unholy.” Very few of them worship quietly; many become outspoken Missioners, dangerous Evangelists or daring Crusaders, following whatever holy mandate they believe to be theirs. The most frightening thing about them, of course, is that one never knows if the voice they hear is indeed the voice of God, or simply their own tormented mind. They believe in spreading the Good Word, as well — but this usually involves use of their Dementation Discipline.

Madmen on the Road of Heaven might follow nearly any path, depending largely on their Derangements. Those afflicted with delusions of grandeur naturally gravitate towards the Path of Divinity or sometimes the Path of Retribution, while those who feel persecuted by the world around them might adopt the Path of Tears. Whatever permutation of the road they follow, their fervor and devotion to God remains striking. Their madness pushes them to greater heights of belief and devotion; even those who are not Penitents show their faith by self-flagellation or staying awake for entire days praying. Conversely, when a Malkavian falls from grace, the result is terrifying, as he sees his madness not as an inscrutable riddle from the Lord but as the damning song of the Beast.

Nosferatu

Jesus walked with lepers. I do not pretend that it makes us Nosferatu blessed, but it is simply something to consider. Perhaps it means nothing — but let me have my hopes.

Many Nosferatu follow the Road of Heaven; for those that do, the fact that they can devote their unlives to God is perhaps the only point of pride they possess. After all, it would be easy enough to degenerate into Ferals or debase themselves as Sinners, but the Faithful Lepers follow a higher cause. Even in the face of Caine's curse upon their line, they are able to look past the ruins of their visages and say, “God sees my true face.”

Indeed, Nosferatu on the *Via Caeli* are among the most doggedly devout of the Faithful. Once they discover their “niche” on the road, be it in the form of a path to follow, a site to protect, a leper colony to watch over or something so broad as “atonement,” that niche can well become their focus for the next several centuries. Just as reaching the Road of Heaven is a supreme effort for the Nosferatu since they must look past their hate and bitterness to do so, they have so much farther to fall.

Not all Faithful Lepers are Penitents, although many are. A decent number follow the Path of Retribution. A

small military order called the Leper Knights, comprised entirely of Nosferatu, is occasionally seen on the battlefields of the War of Princes.

Ravnos

Ha! You wear your curse on your face, so pale, yet so human? And you, Warlord, may only feed on certain stripes of people? Not much in the way of your prayer and penance then, but I am cursed to sin, not merely born into sin, but driven to it, whipped towards it, night after night. You see? Already you are missing your brooch! Oh, truly, God works in mysterious ways!

Few Ravnos walk the Road of Heaven, although just as with the Assamires, there are exceptions. Most Charlatans follow the Roads of Sin or Humanity, finding their clan's weakness too hard to reconcile with an unlife of devotion to God. Some do muster the strength to keep their Beast as bay and refrain from their chosen sin — for a time. When their willpower runs out, however, these Ravnos must find a way to repent, lest the Beast push them to greater depravities later.

The Ravnos hail from the lands even farther eastward than the Assamires, and the cryptic hints they drop indicate that these lands have their own faith, probably pagan. Conceivably, some Charlatans might follow a version of the Road of Heaven that venerates the gods of this land, but to date, no European Cainite has encountered such a Ravnos (not knowingly, at least).

Tremere

Our clan is steeped in sin. I cannot — will not — be held responsible for the actions of my predecessor, but the evil stops with me. In life, I practiced all manner of maleficium, but no more.

As the youngest clan, the Tremere are far more often found on the Road of Humanity. First, they have a much easier time finding the *Via Humanitatis*, since few of their claimmates follow anything else. Second, the nature of their clan, full as it is of sorcerers and thaumaturgists, makes true devotion to God difficult. The Church has strict prohibitions against maleficium (magic with harmful intent) and so some Faithful Tremere manage to reconcile their clan's practices with their faith by never performing baleful magic. This makes them of limited use to the clan, however, especially as the Omen War with the Tzimisce worsens. Some Tremere instead see their magic as a God-given means to smite their enemies; these Usurpers follow the Path of Retribution zealously.

Holy Sites

For followers of the Road of Heaven, many of the very places that hold significance to them also make deadly destinations for pilgrimage. The Faithful must walk a fine line between venerating God and respecting their place in His world; those locations that burn are

clearly the ones they are not meant to traffic or control. Thus, many of the road's holy sites are those that have become far more important to Noddists than they ever were to mortals, thus ensuring their safety as destinations. The simple fact that the Faithful can tolerate these places of religious importance is a source of comfort. Had the Damned any True Faith with which to infuse these hallowed sites, they might well indeed be sources of serious power all their own. As such, most are zealously guarded by the Faithful who frequent them. Regardless of whose name claims title to the domain in which they reside, they are considered the "property" of the road and its adherents.

- **The Stairway of Ahaz (The Holy Land):** This is the site where, according to both the Bible and the Gospel of Laodice, Isaiah the prophet came to Hezekiah and told him to set his house in order, for he had fallen ill and was to die. Terrified, Hezekiah prayed to the Lord for yet more time. In response, God sent Isaiah a vision telling him to inform Hezekiah that his prayers had been heard. He would heal Hezekiah so that a faithful servant would not die, and Hezekiah should go to the house of the Lord on the third day thereafter. Hezekiah asked Isaiah what the sign would be, to which Isaiah responded that it would be the sun's shadow on the steps of the Stairway of Ahaz. He then asked Hezekiah to make a choice: "Shall the shadow go forward ten steps or back ten steps?" Hezekiah chose the latter, and the Lord made the shadow retreat down the steps.

Although the story is familiar to many among the Faithful, the importance (and whereabouts) of the site's location is known only to one clan: the Lasombra. Since olden times, the site around the old stairway has been the central locus of Lasombra dialogue on the subject of Cainites and their relationship with God. Clan members of all religious stripes, be they Redeemers, Heretics, Crusaders or simple Faithful, meet here twice a decade on a date set by the clan's elder council, the *Amici Noctis*, to discuss the nature of Cainite faith, and more specifically Lasombra faith. Lasombra Faithful believe that the moment when God gave Hezekiah a choice in deciding how God would prove Himself good on His promise is a pivotal one in understanding the ways of the Creator and the Curse. They also attach great importance to the fact that this momentous occasion was signified by and executed through the manipulation of a shadow — the one cast by the very source of not only light, but terrible death for their kind.

- **The Castle in the Lake (Scotland):** Under Loch Treig in Scotland lies the home of the Order of Bitter Ashes, a submerged castle. Noddists (who need not breathe and can walk along the bottom of the loch) can reach it fairly easily, assuming they know of its existence. The Order protects the Castle from invaders and stores many of its treasured relics there. While many knights on the Path of Retribution would love to find the Castle, its location is a tightly guarded secret. The Grail Knights are extremely discriminating about whom they allow inside.

- **The Seventh Church (Laodicea):** This holy site is not so much a treasured place of pilgrimage and contemplation as a wistful dream of the Faithful. According to Noddist

scholars, the origin and nature of Laodice, the author of their treasured Gospel, may hold the secret to their own existence. Some believe that, judging by its name, Laodice simply means, "the Laodicean," or someone from Laodicea. In the Bible, Laodicea was the final site in the Book of Revelations where the Holy Spirit speaks to the angels about the Seven Churches, believed to be a metaphor for the dawning of the End Times. And to the angel of the Laodiceans (who some believe to be the author of the Gospel!), the Spirit said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes, I will grant to sit with Me on My throne."

Most scholars believe this last passage to indicate the presence of an actual place on Earth where this divine intercourse would take place. Some further contend that anyone who is there to hear the Lord's voice and open the door will be the one to signal the beginning of the End, and that such an individual would not only ascend in Rapture, but would also sit by God's side after Judgment Day. This is, of course, an extremely attractive prospect for a Noddist, but there are those who worry that it is not the place of a Cainite to be the one of whom the passage speaks, and finding this "seventh church," wherever it may be, could only lead to ruin for both Cainite and kine. Nonetheless, there are those who devote a great deal of their unlives to unraveling the mystery of Laodice, and as a function, to discovering the truth about the Seven Churches of the Book of Revelations.

- **The Isle of Glass (Glastonbury):** Some holy sites are holy because they are composed of pure divine enigma. Located south-west of London, the Isle of Glass (known in earlier nights as Ynas Witrin) is, as far as Cainite politics are concerned, a part of the Fief of Winchester, the oldest center of Noddist activity in England. The entire region contains a disproportionately high number of mystical sites, including Stonchenge, Silbury Hill, the White Horse of Uffington and the Cerne Giant, the majority of which have recently drawn the attention of the Tremere, who seek to study and harness the mystical power of these sites.

This new attention, however, has shattered a delicate truce between the Cainites and the area's other inhabitants. Many are becoming aware that this has resulted in some major losses on the Cainite side over the past few years. What most are not aware of, however, is that the bulk of these losses have been suffered by those of other spiritual persuasions; Faithful residents in the area have escaped more or less unscathed by the conflict, even though they remain embroiled within it. The truth is that the Faithful of Ynas Witrin are so dedicated to preserving the area's holy sites that they are more than ready, willing and able to give up their so-called "fellow" Cainites in order to achieve their own just ends. While it is unknown just how pervasive this movement is within the road, what is known for sure is that the congregational luminaries have yet to act or even speak out on the matter, one way or the other. And the conflict rages on.

- **The Mount of Olives (Jerusalem):** Perhaps the most prominent example of a site that has grown in import to the Faithful is the place where the legendary Diet of Olives was



convened. This landmark Cainite accord brought together all the ruling princes of the Holy Land, from domains as far afield as Cyprus and Tripoli, in a ten-year truce and mutual assistance pact. The Diet was the brainchild of the Salubri luminary Qawiyya el-Ghaduba, the Lioness of Jerusalem. After almost single-handedly wiping out the Tremere of Jerusalem, she convened the Diet at the site of the former chantry (now a private property of the Salubri), where she hosted the visiting dignitaries. After a week of deliberations, the gathering produced the accord that currently unites all the Cainite lords of Palestine against the depredations of all that is unholy in the Holy Land.

Since the signing of the accord, the site has grown in popularity among the Faithful, some of whom travel great distances in order to pay homage to the accomplishments of the bold Salubri and her pious confederates. Here, at the Mount of Olives site, the Lioness is known to hold court for these Faithful pilgrims, often leading them in prayer and recounting to them virtuous deeds past and divine glories yet to come.

Factions and Paths

Few roads of any kind could claim so many divergent paths as can the Road of Heaven. Its very nature invites schismatic conflict, and when it comes to beliefs about the Almighty, sectarian differences can grow mighty enough to threaten to tear apart even the strongest of alliances. While the road's elders have thus far managed to maintain some semblance of unity by concentrating on the foundational points of doctrine upon which all good Faithful may agree, there are still a number of notable dogmatic schisms and sub-sects that have arisen along the road over time. Those that follow are simply the most widely known.

Knightly Orders

In the Dark Medieval, where the power of the Church is almost uncontested, one of the most common types of organization is that of the religious military order. Among mortals, there are the Knights Templar and Hospitaller, as well as a number of smaller Crusader orders. This is no different in the world of the undead, where knighthood and faith are equally seen going hand-in-hand. A number of knightly orders exist among the Faithful in addition to the Right Knights of His Most Holy Order of Vengeance, the official title for the collected followers of the Path of Retribution.

Leper Knights

The Leper Knights, another military order among the Faithful, is more a union of like-minded souls than a religious knightly order. This group is comprised almost exclusively of Nosferatu, all of whom have been affected by the Embrace far differently than their fellow Noddists by virtue of their clan weakness.

Each Leper Knight finds in his very existence a sign from God. The Embrace, a painful and soul-shattering experience for any Nosferatu, turns the former man into a hideous,

deformed horror, unfit even as a predator among men. Those who survive this initial trial draw meaning from it. The Nosferatu who were honor-bound in life (such as mortal knights of the realm) often dedicate their unlives to bringing light into the lives of those who have none. These Leper Knights are the patrons and guardians of lepers and leper colonies all across Europe. By default, they have become the Cainite associates of the Order of St. Lazarus, the mortal militant order dedicated to caring for the sick and downtrodden of the Holy Land.

The Order of Chanticleer

The Order of Chanticleer is a collection of primarily Christian Faithful who see it as their duty to uproot demonic influence and smite the hated Baeli, wherever they may be found. Although this mission would seem to make them confederates if not members of the Martyr Congregation, the knights of Chanticleer are their own non-biased, apolitical unit, comprised solely of non-path Faithful. In truth, they rarely even acknowledge the Congregations much at all, preferring instead to follow their own doctrines and ritual practices. Nonetheless, attempts have been made to at least begin cooperation between the two groups. Given the current prominence of the Ashirra within the Path of Tears, however, this seems like an unlikely prospect at least for the immediate future.

The Unblooded

This group of Noddist seekers began when two followers of the Path of Retribution — Salubri warriors both, one Muslim and one Christian — decided that something needed to be done to stem the tide of the Salubri clan's downfall. More or less splitting from their parent sect entirely, these two warriors dedicated their unlives to recovering the original rite of Blooding that all warrior Salubri once benefited from receiving. Surprisingly, the two found their goal supported most whole-heartedly by the elders in the Crusader Congregation, many of whom recognized that a proper rite of Blooding would strengthen the entire Order as a whole, were it found and properly invoked on its Right Knights. Since then, a number of other Noddists have joined the cause (more Salubri, along with a handful of other dedicated knights), and their charter has expanded to include finding and recovering any lost lore or magics that could help the knights of the Order regain the power they feel their Blooding deserves.

The Mahgrib

The Ashirra believe that there are forces at work that strive to distort the power of *Rusd* on Earth, and that these forces are given bodily manifestations in the forms of the innocent and/or the "trustworthy." The more harmless such a foe appears, the easier it will be for it to ensnare others in its webs of deceit. Such entities seek to promote the spread of *fasad* and *janaba* ("corruption" and "impurity") on Earth, and are especially driven to — and thus fond of — leading the Faithful away from their faith. The Qur'an speaks of these foul entities as advocates of disbelief, paragons of all that is cosmically *wrong*: "Those who disbelieve shall have the arrogant ones as their patrons, they who will



lead them out of the light and into darkness; they who are the inmates of fire..."

To the Ashirra, these avatars of ruin are known as the *taghut* ("arrogant ones"), and their existence pervades the very fabric of the sect. Indeed, these hidden forces of degradation are probably the single largest concern to the sect as a whole, and many among the Ashirra are wary to the point of being paranoid. Perhaps they are aware of how quick grows the seed of doubt. Regardless, all Ashirra, whether new to the faith or not, are expected to be schooled about not only the threat the *taghut* present but also about how best to spot their vile taint.

Although it is the theoretical duty of every Ashirra to seek out and uproot the *taghut* wherever they may lie, an actual group has arisen within the sect over time — one whose every waking effort is bent specifically to this task. These grim souls, collectively known as the *Mahgrib*, dedicate their unlives to rooting out the source of this depraved evil and preventing it from further corrupting their Muslim brethren (by any means necessary). Each individual member of this elite caste, often known as a *faris*, is usually a respected religious authority in his own right and is given a wide berth in which to conduct his affairs, as the *Mahgrib* and their efforts are supported unwaveringly by all Ashirra (at least in theory). In truth the group itself has become, in essence, a sub-sect of the Ashirra over time, complete with its own sacred texts, rites and hallowed practices. Its members hail almost exclusively from those on the Path of Tears.

The existence of these "pure ones" is largely kept secret within the parent sect. Other Ashirra are encouraged to never speak of them in mixed company. This is not due to the need to protect any clandestine operations the group may have, but rather out of concern for ignorance. If their existence became public knowledge, some might like to believe that these judges would indiscriminately pursue those of other faiths in an attempt to prevent their "lies" from "tainting" Muslim Cainites. Such is not the case. The *Mahgrib* respect faith in God in all its forms, and trust in each individual believer's own faith to carry him through such mundane forms of temptation. No, it is the supernaturally wicked machinations of the *taghut* with which the *Mahgrib* are understandably preoccupied.

Unlike other Faithful Keepers, however, the focus of a *faris'* efforts lies not in investigating those of his own kind, but rather in safeguarding his own brethren from the efforts of those who would lead them astray. It is a fine but critical distinction. Instead of pursuing evil and sin from the inside out, the *Mahgrib* endeavor to educate their brethren on how best to recognize *fasad* when they see it, and to learn how to stray the course through the bolstering of their own spiritual strength. They *do* have powers and can theoretically punish any overly libertine Ashirra, but they typically reserve their wrath for those more deserving: those responsible for turning their brothers away from *Rushd* in the first place.

The Path of Divinity

Not all Faithful accept the "truth" as espoused by their fellows along the road. Some hold that the very foundation

of standard Faithful belief, the notion that God has cursed their kind, is flawed. Rather, they hold that their so-called accursed nature is nothing short of a divine blessing. They feel that they have been touched in a real and literal sense by the divine, and that they stand alone above all other of God's creations. They point to their supernatural powers and perfect, undying existence as evidence of their claims. By virtue of some often creative interpretation, these Heretics manage to find support for their view in the very text that other Faithful hold dear — the Gospel of Laodice.

Naturally, the body of the road's adherents find these deviant few to be grossly misled at best and greatly blasphemous at worst. Many Faithful count these "Heretics" among the enemies of both the road and of God. Thus, it is generally considered unwise to publicly announce one's adherence to the Path of Divinity, especially around more traditional Faithful. This requires some circumspection on the part of the Heretic, which only makes it easier for him to blend in with the broader hierarchy of the road at large. Indeed, there are no few ashen priests within the road that secretly follow the Path of Divinity, where they are free from overt persecution while having access to the hearts of their brethren. It is for this reason (and the paranoia that it feeds) that the Congregations' luminaries allow broad powers to those who feel compelled to fulfill the Gospel's covenant about Keepers — those who look for signs of heresy and sin amidst their fellow Faithful.

The Path of Penitence

Some Faithful grow so revolted by their accursed condition that they feel it must be God's punishment for a life of sin and impiety. These Noddists feel that only by spending their unlives in search of atonement may they once again know God's grace and eventual release from the torment of the Curse. These Penitents adhere to the same basic tenets of the parent road, but in addition to holding certain theosophical positions they further espouse a rigorous regimen of disciplined prayer and penance as fundamental to their belief system.

Larger perhaps than the ideological differences between Penitents and other Faithful is the manner in which they practice those differences. Followers of this path are given to self-abuse in the name of atonement. Many practice blood-derial, sometimes going without nourishment for nights on end or engaging in extended fasts where they maintain a constant minimum of blood in their bodies. Penitents also follow other modes of piety, the most common of which are flagellation (self-inflicted beatings) and the taking of solemn vows before a Penitent ashen priest. Vows of poverty and silence predominate, but a number of Penitents, having acquired considerable power and wealth over the course of their protracted existences, prefer to see the glass as half-full and instead take vows of charity. These individuals are a prime example of how even ambitious and powerful Penitents can remain true to both nature and path simultaneously.

The Path of Retribution

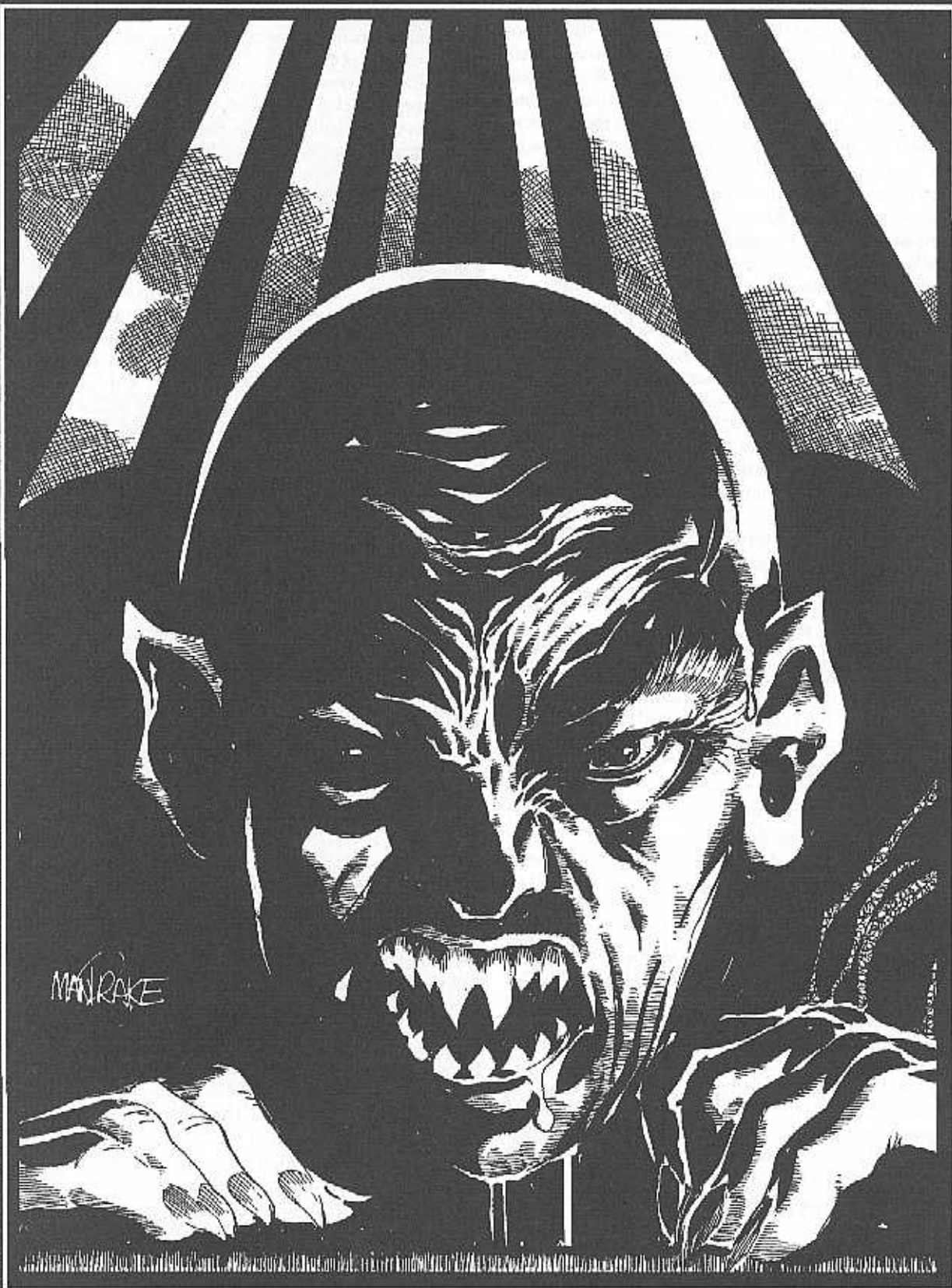
Most Faithful believe that the Curse is God's way of imposing certain duties upon those accursed. For Penitents, those duties include penance and rigorous self-discipline toward the goal of eventual atonement. Followers of the Path of Retribution, however, believe that those duties include punishing the wicked and the sinful. These Crusaders, as they are often called, believe themselves to be agents of divine justice, touched by God to act as the scourge of evil on Earth until the End of Days. They are martially minded Noddists who use their God-given power to bring the light of Heaven into the world, beating back the darkness in the process.

The structure of this path is one of the most rigid, as each adherent who wishes to be involved at any level in path affairs must be officially ordained by a path elder. This initiation ritual, called the Blooding, confirms the initiate as knight — one of the Right Knights of His Most Holy Order of Vengeance, as the collected path is officially known — in the service of both path and God. Once confirmed, a knight of the Order is now part of a brotherhood, a worldwide military order of Noddists dedicated to smirning all that is unholy in the name of the Lord. The Order's beliefs are stark and its methods Draconian, but none can deny its power.

The Path of Tears

The last of the commonly followed branches of the Road of Heaven is the Path of Tears, also called the *Via Dolorosa* or the *Tariq el-Alaam*. Adherents of this unique ideology, known as Martyrs, believe that the duties imposed upon them by the Curse include both suffering and smiting evil, most notably in the form of the Baali and those whom they would serve. Unlike those on the Path of Retribution, however, the Martyrs do not feel that they are the scourge of the wicked among the kine, and indeed feel themselves inferior to the Children of Seth. Instead, they believe it is the burden of the Noddist to disrupt the plans of the Adversary on Earth by any means necessary, up to and including the sacrifice of their own unlives.

The path has its origins with a group of Salubri who took its tenets to extreme degrees by inviting demonic possession. They would make pacts with infernal forces, thereby linking their souls with that of the enemy, and would then end their own unlives, taking the demonic entities down with them. Although this practice has all but disappeared among the Salubri (and it was never really popular among non-Salubri Martyrs), the path's numbers have grown. Most of the current Martyrs hail from the ranks of the Ashirra (especially those Assamites who survived or studied the Baali Wars). In addition, the path has recently gained new life and status following the valiant efforts of the Lioness of Jerusalem, whom many Martyrs look on as the one to lead them into the future.



CHAPTER THREE: ANGELS OF THE LORD

For ye are like unto whited sepulchres,
Which indeed appear beautiful outward,
But are within full of dead men's bones — and of all
uncleanness.

— Matthew 23:27

While characters on the Road of Heaven are not inherently the most difficult to roleplay, they can indeed be quite difficult to roleplay well. Religious characters lend themselves to cliché, and it's important to learn the fine but critical difference between stereotype and archetype. The road is indeed a rigid one. Its very essence makes the Faithful seem inflexible, so it's important to know how to incorporate these characters into group play without either giving up too much of what makes them Faithful or making existence unbearable for the other members of their coteries.

This chapter provides some tips at how to flesh out Faithful characters for use in *Dark Ages: Vampire* chronicles. While characters on the other roads, particularly the *Via Bestiae* and the *Via Peccati*, can be difficult to work into the framework of a group involving one or more Faithful, the possibilities for practical, cooperative roleplaying experiences are there. While some of the responsibility for crafting these types of inclusive stories falls upon the Storyteller, the remainder falls upon his players. The following sections focus on what players of Faithful can do to make such experiences a reality.

Conflict Among the Faithful

By their very natures, the Faithful are prone to conflict of many different stripes. Their often elitist beliefs distance them from the rest of their own kind, and their all-too-eager willingness to embrace that gulf often leads them into contention and even terrible war. Add in the overall power and influence of the Church in the year 1230, as well as the various sectarian schisms and heresies of the path, itself, and you have a group of damned souls who seem all but made for conflict. What follows are the most common ways in which the Faithful often bang righteous heads with other Dark Ages residents.

Faithful vs. Faithful

As might be expected, those whom the Faithful come into conflict with most often are other followers of the *Via Caeli*. Although the various Congregations and synods do their best to maintain a sense of equality among all Faithful by encouraging advancement of respect and status through the advancement of one's spiritual progress, there is now and has always been a great deal of friction between the various offshoots, paths and denominations of the Road of Heaven. If forced to step back and analyze fairly, most Faithful would agree that they all believe in basically the same set of important concepts (with the exception of those on the Path of Divinity). They are all still vampires, however, and will thus seek to outwit, out-conquer and even out-worship others of their own kind.

This type of conflict may be as simple as a scion of the Church taking on one of the Catharist "heretics" among the Faithful, or as complex as an internal struggle over the influence and resources of a particular archdiocese. In the former case, the two Faithful are at bitter odds, and given the fact that they are vampires, will likely only resolve their differences through the victory of one over the other or, if they are lucky, through an official decretum (see page 39) from path elders. If they are lucky and smart, such an edict is enough to lay their dispute to rest, or at least remove it from the coals for a time. If the Faithful understand and respect anything, it is the wisdom (or at the very least, the authority) of those farther along the path than they.

In the case of two Faithful of the same dogmatic bent struggling over church resources, the dispute ultimately becomes one of power, regardless of how it was begun. When issues of belief are not in question, two Faithful can and do come to blows over which one is better suited to (or should have greater sway over) the issue or resource in question. Faithful ashén priests do much to encourage the practice of "status through piety," but not all disagreements can be resolved simply by looking at which Faithful is the most spiritually advanced. Sometimes, like when certain mortal resources are at stake, other factors such as location

and lineage need be taken into account. In addition, the issue of progress along the road is a null one when the conflict is between those of similar wisdom and status (see Confessor vs. Penitent below).

Faithful vs. Non-Faithful

The Road of Heaven is perhaps the most unforgiving when it comes to the followers of other vampiric codes of morality. Some paths, such as that walked by the grim souls on the *Via Vindicta*, openly decry all other roads but the Road of Heaven and seek to convert all other Cainites with whom they come in contact. To these fanatics, all vampires who continually refuse to reconsider their "heretical" ways are a threat to God's earth, and thus fall under the category of adversaries. While the reason of elders, particularly those of the Crusader Congregation, has tempered the worst of this rabidity, there are still those xenophobic Faithful who maintain that neither mercy nor patience should be shown to those Cainites who refuse to acknowledge God's hegemony over them.

Even those Faithful who don't take the extreme stance of the Crusaders, however, still have occasion to differ with those outside the faith. Obvious dogmatic issues separate the Road of Heaven from, say, the Road of the Beast. The ideologies of these two roads are so fundamentally different that conflict is bound to arise on principle alone, from time to time. For example, consider the Feral who, while passing through a quiet hamlet, decides to stop for a spell and test the local hunting ground. All the locals are of the same faith, however, and all under the nominal care and protection of the local Faithful ashén priest. The Feral's perfectly "natural" need and desire to feed at will is at direct odds with the resident Faithful's vow to protect his flock. Even though the Faithful in question may respect the interloping Feral's beliefs, he may see no choice but to put a stop to the beast's unsanctioned feeding. Issues of this sort are commonplace in the Dark Medieval world, given the ubiquity and self-proclaimed authority of the Faithful.

Confessor vs. Penitent

Due to the Road's rather strict religious hierarchy, at times one of the Faithful comes into conflict with his own Confessor or direct superior on the Road. This most often occurs when a younger or newer initiate discovers the reality of the *Via Caeli* — the truth that its organization suffers from all the foibles of its mortal counterparts, and then some — and feels morally obliged to rebel against the status quo. Unlike roads such as the *Via Regalis* and *Via Bestiae*, which actively encourage neophyte followers to challenge their superiors, such behavior is not generally tolerated in the *Via Caeli*.

While corrupt or inept elders can potentially be removed from power and/or station within the road, the final decision on such matters never rests in the individual's hands. One with a legitimate grievance is expected to go through the proper channels if he

wishes his complaint and any action that may result from it to be accepted by the Congregations and synods. In this case, the "proper channels" are carved by those in power to lead to those in power within these same august groups (thus the discontentment of those who seek impartiality). This process is similar to that practiced by the Lasombra high court, the *Amici Noctis*, a like body of clan elders and judges that decides on cases of this sort. Those who abide by their rulings are afforded some respect, while they turn their collective back on all who go outside their jurisprudence. This is not to say that all those who pursue unorthodox methods are always spurned for it. Indeed, more often than not, any successful "coup" against a corrupt confessor or local paragon is met with quiet admiration. The Faithful are, after all, vampires.

Faithful vs. The Adversary

The central idea around which the Road of Heaven revolves is that God exists and that Cainites are, indeed, a part of His design. The urges of the Beast are viewed as Satan's voice (to most Faithful, though by no means all), and all Faithful are expected not only to keep him out, but to rage against all those who would willingly do his bidding on Earth. While this may seem a noble pursuit on the surface, it becomes a stickier issue when the practicalities — and mysteries — of night-to-night life are taken into account.

Devout Faithful have a tendency to tilt at an awful lot of windmills in the name of beating back the machinations of the Adversary. More often than not, those windmills are owned and held by other supernaturally aware forces in the world of the Dark Ages, and they rarely take kindly to being accused of *maleficium* by these hypocritical so-called Faithful. Blind fervor leads followers of the *Via Caeli* into some ugly conflicts with not only other vampires, but werewolves, mages and other supernatural creatures, too. The only beings with whom fanatical Faithful have no regular quarrel are the Flock's own inquisitors, and these only because they are a relatively new phenomenon. Time will tell just what sort of dealings and troubles occur between them.

Creating Faithful Characters

While the Damned certainly can and do "find God" at various times in their unlives, it is assumed that a Dark Ages Vampire character has selected his favored road by the time character creation is complete. Nods are given to converts in the character tips provided below, but the focus remains on characters who begin play on the *Via Caeli*.

Concept

As mentioned earlier, it's a good idea to avoid dangerous (and often unrewarding) stereotypes when creating a highly religious character of any kind, and particularly when that one happens to be a vampire. That said, certain character concepts fall under the descriptor of archetypes, and are well-suited to the Road of Heaven. Please note that although many Faithful characters were devout pre-Embrace, it is a perfectly viable option to say that a shocking event (such as one's death at the hands of a vampire) caused a dramatic shift in one's beliefs, thus turning him onto the Road of Heaven as a result of his Embrace. The following concepts appear frequently among Faithful, and players may use them as examples of the archetypes mentioned above.

Ashen Priest

This Faithful character did, indeed, have a solid religious background before his or her Embrace. Many of those Embraced by Faithful characters are chosen for their piety or beliefs (and often skills or knowledge) that would be of benefit to the Faithful as a whole and thus to God, thus a great many mortal priests are intentionally brought into the road. This character is one such individual, drawn into the fold to help do the Lord's work for all eternity. This process may also happen in reverse, with the Faithful sire encouraging his childe to dedicate his newfound existence to the road itself, and to helping other Cainites do as they must for both themselves and for God.

Crusader

Knights in the Dark Medieval take the forefront of a great many stories; they occupy a similar vanguard among the Faithful. The term "crusader" is used broadly here, indicating a warrior who spent his mortal life fighting in the name of God or as a part of one of the various holy militant orders. A Cainite of this type is most typically associated with Christianity, but for these purposes, numerous Muslim, pagan and even Jewish "crusaders" exist as well. Many of these characters end up joining the ranks of the Path of Retribution, whose members are known as Crusaders, but not all; that "honor" seems to be reserved for only those who truly believe that their primary purpose in unlife is to lay down judgment and despair upon the wicked. More than a few warrior-Faithful find such duties to be an unnecessary burden upon the soul.

Lifelong Sinner

The Dark Medieval is a place and time of great ignorance and rampant suffering, one where the darkness continually threatens to eclipse the light. Faced with the prospect of grunting and sweating under a weary

life without purpose or meaning, many lost souls simply give in, opting instead to satisfy every immediate whim or desire — regardless of what impact such behavior may have on the soul. The Lifelong Sinner is one such quitter, forsaking the path of righteousness in favor of the path of least moral resistance. He or she probably never stopped believing in God *per se*, but rather, stopped believing that anything he did or failed to do ever really made a difference in his life. For these characters, the Embrace is usually the event that sparks the change in outlook. Those who come from backgrounds such as this often make the most devout Faithful.

Prophet

The Word of God has always been revealed to Man through the voices of other men. As such, the world (and the road) is in need of those who have heard the Word and are willing and capable of spreading it far and wide. There are a wide range of opening possibilities for this concept: perhaps the character was a simple carpenter in life who happened to receive visions of an archangel, or a street preacher who came to know the Word through dreams. Whatever the circumstances, the Prophet is in touch with the Divine and strives to make it known to those around him. The Malkavian known as Anatole is the embodiment of this concept.

Clan

Although a few notable clans can claim disproportionate ratios of Faithful among their number, the road itself is open to any Child of Caine — a fact of which the proselytizers among the Faithful make regular (and often obtrusive) mention. Clan does not govern or decide any road affairs *per se*, but it does affect almost all political dealings between Cainites. Given the fact that religion and politics are longtime bedfellows, the issue has more influence than many Faithful would care to admit. Depending on one's status within and duties to the road at large, one's clan may also play a role in deciding what challenges or opportunities a given character may face.

In broad strokes, the Road of Heaven is most commonly found among the highest of the high and the lowest of the low. While most everyone in the Dark Medieval clings to a faith of some sort or other, it is the polar extremes of both Cainite society and philosophy that seem to draw the most converts to the Road's tenets. For members of many of the High Clans, the Road of Heaven is at once a duty, a birthright, and a most convenient excuse for otherwise questionable deeds. Among the first-cursed, only the Tzimisce fail to find the road appealing. (Fiends seem to require no other justification for their actions beyond the authority granted them by their own power.) As such, the most potent and numerous voices within the road belong to the Ventrue, the Lasombra and the Toreador. But then, the same might be said of all general Cainite politics.

Although they are not as thoroughly well-represented in the Road as their High Clan counterparts, Cainites from the Low Clans also come to the Road of Heaven. When they do, their sincere devotion to it is called into question far less frequently. These Cainites typically come to the road for one of two reasons. First, there are those who seek acceptance and, equally as often, repentance for their lowly natures. These Cainites find peace in the worship of God and the notion that they are equal to the mightiest highborn lord in His eyes, if their faith is pure. The second reason that Low Clan vampires find the Road of Heaven is the same reason High Clan vampires do: their acknowledgement and worship of the Almighty, whatever He may be called. The most prominent examples of this hail from Clan Assamite, the majority of whom follow the Road of Heaven as an alternative to their own Road of Blood. Of all the Low Clans, the Followers of Set and the Tremere seem to find least use for the *Via Caeli*.

Path

It is said that every Faithful Cainite follows the Road of Heaven in his own unique way. The various paths beginning on p. 64 of this chapter show the wide range of ways to look at the Road of Heaven. Some are better suited to certain character types than others, and this fact should be taken into account when considering a path for a Faithful character.

By the same token, it can be intriguing to select a path for a character for whom it would not otherwise seem suited. Imagine a Nosferatu on the Path of Divinity who believes his appearance to be a sign of God's favor, or a Cappadocian on the *Via Dolorosa* who uses his understanding of death and the Cainite condition to combat the forces of the Adversary. Simply by taking on a path, a budding character concept can often take on a life of its own, or even result in a new or interesting slant in its own right.

When you select a path, it is wise to think about what effect it will have on both your character's goals and his night-to-night existence. Every path off the main is equally as challenging and demanding as its parent road, if not more so. The behavioral and social demands it places on a character are bound to affect not only his outlook, but his plans as well. One often leads into another, given the fact that at least two of the road's paths are characterized to some extent by the actions they encourage their adherents to perform.

The four primary paths of the *Via Caeli* are detailed on pp. 64–67.

Nature and Demeanor

The only real commonality to the wide range of personalities that find the Road of Heaven is the belief that one's unlife serves a purpose. Thus, most Faithful

characters are driven and purposeful, if not outright goal-directed souls. That's not to say they're all Bible-thumping preachers, but most consider themselves to be in the right and will gladly defend the notion if pressed. Accordingly, some of the most common Natures associated with the Road of Heaven are Autocrat, Caretaker, Defender, Judge and Penitent, but even these are used in a multitude of different ways and means.

Given their duties, most Faithful are expected to acquire an intuitive sense of Demeanor and how it affects those around them. While a fire-eyed Fanatic might not understand why his colleague doesn't simply "see the light," he probably won't get very far by bellowing something to that effect in his colleague's face. The lesson of getting more with honey than with vinegar is one that smart Faithful often take to heart. Remember also that Demeanor is not as static as Nature, and the Faithful are certainly not above changing their outward means to suit their current circumstances. Indeed, sometimes a bold (or humble) front is all that's needed to smooth the way through what might otherwise have been a tricky encounter.

Traits

Certain Traits (along with higher ratings in some Traits specifically) are common among the Faithful. None should be considered hard-and-fast requirements, but a few of the more central ones help flesh out the character and add depth to the role of the Faithful in the game.

Attributes

As with most characters, the prioritization of Attributes should be dependent upon what sort of concept defines the character. A Crusading knight might well have considerable social prowess, but it might be wise to reflect his martial skills by giving his Physical category the primary spot. Likewise, a holy oracle driven by duty and faith to guide his road's warriors to victory probably won't get very far with a measly three points to distribute among Mental Attributes. In all things, let concept be your guide.

Abilities

While some Faithful characters are veritable Jacks-of-all-trades with a wide range of skills at their disposal, others are highly focused individuals who do one thing and do it well. Overall, this dichotomy serves the road well in the long run, as a number of highly specialized members lend their expertise to the furtherance of the road's ethos and goals.

Beyond this, some Abilities are simply par for the course to being among the Faithful. Talents like Intimidation and Subterfuge are familiar to most Faithful, along with Skills such as Commerce, Etiquette and Performance. For the more martial adherents, physical

Abilities such as Brawl, Athletics and Dodge should be commonplace. Most characters hailing from the military orders are at least moderately proficient in Athletics, Melee and Ride.

For the scholarly face of the road, Knowledges are always primary. First and foremost is theology, which no self-respecting Faithful would do without. Many Faithful characters also have ratings in some or all of the following, depending upon focus or concept: Academics, Hearth Wisdom, Law, Investigation, Occult, Politics and Senseschal. The road needs linguists to help spread the Word and communicate with heathens, so Linguistics is a similarly prized commodity among Faithful, especially among those who favor travel.

The Faithful tend to make good use of Ability specialties. These not only allow you to personalize your character's capabilities, but can often help you get a grasp on just who your character is (or who he is becoming). For example, most every adherent of the Path of Retribution can claim at least one specialty, most often in the style of combat or field of knowledge that is his focus. Many such Faithful, however, did not develop their specialty until after being accepted into the Order. In addition, Martyrs (followers of the Path of Tears) often develop the Occult specialty of Demonology.

Backgrounds

Despite occasional claims about the evils of the material world, Backgrounds are just as vital to the existence of Faithful as they are to other Cainites. While individual followers of the *Via Caeli* might not consciously seek temporal power or influence over the waking world, the road itself does. More often than not, the individual Cainite gets caught up in the designs of his fellow Faithful and their superiors. Backgrounds demonstrate just how much of that power and influence has "drifted" the character's way, whether by personal choice or the design of some greater power.

As most Faithful endeavor to maintain some contact with (and often influence over) the mortal world, social Backgrounds are both highly prized and quite common in areas with enough to go around. Allies, Contacts, and Retainers provide them with access to the affairs of the kine, and they use these resources to both gather information and cement their own holdings and alliances.

Along these lines, one of the most important Backgrounds to any Faithful character is Influence. Normally, it is the one Background that has difficulty following the character into undeath and thus must be acquired anew after the Embrace. In the case of religion, however, this rule is somewhat more flexible. Indeed, some Faithful elders carefully select their would-be childer from among the ranks of those with the greatest degree of influence over the moral foundation of a given population of mortals for this very reason. It is this type of Influence that most easily carries over, and is thus highly prized by

ambitious or dedicated Faithful. Through these and other means, it has become possible for one Faithful to develop nearly unheard-of influence over local and even regional Church bureaucracies, while maintaining the secrecy of his own involvement elsewhere.

Thin blood is considered a sign of both God's disfavor and the end times, so Generation is both common and preferred among Faithful. A low generation indicates that one's sire is a personage of some note, and low-generation Faithful often receive more favorable assignments and decisions from above. Those of the 12th generation are often quietly (or even blatantly) spurned by other Faithful, driven into the arms of their low-blooded brethren along the Path of Penitence.

It is almost unheard of for a Faithful character not to have a mentor of some kind, although this relationship need not always be represented by the Background of the same name. And while every Faithful has (or should have) a Confessor, this does not guarantee that said Confessor is particularly disposed to helping or guiding the character above and beyond the strict terms of his duties. A Confessor who *will* do such things probably qualifies as a Mentor as defined by the Background, and some points should be invested in it accordingly.

Status is another fervently sought (if understated) goal of most Faithful, as they desperately seek the acknowledgement, approval and power that comes with being regarded as a spiritual paragon and chosen of God. Like many other things in the unlife of a Faithful, Status is therefore a two-tiered consideration. If the character's Status comes from his place along the road, then it is applicable in dealings with other Faithful, but not as much so outside the road. If the Storyteller allows, a character's Status may be equally strong across all Cainite areas, but Storytellers are encouraged to limit the amount of Status a starting Faithful may take regardless of which they choose.

Disciplines

While a few Faithful see Disciplines as temptations from Satan and thus spurn them, such naive and idealistic vampires don't tend to survive very long. Most Faithful equate mastery of Disciplines with mastery of the vampiric self and thus encourage members of the Congregations to explore their capabilities. Wanton acquisition of power is rarely the stated goal, but rather, the progression of one's understanding of the limits of one's own curse. Disciplines allow Faithful to demonstrate that they understand why God afflicted them so, and they strive to make every Discipline use further their spiritual growth in some form or another. Or rather, the truly Faithful do so; others merely preach and strut to a similar tune, all the while forgetting the fact that each Discipline is a reflection of God's curse.

Two Disciplines are considered vital to the Road of Heaven, with another coming in a close third.

Auspex and Presence are most highly valued, and those who would make converts of their brethren often vigorously pursue clans that have one of these as favored Disciplines.

Faithful also make use of several Discipline techniques not found among other Cainites. These are described beginning on p. 68.

Auspex

Auspex is a useful Discipline for Faithful because it allows them to glean greater understanding of God's mysteries through ordinary events around them. It also allows astute spiritual leaders to detect flaws in others' faith, as well as impending dangers and plots from those who would see God's plan foiled.

The most basic uses of this Discipline allow Faithful to detect minute shifts in both temperature and mood, as well as to determine the natures of creatures with whom they come in contact. It also helps for one of the Faithful to be able to tell when another is planning an attack, or otherwise attempting to deceive him. And after all, "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord," according to Proverbs.

At higher levels, the Discipline becomes awe-inspiring. Truly devout Faithful see only the opportunity for increased wisdom through this power, and many feel that at a certain point of skill, one becomes able to hear and understand the will of Heaven. There are, of course, other, more practical advantages as well. True masters of Auspex eventually learn how to spy on areas (or individuals) at great distances and pull all but the most deep-seated secrets from the minds of those nearby. In this way, those in positions of leadership within the Church *stay* in those same positions of leadership.

Presence

More practical Faithful would stand by the claim that Presence is far and away the most invaluable Discipline. With it, a vampire can attract and sway the emotions of the kine as though they were putty in his hands. The delicacies and vagaries of interacting with those who must be considered prey fall by the wayside, as the power of command takes hold and will of Heaven pours out from the user's body in palpable waves. Faithful can and do often become addicted to the heady feeling of dominion that excessive Presence usage engenders, and more than a few take hold of that feeling and never look back.

For this reason (and others), most priests of the road encourage moderation and temperance in the disposition of Presence among the kine. They prefer to emphasize typical if skilled interaction where possible, rather than yet more overt abuses of the gifts of Caine. Nevertheless, it is a rare Faithful who will not fall back upon his mastery of Presence when he finds his powers of argument failing him.

Dominate

When the power to sway emotion falls short, it is good to be able to resort to issuing edicts, should such become necessary. Dominate fills in nicely in this regard. While it is seen as somewhat crass among road paragons, there are quite a few (mostly those among the Ventrue and Lasombra) who stand by its effectiveness. One of the lesser known uses of this power allows the Faithful to determine God's chosen among the kine, for many believe that any mortal who is immune to its effects (and the Faithful know of at least a few) has been blessed by God, Himself.

Merits and Flaws

Certain Merits and Flaws are particularly appropriate for followers of the Road of Heaven. Social Merits (and, equally as often, Flaws) are quite common for the Faithful, including Prestigious Sire, Debt of Gratitude, Dark Secret and Enemy. Interestingly, Apostate is one of the most common Flaws among the Faithful, with Crusader being one of the most common Merits, especially on the Path of Retribution.

Perhaps even more curious, however, is the fact that Mental Flaws are found much more frequently than are Mental Merits, particularly among those Faithful with high Road ratings. Common Flaws include Nightmares, Prey Exclusion, Amnesia, Deranged, and Religious Prohibition. Supernatural Merits and Flaws are almost equally as common, though this time with a fairer distribution of each. Inoffensive to Animals is often found among those on the Path of Penitence, and both Medium and Oracular Ability are of great use to the Faithful in their endeavors, though they often wonder about the insights such gifts afford them. Along similar lines, the Faithful seem to carry over the superstitions of their mortal days, and are thus veritable magnets for the more unwholesome Supernatural Flaws such as Touch Of Frost, Cast No Reflection, Eerie Presence and Can't Cross Running Water.

New Faithful-specific Merits and Flaws can be found beginning on p. 72.

Discovering God

For some, the first step on to the Road of Heaven is taken as a mortal, preparing them for a simple transition into undeath. For others, the very process of finding God is a journey of steps in and of itself. Preludes can therefore provide some extremely important moments in the early unlife of a Faithful, and should be handled with great care. What follows are some notions to consider in the preludes of those on the Road of Heaven.

• **Faith:** The Road of Heaven is nothing if not a constant test of the faith of a character. They are, after

all, called the Faithful. It is this aspect of their belief that defines their existences post-Embrace. While all systems of beliefs rely on an element of faith, the Road of Heaven is predicated on the biggest leap of faith of all — the notion that after all is said and done, there is a supreme being, and that this supreme being has not only allowed but *caused* the existence of vampires on the jewel of His own making, Earth. Faithful can and do disagree about the designs and destinies of their accursed souls, but they all understand that without faith, their unending existences are meaningless.

• **Humility:** Through all its various paths and offshoots, the core lesson of the *Via Caeli* remains one of humility. Those who follow the Road of Heaven in any form must realize that they are insignificant when compared to the One who created them. They also owe their newfound existences — for however long they last — to that same Creator. Hubris and arrogance are like music to the Devil's ears. If the Faithful hold out any hope whatsoever for their damned souls, they must at all times remember their place. Only by humbling and proving themselves before God may their accursed souls be saved. Sects might differ on how best to accomplish this, but all Faithful can agree on the goal.

• **Purity:** The first steps on the Road of Heaven involve learning how to differentiate between the compulsions of the spirit and the requirements of the flesh. The Faithful know that they are being tested at all times, by their very natures. Part of that test is knowing when and how to recognize the face of Satan — even when they see it reflected back at them from the mirror. The Faithful's unrelenting drive for purity is what keeps him true to his faith and free from the ravages of the Beast.

• **Conviction:** Faith and humility are nothing if they fall short when they are needed most. A Faithful Cainite must have the strength of his own convictions — and must be willing to lay everything he holds dear on the line to uphold those same convictions, if necessary. As those on the Path of Penitence so often point out, "If it were easy, then it would hardly be a test, would it?" Conviction is what allows the Faithful to stand resolute in their faith and humility, turning those selfsame qualities out into the rest of the world where they may benefit all mankind.

• **Duty:** The Road of Heaven is about an acknowledgement of place and purpose. The importance of duty is central to the road, and every Faithful must come to understand that the price for his continued freedom is his eternal vigilance in the name of God. Along with his sense of duty, the wise Faithful incorporates all the other elements of his nature, including his faith, his conviction and his humility into a singular whole — an unshakeable resolve to do his duty to the Lord. Only by staying true to this can one of the Faithful ever hope to reconcile the whole of his being.

PATH OF DIVINITY

VIA DIVINITATIS



Not every follower of the *Via Caeli* believes the Curse of Caine to be truly a curse. When faced with the overwhelming evidence of the sheer power of their new conditions, some minds respond by rationalizing their change as irrefutable proof of God's favor, rather than His condemnation. Believing themselves superior to men, these Cainites invariably come to Path of Divinity, as it is the only viable means of reconciling their genuine belief in God with their secret delight at having been "gifted" with the Embrace.

The Path of Divinity is arguably the most variant offshoot of any road, as its tenets emphasize a contrary relationship with God to all others who follow the *Via Caeli*. Although they refer to themselves as Divinists, those on this Path are known as Heretics among most other Faithful and are rarely accepted as fellow travelers on the road to Heaven. Part of this enmity is due to the Path's most dubious claim to fame: it indirectly gave rise to the subversive horror known as the Cainite Heresy. Armed with an unholy text called the *Euagetaematon*, a cult of fifth-century Divinists twisted the practices of the road into a mockery of itself and a potent weapon against the Catholic Church—one that grew to become one of the most powerful sects of Cainites in existence.

Additional Ethics of Divinity

- The blood of Caine makes you superior to mortals.
- The Flock must be led, guided, and educated to fear and adore God's chosen.
- Spread of the worship of Cainites increases and spreads the worship of God.

Practices: The path embraces the kine as a means of self-control. A devotee of this path can be likened to a wolf that surrounds himself with the sheep of the valley. The Beast rises to action when it is frustrated and denied; so long as its hunger is kept satiated, a Cainite never needs fear that his Beast will slip its leash and put the Faithful's soul in jeopardy. The kine are there specifically to ensure the Faithful's continued good behavior. To show his appreciation for God's bounty, the Faithful is expected to give something back. At no point, however, is he to acknowledge any other truth other than the notion that he is a blessed soul, certainly among God's most favored creations.

Due to the almost universal rebuke from those on other paths, Heretics organize themselves quite tightly and admirably. They really only have one another as company, so they tend to make the most of it where they can. The path's official structure mirrors that of the Catholic Church, borrowing papal titles like archbishop and cardinal to represent the most enlightened and influential within its ranks. More often than not, such positions carry some material cause and benefit, as well. For example, a Heretic with wide holdings and a sizeable population of mortals under his sway would have earned himself the right to be called archbishop. Otherwise, they share a body of ritual with both the other Faithful and the mortal Church, including an unholy communion of their own, wherein mortals are fed drops of the Cainite's blood.

Heretics hail from all Cainite clans and former mortal lives. They are fond of wealth and power, and strive to accumulate much of each. Naturally, the path appeals to many Lasombra and Ventrue, who naturally view themselves as superlative Earthly creatures.

Virtues: Conviction, Self-Control

Hierarchy of Sins Against Divinity

Score	Minimum Wrongdoing	Rationale
10	Allowing mortals to violate the Ten Commandments.	God's word is law.
9	Failing to speak out against corruption and sin.	God blessed you so that you could act, not sit idly by.
8	Acting out of pride, avarice or some other sinful impulse.	Do as you must, but do so only in the name of God.
7	Theft, robbery, willful vandalism.	Such things are beneath Cainites.
6	Causing harm to a pious and virtuous person.	Cainites are not above the truly innocent.
5	Feeding from an innocent by force.	The Flock must come to you.
4	Blasphemous or heretical acts.	Flaunt God Himself and He will strip you of His blessings.
3	Allowing a crime or major sin to go unpunished.	"Vengeance is mine," sayeth the Lord.
2	The murder of innocents.	Do not repeat the sin of Caine.
1	Aiding a demon or other supernatural agent of evil.	Serve evil and you deny your place in God's favor.

PATH OF PENITENCE

VIA PINACULUM

While the High Clans wage war with one another over tracts of land and purses of coin, a small faction of mostly Low Clan vampires remains dedicated to the one truth of their existences: that they are damned by God and must atone for their sins. Even among their fellow Faithful, these Cainites are austere. They are dedicated to the notion that unlife as a damned child of Caine should not be pleasant or secure; that their condition is both a test and an opportunity — the last they'll ever get, in fact — to show their Creator that their damned souls are not beyond hope.

While traditional Faithful empathize and often agree with the fundamental stance taken by the Penitents, most draw the line at the type of rigorous discipline and self-abuse the path requires of its adherents. And in all fairness to that reticence, it really is the most demanding path of the *Via Caeli*. Penitents hold fast to the Faithful ideals of worshipping God and understanding their own accursed natures, but for them the key to self-mastery lies in showing God just how faithful they truly are. They understand their Beast quite well, perhaps better than other Faithful, and they know that by keeping it weak and tame, they can avoid temptation and further spiritual disintegration.

Additional Ethics of Penitence

- Cainites are damned, filthy creatures by their very natures.
- Personal suffering leads to enlightenment, and ultimately to redemption.
- Removing the stain of sins past requires the performance of good deeds present.

Practices: All Penitents are expected to literally beat their own damned souls into submission. In addition to the other duties common to all Faithful, those on this path must regularly flagellate themselves in some form or other, as well as engage in ritual fasting and denial of unnecessary "luxuries." They believe it to be their duty to show just how humble they can be; the more penitent the Penitent, the more forgiving is the Lord.

While it would seem that Penitents might lead solitary unives due to the restrictive and meditative nature of their beliefs, such is not the case. Part of the path's foundation lies

in doing beneficent works for mankind, particularly in whatever community the vampire takes part (or is at least a peripheral element). Dedicated Penitents often become nocturnal guardians of their communities, spending whatever time is not devoted to prayer or atonement out patrolling the streets or cementing alliances with Penitent paragons in nearby communities. In this way, they spread their good works throughout and across all mankind, while maintaining their own networks of allies.

The Penitents cannot claim very high numbers, but what few there are remain devoted to their path and its teachings. Cainites who come to the path usually do so through personal instinct or a desire to prostrate themselves before God. Although a few notable groups exist in Europe proper, the path sees its greatest concentration of adherents in Palestine and the surrounding lands of the Middle East. Among the Ashirra, this path is known as the *Tariq al-Islam* and is seen as a natural extension of their religious beliefs.

As noted previously, the Path of Penitence strongly attracts Low Clan Cainites, many of whom hold nothing but contempt for their High Clans fellows' pretensions to purity — or worse yet, godhood. The Nosferatu are still the clan of most considerable regard within the path, especially in France, where the very night resounds with the sound of penance.

Virtues: Conscience, Self-Control



Hierarchy of Sins Against Penitence

Score Minimum Wrongdoing

- 10 Violating any of the Ten Commandments.
- 9 Failing to speak out against corruption and sin.
- 8 Feeding to maximum capacity.
- 7 Failing to self-flagellate or otherwise suffer nightly.
- 6 Failing to administer charity to the needy.
- 5 Feeding from an innocent without permission.
- 4 Blasphemous or heretical acts.
- 3 Allowing a crime or major sin to go unpunished.
- 2 The murder of innocents.
- 1 Aiding a demon or other supernatural agent of evil.

Rationale

- God's laws are the path to redemption.
- Spreading the Word is part of your penance.
- Hunger is a reminder of one's sinful nature.
- Returning to God's grace requires sacrifice.
- Good works help pave the way for atonement.
- Cainites must respect all children of God.
- Denial of God leads only to damnation.
- Sinners must be punished for their crimes.
- Do not repeat the sin of Caine.
- Serve evil and you serve the Beast.

PATH OF RETRIBUTION

VIA VINDICTA

"Vengeance is mine," sayeth the Lord of Heaven. The followers of the *Via Vindicta* take heed of this statement. The zealots who make up the Path of Retribution take this bit of scripture as both their motto and sacred creed. It is at once a divine curse, blessing, duty and birthright to act as God's wrath on Earth — one that falls to a devoted few among the Faithful to sustain until the End of Days. These chosen warriors mete out justice wherever they feel it is needed and rarely care about acting in error. After all, God will know His own.

Among Christian Faithful, followers are often known as Crusaders, while those Ashirra who follow the path refer to themselves as *Faris* (holy warriors).

If all Crusaders commit any trespass, it is the hubris to presume that they know God's will. They believe that Cainites, having been stripped of their mortality, are the hands of God on the physical world (which many of them believe to be the realm of the Adversary). Just as angels are the Lord's Heavenly children and messengers, so too are the Faithful His earthly children and soldiers. They recognize the Beast as Satan trying to draw them from the path, and they view their intake of blood as a divine sacrament in that the blood quiets the corruptive urges of the Beast.

Of all the Faithful, Crusaders are the most at peace with their natures — a fact that makes them all the more unsettling.

In practice, the Path of Retribution borrows aspects of the *Via Regalis* (particularly the Path of Chivalry) and applies them

as a sieve through which its Heavenly tenets are filtered. Like their Chivalric counterparts, Crusaders expect themselves (and others, to a lesser but dangerous extent) to abide by a certain code of behavior. The difference is, that code of behavior is handed down from God Himself as far as the Crusaders are concerned, rather than from some nebulous body of social regulations. Coupled with their duties to battle the Adversary on Earth, followers of this path tend to be austere in conduct, rigid in belief and quite unforgiving in the grim pursuit of each.

Additional Ethics of Retribution

- The Faithful exist to serve as Heaven's righteous wrath.
- Clemency must be neither asked nor given where evil is concerned.
- Non-Faithful Cainites ultimately walk the path to damnation.

Practices: Like many Faithful, Crusaders seek to find fulfillment in brotherhood. The path thus follows a strict hierarchy and, with the possible exception of the *Via Divinitatis*, is the most tightly organized path on the Road of Heaven. Its official title is rumored to be "The Right Knights of His Most Holy Order of Vengeance," but among the Faithful the path is most commonly known as simply "the Order." While it borrows structure from the various mortal holy orders, it refrains from culture or creed-specific titles and terms and otherwise maintains a strict policy of non-denominationalism. Cainite followers of the three Abrahamic religions comprise the body of the order, but pagan Cainites do find the path of their own accord on occasion and are thus grudgingly accepted into the Order as brothers. Such Crusaders must still abide by all traditional rites, and a pagan Cainite who has not undergone an official Confirmation of Blood by one of the path's paragons will not be acknowledged by the corpus of the Order.

Nevertheless, the Path of Retribution is surprisingly broad in its appeal. Cainites from both High and Low clans find purpose in its tenets, and indeed, see the potential for brotherhood in their common spiritual cause where there they may find none elsewhere. In particular, there seems to be quite a strong showing from among the Assamite, Brujah, Nosferatu, Salubri and Ventrue clans along the Path of Retribution.

Virtues: Conviction, Self-Control

Hierarchy of Sins Against Retribution

Score Minimum Wrongdoing

- 10 Neglecting an opportunity to exact vengeance.
- 9 Failing to punish any corruption or sin.
- 8 Acting out of pride, avarice, gluttony or some other sinful impulse.
- 7 Allowing a moderate crime or sin to go unpunished.
- 6 Causing harm to a pious and virtuous person.
- 5 Feeding from an innocent without permission.
- 4 Blasphemous or heretical acts.
- 3 Allowing a major crime or sin to go unpunished.
- 2 The murder of innocents.
- 1 Aiding a demon or other agent of evil.

Rationale

- Retribution is the both your duty and your purpose. The Devil prospers in the hearts of the uncleansed. Sin is the road to the Beast. God demands that justice always be served. God sees all and punishes such sins. God protects the innocent. Denial of God leads only to damnation. "Vengeance is mine," sayeth the Lord. Slay only those found wanting. God demands such forces be laid to waste.

PATH OF TEARS

VIA DOLOROSA (ALSO TARIQ EL-ALAAM')

According to path gospel, this system of beliefs has its origins in an ancient cabal of Salubri warriors who, after struggling against the Baali and their demonic overlords, vowed to do whatever they must to rid the world of such evil. These fanatics actively pursued interactions with demons in the hopes of outwitting them. A Salubri would tie his soul to a demon then end his own existence, thereby freeing Earth of the demon's foul taint. In practice, the Path of Tears is a combination of the Paths of Penitence and Retribution. Martyrs, as followers of this path are known, believe God cursed them with the duty of combating evil in the world (a sort of "fire with fire" arrangement), and in so doing pay the greatest cost of their atonement in undead toil, suffering and struggle.

The Beast is seen as the personal barometer of damnation. Whenever it rears its ugly head, it must be beaten down through the sacrifice of the metaphorical blood of the damned. This can be the Cainite's own blood or it can come in the form of another damned creature's blood. To this end, Road rating is a very important issue for Martyrs. If they find themselves slipping too far down the path, they view it as Satan (or whomever) gaining undue influence over their souls. They will dutifully end their own lives without hesitation if it looks like they've fallen too far to recover. In addition, some Martyrs still cling to older practices, opting to indebt demonic forces to themselves, thus tying their essences together, and then voluntarily suffer Final Death while they still have control.

Additional Ethics of Martyrdom

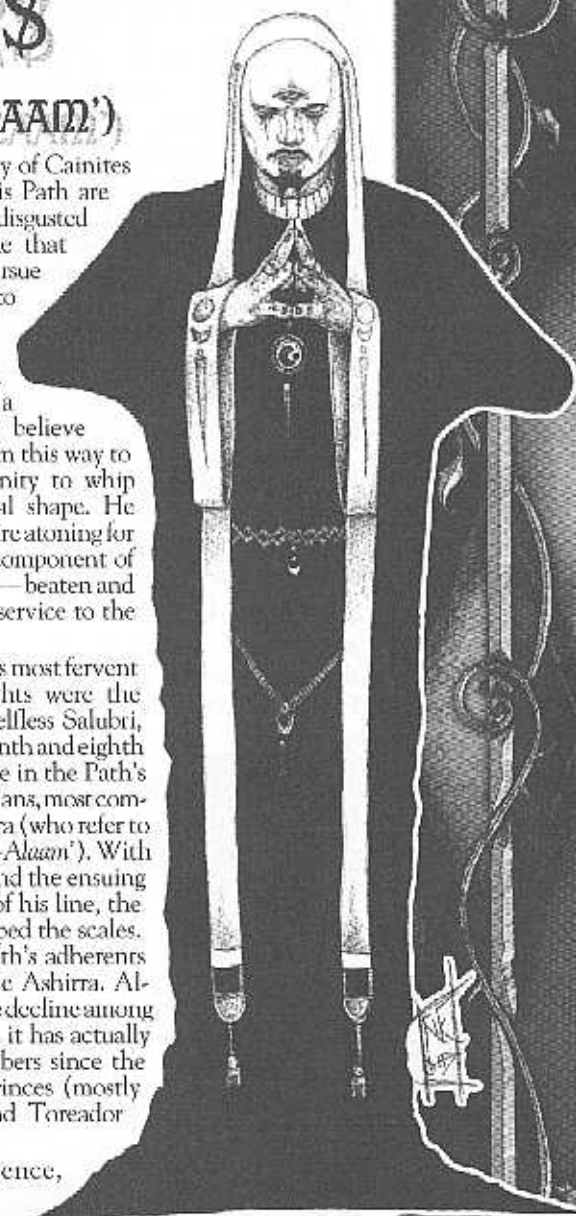
- It is the duty of the Martyr to suffer so that others might not.
- The tide of corruption brought forth by demons and other Cainites must be stemmed.
- Aid must be offered to those in pain, and protection to those who suffer evil's scourge.

Practices: The Path of Tears typically draws two broad types of Cainites into its fold. First, there are those whose religious beliefs were suddenly bolstered (or, in some cases, terribly shaken) by the Embrace. The first-hand revelation about the existence of the Damned, coupled with ensuing revelations about other truths of the World of Darkness, confirms every paranoid notion of Heaven and Hell. It makes fanatics of those who would see Earth cleansed of evil, thereby cementing their own place in Heaven come the End of Days.

The second category of Cainites most often drawn to this Path are those who have grown so disgusted at what they've become that they feel they must pursue evil at every turn, simply to reconcile their spirits with their natures. These distraught individuals, vampiric masochists of a nearly puritanical bent, believe that God has cursed them this way to give them the opportunity to whip themselves into spiritual shape. He wants them to do some dire atoning for their sins, and the key component of that atonement is blood—beaten and sweated out of them in service to the Lord.

Although the Path's most fervent supporters in early nights were the emboldened cabals of selfless Salubri, the Baali wars of the seventh and eighth centuries saw an increase in the Path's representation in other clans, most commonly among the Ashirra (who refer to their Path as the *Tariq el-Alaam'*). With the downfall of Saulot and the ensuing pogrom upon all those of his line, the final shift came that tipped the scales. Tonight most of the path's adherents can be found among the Ashirra. Although the path is on the decline among its own progenitor clan, it has actually seen a spike in its numbers since the dawn of the War of Princes (mostly from new Assamire and Toreador converts).

Virtues: Conscience, Self-Control



Hierarchy of Sins Against Martyrdom

Score Minimum Wrongdoing

- | | |
|----|---|
| 10 | Neglecting your duty in any way. |
| 9 | Showing cowardice in the face of evil. |
| 8 | Acting out of pride or some other sinful impulse. |
| 7 | Theft, robbery, willful vandalism. |
| 6 | Causing harm to a pious and virtuous person. |
| 5 | Feeding from an innocent without permission. |
| 4 | Blasphemous or heretical acts. |
| 3 | Allowing a crime or major sin to go unpunished. |
| 2 | The murder of innocents. |
| 1 | Aiding a demon or other agent of evil. |

Rationale

- | |
|---|
| Only by fulfilling God's plan can redemption be found. |
| Your penance is to face down the forces of darkness, even if it means your destruction. |
| Sin is the road to the Beast. |
| Martyrs must lead by example. |
| God sees all and punishes such sins. |
| Your curse is to suffer, but for those whom God sends to sustain you. |
| Denial of God leads only to damnation. |
| All who sin do the work of the Devil. |
| Destroy only evil in God's name. |
| It is your duty and curse to battle against such forces. |

Secrets of the Faithful

Some followers of the *Via Caeli* find fulfillment in discovering new ways to use their own inner reflections of the Curse of Caine. They feel that by putting their Disciplines to creative as well as good use, they are doing their part to show God their devotion while simultaneously achieving a greater understanding of their own accursed natures. Although these techniques are developed solely by the Faithful, in theory any Cainite can develop them with time and instruction. There are some who maintain these techniques should be restricted to fellow Faithful, but others believe that they do the Lord's work simply by spreading these practices and willingly teach them to those not already on the road. Even these "open-minded" Faithful, however, insist that their would-be pupils at least open their souls to the possibilities of the *Via Caeli* in return for such knowledge.

Righteous Gaze (Potence 3, Presence 2)

The Faithful place great stock not only in their own virtue above other Cainites, but in their duty as judges over their accursed brethren. By means of this power, the Faithful can burn a foe from the inside out using the oil of

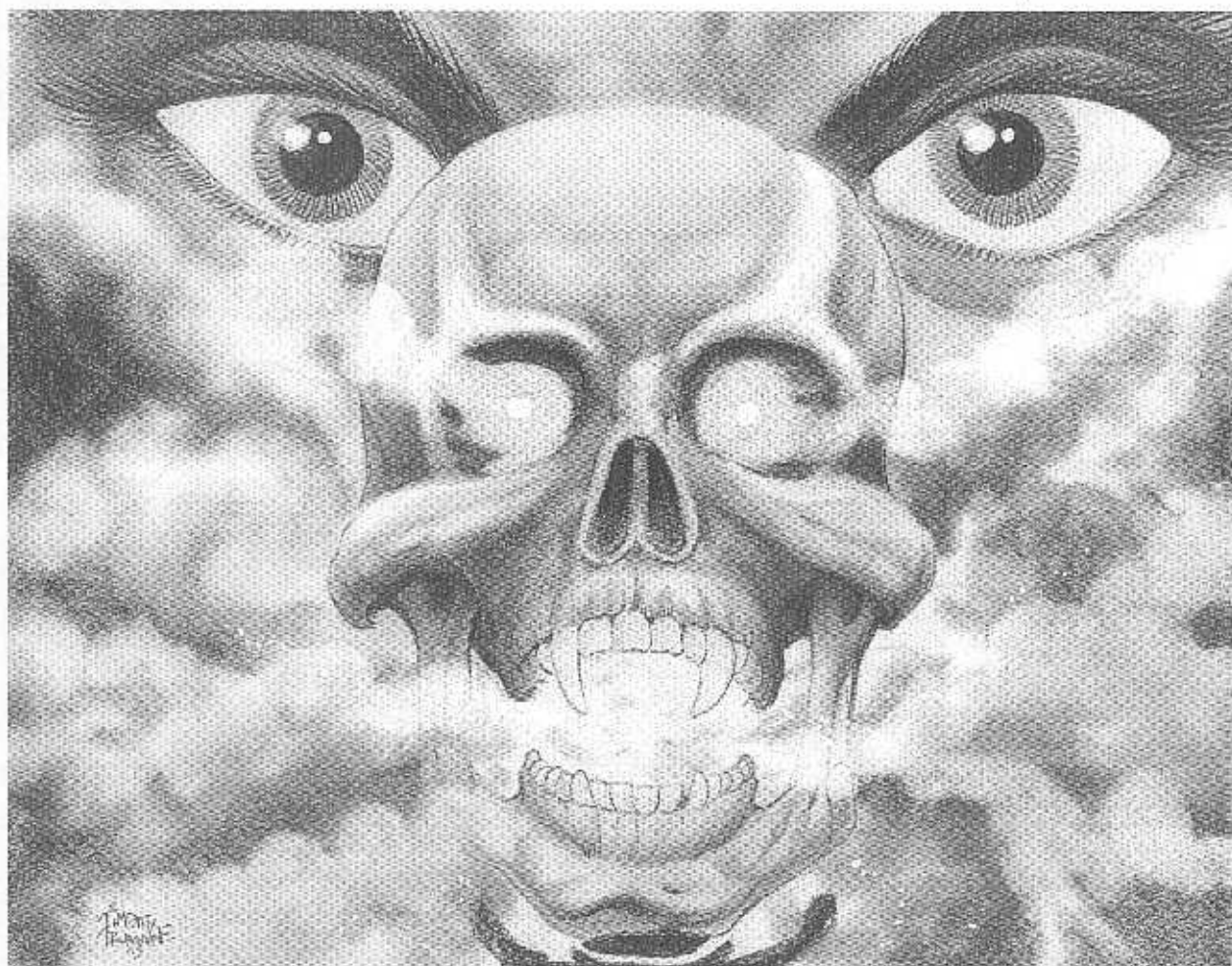
his own sin as fuel. All that is required is a moment's eye contact — and, of course, the moral superiority of the user.

System: After the character acquires eye contact with his target, the player must make a Road roll (difficulty equal to the subject's Road rating). If this roll is botched, the Faithful may not call upon this power again until he has completed a successful Act of Contrition (see page 38). Otherwise, the target suffers a number of aggravated wounds equal to the number of successes achieved on the Road roll at the beginning of the next turn. The target may only soak this damage with Fortitude (difficulty 7), but the difficulty may be modified up or down by his Aura rating. Thus, if the target has a Road rating of 8, then he rolls Fortitude at a difficulty of 6, rather than 7, to soak the damage. This power does not function on Faithful Cainites with higher Road ratings than the user.

Once a given target has been "judged" with this power, he may not be the target of the same user's Righteous Gaze again until such time as his own Road rating changes.

Experience cost: 21

MET: (Prerequisites of *Vigor* of Intermediate Potence and *Dread Gaze* of Basic Presence; experience point cost 11.) The Cainite must make eye contact with the



target and initiate a test of her own Road Traits against her target's. (Compare Willpower if both tie and have equal Road Traits.) Success means that at the beginning of the next turn, the target immediately suffers burning inner pains and receives one level of aggravated damage for each Road Trait possessed by the Faithful character — thus, a Cainite being judged by one of the Faithful with four Road Traits suffers four levels of aggravated damage. Targets may attempt to use *Fortitude* to reduce damage inflicted by this power, but no other powers or armor afford protection.

In the case of employing this power against other Faithful, the damage inflicted is equal to the accuser's Road Traits minus the target's Road Traits, reducing the damage somewhat — or even negating it entirely when dealing with those of equal or higher Road Traits. Therefore, a Faithful with 4 Road Traits judging another Faithful with 2 Road Traits will only inflict two levels of aggravated damage instead of her usual four. At the Storyteller's discretion, particularly foolish or judgmental Cainites who attempt to judge superior Faithful may actually suffer the difference in Road ratings as aggravated damage reflected back on themselves; fitting punishment for daring to question those of more blessed standing.

If the user fails to apply this power successfully, she must immediately make a Simple Test — on a loss, she must perform an Act of Contrition before applying it again. Once used on a particular target, this power may not be used on that target again until his Road Traits change.

Halo of Steel

(Fortitude 3, Willpower 6+)

Truly devout Faithful can call upon their faith to provide them with the extra bit of strength necessary to face down evil. By means of this power, the Cainite learns how to funnel his faith through his supernaturally toughened body, allowing him to shrug off the deleterious effects of his own wounds, no matter how grievous they may be.

System: The player spends a blood point and rolls his Road rating (difficulty 6). Success allows the character to ignore any current wound penalties as well as all penalties he acquires from new wounds for one turn per success. Another blood point and roll are required each time the player wants to reactivate the power. Use of this power is reflexive, and the blood expenditure does not count toward the character's generational per turn maximum.

Experience cost: 21

MET: (Prerequisites of Resistance of Intermediate Fortitude and at least five Willpower Traits; experience cost 11.) As a reflexive action, the Faithful character can call upon the strength of her devotion to continue to fight on, long after others would have been reduced to

ash. The Cainite must spend a Blood Trait to activate this power; this allows her to ignore all wound penalties, including Incapacitated and Torpor (but not Final Death), for a number of turns equal to her Road Traits. In other words, only decapitation, staking, total destruction of the vampire's form (as determined by the Storyteller), fire or sunlight will prevent a Cainite with this power from continuing to act — anything less and she will continue to fight on, although her eventual fate will still likely be quite dire. This power may be used more than once; each subsequent activation requires another Blood Trait. Blood spent to activate this power does not count against the character's generational maximum per turn. At the end of this time, the Cainite suffers the normal penalties for her injuries; she may even be reduced to dust if her injuries are sufficiently severe (Storyteller's discretion, but certainly appropriate if the character has suffered horrendous amounts of damage).

Moment of Grace

(Dominate 4, Presence 3)

The Road of Heaven is the one true way, and anyone who doubts that ultimately courts Hell. Truly powerful Faithful can impose not only their way of thinking, but their very *Via* on other Cainites for a short time. All that is required is a touch and a glance, and even the foulest Sinner or most animalistic Feral becomes one of God's own, if only for a short time. Some Cainites have been known to end their own existences rather than regress to their former brutality. Others experience a moment of truth while under the effects. All, however, are bound by the *Via Caeli*.

System: The player spends a Willpower point and a blood point, and rolls Road (difficulty of the target's Road rating). This power does not function on other Faithful, nor does it function on targets with higher Road ratings than the user.

If the roll succeeds, the target's road changes to the Road of Heaven (including whatever path the character follows, if any) for one scene. The target's effective Road rating is equal to the number of successes the player rolls, so it is impossible for a target of this power to wind up more "advanced" along the Road of Heaven than the wielder. While this power is in effect, the target must check for degeneration if she sins against the Road of Heaven, rather than her actual road. Any dots of Road lost during this time, however, carry over when the scene ends. Often, victims of this power wind up even more depraved than before.

Example: *Muricano*, a *Lasombra* priest of the Cainite Heresy, is assaulted by a *Ventrue* Scion. Realizing that this Warlord is simply misguided, *Muricano* uses this power to enlighten him. *Muricano's* player rolls the *Lasombra's* Road rating (eight dice) against a difficulty of six (the *Ventrue's* Road rating) and scores five successes. For the next scene, the *Ventrue* "converts" to the Road of Heaven and has a functional Road rating of five. During that time, the Warlord

frenzies and kills one of Marciano's ghoul servants. This murder of an innocent requires a roll to see if the Ventrue degenerates, which the player fails. When the scene ends, the Ventrue returns to his normal morality (the Road of Kings) but finds his soul strangely weakened — the degeneration carries over, leaving him with a Road rating of five.

Experience cost: 28

MET: (Prerequisites of *Live of Subtle Whispers* of Intermediate Dominate, Entrancement of Intermediate Presence; experience cost 14). By spending a Willpower Trait and a Blood Trait, the Faithful may attempt to defeat her target in a test of her Road Traits against his. (Compare Willpower scores if a tie occurs and both have equal Road Traits.) This power does not function against other Faithful — let them progress on their own time — nor does it function against other Cainites with higher Road ratings than the user. Only those of exceptional devotion typically have any luck with this power.

If successful, the target's Road is effectively changed to the Road of Heaven for the next scene or hour, whichever is longer. His effective Road Traits are considered equal to that of the user, and during this time he must also test for degeneration as any follower of the Road of Heaven would with the same number of Road Traits. Any loss of Road Traits carries over to his normal Road when he reverts back to his old way of thinking, however — if he lost a Road Trait during his time on the Road of Heaven, his old Road rating is reduced by one, even if the sin which caused the loss would normally not concern him. It should be noted that this is truly a genuine conversion as well as an in-game mechanic — while the player may know that the change only lasts for a short time, the character does not, and should roleplay their sudden shift in perspective and values accordingly. More than one Cainite has lapsed into extreme self-loathing over their "depraved" past acts, and some few have even destroyed themselves in shame.

New Assamite Sorcery Path

Sada Ghadub Allah (Echoes of Allah's Wrath)

This magical Path of study was developed in tandem between Faithful Assamite sorcerers and their non-Assamite brethren among the practitioners of *Sihir* (Islamic blood magic). By spending a blood point and succeeding in a Road roll, the Faithful may temporarily pass along aspects of God's curse upon Caine. Through these sympathetic experiences ("echoes," to the Ashirra), it is hoped that understanding and eventual repentance might be achieved. While the Path's most efficacious targets are those who sin against God but have not yet

been cursed themselves with undeath (mortals, mages, Lupines, etc.), its power is equally effective against Cainites, as it "refreshes" their existing afflictions — a reminder of their accursed nature and of God's will.

Among the Ashirra, voluntarily submitting to this renewal is believed to be good for the soul. To this end, some Penitents both within and outside the Ashirra sect proper make confessors of local sorcerers, going so far as to receive regular infusions of this magic as part of their routine ablutions.

Although the powers of *Sada Ghadub Allah* are moderate in the overt effects they may have on the accused, their potency comes in two key factors: the potential for both multiple effects and extended durations. If a blood magician possesses sufficient mastery of this Path, he may choose to impart any or all of the effects leading up to and including his current level. In essence, he determines just how much of the vampiric nature to "bestow" upon his target. The blood magician may pass along one curse for each success acquired on the Road roll, up to the total number he has learned. Once the magician has cursed a target, however, further applications of this Path are useless: Only by voluntarily canceling all curses on a given target and starting anew (with another blood expenditure and Road roll) may the same target be prematurely re-cursed.

In addition to potential multiple effects, a given curse or curses may also last for quite some time (determined by table below). In the case of Faithful targets, this time can be shortened by a successful Act of Contrition, but the administration of such reductions is at Storyteller discretion. Otherwise, the Path's effects may only be prematurely relieved by will of the sorcerer. No other non-mystical means, not even the sorcerer's Final Death, will grant surcease of the curses before they've run their course.

The practitioner must be able to see those whom he would curse with this Path, but there are no outward signs of a subject being cursed. Indeed, it may be some time (and perhaps an awkward situation) before the subject himself realizes something is amiss.

Duration of Curse Effects

Caster's Road Rating	Duration
1-3	One hour per success
4-6	One day per success
7-9	Three days per success
10	One week per success

MET: Duration determined by Road Traits as well, as follows. Those with one Road Trait can curse their enemies for ten minutes per Mental Trait spent on the curse (in addition to any other costs); those with two Road Traits may curse for half an hour per Mental Trait spent; three Road Traits equals one hour per Mental Trait; four Road Traits equals one day per Mental Trait;

and five Road Traits equals one week per Mental Trait. At the Storyteller's discretion, these times may be altered for curses intended to affect a target during downtime as opposed to during play.

• Curse of Lifeless Mien

The first, and some would say principal, aspect of the curse on Caine was being stripped of his acceptance in the brotherhood of Man. When a man is Embraced, he is made dead to the world of men but forever forced to dwell within it, as a stranger in his own home. This power casts that same pall of ostracism over the target, making him an outsider among his own kind. For those to whom close social interaction is a requirement for daily survival, this can mean a world of trouble.

System: The player rolls Road rating with a difficulty equal to the subject's Willpower. Success imparts a curse of isolation onto the target. Mortals "darken," becoming sinister and withdrawn to the point where even relatives don't trust them. Cainites afflicted with this power are struck by the weight of their lifeless hearts, losing one dot from their highest Social Attribute. Furthermore, any creative endeavor attempted during the curse period becomes nearly impossible for these undying embodiments of stasis (+1 to difficulties for every success). More than one Toreador has succumbed to despair after being smitten in this manner.

MET: Mortals receive the Negative Social Trait: *Callous*, and will generally be poorly received even by their closest friends and relatives. Cainites suffer the same effects, as well as the Negative Physical Trait: *Lethargic*, and must roleplay the listlessness and depression of the true realization of their undead state. Either type of target also suffers a one Trait penalty on all creative endeavors for each Mental Trait spent on this curse.

• • Curse of Heavenly Dolor

According to the Faithful, the curse of vampirism is one brought down from on high — a physical and spiritual damnation straight from the hand of the Almighty. Upon his Embrace, a vampire is forever after humbled by the power of the Lord, wherever he may encounter it. This level of the Path echoes and imparts that vampiric weakness to faith.

System: The player rolls Road (difficulty of the victim's Willpower). If the roll succeeds, the blood magician can cause any target to become vulnerable to the effects of True Faith as though the subject himself was one of the Damned. From the moment of his cursing until the end of the effect's duration, the target takes damage from holy items and holy ground and may be repelled by anyone possessing and demonstrating True Faith. (For a complete list of Faith effects, see *Dark Ages: Vampire*, p. 289.)

Cainites afflicted with this curse find their own vulnerability to Faith heightened. Difficulties against or to resist the effects of Faith are raised by two for the

duration, and any damage suffered from the appropriate sources is doubled.

MET: The caster makes a test of his Road Traits against a difficulty of the target's Willpower Traits. (Each level of True Faith he possesses, if applicable, adds one to his bid.) If successful, the target is affected by True Faith just as though he were one of the Damned — he may be turned back by the faithful, holy ground is blocked to him, etc. (For more on True Faith, see *Faith & Fire*, p. 256) Cainites afflicted by this power find themselves at a two-Trait penalty on all tests to resist True Faith, and suffer an additional level of damage from all True Faith-based attacks.

• • • Curse of Unfettered Rage

Vampires are creatures of ferocity and instinct, driven by a raging Beast Within. At this level of mastery, the practitioner gains the ability to arouse such a beast inside others as well. This force heightens the nerves of the subject, making him susceptible to sudden onslaughts of instinct that force him into mindless fight or flight reactions.

System: This power incites a force similar to the vampiric Beast inside its subjects. This makes mortal targets susceptible to frenzies of all kinds, whether the source be from provocation or imminent fear of aggravated damage. Creatures that already possess a "beast" of their own (such as Cainites and werewolves) find their difficulties to resist frenzy of any kind — and in the case of vampires, to resist Rörschreck — increased by two. In addition, victims of the Curse of Unfettered Rage gain the equivalent of the Flaw: Repulsive to Animals (p. 309 of *Dark Ages: Vampire*) for the duration of the power's effect.

MET: Mortals affected by this power must test against frenzy at most times a Cainite would be required to do so, although they need not fear sunlight or test for self-control when confronted with a large quantity of spilt blood. Fire and other forms of aggravated injury still provoke strong responses, however, as do any number of ordinary provocations such as insult, humiliation or attacks against loved ones. Storytellers may also wish to devise additional uniquely mortal stimuli, or emphasize any specific hatreds or phobias that an individual possesses. If employed against Cainites or other creatures already susceptible to frenzy, they are considered two Traits down on all tests to resist frenzy for the duration of the curse, and are two Traits down on all tests of *Animal Ken* or other interactions with animals.

• • • • Curse of Boundless Thirst

At this level, the beast unleashed within an opponent has grown strong enough to demand actual blood from its host. For so long as he remains thus cursed, the target gains nourishment only from the ingestion of blood; normal food will no longer sustain him.

System: For the duration of effect, the subject requires living blood to sustain him (the equivalent of one blood point's worth per day, minimum). The blood may be from

any living source, and his body mystically processes the blood and nourishes him in place of any and all other food. If the subject ingests anything except blood during this time, he finds it repulsive. He regurgitates it immediately unless he makes a Willpower roll (difficult 8). Non-Cainite subjects have the option of not "eating" until the curse ends, but they will begin to suffer the equivalent of starvation/dehydration after 12 hours without sustenance; in addition, abstinence becomes increasingly more difficult.

Cainites afflicted with this power have all their normal blood expenditures increased by one for the duration. Instead of spending one blood point in order to rise each night, he spends two; instead of burning two blood points to activate his two Celerity actions for the turn, he burns three.

MET: Mortal or other non-Cainite targets must consume at least one Blood Trait's worth of fresh blood per day in order to sustain themselves; other food and drink provides no nourishment and is immediately regurgitated unless the subject spends a Willpower Trait. A mortal target of this power may choose to abstain rather than indulge this dark craving, but soon begins to suffer the effects of starvation/dehydration — one lethal level of damage every 12 hours which cannot be healed until proper nourishment is obtained. In addition, for each such period he chooses to abstain, he must make a Self-Control test equal to a difficulty of one Trait plus an additional Trait for every period that has passed where he has not indulged his hunger. Failure means he must immediately indulge himself as quickly as possible.

Cainites simply find themselves spending an extra Blood Trait on top of the normal cost every time they would normally spend blood, forcing them to hunt more often or risk falling into a hunger frenzy.

••••• Curse of Forbidden Sol

Perhaps the most dreadful aspect of Caine's curse was God's commandment that he never again walk in the light of day. Those afflicted with this power gain the vampire's terrible sensitivity to daylight, turning otherwise sun-loving individuals into nocturnal denizens of darkness and shade.

System: Non-Cainite targets of this power instantly gain the vampiric vulnerability to the sun. If daylight strikes the target's skin at any time during the curse's effect, he suffers aggravated damage from it (as per the chart on p. 258 of *Dark Ages: Vampire*). This also has the effect of reversing subjects' natural biological rhythms, twisting their favored activity cycles from daytime into night.

Cainites afflicted with this curse gain the Flaw: Light-Sensitive (p. 309 of *Dark Ages: Vampire*) for the duration.

MET: Mortals and other non-Cainites afflicted with this power suffer normal damage from exposure to sunlight, just as though they were ordinary Cainites. They also find themselves growing lethargic, needing rest during the daytime and becoming active at night, which while beneficial given their sudden allergy is likely to incite all manner of rumors and suspicions from

their friends and neighbors. Cainites suffering from this power receive an extra level of aggravated damage every time they are exposed to sunlight, and operate at a one Trait penalty in any areas of bright light.

New Merits and Flaws

The following Merits and Flaws are especially appropriate for Faithful characters. As Merits and Flaws are an optional part of character creation, be sure to check with your Storyteller to make sure that they are allowed before purchasing any for your character.

Angel Face (1-pt. Merit or Flaw)

Your outward visage reflects your spiritual purity or fallen depravity. In addition to its usual effects, your Aura modifier adds to (or subtracts from) your actual Appearance rating. This cannot reduce your Appearance below zero or increase to more than one dot above your generational maximum. Angel Face can be either a Merit or a Flaw (and therefore the Aura's effects on Appearance only apply in one "direction," no matter how devout a vampire with the Flaw becomes, she never becomes any prettier as a result).

MET: Taken as a Merit, this Trait allows you to purchase additional *Gorgeous*, *Graceful*, *Elegant* or *Dignified* Traits equal to your Aura rating, even if this causes you to exceed your normal generational limits for Social Attributes — your exceptional beauty is the reflection of the grace of the Creator, and as such is not bound by even the curse of Caine. Should your Aura rating later decrease, these excess Traits are lost until it is restored to its former glory (though they need not be purchased again). Taken as a Flaw, the judgment of God has clearly marked your countenance — you suffer a number of *Bestial*, *Repugnant* or *Ghastly* Negative Social Traits equal to your Aura rating. These Traits cannot be bought off until your Aura modifier is at least neutral. Should you ever slide back to a negative Aura rating, these Traits return once more, forcing you to continue buying them off every time you slide into depravity.

Jacob's Twin (1-pt. Merit)

Through divine providence, or perhaps a simple accident of birth, your face is identical to that of a saint whose image is commonly found etched in wood and glass around the region in which you reside. You are at a -1 difficulty to all Social rolls in situations involving those who have some veneration of the saint in question.

MET: You are one Trait up on all Social tests with followers of the appropriate faith, and you should wear a descriptive tag indicating your resemblance. Take note, however — you may well be held to higher standards than others due to your resemblance to one so holy!

Noted Confessor (1-3 pt. Merit)

You have a particularly well-respected confessor, an ashen priest of the *Via* to whom many look up. Your

association is most likely an open (and highly envied) one. This Merit differs from the Mentor Background in that your confessor need not provide you with any real service aside from taking your confession (and thereby increasing your own reputation among the Faithful, of course). The cost of this Merit is determined by the relative position of your confessor: For one point, he is likely a locally revered ashen priest with a large congregation and disciples of his own; for three points, you have the ear of one of the road's true paragons, and may enjoy the envy of all Faithful who know of the relationship. While confessionals are theoretically sacrosanct, Storytellers may (and probably will) note the potential double-edged sword of willingly pouring your soul out to a Cainite of both power and influence.

MET: This Merit is largely handled between the player and the Storyteller, although it should be noted that as a rule this role should never be handled by another character; a Storyteller character is generally required to ensure that the right balance between favor and possible treachery that this Merit implies.

Save Thy Servant (3-pt. Merit)

This Merit is most commonly found among those on the Path of Penitence, but it is available to any of the Faithful. Of all Cainites, it is those who walk the *Via Caeli* that are most often given to ritual self-abuse and vicious bouts of flagellation in their attempt to do what they believe is God's will on Earth. The paradox of such behavior, however, is that it can leave terrible wounds when taken to extremes — wounds that invariably require the vampire to hunt down and shed yet more innocent blood.

This Merit seems to be the means by which God has reconciled this paradox. Those graced with it have the ability to regenerate self-inflicted damage. Any wound you suffer at your own hand (and in the name of prayer or atonement) counts merely as bashing damage, no matter how grievous the wound itself may be, and may be healed with the expenditure of a single blood point, regardless of how many wound levels were suffered. Thus, if you cut off your own arm in penance, suffering two "aggravated" wounds in the process, you may regrow that arm at the cost of a single blood point. This ability may not be transferred to another nor benefited from at the expense of the Merit's intent.

MET: All self-inflicted damage inflicted in the name of penance or atonement is considered bashing damage. It can be healed with a single Blood Trait, regardless of how many levels of such damage the Cainite has inflicted on himself. Note that this Merit only applies to the Cainite himself. What's more, it only applies to damage knowingly inflicted out of a sense of true penance or devotion — attempting to abuse this Merit for personal gain of any kind results in damage suffered requiring the normal Blood Trait expenditure to heal, as well as possibly some act of contrition for the

Cainite's hubris. Likewise, it does not cover damage inflicted in frenzy, even against the Cainite himself — no matter what the justification might be.

Blessed Myroblite (4-pt. Merit)

By some divine providence, your blood has been blessed with a strange saint-like quality. The bodies of saints are believed to be composed of, and thus to break down into a substance called *chrism*. (One who demonstrates this upon his demise is known as a *myroblite*.) It is believed that this *chrism* carries with it certain mystical properties, and such is the case with you and your vitae. For narrative purposes, your blood is considered to be slightly "less damned" than your soul. It shares the regenerative properties common to all vampiric blood, but it has more "life" in it, and when given in small amounts to living creatures, it can and will heal them without creating ghouls. Your blood is not infertile *per se*, and you may still create ghouls and childer normally, if you so desire. Likewise, the reverse is thus true; your blood is commensurately toxic to others of your own kind. If a Cainite drinks of your blood, he finds it at once succulent and painful, and will suffer one lethal wound for every point he consumes.

MET: You may choose whether or not someone who receives your blood will become a ghoul, or whether she will simply receive its healing powers without the taint of the Beast. You may still ghoul mortals or create childer if you desire, however, barring some other Flaw or peculiarity of your Curse. Any Cainites who drink your blood suffer one level of lethal damage per Blood Trait ingested, which cannot be reduced through *Fortitude* or similar powers.

Of Embrace Foretold (5-pt. Merit)

You are the Cainite equivalent of a prophet or even a true messiah. Some theological scholars claim to have predicted your Embrace long before it happened. Most believe that God has some special purpose in mind for you, and you are something of a luminary among the other Faithful. This Merit has the following effects:

- You are considered to have an extra dot of Status when dealing with Cainites who believe in or recognize your Embrace and your new unlife as something special.
- When confronted with a challenge that directly pertains to God's plan for you (Storyteller discretion), you can re-roll any failed roll (including botches) and take the better of the two results. You can do this up to three times per story, but only when dealing with circumstances that would prevent you from achieving your destiny.
- Once per story, when confronted with dire or overwhelming circumstances, you can draw strength from certain knowledge of your place in God's plan and regain a point of Willpower immediately, even if you have no temporary Willpower left.

At the Storyteller's discretion, there may be omens, portents, or prophecies concerning you, and various sorts of divinations may show your involvement in certain events. There may also be forces out to thwart

your destiny. Circumstances will tend to conspire to ensure that you have the opportunity to fulfill it, so you will never be able to lead a humble or isolated unlife.

MET: This Merit is largely a matter of roleplaying. The Storyteller should carefully work with the player to determine the nature of his destiny (or at least what he perceives of it), as well as the many omens, visions, dream and prophecies which go hand-in-hand with this Merit. In no event should this Merit be allowed lightly; not only does it have the potential to alter the entire landscape of a chronicle by its very presence, but it can also lead to other players becoming upset if they feel all the important events of the chronicle revolve around the blessed character, something no Storyteller wants to promote. In game terms, you receive an additional *Blessed Status Trait* when dealing with those who believe in your Embrace as something foretold, and you may call upon up to three retests per story on any tests related to fulfilling your destiny (even if the test normally does not allow retests). Lastly, once per story you may call upon faith in your destiny to instantly regain a Willpower Trait, even if your Willpower has been expended at that point.

Redeemed (7-pt. Merit)

When you crossed into the world of the Damned (or, perhaps, after stepping onto the *Via Caeli* for the first time), your soul arrived without the fullness of the mark of Caine upon it. While you are still one of the undead, with all the powers and restrictions the condition brings, you find that True Faith (of any variety) causes you no distress whatsoever. Indeed, you are quite comforted by its presence. This spiritual purity comes at a price, however. If you falter or are found wanting in your own faith, you will lose this benefit until you can somehow redeem yourself and atone for your sins. Every time you lose a point in your Road rating, you must immediately roll your new Road rating (difficulty 9). If this roll fails, your redemption is revoked and you will be vulnerable to all the effects of both True Faith and Holy Ground until the spiritual loss is repaired. Needless to say, only those on the *Via Caeli* may benefit from this Merit.

MET: This Merit is also largely a roleplaying mechanic, although any time those who take it lose a Road Trait, they must immediately make an additional test of their new Road Trait rating against a difficulty of seven (any levels of True Faith they may possess are added to their bid for this test). If they fail this second test, this Merit is lost until a sufficiently impressive act of penance is performed. Storytellers should spare no expense in being as demanding as possible regarding Faithful with this Merit — it is an extremely rare and powerful gift, and demands an accordingly high amount of respect and care to maintain.

Cryptophage (2-pt. Flaw)

You have a particular fascination for what you deem the "mysteries of God," and you pursue such secrets with all the passion of your undead heart. You are convinced that

the presence of the Faithful among the Damned childer of Caine is a sign that they figure prominently in His plan, and you've taken that responsibility personally. In short, you seek to gain a real and personal understanding of God's plan on Earth.

To this end, you follow every lead, pursue every scrap of clue, and strive to read if not collect every holy writing or tablet you can find. What the Heretics are to Caine, you are to the Almighty — with a commensurate rise in direction and drive — and you likely view the former as eternal time-wasters, fixating upon the effect rather than the source. When faced with a genuine opportunity to advance your understanding of either the Cainite condition or holy mysteries of any kind, you must roll Willpower (variable difficulty, depending on circumstances) to avoid jumping in head first, regardless of present situation or goals.

MET: You are obsessed with your quest to understand God's will and, more importantly, His plan for the children of Caine — any time you come across some way to further your understanding of His grand design, you must make a Willpower test (difficulty determined by how promising the lead is). Failure means that you must immediately abandon what you are doing in order to investigate this lead; it should be noted that even success generally only means that you'll probably put off investigating until you have time for it later, as your curiosity is truly a driving force.

Soul of Darkness (2- to 4-pt. Flaw)

You have great difficulty in actually walking the *Via Caeli* as a means of controlling the Beast Within. This might be due to some inborn heresy in your veins — perhaps you are the descendant of a *Dhabi* revenant, or the lovechild of some orgiastic rite in the name of Satan — or some spiritual taint that makes you somehow more damned than other Cainites. Whatever the cause, your faith in your chosen morality is not as solid as it is for other Faithful. In addition, you find it harder to increase your understanding of your road. If this Flaw is worth two points, then all Road rolls are made at a +1 difficulty and the experience cost goes up by one (i.e., it becomes current level x 3). Likewise, if the Flaw is worth three points, these penalties go up by an additional one; thus, for four points, this Flaw causes all Road rolls to be made at a +3 difficulty and the cost of raising your Road becomes current level x 5. Strangely, this penalty seems to follow those who give in to their frustration and forsake the *Via Caeli* in favor of other moral codes; such apostates find their new spiritual paths just as difficult to maintain.

MET: Increase the difficulty of all tests involving your Road Traits by one per level of this Flaw (one for 2 Traits, two for 3 Traits, etc.); in addition, it costs an additional Experience Trait to purchase a new Road Trait for each level of this Flaw. This Flaw continues to apply even if you later abandon the Road of Heaven for another path; such darkness as yours is not so easily overcome. In addition, at the Storyteller's discretion you may occasionally attract creatures of darkness seeking a like-minded companion,

and who are only too happy to try to tempt the character to turn away from the faith and embrace his "true nature."

Stigmata (3-pt. Flaw)

Some time after adopting the *Via Caeli*, you awoke to find your form stricken by one of the common sufferings associated with the Passion of Christ: A wreath of small holes around the crown of the skull, an inch-wide hole through the palm of each hand, a vicious puncture wound in the side, or a stinging grid of lash marks on the back. You begin each night at the Bruised health level upon rising from slumber. Unlike the Flaw: Permanent Wound, however, this wound may not be healed with blood. Barring some especially potent magics, the wound reappears each night when you rise. (Note: If the Storyteller allows, this Flaw can be taken twice, with the character adopting another one of Christ's wounds. In so doing, you begin play each night at the Hurt health level, instead.)

MET: First, the critical out-of-game disclaimer: *This Flaw may only be taken with explicit Storyteller permission. She should never allow players to take it who merely seek to use it to inappropriately shock and horrify other players or — worse still — bystanders who are unaware of the game.* The significance of the stigmata invokes very powerful feelings in many people. Even within the context of the game and/or when portrayed by mature and sensible players, it can seriously disturb onlookers, including quite a few of those who understand and enjoy LARP. It is highly recommended that its portrayal be limited to wearing an appropriate description card unless all participants in the game have discussed it and are comfortable with its graphic depiction; this ensures that no one else is made uncomfortable out of game just for the sake of one player's Trait Flaw. What's more, it is also strongly advised that this Flaw never be actively represented in games where there is a chance that uninvolved individuals might see it and

misinterpret what the player is doing — the negative emotions and responses from such accidents can quickly lead to heated confrontations and other unpleasant incidents best avoided.

All that having been said, in game terms your character begins at the Bruised health level, and cannot heal this injury through the expenditure of Blood Traits or any other means. You are also likely to attract a great deal of attention from those who notice your wounds, with a great deal of it unlikely to be favorable to one of the undead.

Relics

The items that follow are the stuff of legend. Indeed, their very existences (and histories) are the subject of some heated debate among the Faithful. Storytellers are encouraged to use these items primarily for story purposes, to further the potential of roleplaying experiences among the Faithful rather than as actual objects to be acquired in game play. For this reason, game statistics are not given herein.

The Cup of Christ

Also known as the Holy Grail, this simple carpenter's cup has become the most recognized holy artifact in Christendom outside of the True Cross itself. Its distinction comes from the fact that it was the very cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, on the eve of his betrayal and crucifixion. According to legend, it disappeared from Palestine in the years after Christ's rapture and has since been the subject of numerous quests and tales. As it has never been recovered, most Faithful assume that it has been lost to history.

Such is not the case.

In truth, an order of Cainites (of all creatures) has been in possession of the Grail since the early eighth century. This group, known as the Order of the Bitter Ashes, is sworn to protect the Cup of Christ and other holy relics from the depredations of their Cainite brethren — and other, even fouler entities. The Grail features prominently in their rites and practices. Its power is a symbol not only of their faith, but also of their very existences. They revere the Grail as much as protect it, and are sworn to it above all else. These Grail Knights seek out all relics wherever they may be and secure them for



their own purposes, leading these individuals to be known as Gatherers into whatever regions their quests lead them. (For more on the Gatherers, see *The Ashen Knight*.)

Gabriel's Trumpet

According to Biblical sources, the arrival of the end times will be signaled by the blowing of a great and thunderous horn — the trumpet of the archangel Gabriel. Insightful scholars among the Faithful point out that it needn't actually be Gabriel himself who blows the trumpet, merely that it be his trumpet that is blown. Thus, it is the object and not the owner that is truly important.

According to the Gospel of Laodice, the Lord specifically bade the hoary archangel to leave his trumpet behind before returning to Heaven the last time he visited Earth — after appearing to the prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century, if the text is to be trusted. The purpose behind this is still the subject of considerable debate, but most agree that the trumpet itself does indeed exist. Some Faithful believe that God wanted the dawn of the End Times to be left in the hands of mortals, while others maintain that since the truth of the matter was revealed specifically to the Faithful, that it is they who are destined to locate the trumpet. Given its prescience on the subject, Laodice is said to believe the latter to be the case — that God Himself expects (or wants) the Faithful to be the ones who shall signal the call to Apocalypse.

The Stone

This mythic artifact has been the subject of considerable debate among the Faithful for as long as the Faithful have existed. In all that time, no matter the language, it has known only a single, simple name — it needs no other appellations or monikers. The Stone is the very object that Cain himself used to murder his brother Abel and, in so doing, bring the wrath of God and the curse of vampirism into the world of men.

According to various records of the Faithful, the object still exists somewhere on Earth. Beyond this fact, there is little the Faithful agree upon regarding this piece of Cainite history. The Stone is rumored to have the ability to destroy any Cainite who lays eyes upon it, while contrary rumors suggest that any Cainite who actually touches it will be freed from the Curse (though Final Death fulfills this promise, say the proponents of the former theory). Some believe the Stone to be the key to finding Cain himself; others postulate that only when the weapon is found by one of the Faithful may Cain's original sin be washed clean, and thus the curse of undeath finally be lifted from the lot of Man.

Warding Iron

Usually a crudely fashioned loop or nail made of iron, these objects may actually be fashioned out of any material. Iron is simply the most commonly used substance, as the practice of creating warding irons has been handed down by Faithful Cainites since before the appearance of Christianity in Europe. Any sufficiently



advanced follower of the Road of Heaven may create these minor talismans, though the cost is high.

When buried in the ground or hung over a door, the warding iron prevents baleful entities from approaching — including vampires. This effect unfortunately includes the creator, and so the irons are usually given as gifts or left for needy mortals to find. Any supernatural being attempting to approach within five feet of the warding iron must succeed in a Willpower roll (difficulty 5) to do so. Even if the roll succeeds, the creature feels slight discomfort and restlessness. The effect is in no way painful; the creature simply feels as though it should not be in the area. Mindless or near-mindless creatures such as Gargoyles and some spirits simply avoid such areas instinctively.

To create a warding iron, the Faithful vampire prays over the intended object for one full night, and as sun rises, pierces her flesh with it (the character thus sustains one health level of lethal damage; this damage may not be soaked, though it may be healed with blood expenditure). The player rolls Road rating (difficulty 7). The warding iron remains empowered for one full day per success. The character may transport the iron, but the player must roll Willpower (difficulty 5) each turn while doing so. Only a Cainite with a Road rating of 8 or more may create warding irons.

Scripture

Since the very foundation of the great Abrahamic religions is holy writ, the Faithful are understandably preoccupied with religious writings of every kind. What follows are simply the most well known (and, thus the most zealously disputed) of Cainite texts that had and continue to have an impact on the *Via Caeli* and its adherents.

The Code of Samiel

The greatest of Saulot's warrior line, the martyred founder Samiel is believed to have penned this text with his own hand (or with help from his childe Uriel, who is said to have taken dictation about the work from his mighty mentor). According to legend, Samiel received a visitation from Michael, commander of the Heavenly Host, while Saulot was away. The archangel directed the warrior king to scribe the Code and to include within it the proper rituals necessary for the strength and blooding of new warriors. Samiel was further instructed to detail a codex of beliefs that are central to and dictate the conduct of any Cainite who fancies himself the personification of Heaven's righteous wrath. The Code's tenets form the theosophical foundation of the Path of Retribution, thus making the warrior Salubri the greatest of that path's paragons and teachers. Although the original text of the Code is widely believed to have been lost to the ravages of both the Tremere and time, at least one original copy yet remains.

The Euagetaematikon

As any proper revolutionary movement must, the Cainite Heresy has its own share of holy (or, rather, unholy) scriptures. This dark text is the foremost of these writings. Also known as the *Book of the Shining Blood*, the *Euagetaematikon* arose from the writings of a Byzantine priest named Procopius in the early fifth century. Little is known about the man himself, for both Cainite and kine alike strove to remove all reference to his name from libraries throughout Christendom in the years following his mortal death. What it is certain is that in his early life he led a division of monks charged with rooting out heresy in Palestine. It was during this endeavor that he began to receive ecstatic religious visions. After a raid on a heretical seaside commune, he holed himself up with several confiscated scrolls. After some 39 days, scrawled in the blood of Procopius' own veins, the *Book of Shining Blood* was complete. From the mind of a mortal, the blasphemy that was to become the Cainite Heresy was born.

The Gospel of Laodice

An enigma in and of itself, the primary Cainite-specific religious text for adherents of the *Via Caeli* sees as much debate among its scholars as any mortal religious text. Among the Faithful, it is the spiritual equivalent (and, some would say, counterpart) to the Book of Nod. Where the latter is a historical record of the woes of the Third Mortal and first vampire, the Gospel of Laodice is a rambling theosophical collection of visions, insights and prophecies about the Cainite relationship to and with God — and by extension, an essential record of the history of the *Via Caeli*.

The gospel's author has never been identified with any certainty. It is presumed to be a Cainite, as the text was written not only by someone (or something) well-versed in Cainite physiology and history, but written specifically with a Cainite audience in mind. Beyond this, however, none can claim any material knowledge about the creature — not even its sex. Speculative theories abound, from the assertion that Laodice was one of the Antediluvians (Malkav according to many Malkavian Faithful; Saulot according to no few Salubri) to the notion that the original author was no Cainite at all, nor even a singular terrestrial being but something wholly different... and unknowable.

Even the content of the text sees its share of controversy. Unlike the Book of Nod, which is scarce in the extreme (and rarely found complete), the Gospel of Laodice is widely available to the Faithful. That's not to say that many copies of the original text exist, of course; merely that many copies of something called the Gospel of Laodice have been produced and distributed among Faithful. On rare occasions, a guilt-ridden Cainite surfaces with claims of having been ordered to "favorably" translate the text into other languages, with those copies then sent out to bring others into the fold. In this way, the gospel itself has become yet another source of sectarian conflict among the divisive undead travelers on the Road of Heaven.



CHAPTER FOUR: A HEAVENLY HOST

For the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant,
Torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword.
And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.
— Kings, 19:10

Although it may seem stifling at first due to its moral and behavioral restrictions, the Road of Heaven is actually quite flexible, given the number of character concepts for whom it would be appropriate—especially in the Dark Medieval. This chapter provides a host of templates for Faithful characters, but it is by no means a comprehensive one. It is important to remember that Cainites from all walks of unlife are drawn to the *Via Caeli*, and therein lies the versatility and depth of its potential adherents. What follows is merely the briefest of glimpses into the possibilities of this broad and divergent Road.

THE PARDONER

Your sin bubbles beneath your flesh like a roiling contagion... How it pains me just to watch! But child, know that I can relieve you of all your sin! And I will gladly do so... for a small fee.

Prelude: Life for you had always been like one of the many confidence games (you preferred to think of them as "whirlwind courtships") you ran in and around your home town. The parade of travelers, traders and starry-eyed women was like a bountiful stream of opportunities flowing right to your door. Of course, you made it a habit not to "court" anyone that wasn't just passing through, lest word of your exploits get around town and subsequently get you into trouble.

One night, a beautiful stranger passed by you, her florid scent on the night air beckoning you to follow. Walking after her, you began to size up your prey, thinking about which tack to take in wooing her to your cause (whatever cause that might be this particular evening). She seemed to sense your presence behind her and turned, smiling gaily and offering you her hand for the evening. The battle half-won, you joyfully retired to her carriage for some free drink and, if you were lucky, some equally free romance.

Once inside, your hostess grew suddenly (and boringly) inquisitive. "Where are your parents?" and other such tedious questions got you thinking that perhaps you hadn't gotten quite as lucky as you'd hoped. But just then, the lady asked you something that snapped you back to the moment. "Were you planning to rob me?" was the query, and you stared at her agape in reply, your honor slighted. You never robbed anyone who didn't deserve it, and you never stole money from women (it was so much better when they gave of their own free will...). Satisfied, she tilted her head back and laughed, a full and hearty sound, as the pearly white fangs descended from between her perfect, crimson lips...

Concept: Your induction into the nighttime world of the Cainites has opened your eyes in more ways than one. For starters, you no longer operate under the childish illusion that you are (or ever were) the "best at what you do." Some of these ancient predators have forgotten more about the art than you ever knew. But more importantly, the Embrace opened your heart. It

showed you that not every vampire had to be a ghoulish predator. Some could even choose to play their part in God's plan, rather than raging against it with all their might. To this end, you bend your mortal skills and charm to the task of making the world a better place (by however little at a time). And, naturally, if you make a few coin for yourself along the way, why... That's just part of

God's plan, too.

Roleplaying Hints: Remaining true to your God and your faith at times clashes with your past as a confidence artist; you don't mean to lie or cheat, but old habits die hard. This is all the more disturbing when you encounter other Faithful vampires who have left

the sins of their mortals lives behind them entirely — you truly do wish to be without sin, after all. You do not doubt your faith, but doubt your own strength instead. You sometimes wonder if, since you can't pray or hear your Beast into submission (for no matter how subtle, all sin is the Beast), perhaps you could trick it?

Equipment:

Pantaloon, feathered hat, vial of water, faux moustache, fat purse.



Dark Ages VAMPIRE

Name:
Player:
Chronicle:

Nature: Gallant
Demeanor: Caretaker
Clan: Toreador

Generation: 9th
Concept: The Pardoner
Haven:

ATTRIBUTES

Physical		Social		Mental	
Strength	●○○○○○○○○	Charisma	●○○○○○○○○	Perception	●○○○○○○○○
Dexterity	●○○○○○○○○	Manipulation	●○○○○○○○○	Intelligence	●○○○○○○○○
Stamina	●○○○○○○○○	Appearance	●○○○○○○○○	Wits	●○○○○○○○○

ABILITIES

Talents		Skills		Knowledges	
Alertness	●○○○○○○○○	Animal Ken	○○○○○○○○	Academics	○○○○○○○○
Athletics	○○○○○○○○	Archery	○○○○○○○○	Hearth Wisdom	●○○○○○○○○
Brawl	○○○○○○○○	Commerce	●○○○○○○○○	Investigation	○○○○○○○○
Dodge	●○○○○○○○○	Crafts	○○○○○○○○	Law	●○○○○○○○○
Empathy	●○○○○○○○○	Etiquette	●○○○○○○○○	Linguistics	●○○○○○○○○
Expression	●○○○○○○○○	Melee	○○○○○○○○	Medicine	○○○○○○○○
Intimidation	○○○○○○○○	Performance	●○○○○○○○○	Occult	○○○○○○○○
Leadership	●○○○○○○○○	Ride	●○○○○○○○○	Politics	●○○○○○○○○
Legerdemain	○○○○○○○○	Stealth	●○○○○○○○○	Seneschal	○○○○○○○○
Subterfuge	●○○○○○○○○	Survival	○○○○○○○○	Theology	●○○○○○○○○

ADVANTAGES

Disciplines		Backgrounds		Virtues	
Auspex	●○○○○○○○○	Generation	●○○○○○○○○	Conscience/Conviction	●●●○○○
Presence	●○○○○○○○○	Resources	●○○○○○○○○	Self-Control/Instinct	●●●○○○
Celerity	○○○○○○○○		○○○○○○○○	Courage	●●●○○○
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	○○○○○○○○		○○○○○○○○		

Other Traits

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Road

Heaven

●●●●●●○○○

Aura: Holiness (0)

Willpower

●●●●○○○○○○

□□□□□□□□

Blood Pool

□□□□□□□□

□□□□□□□□

Health

Bruised		□
Hurt	-1	□
Injured	-1	□
Wounded	-2	□
Mauled	-2	□
Crippled	-5	□
Incapacitated		□

Weakness

Enraptured by Beauty

Experience

THE DOOMSAYER

Repent, while there is yet time! For it is written, that on that day there shall come a reckoning, when all shall know the judgment of the Lord!

Prelude: In life, you were a noted professor, scholar and sometime surgeon. You taught at the finest schools and were rewarded for both your diligence and your reasoned "distance" from subject matter. Your existence was very grounded in reality as you knew it. Though you respected both the power of the Church and those men of the cloth who served it, you never thought much about their work, simply accepting the role that religion played in keeping the masses quiet, orderly and at peace. Your thoughts were at odds with it, though, and wherever your thoughts went, your soul (such as it was) followed suit.

After a long and studious life, you had finally reached the end. As you lay in bed, a visitor was announced—one who would change everything you knew to be. This man, a priest by his vestments, offered to give you your last rites. When you refused he asked, "What will you say to the Lord when you see Him, when you must be judged?" Your only response was to say simply that you did not believe.

His solution—the only way to "save" you, said he—was to Embrace you. You could not go into the next life so unprepared, so brilliant in the ways of man and yet so ignorant in the ways of the soul. All must awaken to the truth of the Lord, and for one such as you, it was a rude awakening, indeed.

Concept: In your short time as one of the undead, you've managed to garner a bit of repute among your scholarly peers. You've taken to your new condition with a zeal you haven't possessed in years. Your desire to learn is matched only by your desire to pass on that which you have learned, and you genuinely hope for all men to awaken as you did, lest they meet their Creator unprepared.

Roleplaying Hints: You often wonder what it might have been like to have been Embraced in your prime.

You see others of your kind, their skin soft and smooth with chiseled features and bulging musculature, and you wonder. As it is, you are the oldest candidate for the Embrace that you've ever seen, although you never let the fact interfere with your attitude or your work. After all, you have so very much to do.

Equipment: Fine robes, errand boy, walking stick, complete Bible (self-copied).



Dark Ages VAMPIRE

Name:
Player:
Chronicle:

Nature: Pedagogue
Demeanor: Penitent
Clan: Brujah

Generation: 8th
Concept: The Doomsayer
Haven:

ATTRIBUTES

Physical		Social		Mental	
Strength	●●●●●●●●	Charisma	●●●●●●●●	Perception	●●●●●●●●
Dexterity	●●●●●●●●	Manipulation	●●●●●●●●	Intelligence	●●●●●●●●
Stamina	●●●●●●●●	Appearance	●●●●●●●●	Wits	●●●●●●●●

ABILITIES

Talents		Skills		Knowledges	
Alertness	●●●●●●●●	Animal Ken	○○○○○○○○	Academics	●●●●●●●●
Athletics	○○○○○○○○	Archery	○○○○○○○○	Hearth Wisdom	●●●●●●●●
Brawl	○○○○○○○○	Commerce	○○○○○○○○	Investigation	○○○○○○○○
Dodge	●●●●●●●●	Crafts	○○○○○○○○	Law	○○○○○○○○
Empathy	●●●●●●●●	Etiquette	○○○○○○○○	Linguistics	●●●●●●●●
Expression	●●●●●●●●	Melee	○○○○○○○○	Medicine	●●●●●●●●
Intimidation	○○○○○○○○	Performance	●●●●●●●●	Occult	●●●●●●●●
Leadership	●●●●●●●●	Ride	●●●●●●●●	Politics	○○○○○○○○
Legerdemain	○○○○○○○○	Stealth	●●●●●●●●	Seneschal	○○○○○○○○
Subterfuge	○○○○○○○○	Survival	●●●●●●●●	Theology	●●●●●●●●

ADVANTAGES

Disciplines		Backgrounds		Virtues	
Celerity	●○○○○○○○	Contacts	●●○○○○○○	Conscience/Conviction	●●●●●
Potency	○○○○○○○○	Generation	●●●●○○○○	Self-Control/Instinct	●●○○○
Presence	●●●○○○○○	Resources	●●○○○○○○	Courage	●●●○○
	○○○○○○○○	Retainers	●○○○○○○○		
	○○○○○○○○	Status	●○○○○○○○		

Other Traits	Road	Health
○○○○○○○○	Heaven	Bruised <input type="checkbox"/>
○○○○○○○○	●●●●●●●●○○○	Hurt -1 <input type="checkbox"/>
○○○○○○○○		Injured -1 <input type="checkbox"/>
○○○○○○○○	Aura: Holiness (0)	Wounded -2 <input type="checkbox"/>
○○○○○○○○		Mauled -2 <input type="checkbox"/>
○○○○○○○○	Willpower	Crippled -5 <input type="checkbox"/>
○○○○○○○○	●●●●●●●●○○○	Incapacitated <input type="checkbox"/>
○○○○○○○○	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
○○○○○○○○	Blood Pool	Weakness
○○○○○○○○	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	+2 difficulty to resist frenzy
○○○○○○○○	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Experience
○○○○○○○○		

THE HAND OF GOD

Suffer not a witch to live... so sayeth the Good Book.

Prelude: All you ever wanted was a mentor to whom you could apprentice yourself. It didn't matter the trade, you were equally skilled (or, rather, unskilled) in them all. It was simply the desire to connect with someone who could guide you through this rough life, to show you all the paths you never seemed to be able to find on your own. As a woman, however, your options were rather limited.

As a child you were eager and active, quick to try new things but never settling into any or claiming any one as your own. Just after you came of age, your mother finally remarried; a local smithy and long time friend of the family. Relieved that she would now be well looked after, you finally felt free to go and seek your fortune.

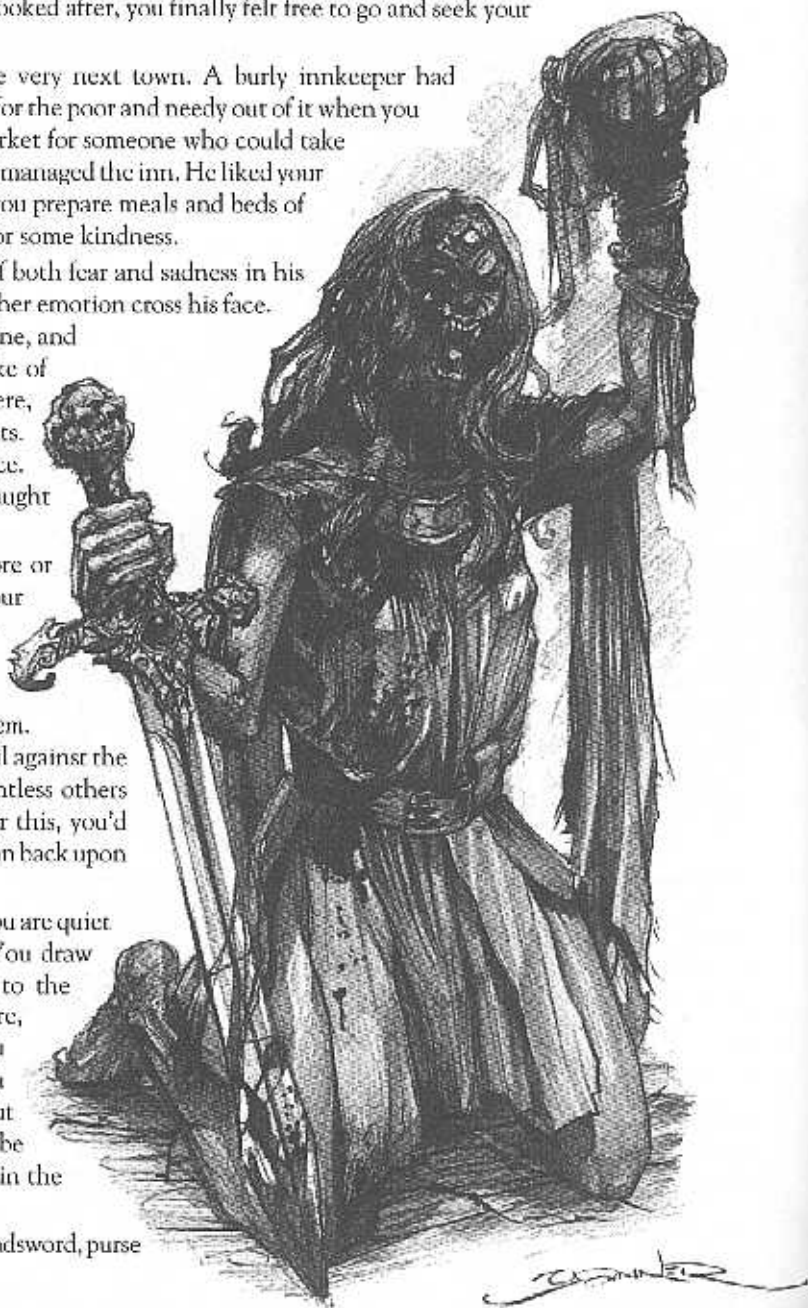
You found it, amusingly enough, in the very next town. A burly innkeeper had converted his stable and was running a hostel for the poor and needy out of it when you arrived. He said he happened to be in the market for someone who could take care of things during the day while he slept and managed the inn. He liked your zeal and took you on as his assistant, having you prepare meals and beds of straw for those who passed through looking for some kindness.

One night, he came to you with a look of both fear and sadness in his eyes. It was the first time you had ever seen either emotion cross his face. He explained to you about God's curse on Caine, and of the 13 clans and of the Usurpers. He spoke of Saulot's destruction at the hands of the Tremere, and of the dwindling numbers of his descendants. At the conclusion, he offered you the Embrace. You accepted. Shortly thereafter the Tremere caught up with him, just as he feared — and knew.

Concept: You have been on the run more or less non-stop since just after your Embrace. Your sire, desperate to save you (and with you, the history of your clan), sent you away just before the Tremere arrived, hoping you'd be safe. In a twist, however, you've begun to chase them. Although the rage you feel saddens you, you rail against the injustice done to both your sire and the countless others whose only crime was being of the blood. For this, you'd sooner rot in hell than not revisit this destruction back upon its source ten-fold.

Roleplaying Hints: When on the road, you are quiet and as assuming as you can make yourself. You draw little to no attention to yourself and stick to the periphery of any given community. From there, your movements generally spiral inward as you search for those whom God would have you destroy. At this point, you don't really hold out much hope for your kind — your only goal is to be the sharpest instrument of justice you can be in the time that you have left.

Equipment: Bloodied jerkin, bloodied broadsword, purse full of ash.



Dark Ages VAMPIRE

Name:
Player:
Chronicle:

Nature: Survivor
Demeanor: Defender
Clan: Salibri (Warrior)

Generation: 9th
Concept: The Hand of God
Haven:

ATTRIBUTES

Physical		Social		Mental	
Strength	●●●●●●●●	Charisma	●●●●●●●●	Perception	●●●●●●●●
Dexterity	●●●●●●●●	Manipulation	●●●●●●●●	Intelligence	●●●●●●●●
Stamina	●●●●●●●●	Appearance	●●●●●●●●	Wits	●●●●●●●●

ABILITIES

Talents		Skills		Knowledges	
Alertness	●●●●●●●●	Animal Ken	●●●●●●●●	Academics	●●●●●●●●
Athletics	●●●●●●●●	Archery	●●●●●●●●	Hearth Wisdom	●●●●●●●●
Brawl	●●●●●●●●	Commerce	●●●●●●●●	Investigation	●●●●●●●●
Dodge	●●●●●●●●	Crafts	●●●●●●●●	Law	●●●●●●●●
Empathy	●●●●●●●●	Etiquette	●●●●●●●●	Linguistics	●●●●●●●●
Expression	●●●●●●●●	Melee	●●●●●●●●	Medicine	●●●●●●●●
Intimidation	●●●●●●●●	Performance	●●●●●●●●	Occult	●●●●●●●●
Leadership	●●●●●●●●	Ride	●●●●●●●●	Politics	●●●●●●●●
Legerdemain	●●●●●●●●	Stealth	●●●●●●●●	Seneschal	●●●●●●●●
Subterfuge	●●●●●●●●	Survival	●●●●●●●●	Theology	●●●●●●●●

ADVANTAGES

Disciplines		Backgrounds		Virtues	
Auspex	●●●●●●●●	Generation	●●●●●●●●	Conscience/Conviction	●●●●●●
Fortitude	●●●●●●●●	Allies	●●●●●●●●	Self-Control/Instinct	●●●●●●
Valeren (warrior)	●●●●●●●●		●●●●●●●●	Courage	●●●●●●
Potence	●●●●●●●●		●●●●●●●●		
	●●●●●●●●		●●●●●●●●		

Other Traits

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Road

Heaven (Retribution)

●●●●●●●●

Aura: Holiness (0)

Willpower

●●●●●●●●

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Blood Pool

□□□□□□□□

□□□□□□□□

Health

Bruised ☐
 Hurt -1 ☐
 Injured -1 ☐
 Wounded -2 ☐
 Mauled -2 ☐
 Crippled -5 ☐
 Incapacitated ☐

Weakness

Cannot refuse someone in need

Experience

THE ASHEN LUMINARY

I am sorry, father, but the congregation has made it quite clear who it is they prefer to lead them all in prayer. Now, if you'll kindly step aside...

Prelude: Although you were your father's first-born, you were his daughter (and thus not his favorite). Nevertheless, you still knew a life of privilege, wealth and indulgence. Lavished with gifts and attention from your mother and all her maids and handmaidens, you wanted for nothing. She read to you from the Bible every day and did her best to make you feel loved; indeed, to "claim" you as her own, since your father clearly wasn't interested.

All the same, you felt the sting of your father's rejection and the slow burn of envy began to rise within you. Soon, you coveted. If God respected the master of each house, then a master you would become. You swore that all that was promised your brother would one day fall to you.

You set about planning his demise. Every detail was worked out in advance; not because you feared something would go wrong, but because you greatly enjoyed the planning of the deed. You savored the thought of being loved first, above all. You treasured the thought that, by your own hand, you could force your father to acknowledge that you alone were the rightful heir to his land, his coin, his name.

It was brilliant. You waited until the entourage of a blood relative was staying at the family manor. Your plan was to do away with your brother and then pin the crime on one of the visiting attendants, perhaps even upon the noble himself (what better motive could there be?). With your scheme full set, you crept into your brother's chambers some time after midnight and found the visiting noble awaiting you within. He'd caught wise to your plan, it seemed. But rather than reveal your scheme to your father, the noble had something else in mind....

The Embrace was nothing less than an awakening; a revelation that God did indeed exist, and did indeed bless those who were worthy. Had

you not planned so carefully to usurp your brother's place in the family line, you would never have been gifted with His divine birthright. Since that night, you have devoted yourself to fulfilling the promise of the power God invested within you.

Concept: You are a budding initiate within the quiet circles of the Cainite Heresy. For you, there can be no other interpretation of the Road of Heaven but the Path of Divinity. By your very existence, clearly you are divine — selected by God himself and blessed with powers beyond reason... or faith. You understand that patience is the way to success, and that the ranks into which you have been brought are very patient, indeed. Thus, you bide your time, indulging in some subtle propaganda in the interim. After all... it's all God's work, in the end.

Roleplaying Hints: You believe that God has chosen you to lead His flock, and you revel in this fact. You always knew you were meant for great things, and the Embrace has opened up a world of untold possibilities for you. You play up your own wisdom and strive to prove just how worthy you are of His gifts. The thrill of being revered fulfills you like nothing else, and you exist for that moment when you present yourself before the congregations who look to you for guidance.

Equipment: Priestly vestments, crucifix, book of scripture, crow's foot necklace.



Dark Ages VAMPIRE

Name:
Player:
Chronicle:

Nature: Autocrat
Demeanor: Visionary
Clan: Ventrue

Generation: 10th
Concept: The Ashen Luminary
Haven:

ACCRIBUES

Physical		Social		Mental	
Strength	●○○○○○○○○	Charisma	●●●●○○○○	Perception	●●○○○○○○
Dexterity	●●○○○○○○	Manipulation	●●●●○○○○	Intelligence	●●●○○○○○
Stamina	●●●○○○○○	Appearance	●●●○○○○○	Wits	●●●○○○○○

ABILITIES

Talents		Skills		Knowledges	
Alertness	●●○○○○○○	Animal Ken	○○○○○○○○	Academics	●●○○○○○○
Athletics	○○○○○○○○	Archery	○○○○○○○○	Hearth Wisdom	●○○○○○○○
Brawl	○○○○○○○○	Commerce	○○○○○○○○	Investigation	○○○○○○○○
Dodge	●○○○○○○○	Crafts	○○○○○○○○	Law	○○○○○○○○
Empathy	●●○○○○○○	Etiquette	●○○○○○○○	Linguistics	●○○○○○○○
Expression	●●●○○○○○	Melee	○○○○○○○○	Medicine	○○○○○○○○
Intimidation	●●●○○○○○	Performance	●●○○○○○○	Occult	●○○○○○○○
Leadership	●●●○○○○○	Ride	●○○○○○○○	Politics	●●○○○○○○
Legendaim	○○○○○○○○	Stealth	●○○○○○○○	Seneschal	○○○○○○○○
Subterfuge	○○○○○○○○	Survival	○○○○○○○○	Theology	●●○○○○○○

ADVANTAGES

Disciplines		Backgrounds		Virtues	
Dominate	●●●○○○○○	Generation	●●○○○○○○	Conscience/Conviction	●●●○○○
Fortitude	●○○○○○○○	Herd	●○○○○○○○	Self-Control/Instinct	●●●○○○
Presence	●○○○○○○○	Resources	●●○○○○○○	Courage	●●●○○○
	○○○○○○○○		○○○○○○○○		
	○○○○○○○○		○○○○○○○○		

Other Traits

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Road

Heaven (Divinity)

●●●●●●○○○○

Aura: Holiness (0)

Willpower

●●●●●●○○○○

□□□□□□□□

Blood Pool

□□□□□□□□

□□□□□□□□

Health

Bruised ☐
Hurt -1 ☐
Injured -1 ☐
Wounded -2 ☐
Mauled -2 ☐
Crippled -5 ☐
Incapacitated ☐

Weakness

Feeding Restriction

Experience

THE LEPER KNIGHT

The meek shall inherit the earth. The meek — not blasphemous swine like you.

Prelude: Your fate was ordained the moment you squeezed the life from your lord and master's throat. The Dauphin was a brute of a man who delighted in riling up the peasantry just to "make an example" out of any who resisted. When a villager would arrive with a legitimate grievance, it was you that he sent to do his dirty work. You suffered from a defect that distorted your body into a monstrosity as powerful as it was revolting, and your liege enjoyed the terror your presence struck into the commoners. You were known as the Dauphin's favorite. Time and time again, you were forced to deliver denials of petitions and to levy taxes upon those already in need.

When the Dauphin learned that you were not properly punishing those who could not pay (thus "encouraging" others towards similar disobedience), he ordered you to deliver ghastly punishments upon any who "refused" in the future. This you could not do, and you began to despair at the thought of what your own punishment would be when the Dauphin learned of your failure. Outside an alley one night (you always took your drink in private, away from those who might see) a commoner, a soft-spoken old crone who seemed to know your predicament, approached you. She asked, quite simply, if it was the villagers or the Dauphin himself who deserved your ire. Faced with this, you acknowledged what needed to be done and made your way into the castle to where the Dauphin slept.

After the deed was done, you gathered what belongings you had and fled the castle. You were unsure as to where you'd go, but you knew that your life was forever forfeit in the Dauphin's demesne after what you had done for God and man. On your last pass through the village, a thin whisper beckoned you towards an alley — the same you'd been in some hours before.

"Is it done?" whispered she, the crone from before. You simply nodded. She smiled, a twisted grin full of black rot and gums. "Then ye need run no longer."

Concept: You are a true champion of the people. Even though you had to die to understand your place, you are happy with your lot and thank God every day for saving you from a life of emptiness and sin. You are convinced that the Lord sent the crone to test you, to force you to choose between spiritual and physical damnations. Since you had always known the latter (after a fashion), the choice was simple. Now you are His sword and His children's strength on earth.

Roleplaying Hints: You found the Lord in the hour of your greatest doom, and have pledged yourself to doing His work as a result. Since your Embrace, you have begun to see the hidden movements of the Lord in the most mundane of occurrences. You know now that He knows all and sees all, and you seek to better understand the kine, that you may better fulfill the role He has chosen for you.

Equipment: Battle axe, studded leather armor, rosary, box helmet with visor.



Dark Ages VAMPIRE™

Name:
Player:
Chronicle:

Nature: Penitent
Demeanor: Defender
Clan: Nosferatu

Generation: 10th
Concept: The Leper Knight
Haven:

ATTRIBUTES

Physical		Social		Mental	
Strength	●●●●●●●●	Charisma	●●●●●●●●	Perception	●●●●●●●●
Dexterity	●●●●●●●●	Manipulation	●●●●●●●●	Intelligence	●●●●●●●●
Stamina	●●●●●●●●	Appearance	✗●●●●●●●	Wits	●●●●●●●●

ABILITIES

Talents		Skills		Knowledge	
Alertness	●●●●●●●●	Animal Ken	●●●●●●●●	Academics	○○○○○○○○
Athletics	○○○○○○○○	Archery	●●●●●●●●	Hearth Wisdom	●○○○○○○○
Brawl	●●●●●●●●	Commerce	○○○○○○○○	Investigation	●○○○○○○○
Dodge	●○○○○○○○	Crafts	○○○○○○○○	Law	○○○○○○○○
Empathy	●●●●●●●●	Etiquette	●●●●●●●●	Linguistics	●○○○○○○○
Expression	○○○○○○○○	Melee	●●●●●●●●	Medicine	○○○○○○○○
Intimidation	○○○○○○○○	Performance	●○○○○○○○	Occult	●○○○○○○○
Leadership	○○○○○○○○	Ride	●●●●●●●●	Politics	○○○○○○○○
Legerdemain	●○○○○○○○	Stealth	●●●●●●●●	Seneschal	○○○○○○○○
Subterfuge	●○○○○○○○	Survival	●●●●●●●●	Theology	●○○○○○○○

ADVANTAGES

Disciplines		Backgrounds		Virtues	
Animalism	●○○○○○○○	Generation	●●○○○○○○	Conscience/Conviction	●●●●●○
Obfuscate	●●○○○○○○	Mentor	●●○○○○○○	Self-Control/Instinct	●●○○○○
Patience	●●○○○○○○	Resources	●○○○○○○○	Courage	●●●●●○
	○○○○○○○○	Retainers	●○○○○○○○		
	○○○○○○○○		○○○○○○○○		

Other Traits

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Road

Heaven

●●●●●●●●○○

Aura: Holiness (1)

Willpower

●●●●○○○○○○

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Blood Pool

□□□□□□□□

□□□□□□□□

Health

Bruised ☐
Hurt -1 ☐
Injured -1 ☐
Wounded -2 ☐
Mauled -2 ☐
Crippled -5 ☐
Incapacitated ☐

Weakness

Appearance Rating of 0

Experience

THE INFERNAL APOSTATE

You speak of damnation, but would that you knew what truly awaits those who would falter in the worship of God. I pray you never find out.

Prelude: There are those for whom the love of God offers neither peace nor succor. Souls to whom His grace is nothing but a wistful dream of what should be — but clearly is not. You were one such soul. As a woman ironically born in what is known as the "Holy Land," you felt nothing of God's power except in its capacity for suffering. Where others saw (and even felt) sanctity and peace in worship, you saw only the oppression and fear in being one who simply did not believe. All around was poverty, pestilence and pain, and you could not conceive of a Father who would permit such ruin to lay waste. His own daughters and sons.

Although you kept your true feelings hidden, as you knew you must, there were those who seemed to smell your lack of faith on the wind... and were drawn to it. Under a new moon they came, whispering words of comfort and promises of what could and would be — if only you'd say the word. Heady with the long-denied feeling of acceptance and enticed by the potency of their profane presence, you accepted, giving yourself to the devil cult in an ecstatic orgy of blood and sweet misery. The leader took you as his own, mentoring you in the blackest art of moral degradation. Through you, he would spread the gospel of despair.

Yet, a curious thing happened when you were finally granted the Embrace. All the teachings of your mentor finally hit home... but not the way he had planned. The existence of the Damned — and through them, the undeniable existence of Heaven and Hell and of God, himself — has shown you the true path. Your

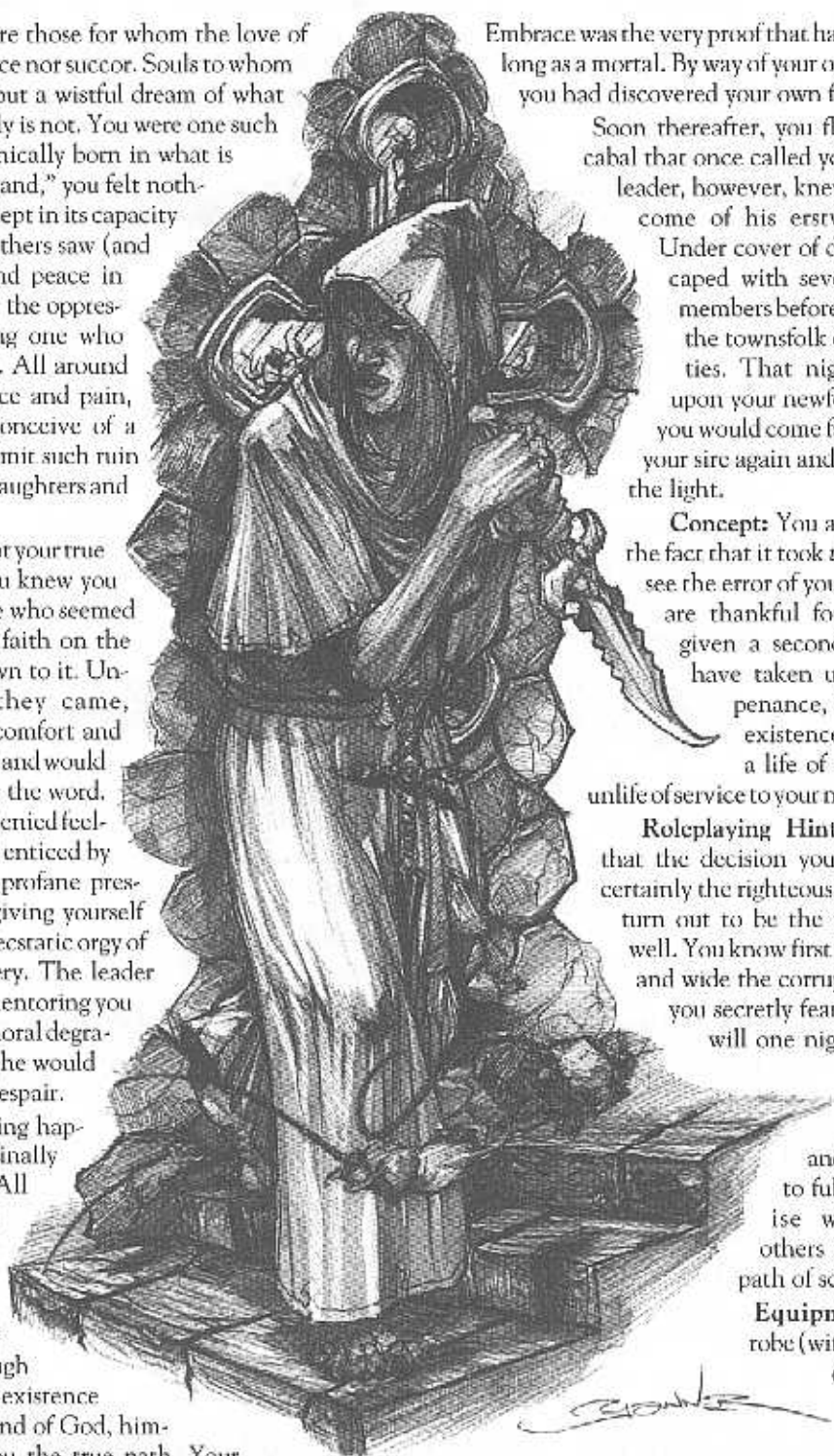
Embrace was the very proof that had eluded you so long as a mortal. By way of your own damnation, you had discovered your own faith.

Soon thereafter, you fled the twisted cabal that once called you "sister." The leader, however, knew what had become of his erstwhile protégé. Under cover of darkness, he escaped with several other cult members before you could turn the townsfolk onto his activities. That night, you swore upon your newfound faith that you would come face to face with your sire again and bring him into the light.

Concept: You are saddened by the fact that it took *this* to make you see the error of your ways, but you are thankful for having been given a second chance. You have taken up the fight in penance, devoting your existence to atoning for a life of sin through an unlife of service to your newfound cause.

Roleplaying Hints: You realize that the decision you have made is certainly the righteous one, but it may turn out to be the unwise one, as well. You know first hand how deep and wide the corruption runs, and you secretly fear that your past will one night catch up to you. In the meantime, you lay low and do all you can to fulfill your promise while turning others away from the path of screams.

Equipment: Monk's robe (with hood), sharpened crucifix, sanctified dagger.



Dark Ages VAMPIRE

Name:
Player:
Chronicle:

Nature: Martyr
Demeanor: Rebel
Clan: Malkavian

Generation: 10th
Concept: Infernal Apostate
Haven:

ATTRIBUTES

Physical		Social		Mental	
Strength	●●●●●●●●	Charisma	●●●●●●●●	Perception	●●●●●●●●
Dexterity	●●●●●●●●	Manipulation	●●●●●●●●	Intelligence	●●●●●●●●
Stamina	●●●●●●●●	Appearance	●●●●●●●●	Wits	●●●●●●●●

ABILITIES

Talents		Skills		Knowledges	
Alertness	●●●●●●●●	Animal Ken	○○○○○○○○	Academics	○○○○○○○○
Athletics	○○○○○○○○	Archery	○○○○○○○○	Hearth Wisdom	●●●●●●●●
Brawl	○○○○○○○○	Commerce	○○○○○○○○	Investigation	●●●●●●●●
Dodge	●●●●●●●●	Crafts	○○○○○○○○	Law	○○○○○○○○
Empathy	●●●●●●●●	Etiquette	●●●●●●●●	Linguistics	●●●●●●●●
Expression	●●●●●●●●	Melee	●●●●●●●●	Medicine	○○○○○○○○
Intimidation	○○○○○○○○	Performance	●●●●●●●●	Occult	●●●●●●●●
Leadership	●●●●●●●●	Ride	●●●●●●●●	Politics	○○○○○○○○
Legerdemain	●●●●●●●●	Stealth	●●●●●●●●	Seneschal	○○○○○○○○
Subterfuge	●●●●●●●●	Survival	●●●●●●●●	Theology	●●●●●●●●

ADVANTAGES

Disciplines		Backgrounds		Virtues	
Auspex	●○○○○○○○	Contacts	●○○○○○○○	Conscience/Conviction	●●●●○○
Dementation	○○○○○○○○	Generation	●●○○○○○○	Self-Control/Instinct	●●●●○○
Obfuscate	●●●○○○○○	Herd	●●○○○○○○	Courage	●●●●●●
	○○○○○○○○		○○○○○○○○		
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Other Traits

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Road

Heaven (Tears)

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Aura: Holiness (0)

Willpower

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Blood Pool

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□□□□□□□□

Health

Bruised		□
Hurt	-1	□
Injured	-1	□
Wounded	-2	□
Mauled	-2	□
Crippled	-5	□
Incapacitated		□

Weakness

Start Play with 1 derangement

Experience

Prophets and Dreamers of Dreams

Given their numerous sects, schisms and heresies, it would seem difficult at first to find any similarities inherent among the Faithful above and beyond their adherence to a road that wears many often-disparate faces. Close examination of the road's true paragons, however, reveals the truth: the truly pious Faithful are more alike than they are different — regardless of clan, path or sectarian affiliation. The names and faces that follow belong to some of those most dedicated to the path they have chosen, and most in tune with its true purpose. Each comes from a different cultural background and not all are true paragons in the systemic sense, but each is a paragon of the road's *ethos* — the embodiment of that which makes the Faithful who and what they are in the Dark Medieval world.

Gawiyya el-Ghaduba, the Lioness of Jerusalem

5th generation warrior Salubri, childe of Samiel

Nature: Defender

Demeanor: Architect

Embrace: AD 636

Apparent Age: mid-20s



Although few of Saulot's line remain, those that do recall the legend of their progenitor's favored childe: Samiel, who was among the first to blood the dread Baali; Samiel, who single-handedly launched a divergent warrior's path from within a clan of healers; Samiel, who founded the Code that bears his name. And Samiel — dead at the hands of the very monstrosities he was sworn to destroy.

Many also remember the tale surrounding the warrior founder's last known appearance. Before leaving to face the Baali in their own unholy sepulcher, the infernal acropolis at Chorazin, Samiel gathered before those of his line to speak. He warned them of the burning times ahead, and bade each of them remember the Code as he had instructed it.

What few recall, however, is that Samiel made a single stop on his way to Chorazin — a stop that would change the face of the warrior caste for all time. The Ancient's powers of perception were mighty indeed by that time, and Samiel found himself drawn by a vision to a small village on the road through the Holy Land. The townspeople had fallen under a terrible curse. Those who remained had given up all hope, abandoning both their homes and their unburied dead for the promise of a new life elsewhere.

All but a single soul, that is.

When the elder Salubri arrived, he found a lone Arab woman single-handedly moving corpses from the outlying houses to a large pyre in the center of town. As he beheld the woman, images of her life splayed themselves out before his eyes. She had lost everything to this pestilence: her infant son, her two brothers, and most recently her loving husband, Nuri. She shouldered her lover's black and bloated corpse upon the fire as Samiel stood rapt. Then, without a word, she set the pyre alight and watched those who had been closest to her vanish into flame.

Enthralled, the warrior asked the woman why she alone had chosen to stay, to fill her days with the presence of the dead rather than to move on as the others had. She replied simply that it was her duty, and that the dead could not go unburied. She knew the source of the plague had been the Devil, and that the evacuation of the town was precisely what was intended. She pointed out, however, that so long as a single soul remained — one whose faith remained unshaken and who would tend to the dead the same as she had tended to the living — then the Devil could never truly claim the town as his own. For all his efforts, the mighty Lucifer could and would be foiled by a simple mortal woman. A woman of faith.

Samiel, the greatest warrior of the Salubri, was shaken. He recognized the hand of God at work, and suddenly knew that he had been guided to this woman for a purpose. In that moment, he knew also that his journey to Chorazin to battle the forces of darkness would be his last. Knowing this, Samiel entrusted the woman with two great responsibilities that night: First, he Embraced her into the line of the warrior, making her the heir of his legacy. Second, he produced from his satchel the only known first-hand copy of the Code of Samiel, penned centuries before. This, he gave to her to keep safe... and to remember.

Six centuries later, the last childe of Samiel returned to the Holy City of Jerusalem. In the interim, she had seen both her sire and her sire's sire fall to the forces of darkness. The time had come to take a stand. There, she launched a campaign of brutal justice against the Tremere and all whose aim was to defile the Holy Land. An aged Salubri healer named Nahum ben Enosh assisted her in her early efforts before passing the torch and slipping quietly into torpor. He was laid to rest in a secluded crypt of her own design, and she watches over her ancient mentor as vigilantly as she safeguards her copy of the Code of Samiel.

Since that time, Qawiyya has cemented her power base in the Holy Land. Her bold first move was to call a convocation of the Cainite powers of the realm. The lords (or representatives thereof) from the domains of Acre, Antioch, Beirut, Cyprus, Jerusalem, Tripoli — all the domains of the Holy Land, save Tyre — came to her dwelling on the Mount of Olives to hear her plea for unity. All those in attendance (save Cyprus, whose lord quietly abstained) pledged their support to Qawiyya's cause and the Diet of Olives was born. Although a Christian Ventrue now claims the title of prince, it is the Lioness herself who holds the real power in the Holy City, and indeed, throughout all the lands of Outremer.

Adrojai, Cainite Krivê of Lithuania

8th generation Malkavian, childe of Yislei

Nature: Celebrant

Demeanor: Jester

Embrace: AD 1130

Apparent Age: 16

Since Lithuania's earliest nights, when magic ruled with a far firmer hand than it does now, the position of the Krivê has always been one of diplomacy and mediation. The land's true masters, the Fair Folk, have always accepted one of Caine's childer as the emissary and spiritual mentor of his kind. When



disputes arise, the fae come to this chosen agent rather than settle the matter on their own, thus avoiding much rancor and bloodshed between races. Such an accord has always been the way in Lithuania, operating without incident for centuries.

In the early 12th century the position was held by a Malkavian high priest named Yislei, a kind man known throughout the land for his love of all things sacred to *all* pagan Lithuanians, be they vampire, werewolf, fae or mortal. His own apprentice, a young ghoul named Adrojai, was a devoted student who yearned to learn all he could about the duties of his mentor but was eternally hampered by an unrelenting prankish nature. As a boy, Adrojai had been kidnapped by the wickedest of fairies. They took him to their otherworldly abode and entertained him with their sly and often gruesome notions of play. The experience left him forever marked by their twisted sense of humor and morality.

It was with some reservation, then, that Yislei finally decided to bring his young apprentice across the threshold between life and death. He would do so not a moment too soon. Within the year, Adrojai had lost his mentor to a senseless quarrel with several interloping mortals, a loss felt and shared by all of pagan Lithuania. Grief-stricken and burning for revenge, Adrojai tracked down the travelers responsible and staged an elaborate trap for them at a secluded glade. When the trap was sprung, the mortals were set quickly afoot and hunted by Adrojai's savage allies

among the fae until sunrise, whereupon all the mortal offenders were put to death.

Although simply acting according to his own nature, Adrojai soon found himself the center of a considerable cult of hero worship throughout his homeland. For his bravery in defending his mentor's honor (and in so doing, the honor of all pagan Lithuania), he became regarded by friend and foe alike as the obvious heir to Yislei's legacy... and title. The young vampire initially remained aloof, unsure as to his purpose. He felt honored at first, lucky to be in the position of attaining such an "inheritance" at such an early stage, but he still didn't fully grasp its nature. Desperate for guidance, he once again called upon his fae allies for aid. This time, however, he went to those Fair Folk who had counseled his sire in his time of need, not the sinister fairies with whom Adrojai had reveled as a mortal.

And that was when everything changed for Adrojai.

Yislei's fondest ally among the fae led the errant childe into an *alka*, a holy pagan grove. There the very earth parted, and the ghostly image of Adrojai's sire stepped forth into view! The boy thought it all a dream at first, but dream or no, the apparition spoke to him, comforting him with the words he so desperately needed to hear and the wisdom only his sire's soul could have imparted. Adrojai knew not if what he saw was a vision from beyond the grave or merely the beguiling glamour of a well-intentioned friend, but what he did know — and, indeed, all he needed to know — was that this apparition spoke *truth*. It knew him and it knew why he had come. The phantasm explained the true meaning and purpose of the Krivē, in words Adrojai had never truly understood before. Only when the true scope of his duties became apparent did Adrojai truly come to understand his sire, and only when he truly embraced all that his sire had stood for did his own purpose finally become clear.

Adrojai emerged from that enchanted grove forever changed. No longer was he the childish prankster of his youth. Instead, he had finally become his sire's childe, a paragon along the Road of Heaven and the true leader of the night-folk of Lithuania. Adrojai has led the Faithful in his land as Krivē ever since. Although the coming of the Nailed God has forced him and the mortals for whom he cares into some difficult and rather painful times, he has faced them all with dignity and grace — the same way he intends to face those challenges yet to come.

Ahmed ibn Zayyat, the Spear of Destiny

7th generation Assamite Vizier, childe of Barnabus

On the edge of where the Palestinian coast meets the Mediterranean Sea, in the European periphery known as Outremer, sits the Principality of Antioch-Tripoli. The Cainite residents of the city of Tripoli often whisper about the raised scar on the right hand of their prince (though never in his presence, of course). Along darkened streets and in candlelit chambers they theorize, postulate...even accuse. Most believe it to be a memento of a battle fought with some raging beast, while others quietly suspect their lord of foul, possibly even infernal dealings. The scar is the subject of much debate among Prince Ahmed's subjects, due in no small part to the fact that he seems to take no pains to conceal it, yet refuses to discuss the issue — of his own volition, at any rate. None have dared broach the subject.

The truth is far simpler — and far grander — than any of them would believe.

In life, Ahmed, son of Zayyat, had been a Muslim trader and oil merchant; Muslim by default and upbringing, rather than by choice. He followed the basic precepts of Islam, but only because Islam provides a complete way of living in addition to being a religious discipline. Ahmed's faith, such as it was, rested primarily in the almighty coin rather than in any Almighty



Creator. An Assamite vizier named Barnabus, who seemed also to be religiously disinclined, chose the cool-headed Ahmed as his *fidais* in 793. Ahmed surprised himself by taking to his apprenticeship with honor and vigilance, learning all that he could of their kind.

At the close of Ahmed's apprenticeship, he was given his first real assignment as the final test of his skills: He must sneak into a Crusader encampment, slip into a certain tent, assassinate any guards therein, and return with whatever it was that they were guarding so heavily. Without a word, Ahmed agreed, instantly donning the visage of a Christian knight that he may enter the camp unmolested.

When Ahmed slipped into the specified tent, however, he found the room not only unguarded, but largely undecorated as well. Aside from a few bales of straw, all that sat within was a small pine box resting atop the stump of an olive tree. Although he planned to simply toss the box into a pouch and make good his escape, something deep within made Ahmed open the box. Inside, he saw a thin sliver of wood, no larger than a knife-handle, resting upon a velvet pillow. When he lay his hand upon it, the shard of wood seared his flesh and with it his soul, burning images of the path to the cross, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection into his heart and mind. Ahmed, son of Zayyat, childe of Barnabus, became a devout Christian that night.

Upon emerging from his experience, the young Assamite began quietly scouting about for others among his clan who felt deeply as he did about the divinity of Christ. When he realized that there were, in fact, quite a few, he set about rallying their support under his cause. Together, he felt they could finally stand as one voice — even against the roar of the predominantly Muslim warrior caste. Noble though his stance was, he probably would have failed were it not for Zarathustra, the Lasombra Methuselah of Antioch, who believed in Ahmed's dream and secretly took the beleaguered Assamite under his wing.

With Zarathustra's help, Ahmed soon grew powerful enough to publicly claim the principedom of Antioch-Tripoli (heretofore ruled from the shadows by the Lasombra himself). His position thus cemented, Ahmed then rallied his supporters in a small cabal called the Spear of Destiny. These Christian and Christian-friendly Assamites strive to keep the Holy Land free for all those who would travel there for peaceful worship, while safeguarding the region's numerous holy relics from those who would destroy, despoil or otherwise blaspheme them for cheap, personal gains. Although their numbers are few, the

devotion of the Spear is keen. The recent truce between the Ashirra and the Cainites of the *Franj* is due in no small part to their efforts.

Nature: Visionary

Demeanor: Caretaker

Embrace: AD 793

Apparent Age: late 20s

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 5, Stamina 4, Charisma 4, Manipulation 3, Appearance 3, Perception 4, Intelligence 3, Wits 5

Abilities: Academics 2, Alertness 4, Brawl 2, Dodge 3, Empathy 2, Etiquette 4, Investigation 3, Leadership 4, Legerdemain 4, Linguistics 3, Melee 4, Occult 4, Performance 2, Politics 3, Ride 4, Stealth 6, Subterfuge 2, Theology 4

Disciplines: Auspex 3, Celerity 3, Fortitude 3, Obfuscate 5, Presence 1, Quietude 4

Backgrounds: Allies 2, Contacts 3, Mentor 5, Resources 4, Status 3

Road: Heaven 8

Conscience: 3, **Self-Control:** 3, **Courage:** 5; **Willpower:** 7

Anatole, the Voice of Heaven

9th generation Malkavian, childe of Pierre l'Imbecile

The Cainite known as Anatole was born under a blue moon (the second full moon in the same month) in Paris in 1173. His father was a captain of the city guard, and Anatole spent his childhood surrounded by men who knew only action, honor and duty. As was expected of the eldest son, he followed in his father's footsteps and joined the city watch the very day he came of age. But even then, Anatole had a sense that his calling was much higher, and that his life would serve a greater purpose. In 1193, a Malkavian named Pierre l'Imbecile would fulfill the promise of that sense of purpose with a "gift" he called the Embrace.

Pierre, himself a devout believer in God, saw in the young Frenchman a unique gift of his own, one that would make him the ideal servant of the Almighty among the Damned. He believed that Anatole could see the movements of God on Earth as though they were plain as day, not as the inscrutable mysteries they remained to everyone else. His sire explained to Anatole that his role as a Cainite would be to prove to his Damned brothers and sisters that all earthly creatures — even vampires — served God's plan. After only a short stay the sire released his neonate childe, leaving Anatole to wander the world in search of his destiny.



In his time as one of the undead, Anatole has diablerized several Cainites due to his belief that God wants him to take the essence of those who are truly Damned unto himself, that their souls may be purified by the time they reach their Creator. To this end, Anatole only diablerizes those he sees as irredeemably despoiled or evil, or those whom his visions have specifically guided him to "save." To the rest, he is simply the Word, allowing them responsibility for their own answers and final salvation.

The 13th century has been increasingly disturbing for Anatole. It began while traveling Europe with his Lasombra compatriot, Lucita. A vision came to him wherein he witnessed the fall of a great empire and the rise of a great evil. Shortly thereafter, in 1204, the golden city of Constantinople burned under the infighting of the Church, signaling the end of an era and the dawn of the War of Princes in the Dark Medieval. Since then, Anatole's visions have grown darker and direr, each coming true with the same pinpoint veracity as the last. His recent diablerie of yet another spiritually corrupt Cainite has only heightened his rising sense of doom, and he finds himself envisioning a time — not too far in the future — when all Cainites must choose a side... and ready themselves for battle.

Nature: Defender

Demeanor: Penitent

Embrace: AD 1193

Apparent Age: 20

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 4, Stamina 4, Charisma 4, Manipulation 1, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 4

Abilities: Academics 1, Alertness 3, Animal Ken 1, Archery 2, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Dodge 2, Empathy 2, Hearth Wisdom 1, Intimidation 3, Investigation 2, Law 1, Leadership 2, Linguistics (French, Spanish) 2, Melee 3, Occult 2, Ride 1, Stealth 3, Survival 1, Theology 2

Disciplines: Auspex 3, Celerity 1, Fortitude 1, Obfuscate 2, Potence 2, Presence 1

Backgrounds: Herd 3, Mentor 2, Retainers 4, Status 1

Road: Heaven 7

Conscience: 4, **Self-Control:** 2, **Courage:** 5, **Willpower:** 7

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ROAD



Heaven

CHOSEN OR CURSED?

God cursed Caine, but also laid His mark upon our Dark Father. We Cainites bear that mark even now. Many Undead ignore our responsibility to the Almighty, but some of us do God's work here on Earth, night after night, until He sees fit to release us. We are agents of divine justice, mercy and retribution. We are the Faithful.

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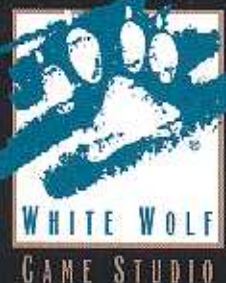
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